

Philosophy of Ethical Leadership

Herman J. Najoli

Indiana Wesleyan University

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Ethics plays a critical role in the practice of leadership (Ciulla, 2004). The leader's development of a personal philosophy of ethical leadership is essential for effective leadership (Klann, 2007). According to Rhode (2006) "early Greeks and theologians dating from the Middle Ages occasionally discussed virtue in the context of leadership" (p. 1). As our modern society increasingly promotes individual excesses, leaders must ground their foundational approaches in an ethical philosophy that protects them from "the impulse to exploit, profit, and selfishly advance" (Dalla Costa, 1998, p. xi). Few leaders take up the challenge to establish ethical foundations for their leadership (Ciulla, 2004). Klann (2007) laments, "the task of defining and instilling moral and ethical attitudes or behaviors seldom gets more than a passing look" (p. 3). Hatcher (2002) argues that "we have come to the point where we *must* have people and organizations that do the right thing more often than the alternative, organizations and leaders that are moral, ethical, and socially responsible" (p. 3, emphasis in original).

Modern leaders have an obligation to live by values that are rooted in principles of moral courage (Kidder, 2005). Towards this end, this discussion endeavors to outline a personal ethical philosophy of leadership, craft an agenda for personal development that takes "other's interests as well as one's own as reasons for action" (Hartman, 1996, p. 15) and establish a framework of leader responsibilities in developing an ethical society. This effort is guided by a core worldview that recognizes the need for authentic leadership, a philosophy of leadership that is informed by the Golden Rule as described in the Gospels (Matt. 7:12), and scholarly research based on the works of prominent thinkers on leadership ethics. Given the continuing debate on whether leadership ethics is a field of study or a topic in leadership (Ciulla, 2005), a proper discussion of ethical leadership necessitates clear definitions of the terms associated with this concept.

Definitions of Ethical Leadership

The analysis of leadership is laden with diverse qualifications that significantly alter the meaning of the term. Most writers assume a commonsense knowledge of essential leadership terms, leading to a “definitional incoherence” (Rhode, 2006, p. 4) that needs resolution. This incoherence is depicted in more than 221 leadership definitions (Rost, 1993). These include the possession of suitable personality traits (Bingham, 1927); the use of influence to inspire change (Nash, 1929); an individual’s behavior while guiding groups (Hemphill, 1949); the creation and maintenance of role structure in groups (Stogdill, 1959); the motivational exchange relationship between leaders and followers (Burns, 1978); and the ability to organize a social system to face its challenges (Heifetz, 1994). This lack of coherence becomes “a central difficulty plaguing analysis of leadership in general, and moral leadership in particular” (Rhode, 2006, p. 4).

These diverse definitions of leadership make the challenge of developing a more cogent definition of ethical leadership increasingly problematic. A suitable approach would be to begin with a definition of ethics. Dalla Costa (1998) defines ethics as “the norms that a community defines and institutionalizes to prevent individuals from pursuing self-interest at the expense of others” (p. 71). This creates the impression that ethical values are constructed by a community. Aronson (2001) views ethics as “the study of standards for determining what behavior is good and bad or right and wrong” (p. 248). Ciulla (2004) is more inclusive and states that “ethics generally consists of the examination of right, wrong, good, evil, virtue, duty, obligation, rights, justice, fairness, etc. in human relationships with each other and other living things” (p. 4). This includes how humans behave in relation to one another and the values they uphold within their environments. Leadership involves both behavior and relationship (Hemphill, 1949; Burns, 1978). A definition of leadership ethics therefore would be inclusive of these concepts.

Based on these definitions, ethical leadership encompasses the implications of societal norms and standards on leader behavior. Brown and Trevino (2002) state that ethical leadership is “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and promotion of such conduct among followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making processes” (p. D1). Ethical leadership involves how leaders behave in relationship to others and their environments. Being ethical requires a “commitment to right action” (Rhode, 2006, p. 4) and may also be viewed as being moral (Ciulla, 2004). A key question is whether the two terms are distinguishable.

The term ethical leadership has been used interchangeably with moral leadership in leadership literature. Burns (2004) differentiates between the two, with ethical leadership entailing a focus on transactional values that govern individual interactions and moral leadership encompassing the transformational values essential in societal change. On the other hand, Ciulla (2004) argues that the two terms have similar meanings and researchers should not “quibble over terms” (p. xvi). A similar viewpoint has been propounded by Kidder (1995) who states “there is little to be gained by trying to distinguish rigidly between morals and ethics” (p. 64).

