

Do the Right Thing?

“The most important human endeavour is striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to our lives.”

Albert Einstein

The Growing Crisis

The events of the previous two weeks meant that, for me, the expedition was over. There would be no more climbing, or so I thought. It was 8am on May 20 and I was swathed in down clothing, crammed into a flimsy camping chair at Everest Base Camp. My bare feet sat in a tub of water carefully maintained at 40°C by an attendant Sherpa bearing a vast kettle of hot water. A tube from a large oxygen cylinder lay in the bottom of the tub, trickling a constant stream of oxygen bubbles. My toenails were black and my toes had a pale waxy appearance in stark contrast to the bright pink of the rest of my feet. Beside me was my hard-as-nails climbing partner from the North of England. He had his own tub of warm water and the Sherpa alternated between us. Between us sat a hissing VHF radio; we waited for the morning radio check-in from all the camps.



Khumbu Icefall from Base Camp

We had recently returned from nine days above 25,000 ft on the North Face of Everest. Our aim had been to push the route beyond Camp V and up through the Hornbein Couloir to establish an assault camp at 27,500 ft and to fix 1500ft of thin Kevlar cord as a life-line to the pair of summit climbers to follow. However, five days had been spent trapped in the Camp IV snow hole with little food, gas and oxygen while a storm raged outside. On the other side of the mountain two climbers from an Indian expedition had died during the storm, freezing on their ropes while attempting to retreat from the South Col. Climbers nearby from another expedition had refused help, not wanting to risk their chances of reaching the summit.

The morning after the storm, the two of us tunneled from our snow hole, emerging thin, exhausted and frostbitten. We were so depleted we realised that day was our last to push the route forward. Without oxygen we climbed the avalanche-threatened route for 15 hours, reopening the route and fixing rope.



Camp IV snow hole



Leaving Camp V, 26,000ft

We remember little of our retreat from 27,000ft in the Hornbein Couloir back to Camp IV. We were incoherent with hypoxia, starving, dehydrated, and had lost our packs, radio and most of our equipment. On our descent to Base Camp the next day we met the first summit and support teams, fat, refreshed and eager for the summit. In contrast, I had lost 15 kg in two weeks and had not felt my feet for five days – but my decisive moment was yet to come.

My Decisive Team Moment

In mid May the approaching monsoon storms create a brief window of fine weather over Everest. This is the summit-fever period, a time when spectators would witness the very best and very worst of human nature.

The 8am radio check-in revealed an emergency. Overnight a climber in an Other team at Camp II, at 21,000ft in the Western Cwm, had become severely ill with cerebral and pulmonary edema, a frequently fatal form of altitude sickness. The Other team was a small lightly-equipped group intent on filming a flamboyant celebrity Other mountaineer, climb all fourteen 8,000m summits. They had arrived at Base Camp late and were making a fast ascent using the route established by other teams. They were *certain of success and 'it felt good'* (Lehrer, 2013, p.210); they were due on K2 in two months.

The Other team had asked our doctor at Camp II to provide oxygen for their sick team-member. Our doctor later went to check on the progress of the Other team and was startled to discover that **despite his extreme sickness his team members had elected to continue up the mountain**. Without a rapid descent, he would be dead in 3-4 hours. **We were shocked by their heartless decision;** their lack of 'fellow feeling' and sympathy - the 'basis for moral decisions' (Lehrer, 2013, p.176).

*Faced with a moral dilemma members of the Other team were 'Fooled by a Feeling.' As expert intuitive mountaineers they found it easier to consider the odds of summit success than the odds of their team mate's survival – they weren't intuitive medical experts. As a result they **gambled on a life to avoid losing the summit**. This loss aversion led them to 'badly miscalculate the risk' on their friend's life to keep chasing the possibility of reaching the summit (Lehrer, 2013, p.82). They also suffered *partisan delusions*, forcing a *rational end to their brain's emotional debate*, 'neglecting crucial pieces of information' (Lehrer, 2013, p.195) and imposing a 'top down solution on their decision process...distorting the verdicts of their emotional brains' (Lehrer, 2013, p.200).*

The moral dilemma had been transferred to our team; **abandon our route or abandon a man who will certainly die without immediate rescue**. From Base Camp to Camp V, our team's **dopamine and adrenaline began to flow**, 'oh shit! circuit[s]' began to fire (Lehrer, 2013, p.43) and the spindle cells of twelve minds 'conveyed emotions across the entire brain...guiding [their] actions and telling [them] how they should feel' (Lehrer, 2013, p.45).

