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Leading With Communication: A Practical Approach to Leadership Communication

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*Do you know the consequences of your lie?
Or do you see only its end results?
Do you tell yourself it's for a good purpose,
Or do you actually believe it's fair?
And how will your lie affect me in the end?
Have you considered that?
And when the veneer of your lie cracks
And I see into the mirror
What will I think of you?*

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UNDERSTANDING THE LEADER'S ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

In July 2011, the following statement appeared in a *News of the World* editorial, a tabloid paper that was part of Rupert Murdoch's news empire until he ordered it shut down: "Quite simply, we lost our way. Phones were hacked, and for that this newspaper is truly sorry."¹

The scandal that caused the demise of the *News of the World* brought to public attention the fact that some journalists had been offering illegal bribes in exchange for access and information and in an effort to silence investigators had also threatened to expose personal aspects of their private lives if they continued to pursue their investigations aggressively.² Such activities led some to question if the cozy relationship between British politicians, Scotland Yard, and the press was ethical.

Certainly, there are lessons leaders can derive from this affair. Though the newspapers were accused of committing criminal acts, there are also ethical issues and concerns raised by such behavior. Critics observe that Murdoch had

created a “kill or be killed” culture and stripped people of their conscience, never understanding that there were lines one should not cross.³

ETHICAL MATTERS: THINKING ABOUT YOUR ROLE

What role do you believe **ethics** play in leading? How would you balance the need to achieve results with human values—both of which are leadership imperatives?⁴ If adhering to ethical principles is an integral part of any leader’s responsibilities, then what is the recourse if a leader or the people who work with a leader “go rogue” engaging in the performance of unethical behavior?

Self-Reflection: Looking In and Out

To aid you in considering the issues discussed in this chapter, compose answers to the following questions, being certain to fully explain each of your responses.

1. Can you give an example of behavior that is legal but unethical? Could you imagine a situation that would find you engaging in such unethical behavior?
2. Would you ever use information that you or a colleague obtained fraudulently?
3. In your opinion, is exaggeration lying?
4. In your opinion, is lying ever justifiable?
5. What actions might cause people to lose trust in a leader?
6. What are you willing to do to get ahead or come out on top?
7. How do you decide where to draw the line between what you believe to be right and wrong?
8. Would you rather fail than compromise your values?
9. Is there any such thing as an acceptable ethical lapse?
10. Is willful blindness—telling those who work for you to not reveal to you questionable actions so that you can claim no knowledge of them—excusable?
11. Should every organization have an ethics code? If you answer yes, what would you put in it? If you answer no, why do you believe such a code to be unnecessary?

Examine your responses. Do any surprise you?

What Role Does Character Play?

What about **character**? According to Nitin Nohria, dean of the Harvard Business School, character is something each of us has to work at forming and developing over the course of our lives. Like good judgment, character is not something we either possess or don't have.⁵ It, too, needs training. Affirming the importance of character, Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus assert that character is what leadership is all about. For them, becoming a leader is akin to becoming an integrated person.⁶ Leaders come to understand not only what to do, but also how to be true to themselves.

We make decisions based on our moral principles every day. For example, many of us expect others to act with integrity, be honest in their dealings with us, treat us with dignity, and be fair. Should we not expect companies and their leaders to do the same? Leaders set the ethical tone for their organizations and have a significant impact on how followers and other stakeholders perform. Often they are the most important source of information and the person to whom others look for guidance.⁷

**The leader sets the ethical standard.
Can you withstand the pressures of leading?**

What Happens When Leaders Fall Short?

There have been too many instances when leaders of companies have fallen short. We need only point to a few examples—Enron (the company that hid debt from its books in order to artificially inflate its value to shareholders), WorldCom (the company that used deceptive accounting to grossly inflate profits, only to go bankrupt), Halliburton (the company accused of overcharging the government), Tyco (the company accused of failure to make accurate financial disclosures, misrepresenting the company's financial condition, and making inappropriate loans), and the mortgage meltdown that precipitated the financial crisis—that have had devastating effects.

