

Teaching ethics and ethical leadership with the Harvard Everest simulation

Elena Lvina

*Department of MGT, Saint Joseph's University (PA),
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – This is a step-by-step guide for teaching Ethics and Ethical Leadership utilizing the Harvard Everest Leadership and Teams Simulation, V.3. The suggested approach is focused on facilitating a discussion and coaching students to recognize and solve problems by applying moral theory explicitly and deliberately. Applying this approach can also help them develop a habit of analyzing one's own and others' behavior using ethical lenses and principles of authentic leadership. It offers practical debrief steps and specific discussion questions that can be used as a standalone resource or alongside the Harvard teaching note accompanying the simulation.

Design/methodology/approach – This innovative approach enables teaching and coaching students on the ethical aspects of their leadership and decision-making based on this hands-on experience with the Harvard Everest Leadership and Teams Simulation. This approach enriches the original HBR teaching suggestions by enabling students to recognize moral dilemmas, confront typical rationalizations and practice ethical actions and decision-making in real time.

Findings – In-class discussion and student reflection assignments provide evidence of the method's effectiveness in translating values into impactful insights and enhanced likelihood of ethical behaviors in real-life scenarios. Students' end-of-class feedback and course evaluations often cite the benefits of using the Everest simulation as a backdrop for raising self-awareness and practicing ethical decision-making.

Practical implications – The approach discussed in the paper can serve as a flexible framework for analyzing and debriefing the HBR Everest simulation and other simulations, "survival scenario" exercises and activities designed to teach and facilitate practicing ethical leadership, authentic leadership and ethical decision making. It is adaptable and can be effectively applied across various disciplines centered around ethical leadership, teamwork, communication and decision-making in higher education and business.

Originality/value – Harvard Everest Leadership and Teams Simulation is among the most popular ones in business education and is used by teachers worldwide (Roberto & Edmondson, 2017). While a comprehensive teaching note on communication and group dynamics is available through Harvard Business Publishing, it still needs to address the ethical issues students face during the simulation. This paper provides a roadmap for instructors who want to improve the student experience with ethical decision-making and ethical leadership.

Keywords Teaching and learning of leadership, Harvard Everest simulation, Moral theory, Ethical leadership, Ethical decision making

Paper type Technical paper

In higher education and business, ethical leadership and ethical decision-making are significant learning outcomes (Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002). Given the current focus of business and business education on humanistic management recently reinforced by the statements of The Business Roundtable (2019) and the new accreditation standards of AACSB

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(2020), it would be reasonable to expect teaching ethics to become particularly pertinent at business schools. However, studies have shown that business education often fails to address these goals and is sometimes even reported to decrease ethical behavior among graduates (Drumwright, Prentice, & Biasucci, 2015). To some degree, erroneous application of traditional pedagogies or insufficient use of hands-on experience may contribute to the issue. Discussions and research projects are cited to be the most frequently used pedagogies (Jenkins, 2013); however, these methods tend to represent the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).

Consequently, some traditional pedagogies may underemphasize leadership developmental and skill-building aspects critical in business education. Reflections, simulations, and experiential learning could achieve personal and professional growth activities and ethical leadership behaviors. However, these pedagogies are reportedly infrequent (Jenkins, 2013). Hence, an important goal of raising self-awareness while building ethical, trust-based relationships is also missing (Berkovich, 2014).

Noteworthy, using team-based simulations can effectively address these omissions. This method is known to facilitate more profound learning, encourage reflective conversations, and foster leadership development (Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005; Lewin, 1948). Additionally, online simulations have distinct advantages and added value (Lovelace & Dyck, 2020). The Harvard Everest Leadership and Teams Simulation is among the most popular in business education and is used by teachers worldwide. It garnered prestigious accolades, is offered in five different languages, and is currently in its third edition (Harvard Business Publishing Education and Roberto & Edmondson, 2017). While a comprehensive teaching note on communication and group dynamics accompanies the simulation and is available through Harvard Business Publishing, it still needs to address the ethical issues students face during the simulation. This paper provides a roadmap for instructors who want to improve the student experience with ethical decision-making and ethical leadership.

