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Moral Attitude and Temptation

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Moral attitudes are shaped by upbringing. Temptation then tests them. Self-interest can pull a person away from what they say they believe.



Hercules at the Crossroads by Annibale Carracci, a classic picture of choosing between pleasure and virtue. Photo: Annibale Carracci, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

1 How are moral attitudes formed?

A moral attitude is a settled view of right and wrong. It starts early. Children pick it up by watching the people around them.

Who teaches first?

The family teaches first. Albert Bandura found that children copy parents, friends and teachers. They also copy characters in media. A child who sees honesty at home learns honesty.

Can early habits change?

Yes. Bandura held that wrong habits learned early can be treated if caught early. So guidance later in life still helps.

What is the memory hook?

We learn right and wrong by watching.

> **Quick check 1.** Children can copy values from parents, friends and teachers. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: simplypsychology.org; newworldencyclopedia.org

2 What is a moral mandate?

Some beliefs feel like moral duties. Psychologist Linda Skitka calls these moral convictions. People who see a moral basis for an attitude resist group pressure. They also distance themselves from those who disagree.

How do mandates change judgement?

Skitka calls this the moral mandate effect. A person with a strong conviction judges a decision by its outcome. If the outcome matches the belief, they accept it. Fairness of the process counts for much less.

Do mandates resist change?

Yes. The more a person sees an attitude as moral, the less likely it is to change under pressure. Such people also keep distance from those who disagree.

What does this mean for officers?

Strong convictions can help an officer resist pressure to do wrong. But they can also make an officer reject fair rules. Good training teaches both courage and respect for process.

What is the memory hook?

Moral beliefs hold firm, and outcome beats process.

> **Quick check 2.** Skitka says people with moral convictions focus most on process fairness. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: las.uic.edu; sites.lafayette.edu

3 What is the slippery slope?

Few people decide to become corrupt in one step. Most drift. A small lapse makes the next one feel less wrong. This drift is called incrementalism or the slippery slope.

What does the research show?

Francesca Gino and Max Bazerman ran a study in 2009. People noticed wrongdoing less when it grew slowly than when it appeared suddenly. They compared it to the boiling frog, which misses slow heat.

What does it look like at work?

Taking office supplies home is a small step. Padding an expense report is a bigger one. Each step feels close to the last, so no alarm rings.

What is the memory hook?

Small lapses make the next one easier.

Quick check 3. Gradual wrongdoing is noticed more than sudden wrongdoing. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu; corruptie.org

4 Slope or steep cliff?

Not all corruption is gradual. A 2017 study asked a different question. Does bribery come from a slow slope or a sudden chance?

What did Köbis test?

Researchers ran four studies using a bidding game. Players could bribe an official to win a contract. One group saw a single large bribe. Another saw a small bribe first and a larger one later. The total cost was the same.

What did they find?

People bribed far more often when the large bribe came as a sudden offer. They still said bribery was wrong. The authors call this a steep cliff, not a slope.

Why does it matter?

A sudden golden chance can pull people over a line. Institutions should spot such high-temptation moments and plan for them.

What is the memory hook?

Corruption can creep or leap.

Quick check 4. The Köbis studies found a sudden bribe offer drew more bribery. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: psychologicalscience.org

5 Guarding against corruption

Understanding temptation helps design safeguards. If lapses begin small, stop them early. If chances arrive suddenly, prepare for those moments.

What helps at the start?

Gino's research suggests small ethical nudges. Signing an honesty statement first, before reporting, cut cheating. Prevention works best before minor missteps become habits.

What helps against sudden chances?

Institutions can find the high-temptation situations. For example, one-time contracts and licence approvals. They could then add checks, such as a second signature or rotation of duties.

Where does training fit?

Training should not just assume good conduct. It should practise the hard moments. Officers can rehearse how to say no, and when to report a lapse.

What is the memory hook?

Catch the first lapse and plan for the big chance.

Quick check 5. Ethical nudges work best after misconduct is common. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: corruptie.org; psychologicalscience.org

Practice MCQs

1. Under Skitka's 'moral mandate effect', a person with a strong moral conviction judges a decision mainly by what?

A. Whether the outcome matches the conviction

B. What the majority prefers

C. What the law says

D. How fair the process was

See answer ↓

2. Gino and Bazerman (2009) found that people overlook unethical behaviour more when it does what?

A. Involves large sums

B. Is done by strangers

C. Appears suddenly

D. Erodes gradually

See answer ↓

3. The 2017 Köbis bribery studies described bribery that happens through a sudden large offer as a what?

A. Rolling stone

B. Slippery slope

C. Steep cliff

D. Broken window

See answer ↓

4. According to Bandura, children learn values mainly by what?

A. Taking exams

B. Observing and copying others

C. Reading about law

D. Memorising rules

See answer ↓

5. Where do ethical nudges work best, according to Gino's research?

A. Only in senior posts

B. Before small lapses become habits

C. During yearly audits

D. After a scandal breaks

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The answer is whether the outcome matches the conviction. Fairness of the process counts for much less. Memory hook: outcome beats process. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The answer is erodes gradually. They compared it to the boiling frog. Memory hook: small lapses make the next one easier. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The answer is a steep cliff. People bribed more often when the large bribe came suddenly. Memory hook: corruption can creep or leap. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The answer is observing and copying others. Parents, friends and teachers are strong models. Memory hook: we learn right and wrong by watching. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The answer is before small lapses become habits. Early nudges prevent the first slip. Memory hook: catch the first lapse. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** Observation teaches a great deal. ↑ 1
2. **False.** it is false. They focus on the outcome. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. Gradual change is noticed less. ↑ 3
4. **True.** They called it a steep cliff. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. They work best early. ↑ 5

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