

**How to Enable Amoral Managers to Overcome their Ethical Lethargy**  
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**Author information:**

**Lyse Langlois, Full professor**

Department of Industrial Relations

Laval University

Pavilion J.A. De Sève, 1025 av. des sciences humaines

Quebec (Quebec) G1V 0A6, Canada

Tel.: +1 (418) 655-2131, ext. 3483

[lyse.langlois@rlt.ulaval.ca](mailto:lyse.langlois@rlt.ulaval.ca)

**Jennifer Centeno, doctorate candidate**

Department of Industrial Relations

Laval University

Pavilion J.A. De Sève, 1025 av. des sciences humaines

Quebec (Quebec) G1V 0A6, Canada

[jennifer.centeno@rlt.ulaval.ca](mailto:jennifer.centeno@rlt.ulaval.ca)

**ABSTRACT:**

Scandals and allegations of misconduct have highlighted the existence of a form of ethical blindness within our organisations. While the perceived erosion of integrity and ethics at work is certainly worrying, it urges us to increase our understanding of the causes at the root of these acts. Our research in the field of ethical leadership has revealed the central role played by ethical sensitivity. The distinction between moral, immoral and amoral management – as defined by Carroll – now enable us to focus more specifically on a group of leaders qualified as unintentional amoral managers. An analysis of data collected in both the private and public sectors allows us to identify elements that may enable these leaders to come out of their involuntary lethargy.

**Keywords:**

Ethical dilemma situations - Ethical Leadership – Ethical Sensitivity - Leadership theory - Organisational ethics

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<sup>1</sup> An article including the data presented in these proceedings has been submitted to an academic journal.

This presentation explores the correlation between ethical leadership and Carroll's [1] moral leadership taxonomy. In light of this typology, we circumscribe the group that is of principal interest to our research: unintentionally amoral managers. Main elements identified as enabling amoral managers to come out of their involuntary ethical lethargy are then presented, based on supporting empirical data.

## **CONCEPTIONS OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP**

Since 2002, our research in the field of ethical leadership has revealed the central role played by ethical sensitivity as well as its ties to meaningful ethical practice.

By analysing the leadership profile of managers identified by their professional association colleagues as ethical leaders, we found an ethical sensitivity coloured by three shades: considerations of justice, of care and of critique [2]. Research conducted among managers aimed at gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms that enable them to exercise their ethical leadership. Findings enabled us to propose a conceptual definition of ethical leadership, thereby contributing to bridge a gap in this area of study. Indeed, Yukl et al. [3] note the absence of a clear definition of ethical leadership in the existing literature. In our own research, ethical leadership is defined as a social practice by which professional judgment is autonomously exercised. It constitutes a resource rooted in three ethical dimensions – essential to the activation of ethical sensitivity – as well as a powerful capacity to act in a responsible and capable manner (Authors et al., in press). Through Carroll's taxonomy, we have further defined moral, immoral and amoral management, paying particular attention to unintentional amoral managers.

### **Moral, immoral and amoral managers**

In his influential 1987 article, Carroll suggested that three types of managers make up the business landscape: immoral, moral and amoral managers. In doing so, Carroll wished to bring attention to a category of leaders that was – and arguably still is to this day – rarely discussed.

For many of us, examples of immoral management readily come to mind. Headline-making scandals and allegations have regrettably supplied a veritable array of illustrations of organisational and individual misconduct. For Carroll, immoral management “is not only devoid of ethical principles or precepts but also positively and actively opposed to what is ethical” [1, p.9]. Here, it is understood that managers choose to act unethically – presumably in pursuit of personal or organisational gain – and do so knowingly. In contrast, moral management “aspires to succeed, but only within the confines of sound ethical precepts – that is, standards predicated upon such ideals as fairness, justice, and due process” [1, p.10]. While managerial objectives are pursued, this quest is counterbalanced by a concern for both legality – in both the letter and spirit of the law – and morality.

Amoral management is found in a somewhat neutral, middle ground to what is often referred to as the dichotomy of right or wrong, of what is ethical or unethical. It is said that amoral management “pursues profitability as its goal, but (...) does not cognitively attend to moral issues that may be intertwined with that pursuit” [1, p.11]. The concept of intentionality allows a further definition of this moral indifference and the distinction of two subtypes of managers. Firstly, intentionally amoral managers do not include ethical preoccupations, or the possibility of any related ramifications, into their decision-making process or practice as such are thought to be irrelevant or inapplicable to the issue at hand. As Carroll states, these individuals simply believe that in the game that is business, different rules apply – a message certainly reinforced by unbridled laissez-faire capitalism and advocated by tenants of the shareholder approach. From this profit-centric perspective, primary attention must be given to bottom-line results and ethical considerations are seen as belonging outside the business realm. Finally, unintentionally amoral managers also fail to consider ethical dimensions, but not due to any claims of ethical neutrality. Rather, these dimensions are overlooked because they are not perceived. This involuntary inattention can in turn be attributed to a lack of moral awareness or ethical sensitivity.

### **Conceptual reflexions based on our research program**

Our reflexion follows the line of thinking set out by our doctoral thesis [4]. . Its aim was to identify individuals’ moral actions when faced with ethical dilemmas. These were in turn typified based on the three ethics previously mentioned [5]. In the years that followed, hundreds of interviews were conducted with school administrators and leaders, health administrators, engineers and public service managers. The obtained data allows us to classify various sources for unintentional and intentional amoral management. An exploration of these eight sources then enables the identification of conditions that appear essential to unlock individuals’, and organisations, ethical potential.

### **References**

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