By integrating this approach, a business ethics instructor can meet multiple goals that are sought after but hard to achieve by traditional methods. For example, structured self-reflection can facilitate students' self-knowledge of their personal values and the role values play in real life (Branson, 2007). It can also help develop a strong foundation for ethical leadership grounded in self-awareness and transparent action (Kiersch & Peters, 2017) required by authentic leadership (George, 2003; 2010; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) and servant leadership focusing on the needs of others (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Given that, as well as raising interest in Ethics among various stakeholders, it is reasonable to expect a global outreach and extensive use of this guide among both academics and practitioners.

The fundamental principles and methodologies outlined in this paper can be utilized in conjunction with or independently of the Harvard Everest simulation (Roberto & Edmondson, 2017). They can also function as a structured framework for debriefing activities centered on ethical leadership, teamwork, and decision-making in other simulations and "survival scenario" type activities. The scope of this paper is limited to the theories commonly used in business ethics education: We offer specific discussion questions and steps designed for systematically examining and applying the concepts of rights, Utilitarianism, fairness, and Rawls's "veil of ignorance."

Integrating ethics into simulation debrief

Harvard Everest Leadership simulation: Description and learning objectives

The simulation uses the dramatic context of a Mount Everest expedition to reinforce student learning on group dynamics and leadership. Students play one of five roles on a team of climbers attempting to reach the mountain's summit. During each round of play, the team must discuss whether to attempt the next camp en route to the summit, and the team must also make

decisions in response to three hidden challenges. Each participant is given unique information and resources they can use at their discretion to receive individual and team points. Individual goals are not necessarily aligned with other team members or overall team goals. Learning objectives listed for the simulation's teaching notes include how to build, participate in, and lead effective teams, as well as examine how leaders shape team decision-making and performance in competitive and time-sensitive situations (Roberto & Edmondson, 2017).

Learning objectives for integrating ethical leadership into simulation debrief

In this guidance, we advocate for the following teaching sequence with the Everest simulation and other similar simulations. First, moral theories and leadership styles should be taught. Also, the students need to understand the central principles of the leadership theories, such as authentic leadership and servant leadership, before the simulation. We recommend using the assessment tools for the leadership styles so the students can see where they stand on each and relate to the theories (e.g. Walumbawa *et al.*, 2008). As a second step, the students should complete the simulation. It can be done either in class or outside the class time. Upon the completion of the simulation, the guided discussion using the questions outlined below should take place. Depending on the course learning objectives and available time, an instructor can use the entire guidance or hand-pick the moral theories and questions that are most relevant to students. Finally, an optional individual assignment focusing on the reflection of the student's experience with the simulation and simulation discussion can be added.

As designed, the simulation offers multiple instances when individual goals are not shared with the team and allows for exploration of the impact of team dynamics on performance. However, given the nature of the assigned activity—a perilous ascent to the world's tallest mountain with a history of claiming over 300 lives (Walsh, 2013)—we argue that disclosing information such as prior health conditions (e.g. asthma) or enticing rewards (e.g. \$1 million for reaching the summit, extra points for the leader for ensuring every climber reaches the top) can transform certain decisions from being merely self-serving to outright unethical. Given the substantial interdependence among team members and the potentially life-threatening consequences arising from corrupt or selfish decisions made by the leader or another participant, it is crucial to recognize team members as stakeholders who warrant ethical consideration and equitable treatment.

Integrating moral theory into the simulation debrief has three objectives: providing the students with a “moral compass” when identifying a moral dilemma, developing a habit of continuous deliberate reflection upon one's experience when dealing with it, and practicing ethical actions in solving the dilemma.

Upon completing the simulation and debriefing with these guidelines, the students will:

- (1) Recognize and solve problems by applying moral theory explicitly and deliberately,
- (2) Develop a habit of analyzing one's own and others' behavior using ethical lenses,
- (3) Manage one's own and others' actions through ethical lenses.