What role did the leaders of organizations play in these scandals? What principles, if any, did the leaders hold themselves accountable to, or what principles did others hold them accountable to? How could talented, creative leaders lose their way? What happened to corporate integrity and social responsibility? What happened to the ability to determine what is and is not ethical—the ability to judge right from wrong?

How would you describe the ethical practices of the leader in this cartoon? Are there any parallels in contemporary society?



David Sipress/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Some leaders fail to develop the ability to withstand the pressures of their positions. Instead of such pressures bringing out the best in them, they bring out their worst selves. The leaders then cave into these pressures, knowingly or unwittingly promoting wrongdoing in themselves or others, usually to achieve short-term gains.⁸

IT'S A QUESTION OF VALUE

Milton Rokeach, an expert on human values, defined a **value** as “an enduring belief about the way things should be done or about the ends we desire.”⁹ Rokeach identified two value categories: **terminal values**, which refer to desirable end states of existence or the goals we would like to achieve during our lifetime, and **instrumental values**, which refer to the means we prefer to use to attain our terminal values or goals.

Look at each of the following lists containing some of the values Rokeach identified. Which value on each list do you believe to be the most important and why? Keep in mind that your values guide your decision making.

Among Terminal Values Are the Following:

True friendship
Self-respect
Happiness
Equality
Freedom
Social recognition
A sense of accomplishment
Security
A comfortable life
An exciting life

Among Instrumental Values Are the Following:

Ambition
Self-control
Capability
Courage
Honesty
Imagination
Independence
Broadmindedness
Obedience
Responsibility

Now, consider how your values will affect you as a leader. Do you think others share your values? Will you be able to use your values to build your credibility?

POSITIONS MATTER: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

The following are questions that once answered provide clues to the nature of a leader's character and an organization's decision making.

How Are Privilege and Power Handled?

Leaders often reap social and monetary rewards. A *New York Times* commissioned study of America's top executives, for example, revealed that the average annual salary of a top executive was about \$10 million and increasing at a rate of 12% a year—during a time when millions of Americans were experiencing high unemployment, stuck wages, and an unparalleled economic crisis—causing some to question these leaders' belief in fairness and reciprocity, their capacity for empathy and impulse control, or their willingness to work cooperatively for the common good.¹⁰ We expect leaders to take responsibility for the impact their strategies have on others. We expect them to be up to the ethical challenges of their jobs, not just the tasks. Leaders need to think about their power and privileges and how these affect how they approach their responsibilities if they are to earn the trust and loyalty of their followers.

The rank and privileges of a leader raise other concerns as well. Are power and prestige corrupting influences? How much personal power and prestige equal too much power and prestige? Should a leader feed his or her coffers at the expense of followers and supporters? Should he or she attempt to realize personal agendas in addition to or at the expense of business agendas? And what happens if the leader violates the public trust as has happened with far too many community, corporate, and political leaders such as New York's Charles Rangel, who was admonished on the floor of the House for ethics violations; Chicago's former governor Rod Blagojevich, who was convicted of attempting to sell the Senate seat once held by President Barack Obama; or Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, who was convicted of looting millions of dollars from his company. Does the leader have a moral obligation to himself or herself, or is the leader's moral obligation primarily to followers?¹¹ And what if a follower objects to what the leader asks him or her to do? How should the leader respond?

Are Lies Ever Told to Control Information?

One of the charges leveled against the big banks involved in the mortgage debacle is that they sought to control information by causing others to believe what they themselves did not believe. They practiced deception on a grand scale.

They told and released information containing lies. Can you imagine being in their position? What would you have done? Do you think lying is always wrong?

What Kind of Lie Is Told?

What is a lie? A **lie** is the deliberate presentation of information you know is untrue. Like all of us, leaders can lie by omission or commission.

When a lie is based on omission, the leader deliberately withholds relevant information, thereby causing partners, peers, followers, or others to draw an erroneous conclusion. Leaders sometimes decide to withhold

Deception has costs! Who trusts a liar?

or conceal the truth—not revealing information they possess. For example, drug companies have been known not to release all the information about their drugs' harmful effects to the FDA. When this happens, the public suffers because withholding such information could cause harm, and the lie likely was told for the drug company's selfish reasons. But scientists in the drug company probably suffer as well because they may have been instructed to withhold the information from those who had a legitimate right to be informed.

