12 Angry Men: An Analysis of the Movie from an Ethical Perspective

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Introduction

In the movie, *12 Angry Men*, by Fonda, Rose, and Lumet (1957), a jury of twelve is faced with the responsibility of determining whether or not a young man is guilty of murder. The jury members, each with a different bias and world view, cannot at first agree. For quite a while it appears they would not be able to do so. The jury's dilemma exemplifies a definition of organizational crisis by Pearson and Clair (1998) as quoted by Christensen and Kohls (2003), and which is now accepted by most of those working in the field (p. 330).

> An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly. (p. 330)

Certainly the jury room was a high impact event requiring a rapid decision. It was also clear that the jury did not have a good idea on how to make that decision. The main protagonist, an architect played by actor Henry Fonda, is able to build community and under his leadership, helps facilitate a unanimous decision on the part of the jury.

Building community

At the outset, most of the jury members thought the young man was guilty. It seemed unanimous so a straw poll was requested. To the jurors' surprise, the architect was opposed. When asked why he was opposed to a guilty verdict in the face of clear evidence, he responded by saying that whether or not the young man was guilty, considering the terrible potential consequences to the young man, they the jury, at least owed him a serious discussion about the evidence. Reluctantly, the jury agreed they could do that. What the architect had done was to humanize the youth to a slight degree, and create a small crack in the juror's consciousness as to

the accused's intrinsic worth. Even if they viewed the young man as a monster deserving the death penalty, they had in effect admitted he had some worth. This seems in line with Kouzes and Posner's (2011) admonition to "shift focus from self to others through values" (p. 65). Further, in getting the jury to agree to that small concession, they inadvertently began to form community, because "common commitments form the basis of community" (Spitzer, 2000, p. 214).

Mitigating opposing views

According to Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, (2009), "cultural differences often lead to miscommunication which can and does cause conflict" (p. 34). Such was the case in the jury room. Each juror viewed the situation through the lens of his own history and bias, and the clash of worldviews created tension and conflict. The tendency with most leaders is to work toward minimizing conflict or tension as quickly as possible. The architect did not. Heifetz (1994) says, "systems under threat try to restore equilibrium...yet there is nothing ideal or good about a state of equilibrium per se. Indeed adaptive change probably requires sustained periods of disequilibrium" (p. 35).

> The more diverse organizations are, the more likely they are to experience conflict. It's only natural that people from varied backgrounds will not always see eye to eye. But rather than suppress dissent, the most credible leaders actively encourage it and demonstrate an appreciation for different points of view—at least the kind that are constructive. (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, P. 75)

The period of emotional disequilibrium allowed the jury members to divulge their worldviews and provided a platform for the architect to begin to discuss foundation principles upon which judgment rightfully should be made. He came to realize that the reasons for voting

for conviction were quite diverse. Some voted from prejudice, others from ignorance, and a couple of the jurors appeared to be simply voting with the majority. The architect worked toward establishing community principles.

> Without principles, we are reduced to emotions, intuitions, or a harms-benefits calculus, but all of these lack "backbone." Emotions can change, intuitions can be rationalized, a harms-benefits calculus can favor one group or another. To move beyond the subjectivity and ambiguity of these three arbitrary approaches to ethics, we need to set up quasi-inviolable principles upon which the community agrees. (Spitzer, 2000, pp. 204-205)

The architect encouraged each jury member to express his view and in the process began to engender trust in his leadership. "You must listen to the philosophies of others. Building trust begins by building a personal relationship through listening. This means listening everywhere to everyone" (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, P. 70). "*Comprehensive listening* is motivated by the need to understand and to retain messages...and "*critical listening* leads to evaluation (Johnson, 2005, p. 225). Both are essential in determining solutions to ethical problems (p. 225).

At one point in the film, many of the jury members stood up and turned their backs to one of the jurors who was articulating a position repulsive to them. The architect did not turn his back to the speaker. Instead, he stayed engaged. According to Kouzes and Posner (2011), a leader cannot sustain credibility without connecting face-to-face (p. 72). The architect was able to develop trust in his leadership as he encouraged each person to fully express his ideas. He respected their ideas and took steps to make sure others did as well. When a couple of men were playing tic-tac-toe while discussions were going on, he walked over and yanked the paper away from them without any comment, but the message was loud and clear.

Finding common ground is vitally important in managing organizational conflict, and is needed as soon as possible. "Determining key shared values is not a technical problem-solving exercise; it's a process in which all the parties must participate (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, P. 88). An interesting thing to note is that as

> team members actively voice diverse positions, the group becomes more resilient. Members are more likely to see their part within the whole, and their satisfaction becomes less contingent on whether they agree with the decision and more on their willingness to commit because of involvement in the process. (p. 75)

Under the architect's leadership the group came to realize that personal opinions and bias were not valid for making a proper judgment, and only true facts should be considered. The process was difficult. Trusted facts had to be separated from untrusted ones. Nevertheless, the jury pressed forward because the architect reminded them of a common purpose—they had to come to a unanimous vote. With regard to developing a cooperative team Kouzes and Posner (2011) say, "They must perceive that there is a common purpose they are all striving to achieve—and that success depends upon them all reaching these goals" (p. 96).

