

In the Spirit of Integration: IPNB in Action

Special Section on Leadership

The Ethics of Leadership

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Introduction by Lisa Firestone, PhD

Introduction

Below is an excerpt from a new book titled *Ethics in Interpersonal Relationships* (in press, for release in 2009 by Karnac Books, London). In the chapter, “The Ethics of Leadership,” co-authors Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett first discuss the characteristics of an *effective* leader and go on to describe the characteristics of an *ethical* leader, and conclude by talking about teachers as one kind of ethical leader. It is clear from the points they make that neural integration, particularly with the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC) with its nine important functions (regulation of the body, attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility, empathy, insight, fear modulation, intuition, morality) (Siegel, 2007), is necessary for optimal ethical leadership. All of these mPFC functions speak to the capacity for regulation of body and mind. With strong connections among the body, the limbic regions, and the cortical areas, leaders are less likely to make decisions from early implicit wounds. Instead, the longer route provided by integration with the mPFC allows them to focus on present issues with the calm clear-sightedness, empathy, and balance that leads to morally sound, flexible responses.

In addition, the role of the nine domains of integration (consciousness, vertical, bilateral, memory, narrative, self-state, temporal, interpersonal, transpirational) (Siegel, 2007) provides one way to talk about the neurobiological correlates of ethical leadership. Integration of

consciousness gives the leader the capacity to be mindful even in the midst of stress, while vertical and bilateral integration provide the connections to the mPFC and across the hemispheres for whole-brain functioning. With memories and self-states well-integrated, and a personal narrative that makes sense of his or her history, this leader can remain centered in the current situation, working from the viewpoint of an authentic and consistent self. Narrative integration, in particular, frees up energy for current endeavors because the person is not constantly struggling with dis-integrated parts of personal history. Temporal integration allows a leader to have a sense of vision for achieving goals over time, while interpersonal integration provides the capacity to inspire others to share his or her vision. Transpirational integration – the ability to sense oneness – can broaden the field of vision so the leader is guided by a sense of the best benefit for the whole, rather than fighting for special interests.

Reading the excerpt below will clarify the relationship between effective, ethical leadership and the important findings from a variety of fields of science, integrated from an Interpersonal Neurobiology perspective.

The Ethics of Leadership

Leadership is essential to any group or organization. It helps coordinate people and projects, creates efficiency, and avoids chaos and confusion. Even a small group of people with like minds and common goals needs organization and

direction to make important decisions. Effective leaders are quick to make decisions and to take action, thereby facilitating the accomplishment of such goals. For example, in sailing the high seas, and especially during storm conditions or other emergencies, crew members require the leadership of a captain, one person who takes responsibility for making immediate, and, at times, life-or-death decisions. In this situation, as in many others, good leadership is prized, whereas bad leadership can be detrimental or even disastrous.

Warren Bennis (2007) stressed the importance of leadership in asserting that “In the best of times, we tend to forget how urgent the study of leadership is. But leadership always matters, and it has never mattered more than it does now” (p. 2). In light of this statement, it is disconcerting to note the dearth of literature on the topic of leadership in the field of psychology.

Leadership is a multidimensional concept that may or may not have positive ethical implications (Adler, 2002; Galbraith, 1983; Gandz, 2007; Winston & Patterson, 2006). The basic qualities that contribute to outstanding leadership potential - charisma, competence, integrity and authenticity, a creative vision or goal, high energy level, and even a sincere desire to serve people - are essentially neutral in relation to ethical considerations. Leadership and the effect that leaders have on the people they influence can be assessed from two perspectives. (1) Pragmatic: Is the leader effective in achieving certain prescribed goals? (2) Ethical or moral: Does the leader meet appropriate standards of responsibility and compassion in regard to human concerns? The question of morality or ethics applies to both the means employed by the leader and to the end results (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Characteristics of Effective Leaders