When a lie is based on commission, the leader makes a statement that he or she knows is false. Thus, lies do not merely involve the delivery of information that is wrong; rather, they involve the act of intentionally seeking to deceive one or more persons.

Sissela Bok, the author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, says that when we lie, it is both our hope and our expectation that we will succeed in making the target of our lie(s) believe information we do not. Bok also notes that liars rarely tell only a single lie because once you lie, there is typically more mending to do.¹² In effect, a lie becomes a tangled web.¹³ Thus, liars are in the information distortion business. Information, however, is what we need to make sound decisions. Thus, by corrupting the information people rely on, lying adversely impacts decision making as well.¹⁴

Have You Told Either Type of Lie?

Lie of Omission	The liar withholds relevant information.
Lie of Commission	The liar makes a statement she or he knows is false.

What Happens When Trust in Information Disappears?

How do lies affect the liar and the lied to once they are uncovered? Rightly, people lose trust in the liar. They will likely doubt whatever information the liar passes on to them in the future. They will also question the liar's expression of feelings. Suspicions and resentments will linger. They are likely to think about other information the liar has previously given to them and question it as well. The relationship between the liar and the lied to, which may have once been strong, weakens. Quite simply, lies are fundamentally destructive to all relationships—including business relationships. Once employees discover that they have been lied to, in addition to destroying trust, both their job performance and satisfaction decline.

What Happens When Information Is Obtained in Questionable Ways?

In the *News of the World* case we spoke of at the outset of this chapter, the press was criticized for obtaining information via hacking, bribery, and trickery. Executives are known to use questionable tactics to come by the information they want. Some, for example, obtain it by reading employee e-mails or eavesdropping on their conversations. Sometimes “nannycams” or spyware are placed in offices, enabling employers to observe and monitor worker performance. When discovered, this too causes workers to question the leader's intentions—especially if their privacy rights have been violated in the process, as happened when Murdoch's newsmen hacked into the contents of private cell phones.

HOW IS RESPONSIBILITY DISTRIBUTED?

When Murdoch was asked if he considered himself responsible for the hacking that his employees had committed, he simply answered, “No.” He passed the buck to his managers or the people who worked for them. In contrast, a sign on the desk of a past president of the United States read, “The buck stops here.” Leaders need to hold themselves accountable for the actions of their followers. After all, they create the organizational culture and set its **ethical framework**—formulating the code of ethics that guides its actions.

The heads of MBA programs have observed that they need to do a better job of preparing leaders to pay attention to ethics—acknowledging the need for leaders to believe that ethics trump profit; that leaders have obligations to

followers, stakeholder groups, and the public; and that the needs of others need to be put before the leader's personal needs—teachings that leaders need to learn if future ethical meltdowns or crises are to be avoided.

What About the International Scene?

Business ethicist Thomas Donaldson asks, “When we leave home and cross our nation's boundaries, moral clarity often blurs. Without a backdrop of shared attitudes, and without familiar laws, and judicial procedures that define standards of ethical conduct, certainty is elusive.”¹⁵ How does a leader maintain integrity in the global arena? Should he or she do business with countries that violate civil and political rights? Should moral and cultural relativism rule, or should a leader adhere to the concept of moral universalism—that we can define basic truths about right and wrong objectively? What guiding principles would you adhere to if demonstrating respect for cultural differences was also a priority?

Leading With Moral Decision Making

Consult your conscience by asking what is right.

Determine if you can achieve the goals without raising ethical issues.

Identify how actions taken will affect others.

Observation: Watch and Learn

Rule 1: Don't lie. Rule 2: Don't cheat. Rule 3: Don't steal. Though these appear to be three simple rules, leaders are known to have violated them—some with irreverent regularity.

Identify a crisis in leadership that can be attributed to the leader's violation of one of the preceding rules. Describe the leader's ethical misstep by identifying the

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situation in detail. Include a description of the culture in force during the leader's tenure; a rationale for the leader's actions; an analysis of how the leader's violation of an understood standard of conduct impacted others (for example, the effect of the ethical lapse on employees, shareholders, customers, competitors, and the community); the consequences, if any, experienced by the leader and the organization as a result of the leader's actions; and what advice you would have given the leader prior to his or her choosing to behave unethically and subsequent to the unethical act's commission.

