Ethics and the Slippery Slope: Why Good People Do Bad Things

Key Concept

An in-depth study of ordinary people over an extended period of time reveals how easy it is for 'good' people, starting with an initial small, self-justified deception, to quickly justify bigger and bigger indiscretions, thus falling down the ‘slippery slope’ to major unethical behaviour.

Idea Summary

Most people think of themselves as moral and ethical. And yet, major fraud and unethical behaviour is widespread. A team of researchers from the University of North Carolina, University of Washington and University of Arizona studied how people who are otherwise good allow themselves to become involved in increasingly unethical behaviour.

It begins with the first small act of deception that people justify to themselves. They convince themselves that the small act was relatively harmless, and that 'everybody does it.' Unfortunately, this rationalization process is then applied to the next act of deception, which is just a bit bigger. Over time, people continue to rationalize their behaviour as the unethical behaviour slowly becomes more and more significant. Through this slippery slope of bigger and bigger wrongdoing, the individuals have become ‘morally disengaged,’ in the terms of the researchers. They have, in other words, disconnected the self-regulation mechanism that previously prevented them from engaging in deceptive acts. They simply don't care anymore that they are unethical.

The research — conducted through a series of experiments that examined unethical behaviour at a number of different points in time — showed that with time, people justify incrementally bigger indiscretions; however, they will not take a leap from a small deception to significant unethical behaviour. The slippery slope is thus the heart of the danger; remove this slope (i.e. do not allow the small indiscretions to become incrementally bigger) and people will stop...
engaging in unethical or immoral actions.

The key to keeping people off the slope, as confirmed in the empirical study, is instilling a ‘prevention focus.’ A prevention focus, which is an emphasis on safety, caution and clear awareness of the rules, stands in sharp contrast to the ‘promotion focus’ — the willingness to take risks and embrace change — that many companies foster. “The prevention focus is the first step toward identifying psychological factors that might be able to mitigate the slippery slope,” explains professor Michael Christian of University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler School of Business. “We were trying to show that this effect can be short-circuited.” A prevention focus enables an individual's ethical self-regulation to kick in even when the transgressions are small — thus avoiding the slippery slope.

**Business Application**

There are a number of steps that business leaders can take to prevent their people from falling down the slippery slope.

1. **Begin with a strong ethical culture** that clearly states that unethical behaviour is not tolerated.
2. **Verbalize ethics.** Include ethics in mission statements, vision statements, presentations to employees, and any other communication.
3. **Make ethics part of the corporate identity or brand.**
4. **Do not allow small ethical lapses to go unaddressed.** This is the start of the slippery slope.
5. **Make sure that employees have a clear ‘prevention focus’.** Set clear standards for conduct, clearly delineating what is allowed and what is absolutely forbidden.

The ease or difficulty with which this prevention focus can be instilled can depend on the business or industry. Industrial production companies, for example ExxonMobil or Dupont, emphasize safety and caution since lack of safety precautions can result in a catastrophic event. In high tech companies such as Google, on the other hand, the emphasis is on taking risks and pushing boundaries. In these kinds of companies, extra effort will be needed to ensure that breaking the rules does not mean breaking the law.

Although beyond the empirical focus of the studies, Christian notes that leaders play a vital part in whether employees and managers in their companies start down the slippery slope. In some cases, bad leadership can actually steepen the slippery slope, he says. If there is unethical behaviour at the top, for example, it naturally becomes easier for lower level managers to justify their own unethical behaviour.

Leaders must also be careful not to reward unethical behaviour — for example, by setting high performance goals or aggressive time limits that encourage or require individuals to reach these goals through unethical means. In this type of aggressive environment, any call to ethics is soon drowned out.

“Leaders need to recognize the fact that setting
multiple goals that compete with each other is a recipe for disaster,” Christian explains. Goals need to complement each other — for example, companies need to sell product but they also need those sales to be conducted in an ethical manner. And if goals are not perfectly aligned, ethical goals must take priority over others. Christian gives the example of the airlines, whose flights have two goals: to be on time and to be safe. When safety becomes an issue, however, it takes precedence over timeliness — without exception.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
David T. Welsh's profile at University of Washington Foster School of Business
Lisa D. Ordóñez's profile at University of Arizona Eller School of Management
Deirdre G. Snyder's profile at UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School ((PhD candidate at at the time of this study)
Michael S. Christian's profile at UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School
UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School Executive Education profile at IEDP