

TWO LEADERSHIP TRAITS: HUMILITY AND ETHICS

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Abstract:-

There are several books and articles on leadership. Many of them focus on leadership styles and approaches such as selecting the right people, or getting the wrong people off the bus, or motivating the right behavior, or using a dance metaphor in a leadership-followership paradigm. The important character traits that a leader must possess are rarely mentioned. This paper focuses on two qualities that a great leader must possess, namely humility and a strong sense of ethics.

Keywords: - *Ethics, honesty, humility, integrity, leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there have been so many published articles and books on leadership that seem to have missed the forest for the trees. There are constructs like good-to-great leadership [1], followership [2], selfless leadership [3], servant leadership [4], and many other combinations of leadership, all of which miss the big picture and the question: what are the essential traits a leader should have?

This paper addresses the central question by providing some context through the following two quotations. “Intolerance is the first sign of an inadequate education. An ill-educated person behaves with arrogant impatience, whereas truly profound education breeds humility.” – Alexander Solzhenitsyn “Rather fall in honor than succeed in fraud.” – Sophocles, Greek philosopher

There are many leaders who do not lead by example. The very familiar „Do as I say, not as I do,“ adage has long been used to characterize such leaders. They focus on getting a degree instead of an education, they lack the humility to lead by example and instead lead by fear and intimidation. These types of leaders often blame others for their lackluster performance, take personal credit for extraordinary results, and do not create a pleasant work environment that motivates others.

During the past decade, fraud or unethical behavior has led to the demise of great companies resulting in a public outcry for honesty. The financial crisis of 2008 demonstrated how technology has provided an easy vehicle for unscrupulous practices designed to defraud consumers. The Internet Fraud Watch reports a dramatic increase in Internet fraud. The future of e-commerce is a cause for concern given the complexity and proliferation of Internet fraud. Another tactic, social engineering, further deceives e-mail users into disclosing valuable data [5]. In many cases, it is much easier to succeed by taking illegal shortcuts or to prosper by using deceptive practices. A company’s culture is defined by what the top executives actually do [6].

Section 2 explains why humility and a high standard of ethics are two important qualities that a leader must possess. Section 3 analyzes the role of these traits in the traditional and notso-traditional models of leadership and followership. Section 4 discusses the difficulties in measuring the characteristics of humility and ethics. Finally, Section 5 offers some conclusions.

2. Important traits of a leader

What role should education play in a leader? Education does not imply the acquisition of degrees such as an MBA, but a much wider interpretation of education as suggested in the quotation in Section 1 by Solzhenitsyn. The same goes for ethical behavior which, simply stated, entails adhering to our fundamental values and social responsibility. The fact that these two attributes are absent in a vast majority of our so-called leaders can be gleaned from the following hypothetical (but believable) anecdote about the CEO of a highly successful financial company. “I am a special and beautiful person, a.k.a., a leader and job creator. I have painstakingly participated in putting into place a casino environment that allows me to gamble with other people’s money, keep the winnings, and stick others with the losses. If the losses are too huge, I get bailed out by the government. There have been absolutely no consequences for any of my wrong doings. I am actually a wealth generator for myself, masquerading as a leader. I serve only my own self-interest while claiming to do God’s work. I evade taxes by lobbying to include several beneficial loopholes in the tax code. I am fiscally irresponsible with everybody’s money except my own. I have a disdain for 99% of the people. I do not want the nation or my company to be great; I just want to increase my own wealth.”

Anecdotes such as these give rise to the following conundrum in leadership. The narcissists who gravitate towards leadership roles don’t possess the humility or basic ethics that one looks for in a leader. When they are incentivized by any lack of accountability, it adds fuel to their fire. In the current (2016) United States Presidential election, one of the nominees has been diagnosed as a narcissist [7]. Most of the humble and decent people that we might want to see in a leadership role would prefer to maintain their dignity and principles and withdraw from a leadership job, leaving only their more ruthless counterparts to compete for such positions.

It would seem appropriate to point out through a quotation by C. S. Lewis that the trait of humility in a leader is not a sign of weakness. “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” – C. S. Lewis

In his seminal book, Jim Collins [1] relates several cases where companies did not reach their potential because their leaders were more concerned about their own notoriety than the reputation of their company. The “good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes,” rather they “were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results”

[1]. These leaders “attribute much of their success to good luck, rather than personal greatness” [1]. The manifestation of personal humility and a compelling sense of modesty cannot be overemphasized in a leader.

