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When Doing the Right Thing Feels Wrong

By Richard Graham

Have you ever faced a moment where doing what felt right could cost you your job, reputation, or future? I have. And chances are, if you've led complex projects under pressure, so have you.

Leadership in project environments often puts us in situations where rules, expectations, and personal values collide. In one high-stakes delivery project with Company A — a major contractor in the UK delivering complex programmes — I was asked by a senior individual to file a formal complaint, a fabricated story to remove a difficult individual, with a suggestion that going along with it might “open doors” for my career.

I refused.

It was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made. It risked relationships, credibility, and future roles. But I couldn't do it—not because of a written code or a corporate handbook, but because it crossed a moral line I wasn't willing to step over.

That moment taught me something important: sometimes, doing the right thing *feels* wrong. But it's exactly when the pressure is greatest that your leadership matters most.

Ethics vs. Morality: What's the Difference?

It's easy to assume that ethics and morality are the same, but they're not.

- **Ethics** are the rules we're expected to follow — organisational codes of conduct, legal obligations, and frameworks like those set out by the Association for Project Management (APM) or the Project Management Institute (PMI).
- **Morality** is internal. It's your compass — shaped by your values, upbringing, and sense of right and wrong.

Ideally, they align. But when the pressure builds, those lines blur.

That's where leadership decisions are made — not on paper, but in practice. The challenge is knowing how to navigate that space when the consequences feel real and personal.

Why Stress Changes Everything

Most project professionals have experienced what psychologists call *ethical fading* — when pressure leads people to justify bending the rules.

It starts small: a shortcut, a white lie, a decision not to challenge something that doesn't feel right. The justification is always the same: "Just this once."

Over time, those decisions shape team culture. And culture shapes outcomes.

This is where moral resilience kicks in. It's less about being perfect and more about staying honest with yourself under fire. That might mean taking five minutes to reflect before making a tough call, checking your bias, or reaching out to a trusted colleague for perspective.

It's not a luxury — it's a leadership essential.

Leading Diverse Teams Means Managing Diverse Morals

Today's project teams are diverse, spanning generations, backgrounds, industries, and values. What feels right to one person might feel wrong to another.

For leaders, that means navigating grey areas, not just enforcing standards.

In inclusive teams, leadership isn't about declaring a fixed position. It's about encouraging discussion, asking difficult questions, and working through moral complexity together. That process can reveal blind spots, improve team cohesion, and strengthen decision-making under pressure.

The leaders who embrace difference — and still make consistent, values-led decisions — are often the ones people want to follow.

A Real-World Example: Company A

At Company A, I encountered a difficult team environment with high turnover, unresolved conflict, and a culture prioritising delivery over decency. New team members were resigning within days. One senior leader, citing military discipline, tried to "enforce compliance" through fear rather than structure. Formal systems were bypassed. People looked the other way.

Then came the request to submit a false complaint.

Declining that request didn't feel brave — it felt career-limiting. I reported the situation to the human resources and ethics teams, knowing it could damage professional relationships. But ignoring it would have meant compromising my values.

Leadership in that moment wasn't about what I said, but what I didn't do.

The MERI Model: A Simple Framework for Ethical Leadership

Out of these experiences came a framework I now use to reflect on my leadership: **MERI** — *Moral, Ethical, Resilience, Inclusivity*. Each component offers a practical lens for principled decision-making:

MERI Pillar	What It Means
Moral clarity	Know your personal values and where your red lines are. What will you never compromise?
Ethical standards	Understand the professional codes and guidelines that apply in your work (e.g., APM or PMI frameworks).
Resilience	Develop habits — like reflection or mindfulness — that help you stay grounded when the pressure rises.
Inclusivity	Create space in retrospectives or decision reviews for diverse moral perspectives — not just performance metrics.

This isn't about being perfect. It's about intention — having something to return to when things get unclear.

Final Reflection

Projects end. But the people you lead, the decisions you make, and the culture you help shape — that all lives on.

Doing the right thing won't always feel good. It won't always be obvious. But it builds trust, strengthens character, and shapes your legacy.

So next time you're faced with a decision that feels like a line in the sand, ask yourself not just what the rulebook says, but what you can live with. Because in the quiet moments after the project's done, it's your values that stay with you.

What would you do when the right thing feels wrong?