

# What was the protestant work ethic philosophy essay



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Robert Jackall in *Moral Mazes: Bureaucracy and Managerial Work* defines Protestant work ethic as “ a set of beliefs that counseled “ secular asceticism”-the methodical, rational subjection of human impulse and desire to God’s will through “ restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling.” This ethic of ceaseless work and ceaseless renunciation of the fruits of one’s toil provided both the economic and the moral foundations for modern capitalism.” (318)[1]This work ethic obligated both the worker and the one he worked for to strive for excellence and hard work, be prudent with their money and at the same time be self-sufficient. It also included “ rational planning” and a “ clear definition of success and failure”. (318) [2]The demise of the Protestant work ethic was caused by industrialization and urbanization of America and the appearance of new work class of managers which also lead to separation from religious guidance. The changes in morals of people initially getting the satisfaction from hard work which would lead to success. to later conforming to the new corporate “ ethics” of not “ making waves” as well as excessive spending from saving their earnings. Hard work was no longer considered a means of achieving success. Instead, conformance and blind devotion to one’s manager was the new means of achieving success.

2. Jackall: Jackall holds that the ethic has now been replaced by bureaucratic managers who have established their own ethic (or rather, bureaucracy has established in them). What is the new bureaucratic ethic and how does it operate?

“ The new bureaucratic work ethic consists of administrative hierarchies, standardized work procedures, regularized timetables, uniform policies,  
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office politics, and centralized control.” (243)[3]The true or “ protestant” work ethic was gradually dying out and in its place the new bureaucratic work ethic was becoming very popular. The conforming to the new bureaucracy forced corporate “ ethics” of not “ making waves” as well as growth of consumerism that lead to excessive spending instead of saving the earnings was becoming widely accepted in the corporate world of managers, clerks and other white collar workers. Hard work was no longer seen as a means of achieving success. Instead, conformance and blind devotion to one’s manager was the new means of achieving success. Why would one voice their objections or concerns when it would most probably lead to career suicide? It is so easy to just conform, make the manager like and rely on you because they know that they can be sure that you would protect them and they would also benefit from taking credit for your achievements. This same process is the same for each level of the corporate hierarchy or “ pyramid” structure. The same devotion or “ fealty” is paid by each level of managers to their superiors and all the way to the top executive of the company. Jackall calls it paying “ fealty to the “ king”. The way the new ethic operates is lower levels are constrained by blind loyalty that is not deserved, but is implied by the level of management. The higher the level of the manager – the higher the risks of loosing everything. However that also means that the rewards, although mostly undeserved, are plentiful. The contrast of bureaucratic ethic and the protestant ethic is very obvious. Where protestant ethic’s main point was that a “ person’s word was his bond” and success was attained by hard work and sacrifice, it was almost completely opposite in the new corporate world. The bureaucratic ethic’s most important characteristic is that “ it breaks apart the older connection

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between the meaning of work and salvation.” Bureaucracy eroded the commonly acceptable standards of morality and replaced them with its own bureaucratic rules where personal morals and ethics get suppressed if not completely replaced.

3. Jackall: What is required now for success and for rising to the top? Why do managers fear making big decisions? What kinds of manipulation are managers commonly a part of in such a system? And most importantly, what has happened to the very idea of “right” and “wrong” in such bureaucratic workplaces?

According to Jackall, the primary requirements for rising to the top in a corporate environment are to be great at conforming (“team player”) and not “making waves” and the ability to play the “game” (i. e., saying one thing and meaning something else). The author also lists five criteria that seem to be instrumental in individual manager’s success in rising to middle and upper management levels in a corporation. How a manager dresses and his general appearance is the first on the list. Another is exercising self-control by not allowing personal emotions to show in any situation (like a “poker face”). Being perceived as a “team player”, such as having the flexibility, knowledge and willingness to take over a lot of same or near same level management positions seamlessly, and also “putting in long hours” – not necessarily working, yet being in the office from “dawn” until “dusk”. Another condition is projecting “style” such as “being fast on your feet” – meaning that a manager is always well organized, ready with a glossy presentation on short notice and give an overall polished image at all times. “Patron power” is the last criterion that has to do with having a “mentor” or <https://assignbuster.com/what-was-the-protestant-work-ethic-philosophy-essay/>

protector that can facilitate a manager's career growth by helping him get exposure to higher levels of management, as well as imparting some internal political news that may also be helpful in achieving growth.

Based on Robert Jackall's research, the managers dread making decisions of any kind due to the decision-making process being so closely tied to authority and advancement patterns. The author describes the manager's rules for making "gut decisions" that may have important effects on the organization such as when large amounts of money are involved or high profile of the situation causing public spotlight. These rules were defined as "(1) Avoid making any decisions if at all possible; and (2) if a decision has to be made, involve as many people as you can so that, if things go south, you're able to point to as many directions as possible." (326)[4] The author explains the above rules by using an example of a chemical company where due to managers' fear of making a decision of spending a large amount of money because of the CEO mandated "to defer all unnecessary capital expenditures" - ended up costing the organization many times more than the cost of initial investment as well as forcing a breach of contractual obligations.