DO YOU KNOW UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR WHEN YOU SEE IT?

Would you knowingly sell shoddy merchandise or equipment to consumers? Would you inflate income figures to make them look better to investors? When faced with such dilemmas, how would you make a choice? If ethics enter into the equation, then your thinking is based on principles of justice, fairness, the expression of values, and your respect for those whom your decision will affect. Certainly, taking a shortcut, such as claiming credit for another person's work, can be tempting, especially if a big payoff is the result. However, if an offender believes that he or she will be punished for the ethical violation, then taking such a shortcut could become less appealing.

Certainly, to behave ethically you need to be able to distinguish right from wrong, as well as be able to assess how the choice you make will impact others. Empathy and perspective taking can be your allies in developing sensitivity to the consequences of your actions. Actions ought to be answerable to ethical principles. Being able to imagine how others will view what you do, not just what you stand to gain or lose, helps you focus on the ethical implications of behavior.

According to Sissela Bok's **model of ethical decision making**, we should use three steps to analyze ethical questions. First, we ought to consult our conscience to see how we feel about the action—its rightness. Second, we ought to determine if we might use another way to achieve our goal that would not raise ethical issues. And third, we should determine how our actions could affect others by consulting the parties involved.¹⁶ Bok's model ensures that you consider alternatives, rather than making a decision prematurely—usually sound advice.

How can ethical behavior and professional ethical standards be encouraged? How can we shore up values of responsibility and trust? At our college, for

example, all students are expected to engage in service, not for a grade but because it is the right thing to do. To promote the college's ethically rewarding environment, it gives out service awards in addition to academic awards. It also punishes unethical behavior such as plagiarism with possible expulsion. Which do you personally find more effective in promoting ethical behavior—the reward or the punishment?

Working It Out: Alone or Together

1. Identify the personal standards of conduct you try to live by. Next, identify a time when you faced an ethical dilemma and felt you were in danger of violating one or more of the standards on your list. Finally, describe how you responded and the impact it had. To what extent did your resolution align or conflict with your standards?
2. Examine the standards of conduct used to govern business decisions and actions in an organization of your choosing. Then develop a document that your college or university might incorporate into an ethics and compliance program. Describe the similarities and differences between the document you created and the one used by the organization you researched.

APPROACHING ETHICS: ANALYZING RATIONALES

Philosophers advance a variety of rationales for ethical behavior. Some of the theories focus primarily on the leader's conduct while others delve into his or her character. After reading a summary of each theory, ask yourself which ethical stance you find most reflective of your thinking.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher of the 18th century, contended that people ought to behave morally without exception. For Kant and other proponents of this perspective, choice reflects our human duty to adhere to universal truths. As Kant saw it, behavior was morally justified only if performed from a sense of duty. He insisted that its universality—whether it applied to everyone—was the test of a moral act. For Kant, if we could answer the question, “Would

we want everyone to make the same decision we did?” with a yes, then the choice is ethical. If the answer is no, it is unethical. Kant advocated for presenting the truth no matter what the consequences. He believed that respect for people demanded no less.

Utilitarianism

Unlike Kant, early 19th-century British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill insisted that a decision’s benefits and consequences determined whether or not the decision made was ethical. For Bentham and Stuart then, the best decisions produced the greatest benefits and fewest undesirable consequences for the most people. While **utilitarianism** appears to be an outcomes-based perspective, sometimes it is difficult to identify accurately all the benefits or costs a decision will precipitate, creating plenty of room for disagreement over whether costs outweigh benefits or benefits outweigh costs.

Ethical Egoism

In contrast to utilitarianism, which seeks to create the most good possible for the largest number of people possible with the fewest costs possible, **ethical egoists** believe that the best thing a person can do is create good for himself or herself. Operating from this perspective, self-interest becomes the leader’s focus. Winning, being the best, and maximizing profits become his or her goals.