The approach described here can also facilitate the development of a robust foundation for Authentic leadership (George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) characterized by high self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective (Walumbawa *et al.*, 2008). Authentic leadership emphasizes leaders being true to their values and beliefs while fostering genuine relationships with followers (George (2010). Luthans and Avolio (2003) linked authentic leadership to positive outcomes like higher employee engagement and performance. Walumbwa *et al.* (2008) found that authentic leadership enhances individual and team effectiveness by promoting open communication, inclusive decision-making, and follower development. According to the research, this leadership style enhances follower satisfaction and performance and contributes to sustainable organizational success by cultivating a supportive

and ethical work environment. Kiersch and Peters' study emphasizes that fostering these leadership qualities in students can lead to the emergence of leaders who prioritize the well-being and growth of their followers, promote open communication, and engage in balanced decision-making (2017). As Kiersch and Peters (2017) proposed, integrating authentic leadership and servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011) results in a comprehensive leadership development approach to cultivating both authentic and service-oriented leaders. Our approach emphasizes the discussion and reflection points by teaching how to prioritize the well-being of others, practice open communication, and engage in ethical behavior in everyday life.

Thus, our facilitated discussion and reflection approach will help students learn how to:

- (1) Develop a deep understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs
- (2) Communicate openly, share their true thoughts and feelings, and encourage others to do the same.
- (3) Consider multiple perspectives before making decisions, seek input from others, and strive to make fair and informed choices, avoiding bias, including self-serving bias.

Teaching ethics and ethical leadership with Everest simulation and Simulation's debrief

Using team-based simulations along with the facilitated discussion and reflection moves students from learning about Ethics ("remembering," as per Bloom's taxonomy) to practicing Ethical behavior and leadership (teaching objectives corresponding to "analyzing," "evaluating," and "creating" (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Team-based simulations, including online ones, are known to facilitate higher teaching objectives through reflective conversations (Nichols & Wright, 2015) and practicing behavior conducive to ethical leadership (Kayes *et al.*, 2005; Lovelace & Dyck, 2020). As Kurt Lewin's research demonstrated (1948), group dynamics significantly impact individual behavior, decision-making, and performance. Teaching with Harvard Everest Simulation allows observing, analyzing, and changing group and individual behavior in the natural settings while applying the Moral theories and Leadership models studied in class. By doing this, the approach capitalizes on Lewin's work of "action research," a participatory approach that combines theory and practice to solve social problems (Lewin, 1948).

In this guide, we primarily focus on how self-serving behavior and withholding information can affect ethical decision-making and ethical leadership. As we demonstrate, the latter impedes team performance and is also potentially critical to team survival, thus putting the conversation on the team members as stakeholders front and center. This section builds on real-life examples of student unethical behaviors during the simulation and their typical reasoning behind it provided by the students in the debrief. After using the simulation for almost ten years, we have to report that nearly 80% of graduate student teams and almost 90% of undergraduate teams fail to share sensitive information. While there is occasional information sharing, it typically happens spontaneously: Just after a team member mentions her individual goals, others start doing it, too. Even then, the most sensitive information, like money or health issues, often never gets shared. Hence, we propose to train the students to solve this problem by applying moral theory thoughtfully and purposefully while practicing analyzing one's and others' behavior using ethical lenses.

Setting a stage for a difficult conversation: General questions

At the beginning of the simulation debrief, we propose to start with several questions assessing students' perception of their individual and team success:

- (1) How do you evaluate the quality of your performance and communication during the simulation?

- (2) Did your team discuss your goals before starting the climb? Did you share your individual goals?
- (3) How did you and your team members treat the information on health preconditions and monetary awards? Was it shared? At what point of time? If not, why, in your opinion?
- (4) How did this (sharing vs withholding the information) affect team trust?
- (5) Did you exhibit Authentic leadership? Servant leadership?

As we mentioned, you may expect that, at first, the students do not recognize any ethical problem or violation of the premises of Authentic leadership when withholding sensitive information. Even when explicitly pointed to cases of questionable behavior, they rationalize their behavior and eagerly come up with reasoning that appears “legit” to them. The primary purpose of this discussion is to enable students to realize the potential issues with their behavior due to their careful analysis, reflection, and peer learning rather than telling them the “right answer.” Explicitly applying Moral theories to their experience may empower the students with a powerful framework and actionable strategy that allows them to clearly recognize when certain behaviors represent an issue or become unethical.

