

The Ethics Exam That Changed How I Think About Leadership

I'll never forget sitting at my desk, staring at my final exam in Dr. Cousins' Ethics class, and realizing... this was it.

Not just another test. Not just another grade.

Everything was on the line.

I had already completed nine out of ten classes for my MBA. This was my tenth and final class—or at least, that was the plan.

The problem? My GPA was just below 3.0—the minimum required to graduate. And in Dr. Cousins' class? I had a C.

If I didn't get an A on this exam, I wouldn't get a B in the class.

If I didn't get a B, my GPA wouldn't hit 3.0.

And if my GPA didn't hit 3.0? No diploma. No graduation. Just a whole lot of extra time, extra money, and extra embarrassment.

And let's be honest—this was all on me.

I hadn't exactly been the most diligent student. I had a knack for pulling things off at the last minute, and up until now, that had been enough. I rarely studied and still managed to do just fine.

But this time?

This wasn't an exam I could wing.

This had to be different.

Thinking Differently Under Pressure

The exam was a case study—a real-world ethical dilemma.

I had two choices:

1. Take the safe route. Write about the ethical frameworks we'd covered. Check the right boxes. Give the answer I knew Dr. Cousins was expecting.
2. Take a risk.

And maybe it was the pressure, maybe it was the realization that playing it safe had gotten me into this hole in the first place, but I decided in that moment:

I wasn't just going to answer the question. I was going to redefine the problem.

Instead of discussing whether the decision in the case study was ethical, I challenged the law itself.

I questioned the foundation of the whole thing. Was the law truly just? Did it serve the greater good? Or was it something people followed simply because no one had ever stopped to rethink it?

I closed my blue book, handed it in, and walked out of that class with no idea if I had just saved my MBA or completely doomed myself.

The Longest Week of My Life

Final grades were supposed to be posted within a few days.

Day one passed. Nothing.

Day two. Nothing.

By the end of the week, I was checking the grade portal like it was my full-time job.

Still. Nothing.

At this point, my stress level was off the charts. So, I did what any desperate, soon-to-be (or not-to-be) MBA graduate would do.

I went to see Dr. Cousins.

His office door was slightly ajar, but I knocked anyway.

"Come in," he called.

I stepped inside, cleared my throat, and went for it:

"Dr. Cousins, I was wondering about my grade..."

He looked at me over his glasses and asked, *"And why is that?"*

I explained the whole situation—how I needed an A on the final to bring my grade up to a B, to bring my GPA up to a 3.0, to graduate on time.

For a moment, he didn't say anything. Just studied me like a professor who had seen this play out a hundred times before.

Then, with a small smile, he reached into his briefcase, pulled out my exam, and slid it across the desk.

There it was. A giant "A" in red ink.

Then he said something that changed everything for me:

"You were the only one who thought that way."

The Lesson That Stuck with Me

That test shouldn't have been a defining moment in my life. It was one exam, in one class, in a long stretch of academic work.

But it changed the way I think.

Because up until then, I had spent most of my time doing what was expected—checking the boxes, following the playbook, and trusting that if I did things *right enough*, it would all work out.

What I learned in that classroom was this: real leaders don't just follow the script. They challenge it when necessary.

They don't just solve the problem—they question whether it's the right problem to solve.

They don't wait for the pressure to hit before they start thinking differently.

And that's when it clicked.

Leadership Isn't About Playing It Safe

That lesson followed me into my career.

Early on, I played it safe. Follow the plan. Hit the numbers. Stay in my lane.

But as I moved into leadership, I started to see the difference between managing and leading.

Managers execute the plan. Leaders ask if it's the right plan in the first place.

The best teams I've worked with weren't just the ones who got the job done—they were the ones who weren't afraid to ask, "*Is there a better way?*"

Think about the biggest business disruptors in history—Amazon, Tesla, Netflix.

They didn't win because they followed the rules better than anyone else.

They won because they challenged the way things had always been done.

How This Applies to You

You don't have to be sitting in an ethics exam to apply this lesson.

Maybe you're in a job where you're doing what's expected but not pushing beyond it.

Maybe you're in meetings where you see a better way, but don't speak up.

Maybe you're waiting for permission to lead, instead of just leading.

But the truth is, leadership isn't about waiting your turn. It's about stepping up, thinking critically, and challenging assumptions when needed.

And here's the best part: You don't need a title to start.

A Few Questions to Ask Yourself as a Leader

Next time you're facing a challenge—whether it's at work, in a tough conversation, or even in your own career path—try this:

1. Am I solving the real problem?
 - Or am I just answering the question in front of me?
2. Is there a better way to approach this?
 - Or am I just doing it this way because it's always been done like this?
3. Am I waiting for someone else to lead?
 - Or am I stepping up to bring new ideas to the table?

Final Thought

Looking back, that ethics exam could've gone very differently.

I could've played it safe. Given the obvious answer. Checked the boxes.

And I probably would have gotten a decent grade.

But I would've missed the real lesson.

Leadership isn't about waiting for the right answer.

It's about asking the right questions.

It's not about waiting for a title.

It's about thinking differently, speaking up, and leading right where you are.