Articulating Ethics
Leading with Integrity

If corrupt behaviour continues, honest people believe they are being taken advantage of, and the weaker ones abandon integrity and begin to look out for themselves dishonestly. Organisational erosion occurs as more and more people join the ranks of marginal cheaters. The self-oriented, careerist model subtly becomes more prevalent and acceptable. The strengths of a once honest organisation languish and those members whose integrity remains intact leave. — Major General Richard C. Schulz

Overview

This paper is intended to raise awareness and debate of the responsibilities that we hold as leaders. Irrespective of our hierarchical roles each of us has a choice in how (and whether) we step forward and make our views known.

Every day we face tension and choices – what we would really like to do and what pragmatically we have the time and resources to achieve. We are constantly choosing what to embrace, what to accept and what to challenge in our organisations. It's not always an easy choice, during one of our large leadership programmes a delegate fed back to us that he had taken a stand against a decision that he felt was ethically wrong. He was told to '*grow a pair*'. His response was that in fact he had grown a pair and that was why he was now challenging his line manager's decision! Could it have cost him his career and ultimately even his job? What was the line that had been crossed or the shift in thinking that had caused that individual to take a stand?

At one level, this paper is encouraging the inherent sensitivity to our moral compass – supporting the development of our moral intuition. At another level, recognising the current complex and changing times, it's a recognition that we need to achieve more dialogue in order to make ethics forefront and mainstream. It's helpful to have a guidance framework to set our expectations of others and to constantly ask the question – what's the right thing to do here? Effective and impactful Codes of ethics do exist –the UK Police Code of Ethics produced by the College of Policing forms the central part of their decision-making model.

Yet major organisations exist and indeed flourish with only a peripheral focus on the ethics of leadership. This is often in respect to legal and statutory compliance rather than an inherent commitment to ethical decision making within their organisation. Ask any leader in that organisation whether they are committed to ethical leadership and it is unlikely any will be honest enough to admit they will cut corners or put short-term business results ahead of the long-term futures of their staff.

A good leader thinks seriously about both the integrity of management and the management of integrity. — *Michael Josephson*

For more details contact: info@moonstoneassociates.co.uk

Fundamentals of Business Ethics

When we start discussing 'ethics' in business, the first question is from which perspective and whose viewpoint? Is it from the perspective of the academic research, the philosophies of 'right' and 'wrong' or the regulatory framework of compliance and best practice frameworks?

"Ethical leadership is leadership that is directed by respect for ethical beliefs and values and for the dignity and rights of others. It is concerned with the kinds of values and morals an individual or a society finds desirable or appropriate. Furthermore, ethics is concerned with the virtuousness of individuals and their motives" …. **Wikipedia**

Ethics is often confused with morality. If we believe that ethics applies even when others are not involved, then perhaps we can frame it as:

- *Morality is the state of virtue**
- *Ethics is the operating code that enables morality*

Or:

- *Ethics is the rational basis for morality, providing valid reasons that something is 'good'*

* A virtue is sometimes defined as a trait or quality that is deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being

Johnson (2001) also put forward the proposal that ethics is in fact two things:
- The ability to discern right from wrong
- The commitment to do what is good and proper

Moorehouse (2002) considered two perspectives – characteristics and traits. He suggested that ethical leaders showed the **characteristics of integrity** and the **trait of leading by example.**

In practice our ethical behaviours will play out in both our public and our private lives. A useful perspective may be:

Obligatory behaviours – 'it's the right thing to do here'; it would be wrong not to take this action.
Impermissible behaviours – 'this is wrong'; we can't' go ahead with this course of action.
Supererogatory behaviours – 'going above and beyond'; it would be right to do this (but not necessarily wrong not to do it). No obligation but going that extra mile.

As a leader in an organisation what guides our individual moral compass? When does acceptance that things could be done better become explicit collusion with maintaining the status quo? More to the point, can we afford the moral high ground of always 'doing the right thing' in these current turbulent and ambiguous times?

Practical Applications

Perhaps a place to start is to consider how ethics actually plays out in the workplace:

- As an individual fulfilling a role within an organisation
- As a leader with positional power within that organisation
- As an employee of an organisation interacting with customers and the wider community
- As a member of society impacted by the corporate behaviours of whole organisations

The challenge is that from many perspectives, ethics and ethical decision making may not be absolute. It may be related to the individual context and the question of whether we are talking about the right decision for the individual or for the organisation as a whole –i.e. looking at the bigger picture.

Take redundancies as an example; at its most basic taking away people's livelihoods to make a company more efficient, sell more widgets and pay out increased dividends to shareholders. The free market economy in action most certainly. Where does ethical decision-making lie in the overall leadership portfolio – is it making the call to cut jobs as it fulfils the psychological (and commercial) contract that the CEO entered into when they took the job?

Is it subsequently ensuring that the cuts are made as compassionately and with support for the individual in question? How much support is then enough – why pay more that the statutory minimum redundancy as it may put pressure on the resources available to the stayers – the leavers are going anyway so who do we give priority to?

We need reasons for making these decisions – even if only to justify them to ourselves and ensure we sleep at night.

