

The Power of Ethics: Rethinking Leadership Roles At workplaces

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Abstract

In the past leadership roles at workplaces looked only into bringing profits to organizations, compete with each other and create a brand image come what may. The emergence of incorporating moral and ethical codes developed when both employees and leaders of organizations big and small got involved in unethical practices which lead to a tremendous loss in business and involved legal cases. Not only the reputation of such companies got tarnished but gradually they started losing their authenticity in the business world. Surprisingly, moral codes and ethical standards always existed in the organizations' policies but their relevance was recognized only in the twenty-first century when business organizations began to merge and expand worldwide because of globalization and the system changed forever. Organizations today simply cannot compromise with unethical practices and values. Today, organizations believe that good leadership is not merely competing, bringing profits and creating an image but also transforming workplaces and bringing changes in the lives of people through ethics. Studies reveal that the integration of ethics within leadership roles can bring significant benefits at workplaces. Morally upright leaders foster good business, encourage excellent task performance, make powerful decisions and nurture corporate vision. This paper studies the relevance of blending leadership with ethics with a purpose to fetch substantial impact at workplaces.

Keywords

Ethics, Morals, Leadership, Ethical dilemmas, Workplaces

1. Introduction

The word ‘Leadership’ suggests different connotations in different domains. Some understand leadership is managing a team either at schools or colleges or in any sports team. Others mean leadership as voluntarily initiating with some work and the perceptions are many that diverge differently in different contexts. At workplaces, however, leadership defines a position or a role to carry out some goals associated with the betterment of the organization. A typical model categorizes leadership as not what leaders do rather what they are like. To understand it better let us consider an example. John is the team leader leading a group of employees in his company. He does his regular duties, he is technically sound, intelligent, trains his employees well. But he lacks compassion, avoids problematic conversations, does not know how to deal with complaints, cannot accept challenges readily, and is not enthusiastic in solving problems. Comparing what John as a leader does and what he is characterized with as a person, one can easily conclude that simply fulfilling job roles of leadership does not make anyone a leader. Rather there is so much more to it. Leadership both as a role and a trait is one of the most essential tools at workplaces to deliver performances that generate effectiveness and accomplish organisational goals. The process begins by setting vision combined with values and moving ahead with pleasure inspiring as many people in the path of success. It is however important to also understand that being a leader is not a designation instead it is a role and it can be at any level at a given workplace. But are values that important? Today innumerable companies around the world believe in values, morals, and ethics as an important means of workplaces of any kind. Working with ethics makes a leader an ethical leader. Collins in his book *Essentials of Business Ethics: Creating an Organisation of High Integrity and Superior Performance* describes “ethics is the set of principles a person uses to determine whether an action is good or bad. Ethics permeates every stakeholder interaction involving owners, customers, employees’ lenders, suppliers, and government officials” (Collins, 2009, p.4).

Today leaders at workplaces have to do tremendous activities everyday without fail. But sometimes leaders get deviated from their track and mismanage situations at workplace. Therefore, leaders are supposed to be conscious while performing duties. Self-aware is a must. Chamberlain in his book *Conscious Leadership: A Guide to Making a Difference One Person at a Time* discusses

“Individuals within organizations have to navigate corporate culture and often take their cues from the individuals around them. Effective leaders have to lead and set the tone for that culture and that team. Both have to take charge and determine how to do this. It is

an individual responsibility. Each of us needs to see where we are living up to our values and where we are sabotaging our achievement to reach our goals” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 6-7).

Ethical leaders must realise on what grounds the values of leadership get incapacitated in the process of achieving goals. The business world is hypnotizing and studies reveal that people in higher roles often get carried away by practices that devalue morals and ethics. Hence, it becomes easy to fall prey to the dishonourable and disreputable preparations in exchange for some temporary yielding. Leadership is, therefore, knowing the inner self first and finding out the ways that drive towards such practices and then knowing the people around.

Leaders who view the existence of ethics in their characteristics traits and job roles as crucial often come across situations that put them into dilemma. Thoughts like serving clients, customers and members of the organizations uniquely without any misrepresentation, achieving desired results without being dishonest, delivering work performance without harming the position, providing satisfaction to customers without discomforting staff and finance soundness, leading through uprightness without being misguided and many more. However, doing so is not a cakewalk. Langlois in the book *The Anatomy of Ethical Leadership: To lead our Organizations in a Conscientious and Authentic Manner* peers being courageous in such situations. Langlois writes “in such a context, making an ethical decision can become a perilous obstacle course though amaze of reflection and organizational rules. The path is fraught with pitfalls and may require a certain moral fortitude” (Langlois, 2011, p. 35). Everyday leaders face a number of challenges related to professional and personal structures and come across complex circumstances when trapped between their morals and professional demands in order to resolve problems that bypass their state of affairs.