Virtue Ethics

We are writing this section midsummer. The fall semester will be here before we know it. Today, a colleague announced that she was leaving the college to take a professorial position at another college. She had known this for some time but kept the decision to herself, when she could have been more considerate and given her employer more notice. **Virtue ethics** place the responsibility for the ethical decision on the person, not on consequences or principles.

Virtue ethicists believe that people of high moral character are more likely to make sound ethical choices that benefit society as well as the person. Thus,

they seek to identify the qualities inherent in the virtuous person, as well as identify what others might do to acquire these virtues. Leaders who consistently act with integrity, who respect followers, who place the interests of others first, who refrain from acting recklessly, who refuse to engage in deceptive behavior, who exercise good judgment, and who display empathy may function as role models for virtue ethics. As they model the behaviors, we learn what justice, respect, compassion, and authenticity are.

WHAT IS ETHICAL? A Summary of Philosophies

Categorical Imperative	The leader has a moral duty to behave ethically.
Utilitarian	The leader weighs benefits and consequences of actions.
Ethical Egoism	The leader focuses on self-interest.
Virtue Ethics	The focus is on the individual responsible.
Altruism	The leader's focus is on concern for others.
Servant Leadership	The leader is the caretaker of followers.

Altruism

For those who believe in **altruism**, concern for others trumps everything else. Adherents to altruism believe that whether we benefit or not, we ought to help others. Rather than seek personal achievement or control, altruistic leaders seek the best interests of others, aiming for the betterment of individuals, groups, organizations, and society. Their goal is to put into place policies and programs that make things better.

Servant Leadership

Servant leaders focus on what is best for their followers—whom they prefer to perceive and call their partners and whom they empathize with and nurture. The maxim of the servant leader might be “followers first.” Servant leaders seek to eliminate social injustices and inequalities, heeding followers’ needs and seeking their unconditional acceptance. Servant leaders measure their own success by

what happens in the lives of their followers. Were they successful? Did they develop the talents they needed to achieve their goals? Were they provided with needed resources? In many ways, servant leaders see themselves as their followers' caretakers—trusted to act on their behalf.

CHOOSING TO LEAD ETHICALLY

Leaders communicate their ethics through their personal actions and relationships. They create positive environments, ones in which others can develop. Leaders gain credibility and authenticity by serving as role models and engaging in behaviors that others judge to be appropriate and unselfish. Their behavior is transparent, fair, and caring.¹⁷ For example, one New Jersey liberal advocacy group that accepted unlimited and anonymous donations came under fire from Democratic politicians, the people it had been created to help. The politicians asked the organization to disclose the identities of donors. Loretta Weinberg, a New Jersey Democratic state senator, said that keeping donors secret is “completely wrong and should be immediately corrected.” She went on to say that “just because” something is “legal, doesn’t always make it ethical or in the public interest.”¹⁸

Ethical leaders are honest and show consideration for others, treating them fairly and respectfully. Since we continually assess how leaders perform, if a leader displays ethical qualities at one time but not at another, his or her behavior will be seen as inconsistent, and assessments of inconsistency could interfere with others perceiving the leader as authentic.

Ethical leaders communicate about ethics. Followers and stakeholders find themselves rewarded for behaving ethically and punished for deviating from this norm. The climate the leader creates helps foster conditions conducive to ethical performance. For the leader to maintain his or her credibility, the rewards and punishments must be perceived as fair.

Ethical leaders understand the many directions in which communication flows. Their communication and decision making are transparent. Those in the organization feel free to inform their leaders about ethical issues of which the leader is unaware, and the leader clearly explains to followers the standards all are held accountable to.

Because of the fair treatment they perceive themselves to receive from ethical leaders, employees and other stakeholders are more willing to engage with ethical leaders. They trust them and know the leaders are not likely to seek retribution.¹⁹ They also are more likely to report ethical violations to them. People also express more optimism about the future when working in concert with leaders they rank high in ethical leadership.²⁰ Things work well when there is no disparity between the leader’s words and actions.