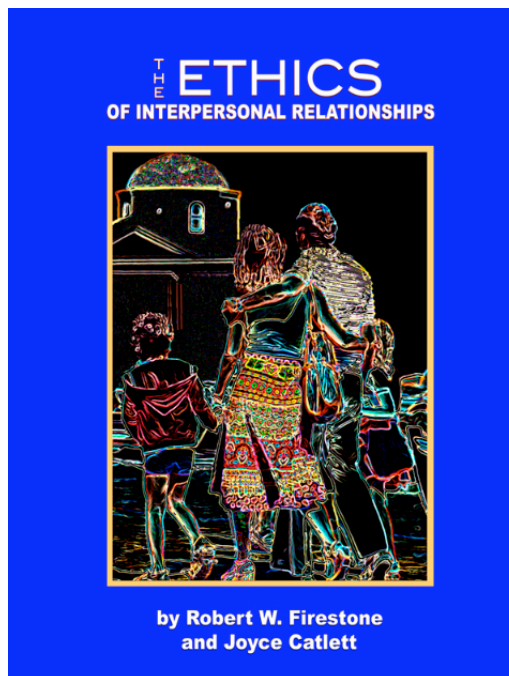
Competence: Competence is highly valued in a leader. Competence represents a combination of the necessary skill for completing the project and the ability to exercise that skill freely and powerfully. The capable leader has a positive effect on the overall project because people tend to feel more secure when led by a person they perceive as skilled and knowledgeable in his or her area of expertise.

Vision. The efficient leader possesses a guiding vision of what he or she wishes to accomplish, as well as a driving passion to bring that vision to fruition. Adler (2002) wrote that “vision can be defined as an inspired, long-run strategy that is not obvious to managers and executives until it is revealed by the transformational leader” (Big Leadership Section, para. 5). In *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership*, James Burns (2004) extended Adler’s definition of “vision” to encompass political and social change:

We think of vision as an overarching, evocative, energizing, moralizing force, ranging from broad, almost architectural plans for a new industry, say, to an inspirational, spiritual, perhaps morally righteous evocation of future hopes and expectations for a

new political movement. (p. xi)

Ability to Inspire Others. Having a guiding vision would count for little if a leader were unable to inspire others to share this vision and work toward its realization (Bennis, 2003; Gandz, 2000). According to Hesselbein (2002), the good leader focuses on “*how to be* - how to develop quality, character, mind-set, values, principles, and courage.... This ‘how to be’ leader holds forth the vision of the organization’s future in compelling ways that ignite the spark needed to build the



inclusive enterprise” (p. 8). Harvard Business Essentials (2005), borrowing a well-known phrase from Thomas Jefferson, pointed out that leaders need to speak to the head *and* to the heart of followers in order to inspire them to work toward a shared goal. Margaret Wheatley (Spears, 2004b) described still another important leadership quality that is needed to motivate others to implement one’s vision:

Once you have a clear vision you have to free people up. This is where autonomy comes in. People need to be free to make sense of the vision according to their own understandings and their own sensitivity to what’s needed. If you combine the sense of great purpose and human freedom, if you can combine a vision that brings out the best of who we are and then gives us the freedom in how we’re going to express that, that is how things work, in my experience. (p. 256)

Authenticity and Energy. Leaders who are authentic and sincere are able to inspire others to follow them because they are perceived as genuine and truthful. The absence of phoniness, superficiality, and hypocrisy in the leaders’ personalities relieves people of much of the suspicion and cynicism they might otherwise feel toward an authority figure. In addition, the excitement, passion, and energy of an effective leader are contagious; these qualities tend to generate a corresponding excitement in others, inspiring them to work hard and take pride in their own contributions to the overall project (Moxley, 2000).

Action-oriented Approach. Effective leaders are active and highly competitive, not simply for the sake of being competitive, but in the pursuit of their goals. Rather than inspiring cut-throat competitiveness, they focus on striving for excellence. These individuals tend to be wholly committed to whatever endeavor they are involved in, with an emphasis on implementing actions to get things done (Covey, 1999). They do not waste time fantasizing about the results they hope to achieve, nor do they spend too much time in

detailed or elaborate planning. Instead they are eager and even impatient to translate an abstract vision into concrete action (Nohria & Berkley, 1994/1998).

A willingness to take risks and the ability to be decisive are characteristic of action-oriented individuals. When necessary, these leaders choose to take action rather than wait until all the possible information has been gathered. They have a fundamental self-confidence or trust in their ideas and their point of view that enables them to be decisive, based on the amount of information that is available at the time. Moreover, the effective leader is able to judge how much information is essential before making an important decision.