Workplaces embody a large mass of people both internally and externally including staff members, managers, executives, customers, clients, policyholders, stakeholders, government officials and many more. An effective leader is in charge of maintaining codes of conduct with each of these parties through a set of codes of conduct. The codes of conduct that the efficient leaders create, shape the future of the organization. An efficient leader is looked upon by others. Employees tend to follow under the principles of leaders. Hence, if the leaders wish to induce honesty among the people they meet and do business with, they will have to venture values like honesty, truthfulness with everyone they deal. Creating an ethical organisation first begins from self. Raichur in his book *Timeless Principles for the Workplace* writes “honesty, integrity and other core values come top

down. If the leader is honest, personally demonstrates honesty, emphasizes it, empowers people to be honest and celebrates honesty, the rest of the people within the organization will follow” (Raichur, 2015, p. 174).

Leaders are responsible for a number of operations at the workplace from taking the right decisions to choosing the right method to solve a problem from appropriate behaviour with others to act as per the circumstances. However, responsibility and accountability are two different sides of the same coin. Responsibility embodies sharing of actions, workloads, decisions and the like, while accountability means being solely answerable to decisions, actions, and behaviour. Effective leadership does not believe in simply winding up responsibilities but also being accountable or answerable to the consequences of the responsibilities covered. If things go upside down ethical leaders do not blame others rather find and fix answers to their problems. Bustin describes accountability as

“a contract, a commitment, a personal promise. Practised effectively, accountability is way of thinking and acting all the time and ultimately trumps any financial, intellectual, structural, or technological ability. The reason is simple: Accountability is not based on circumstances but rather on an attitude of accomplishing a task or achieving an objective despite circumstance” (Bustin, 2014, p. xiv).

One of the most powerful yet difficult attribute to practice today at workplaces is patience. Today many leaders believe in deciding fast and not bearing time to wait for the results which at times can be devastating. However, the relevance of patience in leadership is hard to describe but it produces results far beyond pleasant. “By demonstrating patience, leaders reinforce the importance of focusing on the long-term outcomes. Patience does not mean ignoring the interim milestones or short-term deliverable. It does mean keeping them in context” (Kolodinsky, et al., 2012). Patience in itself takes time to practice but is considered to be one of the most essential tools for leaders at workplaces.

In leadership, fairness is a desirable quality. Studies reveal that the decisions made by ethical leaders are based on justice and fairness. Effective leaders are known for their fair evaluation of situations after studying and comprehending precise and complete information. Beugre in his book *Managing Fairness in Organizations* mentions about “Meindl who studied the leadership style of several managers in relations to perceived fairness in 1989. Results showed that high task oriented leaders preferred equity-based allocation rules. They were likely to distribute rewards on the basis of individual performance” (Beugre, 1998, p.70).

This paper studies the importance of ethical leadership at workplaces at the outset and then discusses the ethical dilemmas that sometimes leaders face and the best and convenient options to tackle such dilemmas. Further, the paper goes to study some of the most important ethics that leaders of today ought to incorporate in their roles namely, honesty, accountability, fairness, courage, and patience with an aim to deliver performance and achieve success.

2. The Significance of Ethical Leadership

Leadership is an art that is either inherited or that can be acquired through formal education, training, and coaching. In most of the education curricula in the recent past leadership has been an important part of students' lives but today as we move rapidly towards personal development to meet the needs and demands of everyday life, education curricula in most parts of the world has incorporated ethics in their subjected and knowledge regarding ethical leadership has been imparted to teach the students of today to develop strategies to administer effective leadership qualities in parallel with ethics that will guide and shape their career and also provide them ways to handle ethical dilemma. Leadership is a complex task and at workplace, today leaders find themselves in a position where the consequences of their actions can either amplify or reduce their power to make strong decisions and influence others. In many such situations, their intentions are not considered to be the driving factor instead their actions are judged over.