Theory Into Practice

The Favorite

Giving preferential treatment to some but not others can cast a pall over the impression a leader makes on followers and on how followers perceive that leader.²¹ If followers see the leader doling out rewards to those who do not merit them, acting in an unfriendly manner, tolerating dishonesty or deficient performance in others, or failing to treat everyone fairly, then that leader likely will not have made a good impression, and followers probably will decide that they do not like him or her.

More appropriate behavior for the leader is for him or her to act courteously, warmly, and friendly toward all, fulfill behaviors members expect her or him to perform, and be seen as contributing directly to the organization's success.

How has perceiving a leader to favor someone other than you affected your behavior? When a leader's behavior caused you to doubt his or her honesty or ability to live up to expectations, how did you respond?

JUDGMENT CALLS

Any human can be tempted. It is likely that few of us are immune to the temptations that the desire to accumulate wealth creates. Reining in greed is a challenge of our times, as is the dissolution of ethical standards in general. Dishonesty, confusing the issue, endangering others, wasting resources, favoritism, and a lack of concern for others are just some of the unethical behaviors leaders have been caught engaging in. Because of this, and the ability of leaders to create rationales for having done the wrong thing, we believe that we all need to think seriously about ethics and the need we each have to learn to recognize our ethical responsibilities.

To be sure, what one leader finds ethical another leader may view very differently. In addition, stakeholder and shareholder interests often clash. From a shareholder perspective, decisions made are guided by the need to make the most money possible so that return on investment is maximized. From a stakeholder perspective, consideration is given to the needs and interests of multiple stakeholder groups, not only those with a financial interest. Countless ethical controversies reveal the range and variability of ethical guidelines and reactions.

Just because it is legal does not make it ethical!

Besides obvious illegal behaviors such as restraint of trade, bribes, and insider trading, ethics are also important because of the impact they have on employee performance, stakeholder confidence, and public perceptions. When, for example, issues arise over conflicts of interest, insider trading, sexual harassment, pay and promotion disparities, the privacy of employees, or an organization's environmental and sustainability record or policies, just to name a few, leaders need to have in place strategies to react to and manage the ethical challenge. Just 46% of Americans surveyed last year said they trusted business. And in increasing numbers, Americans also mistrust the government.²² We need to motivate ourselves to emulate inspirational leaders with high ethical standards. They are our ticket to a better future.

Post It: Imagineering a Better Way

The organization's culture offers clues to the standards its leaders use to determine the difference between ethical and unethical decision making and behavior. Identify the benefits and/or drawbacks of answering each of the following questions in order to ensure that a decision you are about to make is ethical.

1. Do I truthfully believe in the decision?
2. Can I convince others that my information is true?
3. Is this decision in my best interest?
4. Am I being fair to the people my decision will affect?
5. Is my thinking transparent?
6. Will my decision make the company money?
7. Will my decision give us an advantage over the competition?
8. Will my decision build goodwill?
9. Will my decision benefit the parties involved?
10. Does my decision violate any company policies?
11. How would I feel if people I grew up with and care deeply for find out about my decision?

A compelling reason for leading ethically is how ethical behavior contributes to your reputation as a leader. The choices you make—how you answer the question “What should I do?”—reveal your ethics—for better or worse. While reading this chapter will not guarantee that you will perform ethically as a leader, we hope it provides you with a framework you can use to develop an ethical approach to leading. Remember, the leader sets the ethical tone for an organization. Ethical leaders engender ethical followers. Unethical leaders do the same. Which kind of leader do you imagine you will be?

LOOK BACK

Reread this chapter's opening poem. Based on your personal ethical standards, and using the information in this chapter as background, respond to each of the questions the poem's speaker asks.

Key Terms

Altruism (35)	Model of ethical decision making (32)
Character (25)	Servant leadership (35)
Ethical egoism (34)	Terminal values (26)
Ethical framework (30)	Utilitarianism (34)
Ethics (24)	Value (26)
Instrumental values (26)	Virtue ethics (34)
Kant's categorical imperative (33)	
Lie (29)	

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LEADERS AND THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM
MATCHING LEADER STYLE TO FOLLOWER
EXPERIENCE AND TASK

PATH-GOAL THEORY

MATCHING LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR TO
THE SITUATION