

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: CRIMINAL JUSTICE APPROACHES FOR PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES

MODULE 6: Leadership, Motivations, and Rationalizations during Mass Atrocities



UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM



MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

This module seeks to define and discuss leadership qualities that can aid domestic criminal justice professionals in mass atrocity prevention measures. It also encourages participants to reflect on their own vulnerabilities as leaders through a discussion of the motivations and pressures that can lead people to rationalize unethical behavior.

Participants will consider ethical leadership, rationalization, and common motivations for perpetrators of mass atrocities. Engaging with historical testimonies of individuals who perpetrated mass atrocities will allow participants an opportunity to discuss how “normal” people can commit terrible acts, as well as the moral injury that can result from perpetration. Connecting to leadership considerations, this module will provide time for participants to reflect on how awareness of the human tendency to rationalize our actions can help leaders make better decisions.

Participants will have an opportunity to consider their own leadership environment in relation to these concepts.

Guiding questions for this module

- What do we know about why people participate in mass atrocities?
- How does this knowledge help us stop or disrupt these actions?
- How can we guard against our own participation?
- What leadership qualities should criminal justice professionals possess to help prevent mass atrocities?

Module objectives

- Participants understand basic concepts of leadership and can articulate the meaning of *ethical leadership*.
- Participants are able to discuss and reflect openly on common motivations, rationalizations, and vulnerabilities of criminal justice professionals in atrocity events.
- Participants reflect on the leadership qualities and actions they need to effectively address mass atrocity scenarios.

MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

Module length: 1 hour, plus 5 minutes for optional add-on exercise

SEGMENT	LENGTH
Introduction, Discussion: What Does the Term <i>Leadership</i> Mean to You?	5 minutes
Overview of Leadership Concepts and Rationalization Concepts	10 minutes
Exercise: Perpetrator Testimonies	25 minutes
Discussion: Rationalizations and Ethical Leadership	15 minutes
Conclusion	5 minutes
Optional Add-On: Battalion 101 Photo Analysis Exercise	5 minutes

Required materials

- Module #6 PowerPoint
- Module #6 Handout

Further reading

- Key Resource: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Guide to Criminal Justice and Preventing Mass Atrocities](#) (2023), Chapters 2, 3, and 4
- Bradberry, Travis, and Jean Greaves. *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*. San Diego: Talentsmart, 2009.
- Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Revised ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2017.
- Huberts, Leo, Muel Kaptein, and Karin Lasthuizen. “A Study of the Impact of Three Leadership Styles on Integrity Violations Committed by Police Officers.” *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* 30, no. 4 (2007): 587–605.
- Huberts, Leo, Jeroen Maesschalck and Carole L. Jurkiewicz. *Ethics and Integrity of Governance: Perspectives across Frontiers*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008.
- Kotter, John. *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012.
- Kouzes, James, and Barry Posner. *A Leader’s Legacy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
- Lipman-Blumen, Jean. *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Moore, Harold. *Hal Moore on Leadership*. Maple Grove, MN: Magnum Books, 2017.

MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

- Northouse, Peter. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 9th ed. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2021.
- Straus, Scott. [*Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*](#). Chapter 4, “Perpetrators.” Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016.
- Waller, James. *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Willink, Jocko. *Extreme Ownership*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015.
- Willink, Jocko. *The Dichotomy of Leadership*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018.
- Willink, Jocko. *Leadership Strategy and Tactics*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020.

LESSON PLAN

Introduction (5 minutes)

Slides 1–3

Explain: “Up to this point, we have focused on prevention—the before stage—this is the stage where you have the most ability to act. In this session, we are going to focus on the during stage—what happens when the situation around you becomes more complex? How does the context affect behavior and your ability to act? We are going to think a bit more about leaders’ individual capacity for decision making and influence. To do that, we will

- Explore the concept of *leadership*
- Analyze and discuss the role of ethical leadership in mass atrocity prevention
- Explore common rationalizations and motivations for unethical behavior during mass atrocities
- Reflect on leadership characteristics in relation to your role as a leader

Ask: “I would like to begin by creating a common definition of the term *leadership*. What does the term mean to you?”