The qualities of authenticity, integrity, and empathy that one likes to see in a leader all stem from a strong sense of ethics. The Josephson Institute’s six pillars of character [8] can serve as a basis for day to day decision making to create an

ethical environment in a company. These six pillars are: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Ethical dilemmas occur when important values come into conflict – such as putting profits before principles in a company, and an attitude of winning at all costs in sports. These are situations in which a leader is put to the ethical test and must assign priorities to the conflicting values. And yet there are numerous cases where leaders know the right thing to do, but do what is wrong anyway. Bernard Madoff who defrauded investors of billions of dollars knew what he was doing was wrong but he did it anyway. Short term gain, greed and other non-ethical values sometimes take precedence over values like honesty and accountability and the six pillars of character are “tossed out the window.” Responsible and ethical leaders have to be extra vigilant when such conflicting situations are presented before them.

3. Humility and Ethics

The immutable attributes of humility and ethics are easily stated but hard to put into practice. In western culture there is a lot of stress on being a leader. We give our children messages like “Be a leader, don’t be a follower” [2]. But a good role in which to learn to be humble is the role of a follower. Followers are often described as being sub-par or second-class citizens. However, organizations such as the military and team sports have always relied on strong basic followership concepts such as vision, loyalty, focus, and belief in the greater good. Individuals are first taught how to follow before they can lead. These institutions thrive in a culture that has as its foundation an organized relationship between followers and leaders. Good followership instills the trait of humility [9].

Humble leaders are able to attract the right people on their team. The most important characteristic of a good follower is a willingness to confront the truth. In a world of growing complexity, leaders are increasingly dependent on their team for accurate information, whether they like to hear it or not. Followers who tell the truth and leaders who listen to them are an unbeatable combination [10]. While spreading success beyond themselves, such leaders take full responsibility for failures. They face the truth and hold themselves accountable without blaming other people or bad luck.

Humble leaders see the big picture (the forest, not just the trees). They realize that success is contingent on the daily small accomplishments of many individuals. In this global economy, projects and tasks are more complex than in previous generations. It is unlikely that an individual can complete a task competitively in the marketplace without the help of co-workers. The instant availability of information on the internet alone requires many individuals working as a team. The success of this approach to problem solving requires a leader who listens to his team. Employees who are permitted by management to assess situations, assist in problem solving, and complete the steps necessary to bring about a successful change as a team are more effective than an employee who works alone [9].

Humble leaders are open to new information and facilitate fact-finding in order to learn more and improve, and not find someone to blame. The mark of maturity in such a leader begins to take shape when he or she invites open and honest conversation instead of dodging it. Their leadership style is selfless and they embrace the fundamental principle: until you empower your people they are only spectators [3].

Ethics is at the heart of leadership. In his book *Meeting the ethical challenges of leadership*, Craig Johnson uses the analogy of heroes and villains in discussing how leaders implement change: “The power that comes from being a leader can be used for evil as well as good. When we assume the benefits of leadership, we also assume the ethical burden” [11]. An understanding of ethics begins with an analysis of both individual values and organizational values. Leaders must be aware of their values, morals, and system of ethics. Good character and integrity are what one should look for in leaders.

Employees choose their work environments based on their ethical preferences and the connection between their values and those of their workplace. They look for connections between these values and the ability of the leader to use these values to make decisions.

Transparency is critical in creating an ethical environment. Trust can be developed in many ways but most fundamentally through leading by example. As Martin Luther King, Jr., once remarked, “The time is always right to do what is right.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is relatively easy for a leader to resolve what are known as *right vs wrong* dilemmas, namely just do what is right. The harder ones to resolve are *right vs right* dilemmas. The first case is easier stated than done. In the latter case, the leader must consider all the stakeholders and seek solutions that do not jeopardize employees and their families. To have a sound moral compass, leaders need to be mentally strong and emotionally intelligent. The art of clarity, empathy, focus and paying non-judgmental attention are necessary skills for every leader but they don’t come naturally. These skills come with experience tempered with a large dose of humility. And these skills are the ones found only in the very best leaders. Finding more than a handful of such ethical leaders in the United States Congress is tantamount to wishful thinking, given the recent record of this august body.

