Education

Becoming: Shaping Leader Identity Through Ethical Behavior

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Abstract

Description
Leadership is hard to define but easy to recognize and is found in every facet of life. Leaders themselves range from good to bad, the extremities of which are determined by their character, actions, perception of self, how they are perceived by others and their worldviews. An individual's values provide the basis for ethical decisions, which makes self-awareness a critical element in the development of one's leader identity. This article provides an overview of leader identity development and offers ways for leaders to apply ethics in their everyday lives.

Keywords
leadership; ethics; leader identity; leadership/psychology; organization and administration; professional ethics; professionalism

Introduction

Both ethics and leadership are subjective terms in that their enactment highly depends on the beholder's interpretation of the words. Over the last century, researchers have classified leadership by such things as individual characteristics, behavioral styles and a product of external factors.[1,2] Additionally, various ethical decision-making models exist that help guide one's behavior.[3,4] Leaders who internalize ethics as part of their character rather than simply using guidelines as external navigators maximize their overall effectiveness.[5] Ethics is not only about knowing right from wrong but acting on such beliefs.[6] The purpose of this article is to discuss how individuals can incorporate ethics into their leadership identities.

The Art of Becoming a Leader

Although various definitions of leadership exist, at its core, leadership is the influential process of getting others to act.[4] Leadership itself is a neutral phenomenon. It is the individuals in leadership positions and how they execute their duties who add either a positive or negative connotation to the concept.[7] The supportive or destructive ways leaders function depend on how they have defined themselves as leaders. In other words, leaders' actions vary according to their leadership identities.

Identity development is contextual in that individuals have multiple identities that vary according to specific social settings.[8] People make meanings of their surroundings via physical settings, symbolism, verbal cues and others' behaviors in order to create their contextual leader identities.[9] Leader development does not happen in a vacuum but rather is a sum of one's life experiences.[10] Consequently, because roles, situations and meanings change, leader identity is also subject to change. Thus, leader development is a continual process, not a one-time occurrence.[10]

Leaders' identity constructions involve not only their own input but that of others as well.[9] How people internally define themselves affects the outward expression of their behavior.[11] Zheng and Muir proposed that leadership identity development spans three main areas: (a) expanding boundaries in which an individual moves from being a non-leader to a leader,

(b) recognizing interdependencies that call for leaders to value the contributions of others and (c) discerning purpose in which people enact intentional leadership behaviors.[11] Leadership boundaries expand when one begins to have more influence and opportunities within an organization.[11] The process of expanded boundaries might first begin internally with individuals thinking of things they would do or do differently and then seizing opportunities to act.[11] However, individuals must first see themselves as relevant enough to impact their environment before assuming official leadership roles.[11] Once individuals see themselves as relevant to lead, they will create or use a current value system that supports their leadership behaviors. The most effective leaders display behaviors that align with their character.[5] Personal authenticity then connects identity with action for those who value this congruence.

Leadership and Authenticity

Simply put, authenticity is presentation without pretense. An authentic person is true to self in every manner, meaning their actions align with their intrinsic values.[12] While some like to add a moral component to being an authentic leader, such would suggest the decline of some major organizations would not have happened if the leaders were authentic.[13,14] However, other scholars highlight the consistency of an authentic leader's moral reasoning and actions without arguing that authentic leaders always have moral intentions.[15] One can remain true to immoral values and act in accordance with such values just as one can have righteous values and behave accordingly.[16] Whether good or bad, authenticity lets others know where the leader stands.

Authenticity increases a leader's self-awareness[17] and provides the foundation from which leaders derive meaningful work, thereby eliminating the ambiguity and guesswork involved when people fail to show transparency.[10,18] Congruency between actions and words is a crucial element to authentic behavior.[10,19] While there is no moral element to being authentic, it is a morally authentic person who advocates for a group's collective interests rather than one's own, who will be better received by followers and be more effective in accomplishing tasks than one who does not.[19]

Authenticity is essential to leadership development since it adds another dimension to the leader. One way leaders can develop personal authenticity is by having a sense of purpose. Even leaders who find their purpose discover leading is hard work, equipped with both highs and lows throughout the journey.[10] However, purpose helps leaders know why they have chosen a particular line of work and can help combat negative thoughts about their competence to lead.[10]

Character Development

Knowing oneself and practicing authenticity cultivates character—the consistency between thoughts and actions.[20] Clark identified four components that make up an individual's character: integrity, humility, accountability and courage.[5] When leaders cultivate these four building blocks into their identities, they are more likely than not to make morally ethical decisions.