Possible answers: After participants share their responses, the instructor may share the ‘Five Leadership Traits’ examples—making connections to those already raised and noting those that did not come up in conversation: competence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability.

Note: Instructor may ask participants to write down their answer on a piece of paper and then share out their responses with the group, or the instructor may wish to write down participants’ responses on a piece of chart paper that can be referenced during the session.

Say: “It is important that you as the leader are willing to take responsibility. We will discuss having a forward-thinking and proactive mindset. Your leadership can improve operations and the environment where you work. Your leadership can influence, motivate, and guide those who work for and with you. Good leadership can uphold the fundamental rights of all civilians and safeguard lives. Your leadership can prevent atrocities.”

Overview of Leadership Concepts and Rationalization Concepts (10 minutes)

Slides 4–9

Slide 4

Say: “We’ve just generated a number of ideas about leadership. Today I’ll share some framing that can help us think about what you shared and will invite you to reflect on your own leadership style. My hope is that this session will generate internal analysis and reflection.

“There are various definitions of the term *leadership*. But generally speaking, leadership is the ability to influence and motivate others to complete or accomplish a goal. For the purpose of this course, the goal or mission is mass atrocity prevention and the preservation of all lives.” [Instructor may connect this mission to the mission statement of participants’ agencies or institutions if researched in advance.]

Slide 5

Say: “We tend to think of power as hierarchical, a top-down phenomenon—but there are different kinds of power. *Positional power* is the power a person derives from a particular office or rank. *Personal power* is the influence a leader derives from being seen as likable and knowledgeable. You are all leaders in some capacity—depending on your position, you may exercise positional power, personal power, or both.”

Slide 6

Say: “Given the power that each of you exercise within your agencies, for the purposes of this course, we want to focus on a specific kind of leadership. Ethical leadership can be defined as ‘the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to others through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making.’¹

“This can be summed up very briefly: Do the right thing, for the right reasons, the right way. When deciding policy or making orders, think ethically—will this decision protect the peace and lives of all people? Are my actions fair and equal?”

¹ Brown, Michael, Linda Trevino, and David Harrison, “Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 97 (February 17, 2004): 120.

Slide 7

Ask: “These are a few key principles of ethical leadership. How might each of these principles tie into mass atrocity prevention? How do they tie into your mission, values, and code of conduct and professional standards?”

Possible responses: Open-ended—see the list that follows for additional concepts the instructor may choose to incorporate into the discussion.

- **Respects Others.** In mass atrocity crimes, vulnerable groups and civilians are targeted—for example, they may be a minority group or a group about which negative stereotypes exist. Ethical leaders respect the lives of all humans, promote peace, and protect those who cannot protect themselves.
- **Serves Others.** Ethical leaders are humble and able to reflect on their own vulnerabilities and see themselves as public servants—warrior versus guardian mindset.
- **Shows Justice.** Ethical leaders are concerned with fairness and justice—recall the warning signs of discriminatory legislation and impunity for past crimes. Treat all people equally and consider everyone when making decisions.
- **Manifests Honesty.** Honesty helps build trust within the community—vital for atrocity prevention. Avoiding corruption and abuse of power are essential to building public trust and rule of law, and provide a foundation for state officials to be effective in atrocity prevention.
- **Builds Community.** Concern for all people within a community—not just some groups over others. Recall the warning sign of labeling civilian groups as the “enemy.”

Say: “A key part of ethical leadership is recognizing our own vulnerabilities to unethical behavior, in order to think ahead to how we might respond when faced with difficult situations. In the context of mass atrocities, we tend to focus on motivations like fear and ideology. While these motivations can play an important role in someone’s decision to participate or go along with the commission of mass atrocities, ordinary human motivations such as peer pressure or careerism can often play a role in people’s decision-making, even in the most extreme contexts. While some pressures and motivations are specific to one time and place and rooted in the political, cultural, and ideological context, others reflect timeless social and psychological vulnerabilities all human beings face. These are important to understand in order to prepare ourselves to be more ethically conscious leaders.”