When these two traits of humility and ethics have been properly assimilated, a leader can strive to be truly selfless. Selfless leaders understand that people buy into your actions and attitudes before they embrace your vision. They set the tone and create the organizational atmosphere for success, namely, when you help others succeed then you succeed [3].

4. Metrics for Humility and Ethics

Because of their intangible and seemingly subjective nature, both humility and ethics have proved to be elusive to measure. Self-reporting measures on humility have their own problems. Someone who claims to be very humble on a self-report measure might be viewed as displaying arrogance and bragging about his or her humility. Going beyond these self-reporting measures and the challenges they pose, Rowatt and his co-authors offer more complex methods to implicitly measure humility relative to arrogance [12]. Using a new trait of honesty-humility, Lee and Ashton have developed the HEXACO model of personality structure [13]. HEXACO is an acronym which stands for: honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. This model has shown an ability to predict such things as workplace delinquency, vengefulness, and risk-taking [14]. Another method using a relational-humility construct utilizes peer reports of a person's level of humility and is quite unique in its approach [15].

Guthrie and Venkatesh suggest that humility and the ability to admit error may be two of the most important qualities a truly great leader must have [16]. They ask: "What is more powerful than an individual who can stand in front of his or her employees and admit that the failure was his or hers? What better way to gain the respect and admiration of your team than to take the blame and responsibility on yourself rather than calling out someone on your team?"

They then provide the answer: "By admitting you are wrong, by taking blame, you will have a group of more committed followers" [16]. Jim Collins concurs with this by stating that a leader who brings true humility to the organization also brings significantly more benefits. He emphasizes this point by concluding in his paper that consistently high-performing companies were "led by people who possessed a blind humility and strong personal will" [17].

Leaders ought to have a high standard of ethics in order to be effective and successful over the long term. They must demonstrate the highest moral standards and ethical conduct in their everyday talk, actions, decisions, and behaviors so that others in the organization can follow suit. However, ethical leadership has not been tested empirically as a construct in very many studies.

One study which has empirically investigated ethical leadership is by Toor and Ofori [18]. Their method asked senior level managers to nominate one peer and two subordinates to rate their performance on correlations between ethics and a number of concepts such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership, leader effectiveness, employee outcomes, and organizational culture. They found that ethical leadership was positively associated with transformational leadership, employee outcomes, and organizational culture but negatively associated with transactional leadership. Another study by Brown et al. suggests that the combination of integrity, ethical standards, and fair treatment of employees are the cornerstones of ethical leadership [19].

If the measurement of these qualities is difficult, how should one assess them before recruiting a leader? An executive who was on the board to hire a director for a leading software company shared the following information. Ten finalists were called in and asked the following question:

"Suppose you were to start a company, what are 3 foundational values that you would base your company on?" The answers consisted of combinations of team-building, motivating employees, a passion to succeed, achieving breakthroughs, and creating the right culture. Not a single finalist mentioned the qualities of honesty, humility, and dedication.

When asked whether they "would lie for their boss", only two finalists categorically said they would not, while the others hedged their answers with comments like "depends on the situation."

Questions on these two desirable qualities for great leadership have been raised more so now than ever before because of the shift towards a global economy. In their search for answers, however, researchers have been humbled (no pun intended) in their quest to measure the qualities of humility and ethics needed to make a great leader [15].

5. Conclusions

The consequence of the two leadership qualities, namely humility and ethics, instills in employees a sense of self-motivation that results in meaningful work. Humble leaders lead with questions rather than answers and promote frank and open dialogue and debate. The result is that people are engaged in finding ways to improve performance. They are constantly alert to possibilities for process refinement, research diligently for the best solutions to problems, and regularly submit suggestions for fine-tuning their own operations.

In the long run, honesty and integrity are necessary for the long-term success of our leaders. Leaders are responsible for ethical behavior in all situations and serve as a model to their employees. These practices require attention and commitment to behavior consistent with an intrinsic value of all human beings. As global corporations reach the far corners of the world, ethical standards and the human condition are responsibilities of everyone, but particularly of leaders [9].

Lest one should think that these two traits are widely prevalent in leaders, that does not seem to be the case. A vast majority of senior personnel who aspire to be leaders are revolving-door careerists who seek ladders of opportunity instead of growing with an organization. There is considerable room for improvement in how for-profit and non-profit organizations should select their leaders and foster an environment in which humble and ethical people are strongly encouraged to be leaders based on their character and skill sets rather than their degrees, titles, or connectedness to the “right” people.

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