In Search of Ethical Leadership: Navigating the Ethical Divide

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Being an ethical leader implies that an individual who exerts influence over others adheres to and promotes values that are accepted by the society-at-large. While this idea of ethical leadership seems straightforward, it is really much more complex, as business ethicist Joseph Rost (1995) attests that disagreements exist over what is considered ethical (p. 136). As a collective society, for instance, the Vikings and the Nazis shared different ethical values than those presently held by the Americans and British. Within the United States alone disagreements exist over hot button issues, such as abortion rights, the death penalty, and euthanasia. With disagreements over rudimentary issues that involve life and death, it makes it challenging to determine what constitutes ethical leadership. However, scholarly investigation posits that ethical leaders have political skill, compassion for the problems of supporters, and the ability to generate a spirit of teamwork among those who share a common cause. Working in a transparent environment and acting in a selfless manner with no ulterior motives, except for achieving the "greater good," will help foster ethical leadership. However, since humans are imperfect beings, questions remain over whether a completely ethical leader truly exists.

Discussing human nature, Ogunfowara (2014) explains that individuals have not only a desire to stand out within a group but they also desire to cooperate with others in that collective. Individuals considered to be doing the "right" thing, will be followed by others who share the desire to be ethical. When such an ethical role model does not exist for groups to follow, it results in inconsistencies and decreased morale, which could prompt a change in leadership (p. 1473). Ethical leaders, according to Ogunfowara are individuals of good character who demonstrate "the importance of caring and showing concern for others…regularly reinforcing these behaviors" (p. 1474).

Before one can become an ethical leader, however, they must first become a leader. According to Yiannis Gabriel, "a leader is...one of the cast of archetypes that populate our mind, someone who

may be a saint in some plotlines, a devil in others, a devious schemer in others and a sacrificial lamb in others" (Gabriel, 2015, p. 319). Just as there is a divide over what is considered ethical, a similar divide exists over what constitutes leadership, as no universal definition exists. Consequently, the concept of leadership is subjective based upon the ideals of each individual (Rost, 1995, p. 129). Since there is not a standard definition of what constitutes leadership nor is there a prescribed list of responsibilities for a leader, how does one determine what an ethical leader looks like?

Within corporations, there is a general perception that equates managers with providing leadership. However, Rost (1995) argues that managers are not necessarily leaders; "leadership involves leaders and collaborators intending real changes in an organization; management involves coordinating people and resources to produce and sell goods and/or services in an organization" (p. 134). He reasons that since leadership is not authority based and merely includes individuals exerting influence over one another, then everyone is in nature a leader (p. 133). If everyone is a leader, however, what responsibility do individuals have to uphold ethical standards that affect society at large, such as eradicating poverty or responding to climate change? (p. 131). If groups of people do not take an active stance against poverty, does that make the society immoral or are ethics shaped by what is considered to be an acceptable norm within a society? Providing ethical leadership relies on understanding generally accepted societal values, and one society that perceives itself as moral and just can be perceived by another society as crude and immoral. Such is the case when discussing Nazi Germany.

Following World War I, Germans faced great hardships from reparations payments that were imposed on them by Great Britain and France. Blamed by the Western powers for allegedly causing the war, Germans received what they felt was an unjust punishment that caused them great economic hardships throughout the 1920s. Consequently, a people who felt they were treated unjustly, turned

towards an individual who promised to make their lives better, Adolph Hitler (MacMillan, 2001, p.180-181). With the Germans facing such hardships, Hitler exerted leadership influence over the German people by showing concern for the struggling citizenry, uniting them behind the cause of German nationalism, blaming an historic scapegoat, Jews, for all of the misery that Germans faced, and directing a call to action for expansion (Ciulla, 1995, p. 13). However, since Hitler did not actually pull the trigger to kill any of the victims of the Holocaust, but promoted rhetoric that led to such an occurrence, Ciulla questions whether he could technically be considered the leader of the genocide or simply the manager of it?

