

Ethical leadership in troubled times

The idea that leadership and ethics are much like two sides of the same coin (Solomon, 1992; Burns, 2004, 2010; Covey, 2015; Kernaghan, 2003) is a metaphor that has been suggested by a wide variety of scholars across many fields and applies in public administration, education, business, religion, and interpersonal daily living. Bennis and Nanus (2007) are among the many scholars who have called for a transformative approach to ethical leadership that raises the bar for leaders in honoring their ethical obligations. The importance of virtues in leadership was a fundamental principle called for by Aristotle (2013) in his examination of the moral responsibilities of leadership and his thoughtful discussion of the leader's role in helping society to achieve a better world – despite the multitude of pressures facing individuals and society.

In introducing this special edition, we are deeply concerned about a world wherein many of those who lead fail to comprehend the consequences of their actions on those to whom they owe what several scholars and practitioners have called “covenantal” duties (Pava, 2003; DePree, 2004; Covey, 2005). Blinded by short-term self-interest, the actions of government leaders, politicians, educators, and even religious leaders call into question the moral and ethical rationales used by those to whom great responsibility has been given. Pulitzer Prize winning author, Thomas L. Friedman (2009) has decried the failures of leaders of business and government to make the tough decisions in a world seemingly headed for growing political and military conflict, economic decline, and environmental turmoil.

More than 30 years ago, Robert Reich (1983) identified the problems facing an economy based upon “paper entrepreneurialism” – a prophetic declaration that a world that produced little added value, except on an accounting ledger, was destined for eventual economic collapse. Citing problems with a decline in the quality of education, the failure to maintain infrastructures, and an unwillingness to invest in research out of a desire to inflate short-term profitability, Reich explained the folly of that thinking. Despite the fact that Reich's insights were well known and accurately documented, elected leaders for the past three decades have systematically failed to take action to reverse the global problems facing society.

Coupled with the sense of entitlement, the decline in moral values, and the myopic thinking of a generation of self-centered narcissists, the resulting failures to take needed action and the fuzzy thinking of leaders who somehow fail to acknowledge their obligations to the future have led the world to a dangerous brink where their failures to act intelligently and courageously have made it painfully clear that mortgaging the future is no longer an affordable or achievable option.

Current practical research (Gallup, 2016) confirms that many leaders today have essentially failed to earn the public trust – a worldwide phenomenon that exists among nations large and small and in organizations of literally all types. In the wake of the worldwide fiscal crisis of 2008-2009, economies of many nations continue to struggle to survive and institutions and businesses face the same set of ominous pressures. This special edition about the problems of ethical leadership in today's world is timely and significant, offering insights and identifying opportunities for raising the bar of leadership in a world where leaders right and left are viewed with cynicism and distrust.

In introducing the five papers contained in this edition, we are hopeful that its message will appeal to readers of all types from all sections of the globe.



Positive leadership and adding valued – a lifelong journey

The interview with the University of Michigan's Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn offers a positive and hopeful perspective and incorporates many of the key elements of their work on Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) – the philosophy of management for which they have been frequently cited as important contributors and co-founders. POS emphasizes research about what is good and positive in achieving organizational and leadership excellence, as opposed to more traditional research about organizational dysfunction and its causes.

Citing examples from both the public and private sectors, Cameron identifies the benefits of a positive focus on education, government, and private business. Both Cameron and Quinn have identified the importance of positive virtues and treating employees and stakeholders as valued partners as the keys to effective leadership, the creation of high trust and commitment, and the accomplishment of noteworthy and remarkable results that are rarely seen in typical “command and control” organizations.

Robert Quinn emphasizes the need for leaders to look within to acknowledge their own imperfections and to make decisions based upon moral values. “Leadership is about moral power,” he reminds us. And that moral power requires that leaders rise above self-interest and short-term thinking to pursue the common good. Great leaders, he explains, strive to achieve outcomes that benefit others and look for opportunities to empower others to discover the best possible version of themselves. “POS,” he explains “lends itself to elevating the honesty and integrity of people in the world” – an outcome drastically needed to resolve the world's most challenging problems.

Reforming the criminal justice system – an ethical leadership approach

Riki Ichiho, the author of the second paper in this special edition, is both a Practicing Attorney and a University Professor. Identifying a broad array of injustices and impaired logic in the criminal justice system, Ichiho provides examples and specifics about the inherent bias in a criminal justice system that is far from just on every measure. Specifically, Ichiho examines the mythological assumption of “Innocent until proven guilty” that pervades a criminal justice system that reverses that perspective whenever a warrant is issued against an individual.

Defining justice from a multitude of points of view, this second paper also includes examples of a badly broken system characterized by prosecuting attorneys who define their jobs in terms of doing what is easiest for themselves and maintaining the highest conviction percentage, judges who arbitrarily assign sentences, police who abuse their power and profile minorities and the unemployed, and corrections officers who wield their authority in manner best described as semi-sadistic at best. In no nation is the criminal justice more out of control than the USA where nearly 2.3 million people are currently incarcerated and nearly 4.8 million are on probation or parole – with African-American and Hispanic males representing nearly 60 percent of that population according to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics.

However, the need for reforming the criminal justice system is a worldwide problem that bears careful study, thoughtful research, an active electorate, and courageous political decision makers to redirect a broken system.

“Good enough” leadership (GEL)

The third paper in this special edition is about GEL, a leadership approach that treats others with respect and humility but that acknowledges that leaders are sometimes limited in their ability to achieve perfect outcomes. Moses Pava, the Father of Covenantal Leadership, has authored this paper and defines GEL in terms of its commitment to helping people achieve their potential and honoring them as unique and valued individuals – or, as Martin Buber (2013) described, as valued “Yous” rather than as impersonal “Its.” In treating others well, the challenge for GELs is to make ethical decisions within an uncertain world – incorporating the

best available yet often imperfect information along with the best intentions to achieve desired outcomes in an environment fraught with risk.