Leigh in his book *Ethical Leadership: Creating and Sustaining an Ethical Business Culture* discusses

“to be an ethical leader is indeed to be different. This kind of leader acknowledges the complexity of running a responsible business, yet tries to do it anyway. Ethical leaders embody the purpose, vision and values of the organisation and of the constituents, within an understanding of ethical ideals. They connect the goals of the organisation with that of the internal employees and external stakeholders” (Leigh, 2013, p. 6).

It is because of ethical leadership that the entire business organization functions on a daily basis while at the same time empowering and setting the organisation's vision. Ethical leaders set values and standards at the workplace in building and generating an ethical organization. For example, setting workplace values like equality and fairness ensures each one of the staff members to understand how business transactions are handled and so on. Also, they realize what expectations the employees are going to fulfil towards organization, liking dealing with customer, behaving righteously and so on. The purpose is

simply to define an ethical message with clarity to implement ethical means while taking any step towards organizational benefit.

Ethical leadership fosters a higher level of veracity that further leads towards a deeper sense of fidelity and provides confidence to other staff members to recognize, believe and follow the same. When individuals join at the workplace, with them comes the deep-rooted personal values which get blended with the ethics and values of organization. This combination becomes a strong establishment for other strong personality traits that generate guidelines to think, act and decide at the workplace. Doohan asserts “two attitudes are critical to leadership, personal integrity in relation to one’s vision of life, and integrity in relation to the organization’s primary values, issues and loyalties” (Doohan, 2007, p.65). Leaders have a crucial responsibility to convey their feelings, speech, and personality to their followers. But at first, the leaders must hold true to themselves in what they need to convey regarding the integrity or setting a vision or any other value as the followers want to keep their confidence and faith in their leaders as they believe that if leaders are honest they would live their vision.

An interesting feature of leadership is to always stay beside people they and their organization is associated with. Hence, leaders are mostly people-oriented and the decisions they make, or the power they use to dole out the goodness for the people concerned and provide interests both to employees and organizations.

“This modelling serves as a guide and motivator for others to put the needs and interests of the group ahead of their own. Such engagement creates an intellectual and emotional commitment between leaders and their followers that make both parties equally responsible in the pursuit of common goals” (Parsons, 2017).

3. Ethical Dilemma and Leadership

Every day leaders come across a number of ethical situations and difficulties that are not sufficiently expert of providing a win-win solution or in other words a situation that involves an option between equally insufficient substitutes. This complex situation is an ethical dilemma where at a given situation, leaders have not only to choose between right and wrong or good or bad instead between right and right and good and good. Apparently, leaders end up in mental conflicts between moral alternatives and which are equally important and where choosing one would result in bypassing another. However, at workplaces, ethical dilemma can have a massive impact on the nature of work. Fernando describes “A business dilemma exists when an organizational decision maker faces a choice

between two or more options that will have various impacts on the organization's profitability and competitiveness and its stakeholders" (Fernando, 2010, p. 9-1). Let us understand ethical dilemma in leadership roles at workplaces and how ethical leaders find a way to find solutions through one of the real business life example.

Binta Niambi Brown who is the CEO and Co-Founder of Fermata Entertainment Ltd and who by profession is also a Lawyer. In a certain situation, Brown was about to close her three billion dollar asset when she found that some information could have deliberately destroyed the deal. She could not reach her business partner and had two choices: "either tell her client and risk losing the deal or keep quiet until the papers were signed" (Giang, 2015). Finally she took up the decision to tell the client. In her own words "even if the deal had been blown up for good, honest reasons rooted in decent integrity and morality, there's always the fear that you are going to become the associate whose deal blew up, and now everybody's talking about how the senior person wasn't around and you are being Goody Two-shoes and you ruined the deal" (Giang, 2015).

The inability to make proper decisions at the proper time is often the result of fears that are associated with our thoughts and the consequences are perilous. However, at times when we simply give up our fears and take a decision, we find ourselves in celebrated moments.

The next section studies in details some of the most important ethical tools required in performing leadership roles. However, it must also be understood that most of the leaders perform roles giving prior importance to ethics in performing their tasks because ethics as a virtue have been embedded within them since childhood. Also, there are leaders who believe that doing their tasks without ethics is simply doing injustice to their job roles. Hence, such leaders have successfully learned the basics of ethics and their importance in workplaces through training, education and coaching. In both the cases, the incorporation of the principles of ethics and their relevance remain unparalleled and the results are outstanding and satisfying.