Hitler had authority over German society which coincides with the responsibility of a manager, but he also spread his influence over that society by promoting social programs, inspiring nationalism, and attributing problems to an historic enemy as a way of not only building consensus but gaining influence (Znamenski, 2015, p. 547). Consequently, it could be argued that he was both a manager and a leader. Of course, being a leader and a manager is a separate issue from being an ethical leader, which in the eyes of most societies, Hitler was not. However, for Germans, Hitler embodied ethical values as he "cultivated a lofty, nonpartisan image by extolling the ethical superiority of the "Aryan" *Volk* and presenting himself as the very model of the virtues he praised" (Koonz, 2003, p. 17). Projecting an ethical image in the eyes of Germans, Hitler used his influence to convince the general public that it was necessary to slaughter an entire race and his authority as head of state to allow it to happen. Perceiving Hitler as an ethical leader, were the Germans simply following orders from an authority figure, who promised to make their lives better, as argued by historian Christopher Browning in Ordinary Men, or were they Hitler's Willing Executioners who were predisposed to anti-Semitic sentiments that "made them willing to become consenting mass executioners" as espoused by political scientist Daniel Goldhagen? (Browning, 1998, p. 216; Goldhagen, 2002, p. 455).

Trying to conceptualize an international consensus on ethics, the Nuremberg Trials that followed World War II made it clear that there was a moral code accepted by humanity that if individuals were asked to perform a generally accepted immoral action, such as participating in genocide, individuals had a moral responsibility to disobey those authority figures. During the Nuremberg Trials and later prosecution attempts, anyone who played any part in the attacks against or the confinement of Jews, from prison guards to the highest echelon of Nazi leadership, was held responsible for their actions; this coincides with Rost's notion that everyone is a leader (Fraser, 2012, p. 405; Rost, 1995, p. 133). Holocaust perpetrators, according to Fraser (2012), were "the embodiment of the branches of the Nazi state and of the broader nation, which had perverted European civilization and turned the continent into a pit of barbarism" (p. 405). Browning argues that those changes may have manifested from propaganda and educational standards imposed by the Nazis during their regime, while Goldhagen contends that Germans had an underlying hatred for Jews that made them inclined to support the Nazi goal of Jewish extermination (Browning, 1998, p. 216; Goldhagen, 2002, p. 455).

Regardless of why they may have chosen to fulfill Hitler's wishes, judges at the Nuremberg Trials articulated that the Nazi state was inherently unethical, and so, complying with an order from such a regime was not an acceptable defense (Fraser, 2012, p. 405). While the West considered Hitler unethical, Hitler's message resonated with the German people. Seen as an ethical leader by Germans, Hitler utilized his political skill, tapping into the frustrations of the German people, in order to influence Germans to take action against Jews for the betterment of the nation. Leaders, whether in government or business, show a tendency to motivate people to support their cause not by paying them money but because they want to support people whose values they share (Gill, Lapalme, and Ségun, 2014, p. 206; Koonz, 2003, p. 17).

Good leadership involves motivating employees to want to come to non-essential functions, such as holiday parties and non-required meetings (Gill, Lapalme, and Ségun, 2014, p. 206). This means getting people to care about their jobs not because they are paid money but because they want the organization to succeed. This motivational approach is referred to as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Ogunfowora, 2014, p. 1474). Individuals have the greatest desire to partake in OCBs for individuals who they feel are ethical. Ethics is not enough, though, to gain influence, as "ethical leaders who show little or no political skill will not be able to foster the adoption of OCBs among employees." (Gill, Lapalme, & Ségun, 2014, p. 213). In the world of politics, this means that it is not the individual with the best ideas who gets elected; it is the individual who articulates their ideas the best to motive people. United States President John F. Kennedy famously proclaimed, "Ask not what your country can do for you...Ask what you can do for your country!" (Kennedy, 1961, para. 26). Such rhetoric from his inaugural address inspired a generation to become more engaged in their society. But Kennedy, like Hitler was not an ethical leader (for completely different reasons); despite possessing considerable political skill, Kennedy secretly engaged in extra-marital affairs.

