

Beyond Leadership: An Ethical and Moral Dilemma

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Background

In the last few articles, we have been exploring the changing world of leadership. No longer are the long-established rules and traditions of effective leadership working. The workforce is no longer focused on long-term loyalty to one company or even one industry. In our last article we concluded that to meet the changing environment and workforce, effective leaders need:

- high degree of self-discipline,
- deeper introspection,
- less arrogance and more humility,
- faith in people and open mindedness,
- clear critical thinking and analysis.

In this article we add another key factor to our Beyond Leadership discussion: ethics and morality. Over the years, going back to 2011, we have published several articles addressing ethics and moral behavior. The fact that we feel we need to continue to address this says that ethics are not improving and may be declining. We feel it is appropriate to revisit ethics and moral behavior in relationship to fully addressing moving beyond traditional and time proven leadership.

What is going on?

There have been many examples of recent decisions made in industry and government that raise the question of ethical behavior. Why are we allowing these to occur without looking at whether these are ethical behavior?

AI/ChatGPT – So much is being discussed now about how Artificial Intelligence is growing and how it will impact our existing world. We are not condemning AI, but asking how it is being controlled and whether it is being thought through before wholesale roll-out. Recently a friend told how his nephew and his

classmates are using ChatGPT to write their high school papers. Is this learning? They are not researching and learning about topics but short-cutting to a result. The purpose of high school and college is to learn how to think critically. Asking a software program to produce a document is not learning to think critically. Are we becoming a nation of people who know how to use computers and software effectively but not how to think? Is this ethical behavior?

Ocean Gate Expeditions – We all are well aware of the implosion of the Titan submarine that was developed by Ocean Gate Expeditions to take people to view the Titanic wreckage. So much has come to light about employees of the company and other experts who questioned the safety of the craft. We have learned that there were no standards that the company followed in building the craft and no testing to show the effects of deep water pressures and multiple dives. The material used in the viewing window was only certified to pressures much less than the actual depth at which the craft was used. Both of your authors were involved in the Navy submarine program and know the extensive design and testing done before a submarine was launched. Was the Ocean Gate CEO acting ethically?

Supreme Court – So much is coming to light about certain Supreme Court justices receiving trips and other benefits from wealthy benefactors. The Supreme Court is the ultimate judicial body and designed by our founding fathers to be independent from all other governmental bodies. Gifts and trips from benefactors, some of whom have cases before the Supreme Court, is highly questionable behavior. We find that the Court doesn't have strict ethical guidelines, but the justices involved should be expected to know what ethical behavior is – shouldn't they? In 1989 Congress passed the Ethics Reform Act which established

a Code of Conduct for United States Judges. This establishes canons to ensure the independence and integrity of the federal judiciary. However, it does not apply to the United States Supreme Court – the highest court in the country and one that should be totally independent and morally superior. What is wrong with this picture? The ultimate judiciary body is not held to the rules of other levels of judiciary. We don't know the full history of all Supreme Court judges but what we see happening now is a politicized group that does not have clear standards of integrity and behavior.

Government is fertile ground where our elected officials appear to have forgotten the term 'oath' and what an oath means in terms of ethical behavior and governance. To further complicate the issue a question arises: have I broken a law and if not, I am ok. But laws and ethics can be miles apart, particularly when everything is 'subject to interpretation' under the law. Laws are rules that define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Ethics is a moral compass that should guide people regardless of the letter of the law. To your authors laws and ethics are on the same plane. Unfortunately, for way too many, ethics is at best an afterthought.

Similarly, business leaders are equally as culpable but the rationalization for less than ethical behavior is their miss-deeds are not at the expense of the tax payer. But that less than ethical behavior still impacts hundreds if not thousands of people – either directly or indirectly through faulty products or policies. Recent history had given us many examples of unethical behavior in the corporate world – Bernie Madoff, Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling at Enron, Wells Fargo and the fake accounts created, Nestle and its baby formula scandal, the Volkswagen emissions scandal. And the list goes on.

How do we make ethics a standard and not an afterthought?

With so many examples of questionable ethical behavior, it seems like ethics is an afterthought or worse yet, not in a leader's lexicon of leadership. If we do something that happens to be ethical and still achieves our desired result that is wonderful. If we achieve our desired results by questionable means, we achieved our results and who is going to hold us accountable for the means?

What's worse is that when a less than ethical opportunity presents itself, and one partakes, and then rationalizes or justifies their behavior as being legal, the moral system takes a serious hit. Couple that with the exposure of the behavior followed by the public rationalization lowers the overall bar of moral and ethical behavior.

Leadership needs to clearly make ethical behavior a mandatory part of everyday life, whether in industry, in politics, in the home, wherever. There certainly is the case for pushing the envelope to make advances in technology, but there must be an overriding expectation of moral and ethical behavior. We know leaders are struggling to learn how to move leadership into our new world. Leaders must adapt but also must establish and maintain clear expectations of ethical behavior and to learn to think through decisions to examine potential consequences to the company, the environment and the people impacted but the decisions.

Leadership involves being a role model. In today's world of social media, 24 hour news cycles, constant 'Breaking News' banners on news programs makes being a role model an even tougher leadership behavior.



The question of how to move our society toward ethical behavior is not easily answered. There are so many factors that impact the behavior of people, so there is not an ethics on/off switch that can be thrown. It becomes a grass roots effort where individuals must start to behave ethically and hope that others take note and start to do the same. We can try to hold our elected officials – at all levels – to behave ethically but we know that is not easy since way too many people don't even think of what is ethical behavior. So, you, our loyal readers, need to take this to heart and think ethically and behave ethically and hope it rubs off on others.

Please share with us your thoughts and examples of less than ethical behavior you have witnessed or experienced.

Closing thoughts

Ethics and oversight are what you eliminate when you want absolute power. *Unknown*

A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world. *Albert Camus*

Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal. *Martin Luther King Jr.*

A corporation like Enron is a person with a legal identity and no ethical accountability. *Doug Berry*



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