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Ethics in Leadership

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ETHICS IN LEADERSHIP

A discussion of ethics in leadership must be overdue, given a recent business column entitled "Do Jerks Make Better Leaders?" The column, by Geoffrey Nunberg (2012), was originally published in *The Washington Post,* and was excerpted in *The Week* magazine. Citing a few well-known "jerk"-type leaders, Nunberg suggests that "a swollen ego and indifference to the feelings of others" can work wonders in the C-suite. He cites General George Patton as "an abusive jerk" who insulted subordinates out of the firm belief that it was "for their own good," and Steve Jobs' "abusiveness and petulance," which he felt inspired employees "to live up to their potential." But in an age when "people acting like jerks to one another" seems to be a model for reality TV and talk radio, it should come as no surprise when "leaders" assume that persona. Nunberg's short column ended with the assertion that those abusive types become the leaders "whose names we're most likely to know."

But is that the rationale for the "jerk" reputation—that we remember their names? It seems clear, however, that big-time name recognition leaves a lot to be desired. King Jehoram was widely known in Israel, but as a king-sized jerk. His epitaph is a graphic summation: "He died in great agony. His people made no fire in his honor like the fires made for his fathers . . . and he departed with no one's regret" (2 Chron. 21:20, RSV). Oh, they remembered his name all right. In fact his name went into the greatest record book of all. But every remembrance by those who knew him brought a groan and an epithet through clenched teeth that must have ended with something like ". . . and good riddance."

Jerk leaders may effectively "get things done" and also be long remembered. But if they are preoccupied only with a wall plaque of accomplishments and not with ethical "means" to that end, the impact on subordinates and observers will be negative indeed. And that

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negative impact just may, in time, eat away much of the good that they thought they had achieved by their hard-driven tactics.

A cause of concern for ethical principles is the recent account of cheating in schools. Recently, New York City's prestigious Stuyvesant High School suspended 12 students for allegedly sharing test answers by text message and e-mail. And earlier, Harvard University, perhaps the world's most prestigious university, accused 125 undergrads of sharing and plagiarizing answers for a final take-home exam after being explicitly instructed that they were not to discuss the exam with others. Recent research shows that 85% of high school students cheat. Donald McCabe, a Rutgers University professor who has researched student attitudes, asserts that "what a faculty member says is a suggestion for many of them" (quoted in Webley, 2012). Understandably, Harvard is now considering adding an honor code, a pledge against lying, cheating and stealing. Interestingly, as early as 1779, at the urging of then-Governor Thomas Jefferson, the first student-policed honor system was instituted at the College of William and Mary. The visionary Jefferson could foresee the importance for future leaders to be persons of integrity. Today, some of the most notable and stringent honor codes exist at the military academies where it is felt that such codes are essential to the development of officers who are worthy of the public trust. And further, the codes are not limited to conduct on campus, but extend to the way the cadets and midshipmen live their lives at all times. If such integrity is expected among military leaders, should the expectation be less for leaders in general. Yet current leaders at all levels do not have a stellar record of honesty. Accounts of "fallen" leaders seem to make up a regular part of the daily news fodder. How sad that a recent *Time* cover (October 15, 2012), picturing the two presidential candidates, posed the question, "Who is telling the truth?"

Notwithstanding the pressures on young people and the ubiquitous electronic tools at their fingertips, is there a "trickle-down" effect from famous "jerk leaders" that helps to leach away ethical restraints in the next generation of leaders? Are we willing to suggest that the influence of famous leaders has no effect on young leaders-in-training? In other words, are there practices in the workplace and among leaders that work against sound ethical guidelines for the young? And on the positive side, are there sound ethical principles that have sailed by the Millennial Generation, either unnoticed or unheeded? A few suggestions follow.

First of all, to do the right thing must be its own reward. In the movie

The Sound of Music (Wise, 1965), when Julie Andrews is finally in Christopher Plummer's arms, out of her romantic reverie she sings, "Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good." Now admittedly, it is usually a difficult endeavor to extrapolate high moral principles from a Hollywood production. But on occasion, a writer may produce a line that is worthy of reflection. Such is that line about doing good. The implication is that Maria von Trapp's success with the Captain was a kind of reward for some earlier "good." But does that line suggest that good deeds are not simply their own reward, but are utilitarian—that is, doing good at point A will result in good things coming my way at point B and beyond? In other words, does doing good earn me something? Or to put it in the negative, does not doing bad mean I deserve a reward? A "yes" answer to both questions is widely held.