Pre-establishing ethical guidelines can help foster an ethical environment. Managers must not only establish them but have them built within the fabric of a company, institution, or government entity. This starts with creating an ethical orientation plan within a company and holding individuals accountable for their actions (Lakshmi, 2014, p. 69). Individuals have a responsibility not only to their company, but to society, in general. According to the father of capitalism, Adam Smith, there is an "impartial spectator" that observes and monitors ethical behavior. Each individual is responsible for taking actions that are considered to be moral and in the best interest of society (Gonin, 2014, p. 223). Business professor Babatunde Ogunfowora (2014) maintains that individuals have a greater desire to work with and for people who are seen as moral (p. 5). However, nobody is perfect! Even

individuals of high moral standing may have done questionable things at one point or another, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The case of Dr. King demonstrates that while he was a flawed individual in his marital endeavors, participating in extra-marital affairs, he was still capable of providing ethical leadership on other issues, such as Civil Rights (Ciulla, 1995, p. 5). Sociologist Yiannis Gabriel (2015) disagrees with the idea that individuals may provide ethical leadership in one aspect of their life and not in another; "a leader's numerous and substantial achievements may be nullified by a single instance where she or he is shown to have acted unethically, to have lied, deceived or disregarded the well-being of her or his followers." Leaders must be held to a higher standard than others in society as a leader's indiscretion can lead to organizational failure as they lose support and respect from those who previously saw them as role models (p. 318).

Ogunfowora (2014) contends that "ethical leadership is positively associated with many employee attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction and job performance, and negatively related to detrimental actions, such as unethical behaviors and conflict in work units" (p. 1468). While King had ethical flaws, he possessed a strong amount of political skill that enabled him to work with others in a peaceful manner that provided guidance and leadership to those around him. Ogunfowora notes that individuals tend to learn ethical norms from observing people who they perceive as being ethical leaders; this observation is referred to as social learning theory (p. 1470). Business instructors

Thomas Ng and Daniel Feldman (2015) share Ogunfowara's sentiments regarding the qualities that encompass ethical leadership. They assert that "ethical leaders proactively attempt to shape followers' values by being moral role models, communicating important ethical values to followers, using rewards and punishments to promote higher ethical standards, and treating followers with care and concern" (p. 948). As individuals act ethically by following a role model, they will be treated better for it by that role model for continuing to promote ethical standards (Ng & Feldman, 2015, p. 949).

According to some scholars, the human appeal of being ethical even extended to German doctors who conducted scientific experiments on Jews without their consent.

Within Nazi Germany, Zukowski (1994) contends that a psychological dualism may have existed in which doctors repressed their traditional ethical standards while at work, but maintained them in their everyday life. If doctors unwittingly repressed their traditional ethical standards, they may not have been aware that they were performing unethical medical experiments (p. 62). Sharing Goldhagen's sentiments, Hinton (1998) believes that the perpetrators were aware of their actions, but that they became desensitized to their actions, which allowed them to participate in experiments on the Jewish population (p. 13). Other scholars argue that the doctors not only knew what they were doing, but felt a public responsibility to participate in medical experiments as the "Nazi Party framed the extermination of the Jewish population as a health necessity...to ward off contamination (and death)." This may explain why doctors played the most prominent role of any profession within the Nazi party and why they believed their actions to be ethical (Haque, De Freitas, Viani, Niederschulte, & Bursztajn, 2012, p. 474; Craig & Desai, 2015, p. 64). Whether performed knowingly or unknowingly, the lack of concern for injuring, killing, or traumatizing the victims of Nazi scientific experiments represents just one on the many horrific things undertaken under the leadership of Adolph Hitler.

While Hitler directed an unconscionable regime, his leadership skills must be judged based upon his success in influencing people, generating a spirit of teamwork, and showing compassion for the needs of his followers. Gabriel notes that the "leader's power must be deployed to protect [their] followers and to overwhelm their collective foes" (Gabriel, 2015, p. 320). Germans were promised cars, vacations, and vindication for supporting his policies, and there was a joyous and happy sentiment among ordinary Germany for the role that they played in trying to rebuild German greatness