One of the critical elements is to help people save face when they have been publically proven to have been wrong. Reconciliation is needed to smooth over hurt feelings, shattered egos, or hurt feelings. Bringing people together in unity is the job of the leader (Kouzes & Posner, 2011, p. 107). The architect clearly demonstrated this at the end of the movie when the main holdout finally broke down and agreed to vote with the rest of the jury. He had dug in hard based on a personal hatred and bias, and at the end was clearly devastated. The rest of the jury had filed out leaving the architect alone with him. Instead of simply walking out, the architect

went over to the coat closet, took the man's coat off the hanger, and walked over to hand it to him. The architect's personal gesture of friendship was clearly that of reconciliation.

Ethical theory

It isn't fully clear from the movie whether or not the architect had made up his mind at the start as to the young man's guilt. We are led to believe that the architect was an ethical man, and if so, we would be led to believe by his statements early on that he hadn't. What is clear, he had respect for the rights of the accused and viewed him as intrinsically worthy of due process. The architect regarded fairness and justice as high standards and principles. He had developed a strong moral character in line with classical Aristotelian and Platonic virtues (Johnson, 2007, pp. 41-42), in which he displayed strong integrity, self-control, and courage in the face of overwhelming adversity. He demonstrated what Aristotle believed to be true, that character and action are not separated (p. 42). He had, as Ciulla (2004) says, a "shared vision of the good" (p. xv), where justice could prevail, common ground could be found, and people would not be dehumanized in the process.

The architect's ethical system was clearly established on principles and virtue instead of strict evaluation of consequences. It was not a relativistic system in which there were no moral values, or an ethical egoistic theory in which decisions were made based on what was best for him (Wall, 2008, pp. 18-26). It was not a utilitarian or consequential system which "if an action produces more benefit than harm, it should be considered" (Spitzer, 2000, pp. 207-208). Unlike consequentialists who do not believe that any particular actions are intrinsically wrong (p. 208), the architect's ethical system seemed to indicate he felt there were things that were intrinsically right. It seemed to align with a deontological theory, where "we ought to pursue justice even if some harmful or non-beneficial consequences could follow from it" (p. 210). The architect made

it clear that it was better to risk letting a potentially dangerous man free if it could not be proven he was guilty. The architect's ethical values were in line with Wall's (2008) deontological rule-centered theory, in which *beneficence* (doing good and not evil), and *justice* are emphasized, where beneficence is doing good and not evil, and justice is rendered because all human beings have intrinsic worth, and as such, should be provided equality when it comes to moral and legal rights (pp. 56-60).

Extrapolated principles for the workplace

"At the highest stage of moral development persons are guided by near-universal ethical principles of justice such as equality of human rights and respect for individual dignity" (Burns, 1978, p. 42). Those principles form the foundation for Ciulla's (2004) description in which relationships are described as "a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good" (p. xv). Some may question the extent or role of morality in the workplace. But what characterizes morality? Is it a religious viewpoint or persuasion? According to Burns (1978), morality is defined as "justice such as equality of human rights and respect for individual dignity" (p. 42). It is to that which I aspire. I am committed to a deontological approach based on those universal principles. I believe that a deontological principle-based ethical theory as described by Spitzer (2000), or Wall (2008), is the one that gives leaders the best chance of adjusting to rapidly changing environments and gaining credibility among subordinates. Credibility is the basis of leadership (Kouzes &Posner, 2011, p. xi).

Building community should be high on the leader's list. Learning to appreciate the constituents, listening intently to all with an eye to understanding, promoting constructive controversy, finding common ground, etc, are all needed (Kouzes &Posner, 2011, pp. 62-91).

"Creating win-win situations underscores the central role played by leaders in both advocating cooperation and building a sense of community" (p. 95).

Ultimately, I believe a deontological principle based theory is best suited to help effect true organizational transformation whereby a leader is able to "engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns (1978p. 20). It would seem that to Burns (1978) or Ciulla (2004), transforming leadership is, in its essence, one in which the leader is able to raise the level of justice, dignity and human rights for all, and "ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has transforming effect on both" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). It may, in the process, convert "followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents (Burns, 1978, p. 4).

Conclusion

In the movie, *12 Angry Men*, by Fonda, Rose, and Lumet (1957), an architect emerges as the leader who is able to build community and unity in decision in spite of diverse egos, bias, prejudice, and motivations. His character exemplifies a principle based ethical system in which beneficence and justice are key elements. A movie is scripted. Real life, however, is infinitely more complicated. In rapidly changing uncertain environments, a principle centered deontological theory which focuses on "the near-universal ethical principles of justice such as equality of human rights and respect for individual dignity" (Burns, 1978, p. 42) will likely be the best guide, one that "raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has transforming effect on both" (p. 20).

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