

ERIC PLINER

CEO OF YSC CONSULTING

DIFFICULT

decisions

How Leaders
Make the Right Call
with Insight, Integrity,
and Empathy

WILEY

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For Jonathan



Preface

Writing Wrong

This book is wrong.

I don't mean that it's bad or evil. I mean that it's inevitably incorrect.

There is content within these pages with which you are bound to disagree. Your view isn't necessarily right; but then, neither is mine. Nevertheless, some of what I have to say is undoubtedly just plain wrong.

Much of what is contained herein has been examined in various settings for literal millennia. And still—or perhaps inevitably—not everyone sees it the same way. For instance, one fundamental tenet of this book's core framework—that morals are internally referenced and externally influenced, while ethics are externally referenced and distilled internally—runs in direct contradiction to the starting point of plenty of brilliant thinkers in the field. (A pair of ethicists, one in the UK and one in Australia, use definitions in their shared writing that are almost exactly opposite to mine.)¹

¹ Paul Walker and Terry Lovat, "You Say Morals, I Say Ethics—What's the Difference?" *The Conversation*, September 18, 2014. <https://theconversation.com/you-say-morals-i-say-ethics-whats-the-difference-30913>.

Discussions of right and wrong, of good and evil, of fairness and injustice are all deeply personal; they are also contextual and time bound. As a result, some of what I write with certainty today (and much of what I write with uncertainty) is bound to be easily discarded, depending on things like where and when you live, how you are encountering this text, and your reasons for reading it. That is the paradox of insisting that how we make the most difficult decisions must always be contextual.

Add to this the complication of your specific, current leadership context, with responsibility for the well-being, satisfaction, engagement, productivity, happiness, or work/life conditions of an increasingly crowded array of stakeholders, plus the fact that morality and ethics are inherently subjective and ever-evolving, as is our understanding of what it means to lead. All that complexity equals a high degree of likelihood that this book doesn't have clear answers, that it's wrong, or that the apparent answers that seem clear and right today will seem muddy and incorrect far sooner than I or my publisher would like.

I still think it's worth writing, and hopefully you still think it's worth reading. Here's why.

We define *leadership strategy* as the intentional design of the individual styles, the dynamics and interactions, and the collective cultures that create the conditions for others to deliver desired change. Whether that desired change is increased profit or market share, entry into a new geography, election of a new office holder to state or federal government, development of a new and evocative artistic experience, corralling community resources for greater equity in their distribution, or something else entirely, leaders make it possible ("create the conditions") for people working together ("others") to drive results, outcomes, or impact

“deliver desired change”). That’s a tall task, and it’s one that’s best not left to chance (“intentional design”). After all, we have organizational strategies and financial strategies—why wouldn’t we have leadership strategies, too?

Intentional design of those leadership strategies requires understanding where we’ve come from, who and where we are today, how we got here, where we want to go, and how we’d like to get there. That’s the part where thinking about how to make the most difficult decisions before we’re actually faced with them has the most potential to be useful. Given the sheer number of difficult decisions that leaders have to make every day, the pace required of that decision-making, and the seemingly higher and higher stakes of those decisions, clarifying an approach by design rather than by default leaves us more ready to deal with challenges we’ve never encountered previously—like a global pandemic or unprecedented economic disruption or irreversible changes to our physical climate or a woefully unreliable supply chain or bans on international travel or the *en masse* theft of customer data or the disruption of democracy or whatever the next year brings, or the one after that.

Doing so also helps to prepare us to tackle difficult decisions that we haven’t considered because we don’t know anything about them just yet, which means that we also don’t know anything about their answers, which is why the approach in this book is probably wrong or at least ill-suited to some of the tough questions that we’re bound to face.

One thing is for sure: I’m not going to tell you what’s moral, what’s ethical, or what your role is as a leader. I’m not going to tell you what’s right or wrong, helpful or harmful, or who your stakeholders are. These are highly subjective questions with context-specific answers. Our aspirations to objectivity in any of these matters are merely pretensions,

likely imbued with personal experiences and ways of living in the world that are so core to who we are that we hardly notice them anymore.

With that in mind, I'm not going to try to persuade you about my particular views, nor am I going to go overboard in sharing my expertise. Hopefully, this book will help you to unpack your own expertise and to understand your own views with greater skill and sophistication. Hopefully, you will find a path to more intentional application of what matters to you by figuring out with greater clarity exactly what matters to you. Hopefully, the exercises here will help you to understand the realities that become manifest through your opinions and perspectives and the identities and experiences that inform them.

My desire to focus on understanding your opinions and perspective is in no way intended to suggest that I don't believe in facts—or their importance. After years of working in the behavioral sciences, I suspect that not everything that we classify as science constitutes permanently resolved fact. It only takes a cursory review of the lack of replicability of many classic experiments in psychology with well-accepted findings to illuminate that point. By contrast, faults in our earlier understanding and the healthy evolution of our thinking do not negate the existence of facts. Instead, they reflect the importance of lifelong learning and openness to new information. Our prior collective certainty that the Earth was flat does not make it any less round.

What I am concerned with is how, as leaders, we interpret the world around us based on our current knowledge and what we do with that interpretation. How do we use our understanding of good and bad to enrich the quality of our lives and of life on Earth more generally and to leave the world better than we found it? Several of these

words—*good, bad, enrich, quality, better*—are far from value-agnostic in their definitions. As leaders, we make choices many times each day that impose our interpretation of these words on others. Responsible leadership, therefore, begs our thoughtful consideration of these words and their related concepts, of the sources of our interpretations, and of the impact of our interpretations on others who may or may not share them.

Right or wrong, whatever this approach represents, at least it's by design and not by accident.

Hopefully, you will leave this reading having reflected on where you've come from, who and where you are today, and how you got here. Hopefully, you will have considered where you want to go next, both as an individual and as a leader, and how you'd like to get there. Hopefully, you will design a plan and approach to complex personal and professional challenges with intent, enabling you to make tough choices with insight, integrity, and empathy. And hopefully, you will get to do so well ahead of the next round of pain inherent in making the most difficult leadership decisions: the ones that highlight our conflicts, our contradictions, and our hypocrisies, yes—but also our humanity and our ability to shape the future.

You're going to want to grab a pen and some paper. Some of this might hurt a little bit. At the very least, maybe you'll be more ready for whatever is waiting for you tomorrow. If not, well, don't worry. This book is probably wrong anyway.

Eric Pliner
September 2021