Honesty summarizes what it means to have integrity.[5] Individuals determine the integrity of their behavior by evaluating the consequences of actions, guidelines for behavior, others' influence and their own values.[5] While leaders cannot enforce integrity upon others, they can create conditions in which others view integrity as a favorable outcome. For example, swift and severe consequences should follow for those who violate the organization's ethical code of conduct. Ignoring problems makes them worse, and leaders must take actions that coincide with the organization's principles.[3]

Leaders should also consider how their unethical behavior affects the overall organization.[6] Leadership behavior is the most significant contributor to organizational culture.[5] Accepting moral responsibilities is a catalyst for improving group ethical performance.[3] Because leaders create culture and beliefs shape group behavior, leaders should model integrity by practicing congruency between their words and actions, which will increase trust among employees and constituents.[5,21,22]

Narcissism is one of three personality traits (along with psychopathy and Machiavellianism) that make up destructive leadership behaviors.[23] Narcissism increases one's propensity

toward unethical behavior, and those with this personality trait have a sense of grandiosity.[24] An antidote to narcissistic behavior is humility. Humility guards against the unethical use of power by giving leaders a proper perspective of themselves and the ability to recognize their limitations, increasing their willingness to learn and helping them focus on others.[5,25]

Humility is the key component that distinguishes good leaders from bad ones.[5] Leadership comes with a considerable amount of power, and sometimes people misuse it, particularly those in upper hierarchal positions.[26] Power can change the person who possesses it, and the favorable or unfavorable aspects of power depend on how a person exercises it.[27] Personal power increases because of an individual's knowledge, attractive personality or behavior and the amount of effort one gives to a task. The individual who knows how to select and implement influential strategies carefully exemplifies the positive aspects of power since such a person aids in the overall development of others and the organization.[27,28] Humble persons are less like to abuse power.

Wise leaders establish structures that curb their propensity for unethical behavior.[16] Humble persons can accept correction, even from people who may not have the same social or organizational status as them.[5] Accountability helps leaders put others first, increasing the likelihood of congruency between their private behavior and public personas since they understand their decisions affect others as well.[5] Accountability becomes a lifestyle instead of a segmented practice.

With increased accountability measures comes the likelihood that leaders will finish the things they start.[5] Accountability also increases leader integrity since they will not make empty promises and will follow through with obligations. Having a performance review team of superiors and subordinates means that leaders maintain accountability to all persons within the organization, not just their superiors. Ideally, leaders should have different people serve on their review team every year to reduce any risk of corruption.

When necessary, people with courage will challenge others and share concerns, even when such actions may make them feel uncomfortable.[5] For a leader, courage encompasses listening, speaking up and encouraging others to disagree and voice their concerns even against themselves.[5] Courageous people have an accurate assessment of self, which aids in articulating their values.[6] Courage also means making difficult decisions, such as replacing toxic leaders with non-toxic ones even if they do good work.

Courage does not develop overnight. It takes practice to find one's voice, and, ultimately, speaking up is a matter of choice.[6] Think of courage as a metaphorical muscle. It takes time to build. However, the more leaders practice speaking up about concerns, the more confident, skillful and comfortable they will become.[6]

Implications

Sometimes it takes facing a difficult situation for individuals to define themselves.[29] It is during these crucibles of life when people ask themselves questions about their character and purpose.[29] Leaders do not necessarily face different ethical dilemmas than non-leaders, but their poor decisions affect the organization on a larger scale due to their prominent positions.[30]

Moral intentions will not always result in successful outcomes.[6] Likewise, positive outcomes can happen despite the lack of individual integrity.[30] However, the systematic practice of behaving unethically versus ethically has far-reaching and detrimental consequences as seen in our society by the public scandals leaders and organizations face when they disregard ethics.[31]

It is less important which ethics models leaders ascribe to than it is that they operate using ethical principles in general.[3] In fact, a leader's intent matters more than outcomes.[30] Why reveals character. When there is a focus on outcomes, leaders risk devaluing those under their charge.[3] When ethics align with one's being, ethical behavior occurs more often than not. Given humanity's flawed nature, errors in judgment do happen. However, such incongruency results in cognitive dissonance,[3] and leaders should immediately rectify inconsistencies. The

more leaders ignore their conscience, the less it will speak.

Conclusions

Right or wrong, leaders live in a fishbowl with others watching and critiquing their every move.[10] Advancements in technology have led to increased transparency of leaders' behaviors, making a leader's character of the utmost importance.[32] Leaders must ensure that their values align with the organizational values where they serve.[10] No two individuals will respond the same in every situation as values conflict within a person and between persons.[6] Sometimes leaders must choose between right and right rather than right and wrong as decisions are not always cut and dry. Nevertheless, when leaders know who they are and behave authentically, they will better serve others.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares she has no conflicts of interest.

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