

# **NECESSARY EVILS AND INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY IN ORGANIZATIONS PAPER SUMMARY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper discusses the challenges individuals encounter when performing necessary evils, the various factors that generate and shape this psychological experience and the influence that this psychological experience has on the likelihood of producing interpersonally sensitive behavior. It also provides guidance on how individuals and organizations can address these challenges.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Variance along nine dimensions of a necessary evil affects four psychological states: responsibility, justifiability, difficulty and palpability. These four psychological states, in turn, shape the performer's internal drama, which consists of guilt, sympathy, performance anxiety and cognitive load. The combination and intensity of thoughts and feelings within the internal drama drive motivation and tax psychological capacity, which together determine the outcome of a necessary evil. Organizations can influence both the outcome and perceived experience of completing a necessary evil through task design and framing.

## **THE NECESSARY EVIL CONSTRUCT**

### **WHAT IS A NECESSARY EVIL?**

A necessary evil is a work-related task where an individual, as part of their job, perform an act that causes physical or emotional harm to another human being in order to achieve some perceived greater good or purpose. Layoffs are a common example, but there are many emotionally charged interpersonal encounters in the workplace.

### **WHAT ARE THE NINE DIMENSIONS OF NECESSARY EVILS?**

1. *Complexity*- What range and depth of skills are required to perform the necessary evil task?
2. *Frequency*- At what frequency does the necessary evil occur within a particular professional role?
3. *Causal role*- Has the performer contributed significantly to the conditions necessitating the harm?
4. *Involvement*- How involved was the performer in the conception, design and execution of the act?
5. *Legitimacy*- What is the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions?

6. *Magnitude of the harm and benefit*- What amount of negative and positive impact occurs as a result of the necessary evil and how intense is this impact?
7. *Ratio of harm to benefit*- How does the likelihood of the expected harm of the act multiplied by its magnitude compare to the likelihood of the expected benefit multiplied by its magnitude?
8. *Saliency of the harm and benefit*- How conspicuous or clearly evident the harm and benefit are to the performer at the time of task execution, independent of their respective magnitudes?
9. *Identity of the target*- To what extent does the performer identify with the target and his or her fate?

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF CREATING INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY**

### **WHAT MAKES A NECESSARY EVIL POTENTIALLY DIFFICULT TO PERFORM, ESPECIALLY WITH INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY?**

The act of the necessary evil itself initiates the psychological and performance challenges, however, the extent of these challenges depends on how the performer experiences and interprets: the task as requiring conscious skill and effort, the self's own agency in selecting and executing the necessary evil and bringing about its effects, and the impact of the necessary evil as objectionable

### **WHAT ARE THE FOUR MEDIATING PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES OF A NECESSARY EVIL?**

1. The extent to which the performer feels personally responsible for causing the harm.
2. The extent to which the performer perceives the harm caused to be justifiable in light of the good produced.
3. The extent to which the performer finds the task difficult when handling the technical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal demands of the necessary evil.
4. The extent to which the harm and benefit produced by the act are palpable, registering vividly on the performer at the moment of task execution.

These four psychological states affect the intensity and mix of thoughts and feelings within the internal drama.

### **WHAT ARE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE FOUR MEDIATING STATES?**

This paper makes four sets of propositions of expected psychological behavior of the performer associated with the four mediating psychological states that the performer will experience.

1. *Experienced Responsibility*
  1. Greater the experience of responsibility, more intense the experience of guilt.
2. *Perceived Justifiability*
  1. Less justifiable perception of act, more intense the experience of guilt.
  2. Less justifiable perception of act, more intense the experience of sympathy.
3. *Experienced Task Difficulty*
  1. More difficult experience, heavier cognitive load imposed.
  2. More difficult experience, more intense feeling of performance anxiety.
4. *Experienced Palpability*
  1. Greater experienced palpability of harm, more intense the experience of sympathy.
  2. Greater experienced palpability of harm, more intense the experience of guilt.
  3. Greater experienced palpability of harm, heavier the cognitive load experience.
  4. Greater experienced palpability of harm, more intense the experience of anxiety.

## **OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH NECESSARY EVILS**

The combination and intensity of thoughts and feelings within the internal drama drive motivation and tax psychological capacity, which together determine the outcome of a necessary evil. To achieve interpersonal sensitivity an individual must experience sufficient guilt and sympathy to result in prosocial motivation. However, guilt and sympathy must not be so intense that, in combination with performance anxiety, self-protective motivation outweighs prosocial motivation. In addition, the cumulative psychological demands of cognitive load, and personal distress cause by guilt sympathy, and performance anxiety must not exhaust psychological capacity.

### **HOW CAN WE JUDGE WHETHER THE PERFORMANCE OF A NECESSARY EVIL IS EFFECTIVE?**

1. Whether the performer completes or fails to complete the necessary evil.
2. Whether the performer does or does not treat the target with interpersonal sensitivity.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL INFLUENCES**

### **HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS INFLUENCE THE OUTCOME OF NECESSARY EVILS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS PERFORMING THESE TASKS?**

Organizations can design and frame necessary evil tasks using specific techniques in order to decrease exposure, reduce involvement, and increase salience of purpose.

1. *Task Design*
  1. *Exposure*- By exposing performers to the harm they are causing, organizations can manipulate the salience of that harm, and as a result influence performers' motivational state.
  2. *Fragmentation*- By designing tasks so that their component parts are distributed among multiple parties, organizations can reduce the extent of a single performer's involvement.
2. *Task Framing*
  1. *Social Accounts*- By providing explanations that influence a person's perception of responsibility for, motive for and unfavorability of an action (known as social accounts), organizations can transform the harm done in the eyes of the performer and diffuse responsibility by framing the performer as a small piece in the causal chain.
  2. *Goals*- By framing a necessary evil in terms of a particular goal or purpose, organizations can increase the salience of the positive effects of a necessary evil and assign meaning to a task which may ultimately decrease performance anxiety and cognitive load.

## CONCLUSION

By identifying and articulating the challenges involved from the performer's perspective, framework is provided for helping individuals and organizations understand and manage necessary evils.