Ethical Frameworks

How do we navigate our way through ethical decision making? Let's take a step back and try to put a framework around ethics; there are three main theories:

- Consequential Ethics
- Non-consequential Ethics (Duty Based)
- Agent centred Ethics (Virtue Based)

The Consequential Perspective:

Achieving the greatest good/doing the least harm. Characterised by Rousseau as achieving the best for people as a whole. Understanding the networked aspects of society; emphasising respect and compassion for others, especially those most vulnerable.

Consideration - the future effects of possible courses of action, who is directly or indirectly affected by what we are proposing to do. On balance, are we achieving the greatest good for the largest number.

The Duty Based Perspective:
According to Kant, characterised by a focus not on the consequences (over which ultimately, we have no control) but the intent we held when performing the action. According to Locke, the best ethical action is that which protects the ethical rights of those impacted – the belief that all humans have a right to dignity.

Consideration – when we embark on this, have we ensured an even handed and equitable approach that respects the views and interests of all those impacted.

The Virtue Based Perspective:
Ethical actions are those consistent with the ideal human virtues. Characterised by Aristotle who believed ethics related to the whole of a person's life and not just individual actions that may be taken in a particular situation. Basically, the epitomisation of 'good character' and emphasising the importance of the role model.

Consideration – our experiences, emotions and thoughts will have developed our character. Are we being true to those values that we hold most dear.

This has been summarised by Bond and Firenze in their 2013 summary of a seminar on ethics as:

	Consequentialist	Duty	Virtue
Deliberative process	What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)?	What are my obligations in this situation, and what are the things I should never do?	What kind of person should I be (or try to be), and what will my actions show about my character?
Focus	Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action.	Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.	Attempts to discern character traits (virtues and vices) that are, or could be, motivating the people involved in the situation.
Definition of Ethical Conduct	Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences.	Ethical conduct involves always doing the right thing: never failing to do one's duty.	Ethical conduct is whatever a fully virtuous person would do in the circumstances.
Motivation	Aim is to produce the most good.	Aim is to perform the right action.	Aim is to develop one's character.

Applying Ethics in the Workplace

Sometimes it's useful to have a process to follow. Also extracted from the Bond and Firenze 2013 seminar, here is a suggested path:

1. **Recognise it's an ethical issue -** We work at pace, under pressure and with insufficient resources, often this is exacerbated by conflicting and shifting priorities. There is a need for a time out switch – something that says, *'hang on a minute let's stop and think this through'.*

2. **Consider all parties who are involved and may be affected** - Whichever of the ethical perspectives that may be relevant; the potential outcomes, the pending actions or the underpinning values. Reflect on who and how may be impacted now and in the future and the possible consequences for them.

3. **Gather information** - What (else) do I know or need to know to make an informed decision. Have I considered all the various perspectives, is there existing data or research I could use? What guidelines, codes of practice or statutory requirements may apply.

4. **Formulate actions/consider alternatives** - What appears to be the best course of action to take. What else may be possible, what are the risks, benefits and consequences of the proposal - do I need a contingency in place.

5. **Make a decision/review the decision** - Whatever decision-making process or framework you would normally use, consider getting another view/perspective. Who else could you check in with or ask to review the decision prior to implementation. Not just from the perspective of establishing an audit trail, potentially an input from those impacted by the pending decision will help demonstrate genuine commitment and concern.

6. **Act** – At some stage action is required. Consider how, when and where this needs to be communicated. Consistency of message and of application are critical to success. Consider the resource requirements and ensure it is not added to someone's already overloaded in tray.

7. **Reflect on outcome** – As part of the design stage, you will have considered what good looks like in terms of effectiveness of outcome. Reflective practice is a key component of any leader's toolkit, evaluating what worked and what might need to change both as an individual and as a team is an integral part of the overall process.

Summary

I've tried to summarise and present a balanced and practical view from a practitioner's perspective. Are there certain traits and characteristics that typify ethical leaders – absolutely. Is there a framework that will help to identify and develop these traits? Have a look at the creative characteristics **in The Leadership Circle Profile (TLCP)**™ framework - particularly the authenticity dimension:

'Your inner and outer lives are congruent. Your behavior matches your values and others trust that you can be counted on to keep your word, meet your commitments, deal with them honestly and fairly, and remain true to your purpose.

Authenticity and integrity are the qualities most desired in a leader, so scoring high on Authenticity suggests that you are perceived as a leader, and that others will follow. They will align with you because you practice what you preach. Your power in the organization is not primarily based on where you are in the hierarchy (position power), nor does being indirectly political attain it. Your power is given to you by others because you act with integrity' - Extract from TLCP Manual, descriptors of the Authenticity dimension.

The nobler sort of man . . . is anxious to see clearly, to hear distinctly, to be kindly, respectful in demeanour, conscientious in speech, earnest in affairs. When in doubt, he is careful to inquire; when in anger, he thinks of the consequences; when offered an opportunity for gain, he thinks only of his duty. - Confucius

Andrew Porter
Director

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For more details contact: info@moonstoneassociates.co.uk