A heated debate rapidly unfolded over the radio. Could he move? How many would it take to bring him down the dangerous Khumbu Icefall? Would the risk be justified? Would we be abandoning our own hopes of the summit? As the discussion developed it immediately became obvious that no-one in the team was prepared to abandon him, we were **'deciding without thinking'** (Lehrer, 2013, p.12) and the decision was **made 'at an emotional unconscious level, not at a logical level'** (Antigone Bechara, cited in Lehrer, 2013, p.192).

Like Lehrer's quarterback Tom Brady, 'in the space of a few seconds... we had to make a series of hard choices' (Lehrer, p.12). Subconsciously we prepared for action, **'our feelings compelled us to respond to the situation in the right way'** (Lehrer, 2013, p.42). **Without a conscious decision** the discussion became about *how*, not *whether*, to rescue him. We didn't know his name and were in different locations but we had **unconsciously assumed responsibility for him**. Like the easy option to turn the wheel in Joshua Greene's 'runaway trolley' case, **'it was an impersonal moral decision'** (Greene cited in, Lehrer, 2013, p.171).

Minutes ago our team had been totally committed to the summit. Now our focus had **effortlessly switched to saving a stranger**. Lehrer states, **'At its core, moral decision-making is about sympathy'** (Lehrer, 2013, p.174). Our team had climbed three Himalayan mountains together and had developed a social and personal bond so tight that we would have willingly risked our lives for one another – **our commitment was deeply empathetic and primitive**. Greene explains how our primate ancestors had 'intensely social lives' and were sensitive to 'personal moral violation' of one another (Greene, cited in Lehrer, 2013, p.172). This 'altruistic behaviour' and 'mirroring of...feelings for other people' was named by Adam Smith as 'fellow feeling' (Smith, cited in Lehrer, 2013, pp.176-177). **Our team had subconsciously brought the dying member of the Other team into our social group.**



Camp II, Western Cwm

Climbers at Camps I and III quickly set off for Camp II. There the team members were preparing the Other climber on a rigid stretcher to drag him down the Western Cwm to the top of the Khumbu Icefall. **The plan was to transfer him to a lightweight stretcher at Camp I and pass him to a team of six of our Sherpas and climbers from Base Camp. They would take him down through the labyrinth of crevasses, ladders and ice cliffs to Base Camp.**



Khumbu ice towers and climbers



Camp I, top of Khumbu Icefall

My Personal Decisive Moment

At Base Camp I was engaged in a personal dilemma. We had been joined by Fernando Diaz, the doctor from Another expedition and a world-leading frostbite expert. He was firm, rational and strongly advised me *not to go back up the mountain – the chances of refreezing and losing my toes was extremely high*. There are plenty of fit and strong climbers available, he argued, ‘you would almost certainly damage your feet and become another liability’.

The doctor was right, but like the Concord Monitor editorial board (Lehrer, 2013, p.189-191), *my mind was engaged in a fierce argument – my instinct as a climber and team member told me to climb the icefall and join the rescue but my rational brain was telling me the personal risk was too great – that I would be of limited use*. The sharp internal limbic argument ‘was largely emotional’ (Lehrer, 2013, p.191) and *subconsciously involved feelings such as pride, excitement, fear, integrity, comradeship, commitment and shame*.