Due to the considerable consensus about the interchangeability of the two terms (Kidder, 1995; Rhode, 2006), this discussion does not attempt to pursue a distinction but rather follows the majority of scholars who understand the two terms as mutually related. Ciulla (2005) identified three general categories for the moral assessment of leadership: “the ethics of leaders...; the ethics of how a leader leads (or the process of leadership)...; and ...the ethics of what a leader does.” (p. 332). Considering these three categories as a foundational framework for the development of an ethical philosophy of leadership, this effort aims at outlining personal beliefs that align with the writer’s faith and moral upbringing.

The ethics of the leader

Many leaders have failed to live up to societal standards expected of them. Ciulla (2004) laments “we live in a world where leaders are often morally disappointing” (p. 3), implying that acting morally is in the leader’s and the society’s best interests in the long run. Classical leadership theorist, Machiavelli (1515) thought otherwise, stating “the man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous.” In the wake of modern ethical scandal, one would be pained to accept this view. Character in a leader is critical if one is to motivate collaborators to embrace one’s leadership. Price (2004) states, “when an ethical failure of leadership is exposed, we are inclined to look for an explanation of the leader’s behavior, not an analysis of the moral status of what was done” (p. 127). Leaders ought to commit themselves to virtuous living (Kidder, 1995; Anderson, 2008).

Modern understanding of moral virtues stems from Aristotle (Kidder, 1995, Klann, 2007) who established the doctrine of the mean, meaning that moral virtues regulate individual character traits at a mean between two vices or extremes (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006). The leader should avoid excesses of behavior and conduct in order to achieve excellence. Ciulla (2004) points out that “one of the problems with using the values approach to ethics is that it requires a very complicated taxonomy of values. The word value is also problematic because it encompasses so many different things” (p. 23). Fortunately, four virtues have are regarded as cardinal in the development of moral character: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude (Anderson, 2008). Oderberg (1999) argues that “the four virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice are jointly necessary for the possession of every other virtue” (p. 306). Following is a discussion of these values.

Prudence and Ethical Leadership. Dobel (1998) states, “the ethics of prudence focuses upon the obligation of a leader to achieve moral self-mastery, to attend to the context of a situation, and through deliberation and careful judgment to seek concrete outcomes that are legitimate and durable” (p. 74). Prudence is defined as “the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason; ...sagacity or shrewdness in the management of affairs; ...skill and good judgment in the use of resources” (Prudence, 2009). A classical understanding of prudence that has guided this writer’s worldview was developed by the Biblical King Solomon of Israel.

Solomon’s writings form a trustworthy foundation of thought for the ethical leader. Solomon states, “Every prudent man acts out of knowledge” (Prov. 13:16). Knowledge, along with understanding and wisdom are “speculative intellectual virtues” and also a species of prudence (Oderberg, 1999, p. 310). The implication of this is that ethical leaders ought to develop the ability to perceive truth through logic, argumentation, and perception. According to Oderberg (1999) “prudence also enters into humility where deliberation of means is concerned” (p. 308), meaning that the prudent leader will cautiously determine how to act in all situations. This correlates to King Solomon’s statement that, “the wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways....a prudent man gives thought to his steps” (Prov. 14:8a,15b). Ethical leaders ought to be open to feedback and correct their errors. King Solomon states, “...whoever heeds correction shows prudence” (Prov. 15:5b).

Justice and Ethical Leadership. Ethical leaders strive for justice (Dalla Costa, 1998). Murphy and Enderle (1995) contend that “ethical leadership withers without justice” (p. 123). Leaders have an obligation to ensure fairness to all that are served. According to Kymlicka (1993) leaders have a “natural duty of justice....a duty to promote just institutions, a duty not derived from consent or mutual advantage, but simply owed to persons as such” (p. 20). Dalla

Costa (1998) contends that “the command of justice is *Do not discriminate*” (p. 168, emphasis in original). The ethical leader must tackle injustice head-on and endeavor to ensure equity for all. Leadership is a responsibility that one is entrusted with whose purpose is to ensure a just society.