Slides 8–9

Say: “When our conduct clashes with our prior beliefs, our beliefs can change to match our conduct, without noticing that this is going on. We refer to this phenomenon as *rationalization*. Rationalization, simply put, means trying to resolve the tension between your unethical actions and the desire to see yourself as a good person.

“Rationalizations, or how we convince ourselves that we are still ‘good people’ in spite of our actions, come in many forms. They can arise well before or in the lead-up to mass atrocities, as well as while mass atrocities are underway. These are some common types of rationalizations.” [Instructor may read through the list of rationalizations on slide 9 aloud or give participants a few minutes to read through the list on their own.]

“Take a minute to think about a time when you have heard one of these rationalizations used. [Reflective only, no discussion.] While the choice to participate in mass atrocities is an extreme context, we often see leaders in less extreme situations rationalize their involvement in unethical behaviors with many of the same devices you see here. In the next exercise, we will look at a case study examining how police rationalized their participation in the Holocaust, and I will ask you to keep this list of rationalizations in mind.”

Exercise: Perpetrator Testimonies (25 minutes)

Slides 10–12

Say: “We ended Module 3 with a brief discussion of how German police officers followed behind the front lines of the German army during World War II and participated in mass shootings of Jews and other perceived enemies of the Nazi state. In this exercise, we’ll take a look at statements from German police officers who were asked to participate in mass shootings as well as the testimony of a Lithuanian auxiliary police officer who participated in mass killings of Jews during the Holocaust.”

Instructor should give participants 5 minutes to read through the quotes from German police officers on the first page of the handout.

Say: “Next we will view a clip that features Juozas Aleksynas² of Lithuania. During World War II, he served as an auxiliary to German forces and participated in several massacres of Jews in occupied Belarus in fall 1941. Aleksynas’ citizenship changed many times between independent Lithuania, the Soviet Union, and Germany in the 1940s. In addition to serving in this German auxiliary unit, he claimed to have served as a Soviet partisan during World War II. This testimony in which he recounts his experiences was filmed in 1998.” [Instructor should warn participants that the video contains graphic descriptions of mass killings.]

After showing the video, the instructor may wish to give participants 5 minutes to discuss the questions below in small groups, followed by reporting out to the larger group for a 10-minute discussion.

Ask: “Thinking about the quotes you read from German police officers and the testimony you just watched, how did each person explain their decision to participate in mass killings? How did they wrestle

² Pronunciation: Yu-O-zuss Alek-SEE-nuss

MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

with any ethical tensions they may have felt about their participation? Did you notice any of the common rationalizations we discussed before?” [Instructor may refer participants to the list of common rationalizations on page 2 of their handout.]

Possible answers: Denial of victim: If I don’t shoot children, they will grow up to threaten my family; money/greed/personal gain through participation; conditioning/desensitization—got easier to participate as they went along; denial of responsibility (Aleksynas testimony—only blames God, does not take responsibility for his actions).

Ask: “How did the choice to participate or not participate in mass killings affect the police officers?”

Possible answers: German police officer quotes highlight choice—officers were assigned other duties if they refused to shoot. Lithuanian police officer describes ongoing shame about his participation. Moral injury to perpetrators from their own participation. Instructor can also highlight the importance of ethical leadership here—when the leadership environment does not integrate ethical principles, subordinates have limited options to act on their ethical concerns.

Ask: “How might society be affected if those who participated in mass atrocities don’t face any consequences?”

Possible answers: Impunity for past crimes as a warning sign for mass atrocities, divisions in the community, mistrust of police and state authorities if involved in perpetrating mass atrocities previously; lack of ethical leadership in institutions if criminal justice professionals who were involved in perpetrating mass atrocities are reinstated and do not have to account for their participation.

Discussion: Rationalizations and Ethical Leadership (15 minutes)

Slides 13–14

Say: “After the end of World War II, many criminal justice professionals who aided the Nazi regime claimed they were ‘just following orders.’ However, as we saw in the last exercise, the reality was more complex. As we conclude this session, I would like to bring the conversation back to your own leadership environment, reflecting on our previous discussion of ethical leadership and rationalizations.”