In my mind two separate processes were at work. My *‘emotional brain generated the verdict’ – I could not stomach turning my back on a fellow climber, I need to do the right thing*. My rational brain *‘explained the verdict’*, it gave reasons ‘after the fact’; *it concluded that a few toes were worth the risk and that the trip down the icefall would be at night and extraordinarily difficult – all help would be critical* (Haidt, cited in Lehrer, 2013, pp.168-9). Lehrer stated that only *‘after the emotions* have already *made the moral decision – that those rational circuits in the prefrontal cortex are activated*. People come up with persuasive reasons to justify their moral intuition’ (Lehrer, 2013, p.167). What emerged was ‘a clear-cut decision’ that showed ‘no trace of the debate’ (Lehrer, 2013, p.191). **To the team I appeared effortlessly decisive.**

Altruistic behavior translates into positive, pleasurable emotions - acts of charity and selflessness make us 'feel good', (Lehrer, 2013, p.177). While there were personal self-interest influences on my internal debate, the core of my decision was based on a sense of empathy, injustice and fair play. Like the findings from the ultimatum game (Lehrer, 2013, p.175) the source of my sympathy and 'moral emotions was the imagination' (Smith, cited in Lehrer, 2013, p.176). Filled with those emotions I set off for my 24th journey through the treacherous Khumbu Icefall.



Babu Chiri Sherpa

The rescue was epic. Eighteen hours after the rescue began, in pitch blackness and a driving blizzard I took turns with the legendary Babu Chiri Sherpa to piggy-back Christian, the barely alive Other climber, 100m at a time across the moraine to Base Camp. Behind us trailed injured and exhausted climbers, the dangers of the icefall now behind us. **My instincts had been correct**; my contribution to the rescue was decisive, and I had kept my toes.



Slow progress descending into the Khumbu Icefall

A Systemic Model to Aid Understanding Decisions and their Consequences

*Between truth and lie are images and ideals
We imagine and think are real,
That paralyze our imagination and our thinking
in our efforts to conserve them.*

*We must continually learn to unlearn
much that we have learned, and learn to learn
that we have not been taught.*

Only thus do we and our subject grow.

R.D. Laing. 1972

Sheffield's V-Model (Sheffield, 2005) allows us to understand the decision processes and actions during the rescue of a member of the Other team. It presents progressive comprehension of a problem solving event by taking a systemic and hierarchical approach. The left side of the **model breaks down, or analyses, the process steps concerned with intentions**. The right side of the model shows the steps constructing the outcomes, or synthesis. The three vertical hierarchical levels of *why? what? and how?* are similar to the *ends (strategic), ways (operational), means (tactical)* levels of classical strategy and allow us to understand the relationship between the intentions and the outcomes.

