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Different Lenses, Different Visions

Understanding moral views of stakeholders can help you promote a controversial program

BY EVONNE HEDGEPEETH

"We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." -- **The Talmud**

School leaders who have advocated for controversial programs know the pitfalls. Among the most frustrating are individuals and groups who resist any change at all, those who are supportive but remain silent and those (opponents and allies alike) who are so passionate in their position they seem unable to hear the views of others. Each group presents challenges for administrators and can put a proposed or existing program at risk.

Each individual is guided by moral views about how the world is and how it should be. Increasingly, such individuals organize into advocacy groups that push a particular moral stand on an issue and are ready to storm into action when and if that issue arises. Understanding these differences in moral perspective and how they can be addressed directly in program advocacy can increase the effectiveness of those who lead.

The so-called "culture war" has been described as a conflict between two broadly defined and loosely affiliated groups of people--the "orthodox" and the "progressives"--who hold widely differing moral visions for America. Each sees the other as a threat. The orthodox fear a progression toward "state-supported, secular humanist, moral relativism," while progressives fear a slide toward an "authoritarian, non-tolerant theocracy."

This cultural divide affects education in many ways, leading to debates over taxpayer support and school vouchers, board elections and politics, curriculum choices (especially sexuality education), textbook selections, religious expressions at school and legal protections for gay and lesbian students. Orthodox and progressive groups predictably line up on either side of these issues. Caught in the crossfire is the movable middle, the majority whose opinions fluctuate depending upon which camp they consider least objectionable. James Davison Hunter, in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, says the orthodox and progressive groups are well-matched, promoting equally valid if divergent moral visions in an attempt to win over the hearts and minds of the middle. However, are they truly operating on the same moral plane? Careful examination of the beliefs of these groups in light of Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development suggests they are not, and this finding has useful implications for program advocacy.

Moral Reasoning

Kohlberg, a psychologist who applied the developmental approach of Jean Piaget, defined moral reasoning as one's beliefs about the obligation of self toward others and of society toward self. This moral lens determines how an individual views events of the community and the world and his or her proper role in them.

In *The Psychology of Moral Development*, Kohlberg asserted that the foundation of morality in a democratic society lies with an individual's developing universal principles of justice, not just acquiring simple virtues. Individuals progress through three main levels of moral reasoning-- pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional--divided into six stages. ([See Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development](#)). Individuals move through these stages at different rates, but only about a quarter of them ever reach the advanced stages, and most remain at the conventional level.

Carol Gilligan, who holds the Patricia Albjerg Graham chair in gender studies at Harvard Graduate School of Education, added that while men's morality is centered around an ethic of justice, women's morality is oriented more toward an ethic of caring. That is, when presented with a moral dilemma that involves competing individual needs, women are more likely to base their judgment on what works best for everyone involved as opposed to the rights of one individual over another.

Women advance through the three levels of moral development differently from men. At the pre-conventional level, they are mostly self-centered. At the conventional level, they are focused on caring for others, even to the detriment of their own needs. At the post-conventional level, they see the value of balancing the needs of others with their own needs. As with most individuals, a majority of women do not advance beyond the conventional level of moral reasoning.

Moral Hierarchies

Asserting that the orthodox and progressives are at different levels on Kohlberg's scale is not a new idea. What is new is the application of this observation to school politics and program advocacy.

Most of those who hold to orthodox views are in Stages 1 to 4 on the hierarchy. Orthodox individuals typically hold beliefs consistent with Kohlberg's Stage 4 (and elements of Stages 1, 2 or 3). In this belief system, God, the Bible, the Koran, Karl Marx or some other authority or dogma provides individuals with the "one right answer" to all moral and political concerns. Issues are seen as black and white, right or wrong. For these individuals, correct moral action is prescribed and not subject to interpretation.

This view also embraces hierarchical relationships--God as head of the universe and man as head of church and family. Such thought does not take kindly to feminism, which is seen as one of the driving forces behind movements for public school sexuality education, gay civil rights and abortion rights.

Some orthodox who are religious fundamentalists believe they have a moral mandate to proselytize others. Consequently, they cannot observe what they believe to be evil or immoral (for example, keeping religious practice out of

schools) and not take action. Also, some of these individuals will perform good deeds in part because they believe they will be punished otherwise (Stage 1). Orthodox individuals tend to believe that the development of critical thinking is risky because it implies a critique of authority, which could contribute to breakdown in the system (Stage 4). Although they benefit from living within a democratic society (and thus are at liberty to express and practice their beliefs), they often distrust democratic process or are intolerant of those whom they perceive to be different (Stages 1-4).

Most progressives fall into Stage 5. Progressives celebrate the multiplicity of values in our pluralistic society with its diversity of cultures, religions, family configurations and lifestyles. They see shades of gray in many moral issues and may operate on a different moral level as circumstances require. Some use scripture or other spiritual writings to guide them, but often view such authority as subject to interpretation. This contributes to the impression by the orthodox that progressives are “morally relativistic,” that is they adjust the moral code according to the circumstance at hand. Progressives also believe that humans have the means to solve their own problems, which leads to opponents’ charges of “secular humanism.”

Progressives welcome critical thinking and inquiry, and worry that religious involvement in schools and public policymaking will lead to a restriction of both. They also recognize the rights of others--even groups or individuals they find personally distasteful (such as the Ku Klux Klan's right to demonstrate in public or a murderer's right to a fair trial)--in order to uphold important higher principles. The uncommitted, movable middle, which contains most Americans, falls into Stages 3 and 4. They typically align their opinions with those in authority or whoever seems most credible. In surveys, they express tolerance for human rights and diversity, yet consistently reject such principles as the Bill of Rights. Typically not critical thinkers or well-informed on issues, these individuals are easily swayed by arguments from both progressives and orthodox, but react against perceived extremism from any quarter.