(Znamenski, 2015, p. 547). Whether Germans were happy to promote Hitler's genocide or they were simply following orders, it begs the question of how leadership traits differ between leaders who are ethical and unethical. Yiannis Gabriel (2015) contends that leaders who are immoral are often more prideful than ethical leaders. Consequently, they will often refuse to change course in the face of a disastrous occurrence (p. 318). Hitler, who is universally seen as immoral for his role in the Holocaust, exemplified pride as he refused to retreat when facing losses against the Soviet Union during the course of World War II (Gabriel, 2015, p. 318; Gupta, Kim, Agarwal, Lieber, & Monaco, 2015, 1449). However, neurologists believe that he made irrational decisions not necessary based on pride but more so as a result of a serious neurodegenerative disease, Parkinson's disease. They contend that this illness "may have influenced the development of his inhumane and callous personality, and that his condition led him to make a series of risky and poor wartime decisions, which resulted in the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany" (Gupta et al., 2015, 1447). This makes one wonder about the general impact of health of ethical decision-making.

Additionally, does unethical behavior result in bad leadership? While "yes" sounds like the wishful answer, it must alternatively be considered whether ethical leaders always provide good leadership? In order to analyze that question, it is useful to focus on the case of U.S. President Lyndon Johnson in the midst of the Vietnam War. He spent restless nights planning the next attack against the North Vietnamese, searching for the option that would result in the fewest civilian casualties (Miguel & Roland, 2011, p. 7). For his part, Johnson felt that he had an ethical responsibility to oppose Communism in Southeast Asia (Lytle, 2006, p. 176). However, college students felt that the war was immoral and also feared being drafted into a distant war. As student protests mounted against the Vietnam War, Johnson, in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, investigated the students as potential Communists for opposing a war that the

administration saw as necessary in order to uphold the international reputation of the United States (p. 226-227). With mounting casualties and the war dragging on, a "credibility gap" developed between Johnson and the American people as he lied over how long the war would last. Despite Johnson's self-perception of providing ethical leadership, Johnson's political skill abandoned him as his blatant disregard of public opinion made him decide against running for re-election in the presidential election of 1968 (Miguel & Roland, 2011, p. 7). This shows that groups can lead protests towards actions that they feel are immoral, to press the hands of the few who are in "leadership" positions. In the business world, that may translate into a labor strike against an unjust management. Whether in business or government, it shows that ethics can be applied to larger groups as opposed to the traditional manner of focusing on smaller groups. As noted by Rost (1995), everyone is a leader who has the potential to exert influence (p. 133).

If all individuals can be leaders, should they subscribe to the idea of role models? Business ethicists traditionally support the idea of role models in order to improve morale and ethics in the workplace. However, Ogunfowora notes that "researchers have yet to empirically evaluate the basic assumption that ethical leaders are perceived as role models of ethical conduct at work" (p. 1468). Ciulla (1995) explains that even leaders held in high esteem, such as George Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. can be scrutinized as providing questionable moral leadership. For Washington, he was a slave owner, whereas King engaged in extra-marital affairs (p. 5). Another consideration is whether historical individuals should be judged based upon ethical standards that were in existence during their lifetimes or based upon moral standards as they exist today? If the former is imposed, Washington, as a slave owner may be given leniency based on the fact that slavery was a widely accepted norm in his home state of Virginia. If the latter is imposed, he must be bitterly criticized as slavery is viewed as an unconscionable institution today.

Rost (1995) disagrees that leaders must be ethical in order to be good leaders, explaining that leadership is about exerting influence towards achieving a goal, which is not necessarily related to ethics as illustrated in Ciulla's discussion on Hitler (p. 132; p. 13). The degree to which it is necessary for leaders to be ethical varies within history and in the scholarly literature. John W. Gardner contends that ethics should be one of many factors considered when judging a leader, rather than considering ethics as a part of leadership. By seeing ethics as a dimension of leadership, this avoids the complete promotion of a bias for disagreeing with the leader's decisions. Other scholars, such as James MacGregor Burns assert that leaders must be ethical in order to provide good leadership (as cited in Ciulla, 1995, p. 9). Levine and Boaks (2014) disagree that ethics plays a part in good leadership. Like Ciulla, they maintain that they are separate entities and to establish ethics as a prerequisite to being a good leader is to be considered a "Machiavellian skeptic" (p. 227).