Integrating moral theory into Everest simulation debrief

In this section, we provide recommendations on debriefing the simulation based on the premises of several moral theories frequently used in teaching Business Ethics. In our experience, many of the Organizational Behavior and Ethics textbooks cite Rest’s “four-component model” (1986) to outline the ethical decision-making process. It is a widely recognized tool for analyzing ethical problems and includes (1) issue recognition and interpretation, (2) moral evaluation and judgment, (3) intention, and (4) implementation and behavior. Applying moral theories increases the student’s chances of success in ethical reasoning, primarily through the first three stages of Rest’s framework, ensuring robust analysis and raising awareness. Below, we provide recommendations and suggest discussion questions based on Utilitarianism, rights, fairness, and Rawls’s “veil of ignorance.”

The theory of rights

The rights approach to ethics focuses on the idea that individuals possess certain inherent entitlements that should be respected and protected by others, emphasizing the importance of respecting human dignity (Desjardins & McCall, 2015). The students often use the theory of Rights to justify their choice to refrain from sharing personal information about obtaining individual gains. They perceive money to reflect their right and the inherent value of a person and believe they act as autonomous beings who can reason about and choose their actions. In the debrief, an instructor needs to bring to the students’ attention that sometimes fulfilling their individual rights can come at the expense of other people, herein, their team. For example, the leader’s goal is to reach the summit, and they are offered \$1 million by a famous gear company for capturing themselves on the top. The leader also receives individual points for bringing all the climbers to the top. This climb is the leader’s last shot to climb to the top of the world, and s/he wants to make the most of it. At the same time, other team members have their own goals and often do not share them. Instead, they keep pursuing the goals, trying to manipulate their team’s decisions. So, you can start the first round of discussion with the following question:

- (1) Is it unethical to withhold the information from the team members? Why?

Analyzing the problem using the theory of rights allows the students to see that hiding important individual goals may deprive the team members of fulfilling their rights of

“Dignity and Respect.” Firstly, team members’ “ability to reason” is undermined if a leader thinks that mentioning “their” money will affect the objectiveness of their reasoning and their attitude toward the leader. Secondly, the theory of rights emphasizes the need for due respect for others as autonomous beings who can reason and choose the course of their lives. Hence, it is upon the team members themselves, rather than the leader, to decide how they will treat this sensitive information. So, ask the student teams:

- (1) Would you like to know about your leader being rewarded with one million dollars for this climb?
- (2) How do you feel about your leader who did (or did not) share this information?
- (3) How do you feel about your leader who did (or did not) tell the team that s/he gets rewarded for bringing all climbers to the top?
- (4) Do you trust your leader?
- (5) Do you think your leader demonstrated Authentic leadership? Servant leadership? Why? Why not?
- (6) How would you feel if this happened at work?

Overwhelmingly, the students say that they want to know about the monetary awards. They also often indicate that they would be absolutely fine with those if the information were shared before rather than after the climb. Similarly, a discussion about a team member who chooses not to share his precondition (asthma) may be initiated. It is worth bringing up the topic of trust at this point. Trust is about one’s readiness to be vulnerable and depends on a positive perception of three components: Ability, Benevolence, and Integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Probe the students by asking if leaders did not share their money information because they thought it might negatively affect how the team perceives their benevolence (“Is the leader concerned about my interest or money?”). If so, you should highlight that while withholding this information could have taken care of this perception, the team now has an issue with the leader’s integrity.

In addition, put the team leaders into the shoes of the stakeholders by asking:

- (1) How would they perceive the decision not to share the information if they happened to be team members?

Finally, you can ask:

- (1) What reasons can justify a general claim that something is a *right*? Is it really their right to withhold the information?
- (2) Rights always have corresponding duties, so is it the team’s duty to meet the leader’s rights? (We think it is not! Notably because some of the conditions of the *duty* are not met. More specifically, while the team has the *ability to assist*, it is not *the last resort*; there is no real *need* (rather the leader’s wish), and most importantly, there can be significant comparable *risk* for the team in fulfilling the leader’s right.