Early in my ethics classes I used to pose this scenario: You arrive home late one night in a driving rain. As you pull into your drive, you notice that your neighbor's front door is standing open—the house is dark, they appear to be gone and the rain is drenching their entry-way. Do you run across and close their door? Student responses vary. There are always those who wouldn't touch their neighbors' door. But there are always those who would. Sometimes their responses seem affected by the size of the city in which they grew up—the larger the city, the more likely they wouldn't get involved. Of those who would close the door, when I asked why they would do it, someone nearly always responds, "Because then they might close my front door if it ever blew open in a rain storm." In other words, if I do a good deed, there is a chance I will be repaid by good later. It is not necessarily a flawed notion. After all, the ancient Preacher said, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Eccl. 11:1, RSV). Clearly the principle of reciprocity is there. However, the driver of the good act should not be the prospect of repayment, but rather doing the right simply because it is right. Integrity should be its own reward. But in a day of rampant utilitarianism, Abe Lincoln would be trudging pretty much alone on his high-minded mission to return six cents in change to a customer who had inadvertently overpaid. A respected leader must personify integrity.

In addition to modeling transparent honesty, in a day of complex organizations and tight budgets, a leader must keep his colleagues informed. If the three most important rules of real estate are location, location, location, three of the most important rules for leaders must be

communication, communication, communication. Nothing takes a greater toll on a leader's time and nervous energy than issues of personnel. And if a leader is to maintain her position for any length of time, in other words, if she is to wear well, her communication must be thorough and reasonably congenial among both colleagues and subordinates. Of course, that suggestion flies in the face of the "I brow-beat you because I'm the boss and it will bring out the best in you" idea of leadership. Long-term good communication has been the hallmark of leaders whose influence has been positive. Ronald Reagan, often called "the Great Communicator," clearly left a positive influence as both political parties, on occasion, speak of him favorably when it advances their agenda. While Jesus never had to lead a country or even a large company, He must have had grave concerns for the longevity of His message. Accordingly, His communication, while sometimes mystifying to His followers, was never demeaning. As a result, His leadership has worn rather well, given the fact that He is remembered fondly and His positive influence continues after more than 2,000 years.

Maintaining an aura of good communication is inherently related to another important guideline for leaders—their role as morale officers. While we generally think of the Department of Human Resources as the morale office, this is one aspect that works best when it starts at the very top. But often this is a challenging assignment for a leader, who is expected to be transparent about every good or bad fortune confronting the company and its budget constraints, and at the same time keep an up-beat attitude, if not a fixed smile. The earliest Christians, belittled, demeaned, and constantly humiliated in the public sector, must have grimaced ever so slightly at the apostle Paul's breezy suggestion to "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . Have no anxiety about anything . . . and the peace of God . . . will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:4-7, RSV). As difficult as that admonition must have sounded, it had broad appeal for two reasons. First, it was coming from one of the top-most leaders, who at that very time was experiencing some sort of humiliating imprisonment. Second, this leader obviously led by example, for it was in that same town, Philippi, where he had earlier suffered "many blows," then had been imprisoned with his feet in stocks, in which condition he had led out in a hymn sing (Acts 16:25, RSV)! Some morale officer!

A negative influence on the ethics of leadership is the ever-present drive for advancement. So much of our terminology leaves no doubt

that the entire workplace is completely dominated by this concept. It all begins with an "entry level" job—a term clearly intended to remind all concerned that it is a temporary means to a different end. And then we hear of the "corporate ladder," the upper rungs of which comprise the goal to be reached. Then there is the "glass ceiling," which, though it needed to be broken, could only be reached by struggling "upward." And in academia, assistant professors can be forgiven for mediocre teaching if they show expertise in research and writing, which is the required path toward the "holy grail" known as full professorship. It's onward and upward and away from my current lowly job and status. Of course, for politicians, it means "by all means" (very literally) get the votes; for others it may mean handing out lots of polished apples— especially to your superiors. But in all these areas, the ethics of acting "on principle," regardless of where it leads, bumps along somewhere behind, mostly out of sight.