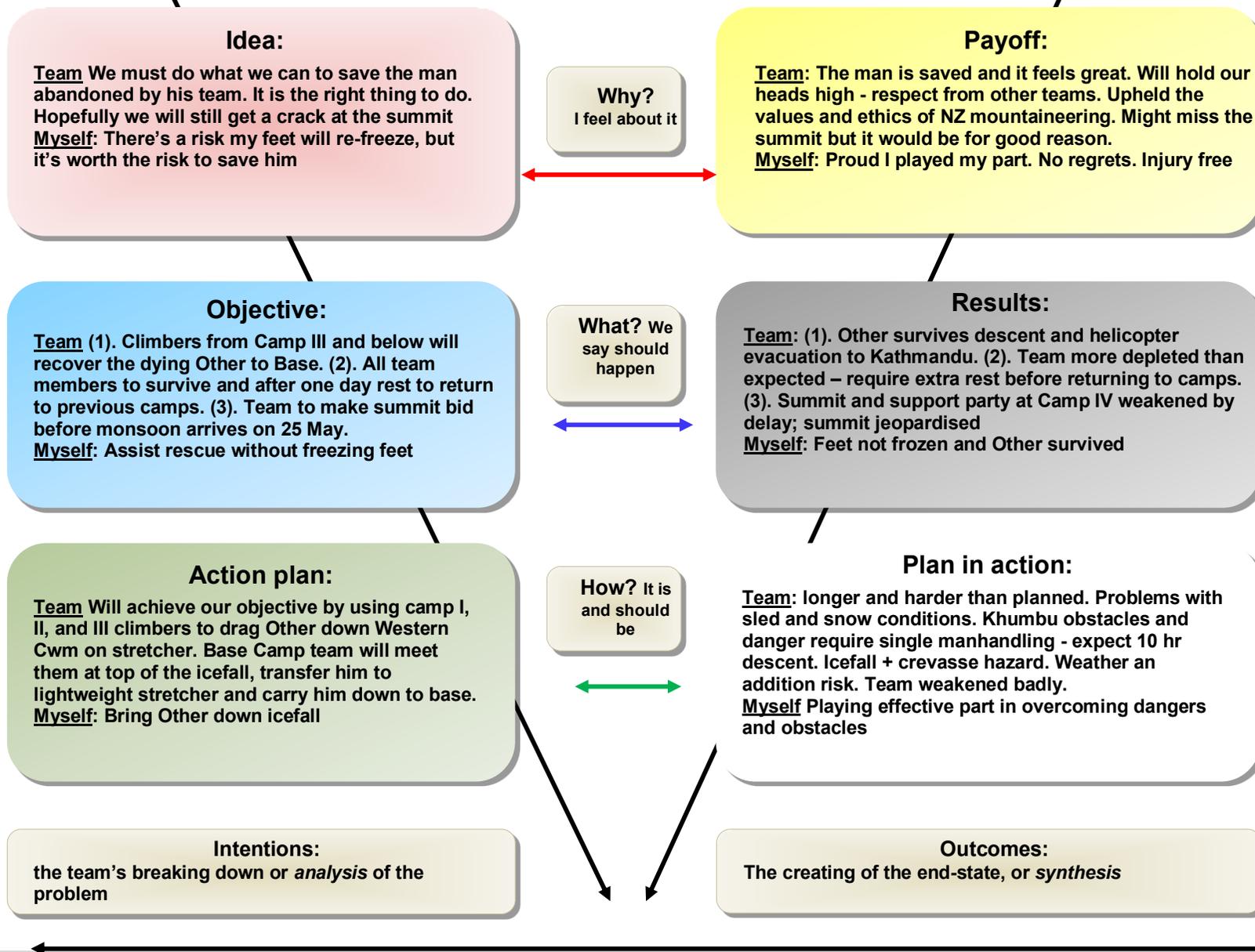
When describing the making of strategy, Gray states '**there can be no evading a moral contribution to strategy-making and execution**' (Gray, 2010, pp.56-59). Gray identifies three useful dicta reinforcing Sheffield's construct:

1. *Strategy is a value-charged zone of **ideas and behavior***
2. *Historically specific strategies often are driven by **culture and personality***
3. *Strategy is typically made by a process of **dialogue and negotiation***

Sheffield states that the V-Model 'validate[s] systemic knowledge by testing the coherence among intentions and outcomes at three levels of inclusiveness' (Sheffield, 2005, p.94). de Bono's Six Hats are used as a framing technique throughout the model to illustrate the modes of thinking at each of the six levels (de Bono, 1999). The model (Fig. 1) unfolds a 'voyage of discovery' through answering six questions: *why, what, how* to break the problem down into intentions; then, *how, what, why* to synthesize the outcome. The questions align to three criteria (Sheffield, 2005, p.88, Fig. 1, Fig. 2):

1. **Personal Commitment** (the decision)
2. **Interpersonal agreement** (the team rescue plan)
3. **Technical excellence** (execution of the complex and dangerous rescue)

Fig. 1. V-Model Decision Framework using de Bono's Thinking Hats



The Gold Standard

This paper considers the interaction between the Other Team, My Team, and myself. Despite the high emotional states, the difficult conditions and radio communication, it is possible to reconstruct three snapshots of interaction as the protagonists employed **emotion**, **morality** and **reason**: **before** the decisive moment; **at** the decisive moment; and after **resolution**. Before the rescue the Other and My teams were completely separate – sharing Camp II was all they had in common. They clearly had **different ethics** and **values**. This condition is shown at Fig. 2.

At the decisive moment, the two main cultures clashed and I faced my own dilemma. There was an unsuccessful dialogue between the two teams but the role and relationships within My Team swiftly led to a **moral and just decision**. This condition is shown at Fig. 3. At the decisive point My Team members, spread across the whole mountain, put all previous plans and **personal aspirations** to one side and **instantly collaborated** toward a **shared moral purpose**.

After the rescue the members of Other team were ashamed and avoided contact with My Team. However, despite the arrival of the monsoon and the failure of both teams to reach the summit, My Team retained **a high morale and an extremely close bond of friendship**. My Team met the Gold Standard. This condition is shown at Fig. 4.

