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Avoiding Moral Disengagement

Have you ever wondered why good people make unethical – perhaps criminal – decisions? The cause is often moral disengagement, a situation where behaviors are at odds with normal beliefs. If your moral compass goes haywire, you may do things you'll come to regret.

Four things lead to moral disengagement: moral justification, dehumanization, minimizing, and displacing responsibility. Understanding these helps avoid their insidious effects.

Moral justification occurs when we overlook bad outcomes for individuals based “on the greater good.” For example, sometimes our product injures people but we rationalize that by saying lower safety standards make it more affordable. We might even calculate that it's cheaper to pay product liability claims than redesign the product. This is a matter of thinking of costs, not health, and has happened repeatedly over the years in automobile manufacturing, to cite just one industry.

Dehumanization is common throughout human history. Adolf Hitler's final solution for European Jewry is a noteworthy example, but you need not be a dictator to fall into this trap. Just characterizing someone in a negative way (terrible, greedy, devious, etc.) can lead to punitive behavior.

Minimizing to justify our actions works well with moral justification. “It's only 100 lives. That's just a tiny fraction of the number of people who die in automobile accidents every year.”

Finally, we displace responsibility: “I was only following orders” or “I don't make the rules, I just carry them out.”

Moral disengagement is more likely in stressful situations because our thinking shifts to a narrow, short-term focus mode. If you are in a tense situation facing an important decision, zoom out from your close-up focus and expand your perspective. Also, reframe the question, like: “Can we prove it's safe?” instead of “Can we prove it's dangerous?” Re-engage and think about people, not just statistics. There will always be judgment calls and trade-offs, just ensure that the choices are thoughtfully made.



Tom

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