Fairness/justice and Rawls’s veil of ignorance

The fairness and justice approach centers on the idea that ethical decisions should be based on the principles of equality, impartiality, and fairness in the distribution of benefits and burdens (Desjardins & McCall, 2015). Fairness is likely the second highest reason students use to justify hiding personal goals from others. As they often see sharing those with others as sensitive, prone to misinterpretation, and, thus, potentially detrimental to them, you need to ask:

- (1) Is there any evidence of justice/fairness in support of the choice to withhold the information?
- (2) If the information is withheld, are the team members' basic needs taken care of? (In our opinion, they aren't since their safety might be jeopardized.)
- (3) Is there any evidence of self-interest in any party?
- (4) Does the choice violate any principles of *fair cooperation*?
- (5) Does the choice violate any principles of Authentic leadership? Servant leadership?
- (6) Is there any evidence that the decision-maker does have the required self-awareness or does not exhibit the right motivation to be objective (the *veil of ignorance*)?

The last question can be used as a segue to the questions based on Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance," - a thought experiment in which individuals design a just society without knowing their own place within it, ensuring decisions are made fairly and impartially (Desjardins & McCall, 2015). Rawls' so-called "Original Position" in ethical decision-making is designed to prevent bias and unfair treatment, which is often based on "inherited" characteristics of persons, such as race, gender, age, economic and social class, natural talents and abilities, beliefs, and so on. A self-interested decision made "from behind a Veil of Ignorance" would deliberately ignore these characteristics and self-interest. Since this kind of attitude is hard to achieve, it is worth exploring with the students' help what can make the decision more objective. We recommend suggesting to the students that, when well-informed, the team can potentially serve as a valuable "checking point" for the leader's risky decisions. This can attenuate a leader's blind spots and enhance her objectivity ("original position") in decision-making. No leader can claim to be fully cognizant of the hidden effects of withholding information on this big monetary reward.

Utilitarian arguments

Utilitarianism posits that the best action is the one that maximizes the collective good (Desjardins & McCall, 2015). Often, students think of Utilitarianism as a pursuit of "the greatest good for the greatest number" and may see it as an easy solution when they need to "take sides." To demonstrate that it is not always easy, one may ask the climber with the health precondition how she would feel if, as soon as she mentions it, the team decides that her asthma may jeopardize their success and she has to leave the team.

If this is really about "checks and balances," she should not climb and agree that this is totally fine as the other four people (versus 1) will potentially benefit from this. The "left behind" student/climber would rarely be happy with this solution, and rightfully so. It is more appropriate to think about "the greatest net collective good" rather than the "greatest number." Furthermore, this will allow you to introduce a set of questions that can help the students both achieve the best solution and appreciate the complexity of Utilitarianism:

- (1) What is the evidence for their predictions in support of this choice?
- (2) Were all facts collected and considered in the cost/benefit analysis?
- (3) Are there any likely costs of their choice that they have not considered?
- (4) Is there any evidence of subjectivity?
- (5) Have all reasonable alternatives been accounted for?
- (6) Does the recommended choice violate or neglect any stakeholders?
- (7) Will the recommendations hold in the long term?

As a result of this discussion, students are expected to start questioning the idea that “the end justifies the means” and conclude that applying utilitarian arguments can help identify alternative decisions and estimate the net and long-term benefits for each stakeholder group and society overall. They should also be able to see how being an authentic leader and integrating the opinions of other people into decision-making maximizes the collective good.

Conclusion

The Harvard Everest Leadership and Teams simulation represents a unique teaching opportunity for introducing and reinforcing principles of moral theory, particularly in student self-reflection and analyses of ethically bounded individual and group behaviors and questionable decisions that occur regularly during the exercise. The simulation can also be used as a shared experience that allows for practicing ethical actions and capitalizes on peer learning. Our debrief guide has value for practitioners and managers as the activity allows them to practice teambuilding and effective communication while also emphasizing ethical leadership and decision-making.

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Corresponding author

Elena Lvina can be contacted at: elvina@sju.edu

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