Rawls (1985) suggested that the concept of justice and fairness enables the basic institutions of society to “realize the values of liberty and equality” (p. 227). Ethical leaders should encourage cooperation amongst diverse individuals with the goal of improving the well-being of the entire community and establishing a culture of equity amongst constituents (Dalla Costa, 1998). Equality necessitates a positive approach in leader interactions. Avolio and Locke (2004) indicate that leaders should manifest the virtue of justice by modeling “rationality with regard to other people, judging them in accordance with the facts by a rational standard” (p. 108)

Temperance or Self-Control in Leadership. Ethical leaders ought to control their desires and overcome the temptation to pursue selfish interests. This requires self-mastery. Machiavelli (1515) stated “a prince ought to live amongst his people in such a way that no unexpected circumstances, whether of good or evil, shall make him change.” The ethical leader remains level-headed at all times to ensure a consistent ability to make the best decisions in critical situations. In a world that constantly appeals to the selfish appetites of leaders, it is essential for the ethical leader to possess self-control that limits these desires. According to Oderberg (1999), temperance regulates “the bodily passions and passions of desire” (p. 307). Leadership literature is replete with examples of leaders who failed to control their passions, indulging in immoral behavior whereby their actions were “out of sync with values – either with the individual’s inner values or with values we can reasonably take for granted in the community at large” (Kidder, 1995, p. 43). Leaders must clearly define their values and develop mechanisms for controlling the temptation to deviate from such values.

Moral temptations can be viewed as right-versus-wrong choices, consisting of the failure to abide by established law, claiming for fact that which one knows to be false, and engaging in acts which do not align with widely shared societal values (Kidder, 1995). Temperance enables the ethical leader to avoid such temptations by cultivating an orientation towards good through the development of “the habits for thinking, deciding, and acting toward that good” (Dalla Costa, 1998, p. 252). According to Klann (2007) these habits are cultivated through character development. Leadership character is developed in an organizational context through the modeled example of other influential leaders, exposure to challenging leadership work, relevant education that focuses on specific ethical choices, a constructive environment that supports moral growth, and evaluative feedback that focuses on specific areas of growth (Klann, 2007).

Dispositions for the ethical leader

Leaders are faced with many crucial decisions that have a significant impact on their constituencies. Kidder (1995) suggested that three overarching principles that are most commonly used in making ethical decisions: “1. ‘Do what’s best for the greatest number of people’ (...*ends-based* thinking). 2. ‘Follow your highest sense of principle’ (or *rule-based* thinking). 3. ‘Do what you want others to do to you’ (or *care-based* thinking).” (p. 154, emphasis in original). These principles, along with individual traits of a person and cultural proclivities, serve to develop the leader’s character (Bass & Bass, 2008). For many leaders, these decisions are governed by their worldview, cultural upbringing, and education (Klann, 2007; Nash, 1992; Bass & Bass, 2004). The principle of care-based thinking has commonly been referred to as the Golden Rule and “is so commonplace as to be almost unavoidable in human experience” (Kidder, 1995, p. 159). Bass & Bass (2008) suggest that “the Golden Rule is found in all the

world's major religions and many of its minor ones" (p. 221). Leaders must commit to the development of credibility with their followers (Kouzes and Posner, 1993)

Motivations for the Ethical Leader

Batson (2006) identifies four kinds of prosocial motivations that drive human action: egoism, which aims at self-interests; altruism, whose goal is to increase the welfare of others; collectivism, whose ultimate end is group welfare; and principlism, which strives to uphold moral principles. Egoistic motivation may be beneficial to the ethical leader when "the action is either instrumental to reaching the ultimate goal of self-benefit or is an unintended consequence of reaching this goal" (pp. 199-200). Altruistic motivation is driven by "other-oriented feelings elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of another person" (p. 202). Ethical leaders ought to value the welfare of those in their care. Collectivist motivation endeavors to "benefit some group, whether large or small, inclusive or exclusive" (p. 205), an example being the support of a charity. Principlism requires a "universal and impartial moral principle" (p. 207) that one seeks to uphold.

Good leaders model transformational and ethical behavior that facilitates the great changes that elevate the quality of life for their followers. Burns (1978) alludes to this when he says that a leader "recognizes and exploits an existing need or demand" (p. 4) in society. Leaders help groups to achieve common goals by defining expectations and clearly outlining the performance targets that ensure group effectiveness. Kouzes and Posner (1995) say, "The most admired leaders speak unhesitatingly and proudly of mutual ethical aspirations. They know that people aspire to live up to the highest moral standards". (p. 133). A focus on mutual ethical aspirations at the global level allows leaders to exercise good governance by making decisions that make a difference for a global audience.

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