Of course, the desire for advancement is not wrong. However, like happiness, it is rarely achieved by hot pursuit. Rather, it comes as a by-product—in this case, by diligence toward the job at hand. As William Barclay (1984) put it, "The best way to a greater job is to do the one we have supremely well" (p. 96). But of course, this calls for another difficult requirement—patience. It begins with the student who wants to trade the classroom for the work place, since the study of dead Europeans simply seems to be a colossal waste of time. "The study of European history can't possibly make me a better architect." Or "Why should I waste my time studying literature when I'm planning to be a hospital administrator?" And then the story circulates that a certain business major became CEO of a small corporation before he was 40. The impetus to climb quickly too often outweighs the importance of "take your time and be thorough." Patient perseverance in the work that lies nearest is just not a part of the ethos of today's workplace.

Another important guideline for good ethical leadership is to acknowledge the value of colleagues. While it isn't always true that two heads are better than one, the wisdom of several minds always exceeds that of one—a principle denied by certain "jerk" leaders. A good leader will take advantage of the collective wisdom of the team. It was a lesson that Moses adopted only under pressure. Once he assumed the mantle of leadership, he took his role very seriously—this in spite of how loathe he was initially to take on that role. In Exodus 3-6, seven times Moses whined out excuses for why he didn't want to accept God's invitation to take the leadership role. But having finally capitulated, he

bent to the task with an iron will. His primary assistants were his brother and sister, but like many siblings, their support was sporadic. Let a crisis arise and Aaron and Miriam are conspicuous by their absence. So, like many a true leader, Moses shouldered the primary burden all by himself. After all, it is the calling of leaders to lead, and Moses had accepted his calling.

A leader is usually in that position because he has the necessary credentials and ability, and frequently feels that subordinates are not really qualified to deal with the tough issues. So "bring me all the hard cases." But soon all the cases are hard cases—or so it seems. Moses was convinced that he was the only one qualified to "judge" all the hard cases, and in no time "the people stood about Moses from morning till evening" (Exod. 18:13, RSV). But father-in-law Jethro, older and wiser, could see the developing burn-out already at work. "You . . . will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone" (Exod. 18:18, RSV). As Moses pondered the advice, he did a little research and discovered that, to his amazement, there really were able men in Israel. The biblical account tells best what happened next:

> [Moses] gave heed to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said and . . . chose able men . . . and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. (Exod. 18:25-27, RSV)

But such delegation is very hard for many leaders—especially young leaders. Depending on the team spirit, it often seems easier to just "do it myself" rather than try to get a subordinate to say yes. And the other temptation is to feel, like Moses, that no one else is really qualified, so the job won't be done right unless I do it. But for the long-term success of the company, a good leader should feel some responsibility to grow the team, for in most cases, the leader will be outlived by the entity she leads. And someone from within the organization, if given the opportunity, just may be ready and able to learn the necessary leadership skills. Leaders should keep well in mind that organizations that revolve around one dominant personality nearly always have a terrible struggle when that person is gone. And so far, every dominant personality has ultimately left the organization—if not through transfer to the competition, then through retirement or death or translation. The exit rate is 100%. So if the organization is to have a future, leadership training should always be an important part of a leader's agenda.

Finally, the moral fabric of society at large is affected by the moral principles of its leaders. When the integrity and veracity of its leaders

disappear, public trust disappears and the moral fabric begins to fray. In contrast with politics and law, careers in teaching and professorship have enjoyed a high level of respect and public trust. But with recent developments in business and banking, it would not take too much temerity to suggest, not entirely with tongue-in-cheek, that business ethics has become a contradiction in terms. There is the apocryphal story of the engineer, the lawyer and the accountant who were all asked how much was 2 + 2. The engineer responded that after a great deal of research and testing, he could show that 2 + 2 = 3.9999. The lawyer replied that after many cases where that very problem had been debated, she could prove that 2 + 2 = 4. The accountant replied, "How much do you want it to be?"

Seriously, I think it is safe to say that morality and doing right are never far below the surface of the public consciousness. And while there will never be consensus on just how situational our ethics should be, there is consensus that our leaders should personify the highest standards of integrity. When the ethics of its leaders are totally malleable and utilitarian, public trust wanes, and the moral fabric of society begins to unravel. In contrast, when society sees its leaders making decisions based on principle, it helps create the desire in others to do likewise. Or to put it another way, when the tide of principled morality rises, all boats rise with it. Jerks make memorable leaders, just not better ones.

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