In meeting the Gold Standard all members of the team faced a personal decisive moment; they achieved:

- ✓ **An emotional commitment**: to abandon the route and possibly the summit
- ✓ **A moral agreement**: to rescue the dying man and do the right thing
- ✓ **A reasoned excellence**: To execute an extremely difficult and dangerous rescue



After the storm: descending Mt Everest, 24,500ft

Roles, & Relationship to the Rationality Underlying Attitudes & Behaviours	Other team	My team	Myself
Emotion	Get to the summit as fast as possible. Keep fit for the next expedition to K2 in two months. Failure will cost too much	All committed to each other to get two climbers on the summit. Difficulty of route and style of climb is important. Look after each other, survive and remain friends	Proud at my effort and happy to have 'spent' myself in the Hornbein Couloir fixing rope for the summit pair. Now concerned about recovery and frostbite. Job well done
Morality	Do what it takes: get the film in the bag and move onto next project. Arrive late and leverage off other expeditions fixed ropes and supplies	Ethical, clean climb of a difficult route. Remove rubbish from mountain. Don't use Sherpas for climbing. Play lead role in maintenance of shared route and ropes in icefall	Have met my obligation to the team: happy to have played my part to make summit bid possible
Reason	As many summits as fast as possible increases my profits. Good film footage means professional status	All amateurs – here for the sense of adventure and discovery. Life-enriching expedition and possibly lifetime achievement	Youngest and least experienced on team. Humbled to be selected and thrilled to be given the opportunity to climb on Everest

Fig. 2: R3 Grid: *Before the Decisive Moment*

Roles, & Relationship to the Rationality Underlying Attitudes & Behaviours	Other team	My team	Myself
Emotion	Christian looks bad. We can't risk missing the summit though. Other teams will keep an eye on him. It's now or never to get to the top	We are all poised for our summit bid – I can't believe the Other Team might abandon him here at Camp II. If they do, we will have to do something about it	I'm not in good shape and if I go up the icefall I might freeze my toes. I would be ashamed to sit at base camp and not play my part. It feels great to be involved in helping
Morality	You accept responsibility for yourself coming up here. No point risking my own life to save him. He would leave me. Every man for himself at extreme altitude	You have an obligation to care for you team mate and other climbers. The summit is secondary. It looks like we are going to have to rescue him ourselves	The poor bloke – left by his team. He must be suffering badly. I can't just sit here, I've got to do what I can
Reason	There are doctors here with medical supplies and oxygen. Leave it to them. Probably too late to save him anyway. He wouldn't want us to miss the summit needlessly	Our doctor believes this man will die in 3-4 hours. Let's get him off the mountain. With luck the weather will hold and we will still make the summit	It's going to extremely hard to get him down. The icefall is going to be difficult and dangerous. Every hand will count