This system forces the managers to commonly be a part of all different kind of manipulations, such as "creative accounting" of pushing expenses to lower divisions operating budgets to make the overall picture appear much better than reality. And most importantly, the very idea of "right" and "wrong" in bureaucratic workplaces is no longer clear at all. In some instances the concepts are interchangeable which makes it even more confusing for all involved.

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4. Bird and Waters: In this article, mention is made of managers who, even when actually working from a moral context, often mask their morality and explain their actions as if they were simply talking practical matters or looking after business. The implication here is that many managers hide their moral beliefs and motives. Their research reveals that ethical discussion is not common in the business world, at least on the broader level. And yet, business cannot possibly avoid ethical issues even on a daily basis. Look at the diagram on p. 336. What is meant by “moral muteness” in Quadrant IV? What does this imply?

The meaning of “moral muteness” in Quadrant IV is the combination of the following two conditions: the “actions follow normative conduct”, yet “moral terms not used in speech”, meaning that the behavior or actual conduct follow the normative moral expectations in contrast to speech that is not guided by moral expectations. Or simply put act morally but do not talk. Although morality is a subject of focus of each individual, it is a taboo in discussions or communications among groups of managers. The “moral muteness” causes the manager to live a lie by believing one thing while saying quite another. There should be no substantial reason for managers to disregard their own integrity to be able to do their job.

5. Bird and Waters: What are the three major causes of moral muteness according to the authors? What are the fears in each case which lead to moral muteness?

The three major causes of moral muteness according to Bird and Waters are threat to harmony, threat to efficiency, threat to image of power and

effectiveness. The Threat to Harmony – is the fear of destruction of the status quo or the accord within the current environment in the organization which may be caused by disagreement with customary practices, any type of confrontation, or questions were raised about any moral issues. The Threat to Efficiency – is the fear that moral issues may cause additional protocols that may hinder the manager's flexibility and therefore disrupt effectiveness of the business function. The Threat to Image of Power and Effectiveness – is the fear of potentially being seen as weak and ineffective, when all managers tend to what to present a perception of being in control, having the power and appearing very effective. All of the above fears are reasons that lead to moral muteness.

As Donaldson, T., & Werhane described the Causes of Moral Muteness in table 8-2[5]:

### **Moral Talk is viewed as creating negative effects....**

#### **...because of these assumed attributes of moral talk**

##### Threat to Harmony

Moral talk is intrusive and confrontational and invites cycles of mutual recrimination

##### Threat to Efficiency

Moral talk assumes distraction moralistic forms (praising, blaming, ideological) and is simplistic, inflexible, soft and inexact

##### Threat to Image of Power and Effectiveness

Moral talk is too esoteric and idealistic, and lacks rigor and force.

6. Bird and Waters: So the morally mute manager seeks to preserve harmony, efficiency, and practical power. But his moral muteness has detrimental consequences. Elaborate on the five consequences mentioned by our authors.

The following are five consequences of moral muteness mentioned by Bird and Waters: Moral Amnesia, Narrowed Conception of Morality, Moral Stress, Neglect of Abuses, and Decreased Authority of Moral Standards.

Moral Amnesia – “ The avoidance of moral talk creates and reinforces a caricature of management as an amoral activity, a condition we describe as moral amnesia.”(340)[6]. In my understanding, “ moral amnesia” allows a person not to notice such things as duping stock holders or customers, padding an expense report, or abusing personal use of business resources. It occurs when a person suppresses his own moral beliefs due to a number of fears – such as fear of losing one’s job, stunting career growth or losing one’s reputation in a business environment. “ Moral Amnesia” is a mask that allows the one affected by it to ignore the pangs of their conscience.

Narrowed Conception of Morality – is “ stonewalling” or blocking out the inconvenient aspects of the situation. The “ blinders are on” and the person literally disregards the overall moral implications. Bird and Waters have clearly explained it as “ Moral muteness in the form of stonewalling thus perpetuates a narrow conception of morality, i. e., as only concerned with blatant deviance from moral standards. Most importantly, moral muteness in

this case prevents creative exploration of action alternatives that might  
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enable the organization to balance better conflicting demands or to approximate better the highest ideals.”(342)[7]

Moral Stress – Experienced not only by managers, but also by any number of workers in different situations. It is caused by conflict between the personal moral definitions of “ right and wrong” and the lack of clearly defined standards of behavior in any given situation. Some moral stress is unavoidable in a business situation, but in most cases it is made worse by lack of “ moral talk” that would help clarify and create guidelines of behavior and decision making process.

Neglect of Abuses – The tendency of managers to steer clear of “ moral talk” leads to total disregard of abuses of moral behavior and also leads to fear of communicating from subordinates. “ Just as norms of confrontation contribute to moral muteness, in circular fashion that muteness reinforces those norms and leads to a culture of neglect.”(343)[8]

Decreased Authority of Moral Standards – The corporate culture must mandate the moral standards by not just communication but also by using real example and implementation, otherwise there are no normative expectations “ Moral ideas communicated without being socially rooted simply lack compelling authority.”(344)[9]