Pava's insight is that ethical analysis will not result in perfect, permanent, or certain solutions but at best will generate good enough, temporary, and probable solutions – but solutions to which we are accountable and which we can “acknowledge in our heart of hearts that the underlying values, principles, and ideals implicit in the decisions we make comply with universal truths, benefit others, and create value and wealth for society.” Pava explains that unless we pursue such noble ethical ideals, “the decisions we make, our leadership paradigms, and our relationships with others will never be truly ‘good enough.’” The avoidance of cynicism and a commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes, given the limitations of what we know, are at the heart of GEL.

Communicating bad news

The fourth paper in this special edition is about the challenges organizational leaders face when bad news occurs. Scott Baker and Morela Hernandez of the University of Virginia provide a framework to guide decision makers in communicating bad news in ways that allow them to fulfill their ethical obligations while minimizing the negative effects of the bad news on stakeholders. In a world frequently faced with disappointing outcomes, the model which they offer bears thoughtful consideration in helping stakeholders to understand both the context and significance of such events.

This paper helps to clarify the moral dilemma facing leaders in troubled times and offers insights about the managing of a crisis when outcomes and conditions are frequently uncertain. Honoring duties to stakeholders can sometimes conflict with how a leader may perceive his or her short-term self-interests – a common characteristic of the Agent dilemma. Anticipating the potential response of stakeholders and planning how to deal with potential bad news can prepare leaders to best serve those stakeholders while keeping their organizations on track and honoring the obligations of ethical stewardship (c.f. Caldwell *et al.*, 2010).

Social responsibility in a troubled world

The concluding paper in this special edition argues that social responsibility is an obligation that permeates all facets of society and extends far beyond the realm of governments and business. Identifying the need for a Virtuous Continuum standard of moral responsibility, Caldwell, Anderson, and Ndalamba argue that the focus of social responsibility must pursue outcomes that emphasize long-term value creation, honoring duties owed to all stakeholders, and pursuing interests that benefit society both today and for future generations.

Identifying specific examples of social responsibility that can be undertaken by business, government, educational institutions, religious bodies, and individual citizens, the authors of this paper cite opportunities for each sector of society to become “owners and partners” and “stewards” of tomorrow's future (c.f. Block, 2013; Hernandez, 2008, 2012). The message of this paper is that each individual and group immediately accept the moral obligation to be part of the solution or they are otherwise a part of the longstanding causes which have led to the critical dilemmas facing today's badly troubled world.

Contributions and conclusion

With thanks to those who have contributed and to the editorial staff who have made this edition possible, we suggest that this special edition makes four meaningful contributions about leaders and leadership in not only the public sector but in all areas of society:

- (1) It emphasizes the moral nature of leadership as a sacred responsibility: leaders bear a sacred trust – yet many leaders pursue short-term outcomes, an agenda that is

parochial and localized in its focus, and the self-interest of a narrow constituency. As Burns (2004, 2010) has repeatedly clarified, leadership and ethics are intimately related and leaders owe those whom they serve the moral responsibility of clarifying the impacts and rationale of their decisions and the ethical basis upon which they made their decisions (Hosmer, 2010). Those who lead have a moral responsibility to future generations (Friedman, 2009) and an obligation to make decisions that do no harm, create value in the short term, and create value in the long term (c.f. Lennick and Kiel, 2011).

- (2) It argues that each sector of society must take a leadership role and become part of the solution or they remain a cause of present and future problems: it advocates a call to action, requiring the participation of all sectors and calls out specific proactive roles of each individual, group, and organization. Those roles are all leadership related and define leadership opportunities for all individuals and sectors of society.
- (3) It emphasizes a positive approach to seeking solutions, acknowledging that there are no simple answers and that a continuous and constant effort must be made: there are no quick fixes or “instant pudding” solutions to today and tomorrow’s problems (Deming, 2000). Leaders who advocate such solutions are both naïve and irresponsible. But those who engage others, create partnerships, and create shared efforts to address problems have the ability to make a significant difference.
- (4) It creates a forum for additional dialogue about the need for immediate constructive change to address critical ethical leadership issues: political, academic, business, and religious leaders must address the low trust in which leaders are held, the knotty economic and financial problems that have been imposed on world residents, and the environmental challenges that threaten world health and quality of life (Friedman, 2009). Leadership, ethics, and trust are mutually interdependent constructs and are interconnected requirements to feasible solutions that must be developed and implemented.

Because the challenges of today and tomorrow have been widely recognized as reaching a dangerous level, the motivation for individuals and organizations to take productive action is also growing. The question, however, is “Do enough individuals and leaders in key positions fully comprehend the scope and depth of the problems that must be addressed and do they have both the will and the competence to take the necessary actions to address these problems?” Unfortunately, the evidence of the last several decades suggests that leaders of institutions of all types have largely failed to demonstrate that they have that will and competence.

Our task as a society, then, is to focus ourselves and our collective efforts on identifying the problems that must be addressed and unite in common causes to address and mitigate the complex challenges facing the troubled world of today and tomorrow. The Irish statesman, Edmund Burke, observed that inaction by good people would result in failures in society, but that those same people could be successful if they had the courage and character to stand up to the problems which they faced. In a world where the character and competence of leaders of all types are held in low regard, future generations and their quality of life depend upon a transformative new approach to ethical leadership (Bennis and Nanus, 2007). For that transformative change to occur, people throughout the world must unite in a common effort.

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Further reading

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