Fig. 3: R3 Grid: At the Decisive Moment

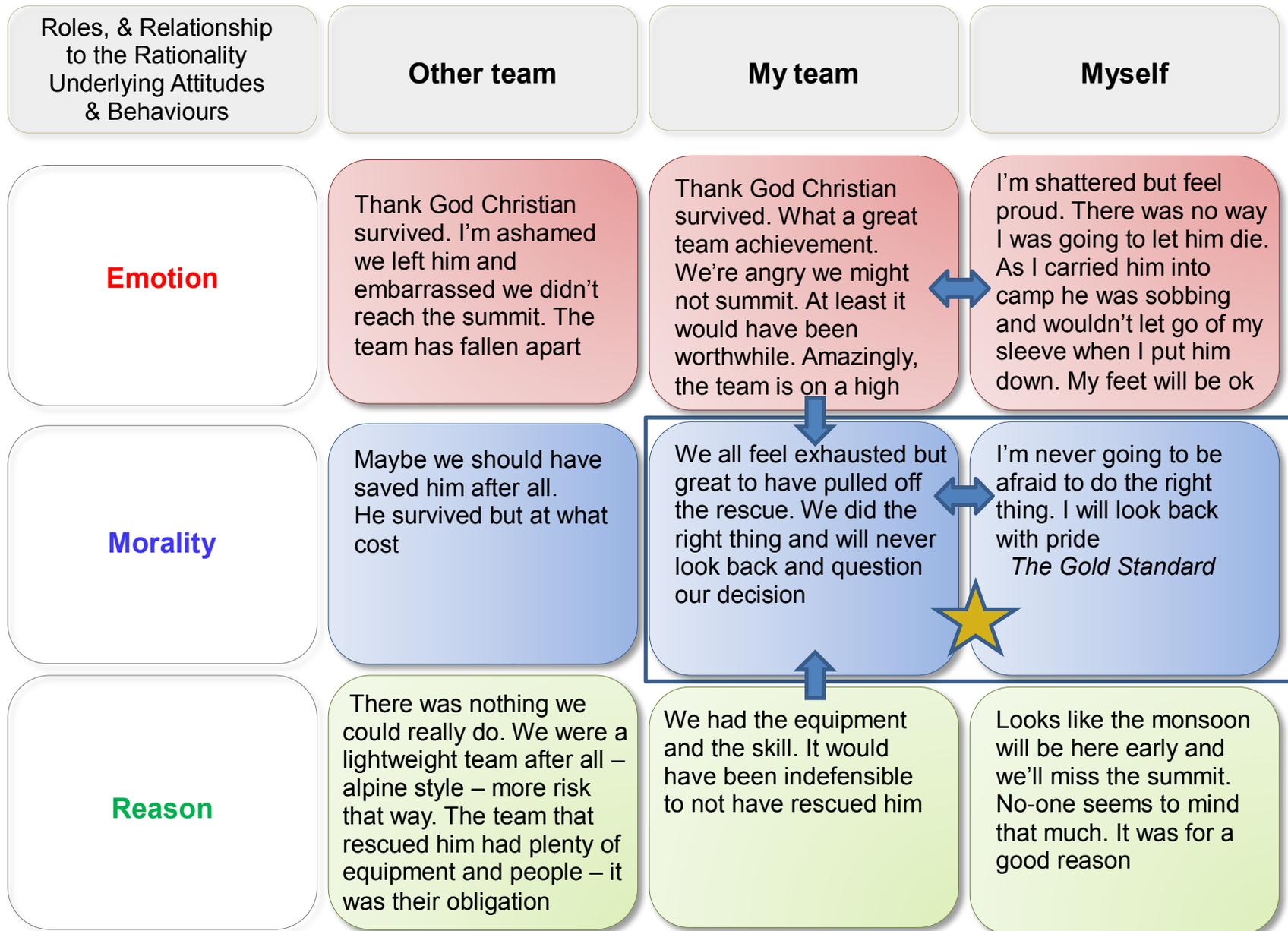


Fig. 4: R3 Grid: After the Decisive Moment

Conclusion and insight

Seven months after the rescue, just before Christmas, a large parcel appeared at my door. It was a bottle of expensive French Cognac and with it was a note from Christian. He was still recovering but had recently begun climbing again. The note briefly described his **terror** during the decent and his **gratitude** for his rescue.

For me and for all of the team, the incident was a test piece in self-sacrifice. The expedition had been two years in the planning and had cost over \$US3m. We had trained relentlessly and had two hard months on the mountain pushing forward a long and difficult route. The team was strong and with rope fixed through the Hornbein, the summit seemed assured. *To willingly turn our back on that goal, without a moment of hesitation graphically demonstrates the power of our primitive genetic conditioning to care for, and do what is morally right to help someone who is suffering.* The decision was a bewildering confusion of emotion and reason but the pre-frontal cortex had no chance of rationalizing a solution – each of us knew instinctively what needed to be done.

The V-Model neatly presents the results of the confusing and competing influences and the Gold Standard clearly explains the roles, relationships and rationality of the interactions that allowed us to leave the mountain with our heads held high.

*Many years on from the rescue I am able to reflect on how the event has influenced my life. I can trace a line from that point through many difficult and challenging decisions and it has now become a true moral compass and a benchmark for my **behaviour, morals and values**. Christian has become a metaphor for the pleasure reward experienced after choosing the difficult, risky, but just path.*

“Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” Aristotle

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