Levine, Boaks, and Ciulla share the belief that good leadership means being effective, not being ethical. Ciulla (1995) possesses skepticism about the existence of ethical leadership as "it's hard to have heroes in a world where every wart and wrinkle of a person's life is public" (p. 9). Individuals will consider things that they disagree with to be unethical, and so, nobody would fit the definition of providing ethical leadership. For that reason, Gardener's assertion that ethical leadership should be considered as one of many factors that judge a person's overall character appears more attractive (p. 9). Leadership involves making many tough choices and ethical divides are present in many choices that leaders are forced to make, such as a decision on whether to enter a war.

Is it inherently unethical to go to war as innocent civilians may die? For Americans, like for many other societies, war itself is not necessarily seen as immoral when there is a virtuous cause behind it. As a matter of self-defense, the United States launched an attack against the Japanese in response to their attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This attack spurred thousands of Americans to

undertake moral and virtuous leadership to gain retribution against the Japanese during World War II. Americans even dropped atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan that had catastrophic effects (Brown, 2003, p. 109). Was this bombing ethical? According to political scientist James R. Van de Velde (1995), these bombs "provided a means for obtaining the emotional and political goal of unconditional surrender. There is nothing sinister, conspiratorial, or particularly evil about that" (p. 456). At the time, Americans considered it was better to lose Japanese lives than American lives. Whether unconditional surrender was a necessary goal is another question that may be debated; but there is no question that such a catastrophic loss of life would not be entertained today, signifying that what is ethical is ever-changing within a society as the United States became reluctant to impose such carnage in the future (Jacobs, 2007, p. 412). In the case of atomic weaponry, that change of perspective manifested from a growing fear of nuclear warfare.

In a business environment, ethical leadership can be fostered by promoting corporate social responsibility. This means not to focus strictly on the bottom line but to consider that "impartial spectator" that is watching over a company. Ethical leaders "manage the firm with ethical values based on a moral foundation that can promote social interest, rather than just on maximization of the firm's profit" (Choi, Ullah, & Kwak, 2015, p. 354). Companies whose structure is rooted in ethical behavior will have workers who conduct themselves in an ethical manner. Managers can become leaders and influence ethical behavior, which is explained through social learning theory. Individuals who abide by ethical standards can be rewarded with raises and commendations. When individuals conduct themselves in an unethical manner, companies must reprimand them. Establishing and enforcing zero tolerance policies towards employees who promote division and hate, such as those who engage in racist behavior, encourages other to act in an ethical manner. Individuals will be happier working for a company that promotes values that they agree with, giving rise to social

exchange theory. By acting in an ethical manner, managers can become leaders, exerting influence and authority, in order to foster a positive environment (p. 355-356).

If everyone is a leader, as Rost asserts, then everyone is responsible for strategizing ways to improve conditions in their environment (Rost, 1995, p. 133). Leaders attempt to influence others and "ethical leaders encourage employees to suggest creative and ethical solutions to the problems encountered in the decision-making process to reach the organizational goal effectively and ethically" (Choi, Ullah, & Kwak, 2015, p. 357). Rost maintains that since no ethical obligation exists within government laws, individuals do not always feel that they have a responsibility to one another. Laws establish parameters for which society is supposed to function under; however, just because something is legal, does not mean that it is ethical (Rost, 1995, p. 133).

Conversely, does someone who exposes illegal activity, such as a whistleblower, automatically constitute as providing ethical leadership? It depends on their motives for releasing information, contends De Jong & De Vries (2007, p. 217). If the individual released classified or sensitive information for personal gain, such as money or because they had a grudge against an individual, it may be considered immoral. However, if it was done for the public good, then it may be justified. Even then, there is a question of what constitutes the public good. Within the sphere of government, "Leaking of confidential information may be seen as justified for the sake of democratic accountability, while in other cases leaking is condemned because it obstructs public policy or endangers state security" (p. 217). The perspective with which the information is explained by the media influences whether the public will consider the action to be ethical or not. The only difference between leaking and whistleblowing, maintain De Jong and De Vries, is the anonymous nature of the leaker. While the motives of a whistleblower may determine whether they were ethical leaders, promoting transparency in both government and in corporations is a way to produce ethical leaders (p.

224). While there are great benefits in promoting transparency, De Jong and De Vries admit that there are some justifiable privacy rights that should be respected for individuals and for national security matters.

