With a Rebel Yell?

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Sergeant Joe Darby walked into a hot Baghdad night, lit up one cigarette and then another, and tried to decide what to do.

Darby was a soldier with the U.S. Forces at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. One day he asked his fellow soldier and guard, Charles Graner, for some scenic pictures he could send home to his friends and family. Graner gave him two CDs, but when Darby opened the folders and looked at the pictures he was shocked by what he saw. The rest of the world would be as well.

We know the rest of the story. Darby turned over the CDs with the incriminating photos of horrific and degrading prisoner abuse. He was lauded as a hero by the media and strangers. However, inside the small community of military families, things did not go so well for Joe Darby. Family members and friends shunned him, his property was vandalized, and he and his wife now live in protective custody in an undisclosed location.

The truth about moral rebels—people who take unpopular moral stands—is that they often pay a high price for doing so. They may be praised and admired by outsiders but condemned by their colleagues and peers who do not take action. There are a couple of reasons for this:

• By taking action, moral rebels remind “non-actors” that it is possible to act. Many times people persuade themselves that action is impossible. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, termed this bad faith, which he defined as the flight from the “displeasing truth” of our freedom and responsibility to the “pleasing falsehood” that we are not free and, therefore, not responsible.

• We fear that moral rebels are judging us from our failure to act. This can be true even if the moral rebels did not witness our failure to act or could not possibly have known about it. It is enough that we can imagine what they might say if they knew.

• Our failure to take action creates a dissonance in our minds. Most of us are convinced of our own morality (this is assisted by the fact that we judge ourselves by our good intentions, which are readily apparent to us and not on the basis of our actions which we understand may be thwarted by others).

Our failure to rebel creates a mental dissonance that is profoundly uncomfortable. It can be resolved in one of two ways: We can change our beliefs about ourselves (i.e., we are less moral than we thought we were) or we can somehow denigrate or diminish the wrong. One way to do that is to condemn the “moral rebel” as a “snitch” or of being self-righteous.

Some lessons can be drawn from the experience of moral rebels. The first is that standing up for your convictions can be very difficult. I don’t think that this point
is emphasized enough in conversations about business ethics. Being all alone, even on the moral high ground, can be a very lonely place.

In a recent article, I discussed the human tendency to want to fit in and to be around people who share similar world views and values. Successful leaders use this tendency to create ethical cultures that are self-policing and self-sustaining. However, the dark side of our social natures is an unwillingness to place oneself on the outside of a group.

In the 1950s, Solomon Asch devised a series of experiments to test the power of conformity in a group setting. The subjects were told that they were participating in a vision test and asked to assess the relative length of several lines. When asked individually, the subjects properly identified the longest line with more than 90 percent accuracy. The subjects were placed in a group (composed of actors) who unanimously agreed that a shorter line was in fact longer. Nearly 75 percent of the subjects voted with the group at least once despite the fact that they had previously identified the correct answer.

We all think that we would never be so foolish and that we would stand up for what we believe to be correct, whether in questions of geometry or morals. Yet the answer is not so simple.

The pursuit of knowledge is a deeply social enterprise, and part of how we gain confidence in our beliefs is to seek the perspective of others. Most believe that knowledge is objective and, therefore, publicly verifiable. We think that others, if operating with their full rational capacities and no perceptual defects, will arrive at the same truth as ourselves. When our assessments don’t match up, we begin to doubt ourselves. This is a natural and helpful response, since it keeps us from uncritically accepting our perceptions. If you are seeing something differently, perhaps you are seeing it incorrectly. Perhaps you have made a mistake.

The same is true in moral matters, which are murkier and more complex than a series of parallel lines. If everyone around you fails to act, perhaps you are seeing the situation incorrectly. Perhaps you have made a mistake. Offering a moral reproach is difficult under the best of circumstances; it is even harder when you doubt that you are correct. This reflects the importance of an ethical culture in which people who see well and correct you when you are wrong surround you.

A second lesson points to the phenomena of moral luck, specifically what Thomas Nagel calls “circumstantial luck” (luck in the kind of problems and situations that one faces). Moral luck is a tricky philosophical issue because it seems that luck should not factor into our moral assessments. But despite its counter-intuitive nature, moral luck does seem to matter.

Certain people, like Joe Darby, will have the terrible experience of opening a CD and finding pictures of prisoners being tortured in indescribably awful ways. Fortunate are the rest of us who do not suffer the terrible weight of that knowledge. We should remember this and approach our judgments of others with a degree of humility: Do we really know how we would behave? Are we really sure?

Finally, as leaders and members of an organization we need to create an environment in which it is easier (or as easy as possible) for people to tell the truth, to be that brave and courageous. We need to tell stories about moral rebels in our organization who have effected real and meaningful change. We need to be conscious of our tendency to dismiss moral rebels and diminish their courage because we are afraid of what that says about our own moral character. We need to celebrate people who represent the best of who we can be.