Leadership Applications

Kohlberg and others in the field of moral reasoning provide some useful insights that apply easily to school leadership.

* A person's system of moral thought is usually consistent internally and falls generally within one of the three moral levels. People have, however, competing values and beliefs that require prioritization. Some will progress on certain issues because they face a moral dilemma, such as parents in one district who were opposed to the school levy but didn't want the schools to cut extracurricular programs.

* Individuals advance (but never go back) on the moral scale as a result of moral dilemmas (real or contrived) that challenge their thinking. Because individuals naturally seek mental equilibrium, such moral conflicts infuse them with a need to know. For example, parents in a high school were skeptical about a new sexuality education curriculum but changed their views after hearing facts about HIV infection rates among teenagers in their community. This process also can

be promoted by engaging individuals in “perspective-taking”--the process of asking them to imagine the realities of others as their own: “What if it were your child?”

* Individuals operating at a higher stage of morality can understand the moral perspective of someone at a lower stage (because they have been there), but not vice versa. This explains the frustration felt by many progressives who can comprehend and even respect the beliefs of orthodox individuals but do not receive the same in return.

* Being religious does not necessarily equate with being morally advanced. Strongly religious people fall into all stages on the Kohlberg scale (and across all religions). However, an inverse relationship has been found between orthodox religious belief and principled moral reasoning--that is, the more dogmatic the belief system, the lower the moral stage.

* One’s level of education is not a factor in morality. This explains why intelligent and well-educated orthodox and progressive individuals can strongly disagree on moral issues. What matters is not how highly someone is educated but rather how they were educated: Were they exposed to many different points of view or one dominant view of the world? Some seminaries produce graduates who are highly educated but only within one ideology. Some universities promote only politically correct views. Education that fosters moral development requires exposure to many different philosophical perspectives and value systems.

* The moral camps do not necessarily coincide with political philosophy or affiliation. Ted (“the Unabomber”) Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh, convicted in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, were left-wing and right-wing radicals, respectively. Both were orthodox individuals who believed in “one right answer” and were dismissive of others’ views and rights. Republicans and Democrats fall into all moral levels.

* Higher-level beliefs transcend but include the beliefs of lower moral levels. People operating at the conventional and postconventional levels are motivated somewhat by moral arguments from earlier stages of their development. Thus, all people are self-interested to some extent.

Advocacy Steps

This analysis has implications for school administrators as they promote programs to various constituencies: parents, students, staff, school boards and the public.

Most importantly, explain programs in diverse ways to address the many moral perspectives of the audience. When talking with individuals or groups, be sure to emphasize at least three key points about the program, designed to address all three moral levels.

Preconventional individuals will be swayed by appeals to established authority or self-serving interests. Examples: "This program has the support of (the president or all major educational organizations)." "Failing to address the need now will cost you higher taxes later."

Conventional individuals will best hear appeals to social approval or maintenance of the status quo: "Other districts already are doing this." "Most parents support this." "If we want to keep our school on the right track, we need this program." Postconventional individuals will care about the universal principles: "Our students have the right to the best education we can offer them." "This program is the fair and just thing to do."

Pay attention to the movable middle and don't take actions that will appear extremist to them. Remember that long-term change happens slowly in small increments. Don't let your passionate supporters or opponents push you into going too fast or too far, which could result in a backlash and lost ground. Don't waste time trying to appease or gain support of extremists who represent a small yet vocal minority. Deeply entrenched, prejudiced individuals who feel morally justified in their actions are difficult, if not impossible, to affect because their core identity often is centered around their beliefs. Such individuals are unlikely to listen to logical arguments. Focus your time and energy on the demographic that is more likely to change their attitudes--the middle. Use methods of educating that have been proven effective in increasing knowledge and changing attitudes, that is methods that foster perspective taking. Avoid the use of war language, personal attacks and emotional outbursts, which frighten and alienate the middle. Take the high road in a calm, logical and unperturbed manner. Give opponents room to undermine themselves. Listen for opportunities to expose the full extent and consequences of their vision. School leaders face a moral dilemma of their own: how to advocate for necessary programs, while respecting the diverse views of stakeholders. Understanding how individuals view issues through their own moral lenses and knowing how to articulate advocacy messages accordingly so that they can be most widely heard can help administrators more successfully gain and retain support for controversial programs.

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Kohlberg's Hierarchy of Moral Development

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The following is a summary of what Lawrence Kohlberg details in his book, *The Psychology of Moral Development*, which includes his six-stage hierarchy of moral development.

Level I: Preconventional

* Stage 1: Egocentric Orientation. Individual is motivated by obedience to authority figures and avoidance of punishment. Doesn't consider interests of others or see more than one point of view.

* Stage 2: Instrumental Orientation. Self-interested and exchange-oriented: "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours."

Level II: Conventional

* Stage 3: Interpersonal Conformity. Individual does good deeds to gain approval

and meet expectations of own social group: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

* Stage 4: Social Order Orientation. Rule and law-oriented. Conforms to maintain status quo (social or religious). Fears a breakdown of the system if enough people do wrong.

Level III: Postconventional

* Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation. Individual respects others' rights and is aware that people hold a variety of opinions and values. Recognizes some universal rights like life and liberty. Realizes that law and morality sometimes conflict.

* Stage 6: Universal Principles Orientation. Follows self-chosen universal principles of justice, such as equality and dignity of all human beings. When laws violate these, individual follows the principles.

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