3.1 Honesty

Honesty is considered to be one of the most positive aspects of leadership. Leadership roles without honesty can put leaders into trouble if not instantly though but a while later. Let's understand the case of Bernard Madoff who is infamous for the largest investment scandal ever and another good number of criminal offenses like securities scam and falsehood. This caused him to be sentenced to prison for a period of 150 years. The investment scandal robbed the life's savings of many people causing enormous downfall to many charities and

foundations and destruction to pension funds. The leadership traits in Madoff like being positive and confident attracted uncountable investors; however, he was not detected with the ethical principles like honesty to do his business. Hence, leadership traits and abilities without leadership ethics are although purposeless yet devastating. Daft claims “one aspect of being an ethical leader is being honest with followers, customers, shareholders, and the public, and maintaining one’s integrity. Honesty refers to truthfulness and non- deception. It implies an openness that followers welcome” (Daft, 2014, p. 40).

The need to implement honesty as an ethical value in leadership is to build trust among the followers. The outrage of corruption, fraud, scandals, and greed among the top level executives in the past is gradually devaluing admiration and respect towards leaders. Hence, the need of the hour at the work places today around the globe demands trust or rebuilding it to promote better work atmosphere and workplace relationships. Trust is a difficult and vulnerable phenomenon to be achieved. Lymn and Adler describe trust as “a bond that is created between and among people. Trust is an emotional and a cerebral connection, characterised by an ability to rely on someone to act in ways that will be of benefit to one’s own health and wellbeing” (Lymn and Adler, 2011, p. 10). Followers often tend to start trusting their leaders during bad times or during times that cause stress or during situations that have negative outcomes. Ethical leaders during each of the situations stand by their followers, provide solutions, bring strength and provide comfort thereby building trust and security.

3.2 Fairness

At the workplaces the discernment of fairness comes to employees when they find their leaders doing justice in making the right decisions. Fairness in judgments and decisions is calculated when a leader does not count culture, caste, creed, sex, and age while evaluating a work performance instead only focuses on the quality of work as delivered by the employees. Ethical leaders by being fair during decisions and judgments are unbiased and make their people feel satisfied and calm. On this note Burchell and Robin suggest leaders to “make tough calls while considering multiple variables, and in some cases those variables cannot be made known. Even when the variables can be made known the decisions often need to be made quickly and cannot be explained thoroughly beforehand” (Burchell and Robin, 2011, p. 98). Hence, whatever may be the requirement or methodologies or values, the insight regarding their leader being fair to make decisions and judgments remain convinced.

Fairness is one of the tough ethics to be mastered and it requires quite an open mind to accept and evaluate situations before jumping up to any decision or judgment. Employees are workplaces are needed to be highly empowered and encouraged by their leaders. This is required so as to achieve goals faster and also employees remain motivated to welcome more tasks. While being fair with the employees, the leaders tend to leverage confidence among the employees and boost their self-esteem at the same time. Employees feel respected and start working towards organizational goals. However, on the other hand when leaders do not play fair and implement one-man-ships or get biased, employees lose respect and trust towards their leaders which directly affects the reputation of the leader and also the organization.

3.3 Accountability

People have a notion in their mind that being a leader means simply to give instructions commands and make people work under them. However, only a few people understand that leadership is a big challenge and in addition to that leadership with accountability is yet another big challenge that only a few leaders willingly accept. Leadership and accountability is a very rare combination. However, this rare combination has unique traits that have the potentiality to uplift the standard of any given workplace. Alston describes some of the important qualities of an accountable leader. He writes “Accountable leaders hold themselves accountable for their actions and decisions and are able to hold others accountable for the same” (Alston, 2017, p. 23). Ethical leaders with accountability do not blame others for the consequences of their choices or actions. Accountable leaders take steps to be responsible not only of their choices and actions but also of their team’s. They carry out all their responsibilities and also take the conscientiousness to answer, explain or take any blame when things go wrong. They are real solvers and fixers of any problem.

The importance of being an accountable leader is vital for any organization. Dive asserts “accountability is vital to organisations for many reasons. Lack of true accountability causes excessive cost, both economic and psychological, de-motivation in those who work for the organisation, dissatisfaction in those served by it, and sub-optimal performance in general” (Dive, 2008, p. 12). In other words, accountability provides freedom to leaders to take up an action or come to a decision. If the leaders have the liability to answer to a particular consequence of the decision they have made or action they have undertaken, that clearly suggests that the decision or the action must be overall beneficial for the organization.