Instructor may wish to give participants 5 minutes to discuss in small groups before reporting out to the larger group for 10 minutes. Participants may discuss all questions or choose from the questions that follow for the discussion. This is an opportunity for participants to reflect on their environment, and the instructor may therefore wish to emphasize for participants that anything shared during this session should remain confidential to encourage open and honest conversation.

Ask: “If a colleague tries to rationalize unethical behavior, how can you respond?”

MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

Ask: “Is it still worthwhile to object if you think no one will listen to you? Or if you think there will be consequences for speaking out?”

Ask: “What could you do to improve your leadership environment for the purpose of atrocity prevention?”

Ask: “Is giving feedback to supervisors encouraged in your agency or organization? Why or why not?”

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Slides 15–16

Say: “In this session, we have considered how ‘ordinary’ humans can find themselves committing what we might consider ‘extraordinary’ acts—as well as how we can think ahead about possible responses to avoid getting pulled into unethical behavior in the moment. In this course, we are breaking down the cycle of mass atrocity violence and considering the actions that can be taken to prevent, mitigate, or even seek redress in the aftermath. The goal in this course is for you to consider what type of leadership role—whether personal or positional—you can play in working toward prevention. Thinking about the definition of ethical leadership we discussed earlier in the session in terms of atrocity prevention, we could define ethical leadership as modeling behaviors and relationships that preserve life and help prevent atrocities, and encouraging others to do the same.

“In the upcoming sessions, I invite you to continue to reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses as a leader, to keep in mind the principles of ethical leadership we have discussed in this session, and to think about how these characteristics might be useful in atrocity prevention.”

Optional Add-On: Battalion 101 Photo Analysis Exercise (5 minutes)

Slides 17–19

Instructor may choose to open the session with a photo analysis exercise to emphasize the role of ordinary motivations (in particular, the role of group dynamics, camaraderie, hypermasculinity, etc.) in the perpetration of mass atrocities.

Instructor should show the image of Battalion 101 without the caption (slide 18).

Ask: “As you saw in the Holocaust case study in Module 3, the Nazis needed the help of leaders across German society to carry out the ‘Final Solution.’ I would like you to examine the photo on this slide closely: What stands out to you as you look at this image? What does this photo suggest about the relationship between these men?”

MODULE 6: LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATIONS, AND RATIONALIZATIONS DURING MASS ATROCITIES

Possible answers: Men are in uniform; it appears to be some kind of celebration; they are drinking alcohol; they look happy and relaxed. Men appear to be close and friendly; they are drinking buddies.

Instructor should reveal the caption (slide 19).

Ask: “This is an image of Police Battalion 101, one of the German police battalions tasked with carrying out mass shootings of Jews during the Holocaust. This picture was taken in 1940, two years before they started participating in the shootings. How do you think the dynamics you see in this photo might have affected individual officers’ willingness to participate in this massacre?”

Possible answers: Don’t want to let your buddies down; don’t want to leave others to do the “dirty work”; want to be a “team player.” Instructor may wish to highlight the role of performative masculinity in perpetration of mass atrocities.³

Say: “When we discuss the role of perpetrators during mass atrocities, we tend to focus on motivations such as fear for one’s safety and ideology. While these motivations can play an important role in someone’s decision to participate or go along with the commission of mass atrocities, ordinary human motivations such as peer pressure can often play a role in people’s decision making, even in the most extreme contexts. While some pressures and motivations are specific to the time period and rooted in the political, cultural, and ideological context, others reflect timeless social and psychological vulnerabilities all human beings face. These are important to understand in order to prepare ourselves to be more ethically conscious leaders.”

Cover: Members of Police Battalion 101 celebrate Christmas in their barracks, December 25, 1940. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Michael O’Hara*

³ For more information on the role of performative masculinity in perpetration of the Holocaust, see Edward B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021). Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.