In terms of the decision of journalists to print leaks, journalists make their own ethical decisions. Are they printing information for their own self-interest or because they have a true desire to expose wrongdoing? Discussing journalistic integrity, De Jong and De Vries note that most journalists do not question the underlying motives of those who provide them with information, believing that their sources are ethical and that they are providing a utilitarian service; consequently, they do not see any problem with releasing information that is leaked by their sources. While not all journalists fact check their leaks, they consider releasing the information to be of great public importance (De Jong & De Vries, 2007, p. 222). While the release and use of some information may be seen as ethical, the dissemination and use of other information may be seen as unethical. This especially applies if that information was obtained in an unethical manner, such as the results of Nazi medical experiments, conducted under the direction of Josef Mengele.

To begin with, just because information was produced in an unethical manner, does not mean that it is not valid or useful. University of Victoria (British Columbia) researcher John S. Hayward relies on Nazi data to determine how long individuals, wearing survival suits, can survive at freezing temperatures. He maintains, "I don't want to have to use this data, but there is no other and will be no other in an ethical world" (Moe, 1984, p. 7). Others, such as Arnold Relman, editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* discredit the information as it was obtained in a manner that reflected no consideration for human life. Gastroenterologist Mitchell Cappell adds that not only does the information not have value but that "intimidation and repression [promoted by the Nazis] stifle scientific creativity and scholarship." Consequently, he argues that the Nazis did greater harm than

good for the medical community and "disproves the myth of the efficiency of Nazism or other tyrannies.

While some information may be deemed as not useful, such as precise measurements of when victims went into cardiac arrest while wearing the wetsuits, there appears to be a larger desire to discredit the information because of the unethical manner in which it was obtained (Moe, 1984, p. 6). Some scholars contend that Nazi research should only be used for case studies involving ethics while others feel that any scientifically valid information should be published, with a disclaimer that allows the reader to determine whether to read or ignore the article. Overwhelmingly, the Nazis are considered unethical by Western society, but whether the information they generated should be utilized generates an ethical divide among scholars. Some consider the Nazis to be so evil and unethical that their experiments should be ignored, while others feel that since the information already exists, the results should be considered when studying scientific and other scholarly endeavors (p. 6). This is just one example of an ethical divide that persists in American society, and in the world, atlarge. With such an ethical divide, even within the scholarly community, it makes it challenging to determine who may be considered an ethical leader.

Ethical leadership involves creating the type of society that a group is desirous of, without ulterior motives for generating and manipulating the emotions of followers. If there are no followers, only leaders, then everyone is capable of exerting ethical leadership by voting for the policies that they feel will create a "just" society. Whether the policies themselves are ethical or not, however, remains a highly interpretive issue. Ethical leadership is not something that stops at the workplace; it extends into the household as "employees who acquire skills and perspectives in the workplace tend to use those skills and perspectives in fulfilling the requirements of their familial roles" (Liao, Liu, Kwan, & Li, 2015, p. 537). Individuals who exercise ethical behavior in the workplace serve as role models for

the rest of their family. This serves to create a positive household environment as family members observe each other's behavior and treat one another with dignity and respect, in accordance with social learning theory (p. 537).

Ethical leadership can be fostered one person at a time. With every decision, individuals decide what type of person that they are going to be: good or bad. Individuals must follow their conscience and do what they feel is right. While there is no universal determination over what is right, treating others with compassion and having sympathy for those suffering through hardships is a start. Everyone is capable of doing those things; it's just a matter of whether individuals choose to do them. There are recognizable differences of opinion over controversial topics, such as abortion rights, the death penalty, and euthanasia, but showing compassion and sympathy for those facing hardships is a start towards fostering ethical leadership. Those who desire to help others become role models, influencing similar behavior. Since humans are imperfect, however, questions remain over whether ethical leadership is more of an ideal, such as those promoted by Plato. According to theologian George Dodson, Plato maintained that those who associate with "good men [are] transformed into their likeness, and that good men who worship the ideal become like unto God" (Dodson, 1913, p. 104). Individuals, just like the nation, continue to strive for perfection and endeavor to find ethical leaders "in order to create a more perfect union" (U.S. Const. pmbl.)

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