A typical accountable leader generally uses terms of 'I', 'me', 'my' rather putting it to someone else like "What would be my responsibility?", "Please let me know if I can help you with anything", "It was I who suggested on the project" and so on. Accountable leaders take ownership of their duties and do it whole- heartedly to fulfil both their responsibilities and of the organization.

3.4 Courage

Ethical leaders have to perform various roles and take severe decisions at times that require speculations and considerations. Most of the decisions are based on ethical dilemmas where the leaders have to choose between right and right. In such situations leaders to select one alternative keeping in mind what consequences not selecting the other alternatives can bring. For this leaders need the courage to choose and take decisions without fear sticking to principles and ready to face the challenges and difficulties. Cottrell and Harvey suggest

"to become a courageous leader, you must have an undeniable, indisputable and unwavering commitment to be the best you can be. The true measure of your leadership is the ability to look in the mirror and know that you had the courage to do what you felt was the right thing to do" (Cottrell and Harvey, 2004, p. 9).

However, there is still a difference between doing the right things and doing things rightly that requires thorough research and a deep evaluation and insight of both the alternatives keeping in mind the consequences and further evaluating the consequences before arriving into a decision.

Often leaders get de-motivated from exhibiting courage in many situations as they have their preconceived thoughts regarding the consequences or desired results. In other words, leaders likely underestimate the significance of courage and the outcomes attached to it. Aristotle, however, studied that courage is the first virtue and everything else is attached to it and is secondary. In the words of Foster, Nollette, and Frank "For Aristotle, courage resides in the realm of confidence and fear. The excess of confidence is rashness, or foolhardiness and its deficiency is cowardice; courage, therefore is the median point between these two extremes" (Foster, Nollette and Frank, 2012, p. 106). Courage is thus the calibre to comprehend one's strengths and constraints in a given situation.

There are two ways courage can be perceived by others in a workplace; courage as a virtue and courage as a vice. Leaders while choosing to be a courageous need to understand the fine line of difference between both. While courage applied as a virtue brings long-term success and meets the demands of time, as a vice it can become along with a false ego that

paves ways for devastation. Today workplaces demand courage as a virtue to unlock both the unseen opportunities and challenges keeping intact the values. Comer and Vega rightly write “Leaders must consistently and proactively model exemplary behaviour by applying the personal governance practices as they build a climate that supports moral strength” (Comer and Vega, 2015, p.137).

3.4 Patience

Ethical leadership is embodying various morals and principles and patience is one of them. Patience is all about self-control in adverse situations. Patience as a personality trait has been unrecognized and if at all recognized undervalued. The business world is travelling at a faster rate and in such a rapid pace implementing patience often goes overlooked. Patience is required at every step especially while dealing with situations that are likely to cause a negative outcome to organization. For example, the workplace may demand extra working hours due to insistent issues or at times situations may cause impulsive reactions. Also, at times dealing with unmanageable people can cause losing temper. However, in all the situations leaders are expected to practice patience and develop tolerance. Practising patience can provide unwavering support towards the development of self and also achieve organizational excellence. Leaders have to work in different fields at workplaces having different goals and yet different resources. However, a few strategies would assist in working with patience successful. Leaders can start with understanding the organizational culture at first and then each one of the employees. The next strategy involves listening to viewpoints of others first and presenting self-view points after that. Ethical leaders need perseverance and not giving up. Ethical leaders must understand that innovative ideas always take a little more time to be nourished. Not only this communicating about the same to people of different opinions and personalities and at different time periods also require lots of time. Once, the ideas are imparted and in safe hands, convincing is the next strategy. Although the process is an elongated one yet it breeds results.

4. Conclusions

Leaders are the futures of any given organization. Practicing ethics along with their duties will not only encourage employees to follow them but also provide satisfaction to the heads of the organization that their company is in safe hands. This paper studied the structure of leadership and the significance of ethical leadership at workplaces. Ethical leadership does not merely recognize and appreciates the positive skills or personality traits but also demands the integration of ethics into roles, responsibilities, and duties for mutual benefits both of self and workplaces. Ethics play wonderful roles in motivating employees and

leaders at workplaces to build strategies and principles to go by it. Ethical leaders must be encouraged, supported, and polished to achieve the maximum of abilities that generate the maximum of accomplishments. This paper also studied some of the basic yet requisite ethics that leadership roles must implement in their daily activities at the workplaces in order to receive excellent outcomes. It can thus be concluded that ethics such as honesty, courage, fairness, accountability, and patience are few among many workplace ethics which require practicing and exercising.

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