Foresight. The good leader has the ability to sense what lies ahead, to perceive opportunities that should be the target of action, and to see threats before they materialize (Farkas & Wetlaufer, 1996/1998). Leaders must be familiar with the context - the social, political, and economic background - in which their organization is embedded. Many business leaders, although highly successful in growing and maintaining a healthy company, fall short when economic or political changes occur.

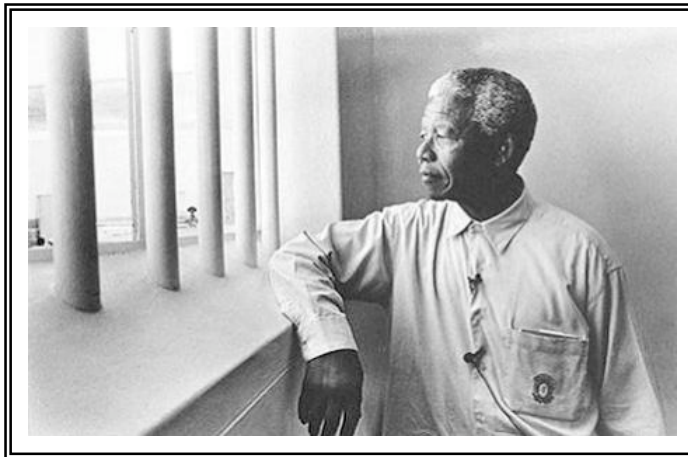
Integrity. Leaders who have integrity are those whose actions correspond to their words and are thereby able to inspire trust in others. Integrity is perhaps the most important characteristic that an effective leader needs to possess or develop (Bennis, 2003; Collins 2001; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). The absence of duplicity, an important aspect of integrity, is necessary for effective leadership. Integrity, as defined in broader terms, that is, as being true to oneself and one’s values, including a deep respect for all human beings, is necessary for a leadership that is both ethical and effective.

Characteristics of Ethical Leaders

According to a majority of social theorists, political scientists, and business management experts, “great” leaders possess ethical principles, have a strong moral compass, and consistently

attempt to do the “right” thing and be the “right” kind of person. Throughout her work, Hesselbein (2002) has emphasized that “It is the quality and the character of the leader that determines the performance [and] the results” (p. 3). And in his advice to potential leaders, Bennis (2004) cautioned, “The most important thing to keep in mind is this: *Never let your ambition surpass your moral compass*” (p. xiv).

Ethical leaders conduct their professional and personal lives according to an internal system of values and moral principles, and therefore function as positive role models for their employees (Bennis, 2003; Collins 2001; Gandz, 2005). They have integrity in that their actions correspond not only to their words but also to human values that transcend the fulfillment of their own goals or the goals of their organization. Thus, integrity, in its broadest meaning, is a personality trait that must be assessed from both an ethical and a pragmatic point of view.



Emotional Maturity: The Ability to Integrate Emotions and Rational Thought. Ethical leaders are emotionally mature, fully adult in their orientation, and take responsibility for their own well-being. They approach problems from an independent or interdependent stance and do not rely on subordinates to solve core problems for them. They have an intuitive sense of what others need, based on their ability to remain close to their own feelings (Badaracco, 1998/2003; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

The more authority and responsibility one attains in rising to a higher leadership position, the more dependent on others one is to adequately fulfill one’s own functions. Similarly, the more elevated the position, the more responsible a leader is for the end results, regardless of whether others succeed or fail at their tasks. Therefore, good

leaders are not only capable of trusting and relying on others; they also accept full responsibility for the outcome, without blaming others (Andrews, 1989/2003; McCoy, 1997/2003).

One indication of a mature outlook in a leader is the ability to integrate emotional responses and intellectual understanding in relation to solving problems quickly and decisively. According to Gardner (1990), “To analyze complex problems, leaders must have a capacity for rational problem solving; but they must also have a penetrating intuitive grasp of the needs and moods of followers” (p. 29). The ability of leaders to grasp the needs and moods of their followers indicates that they are aware of their own feelings, feel compassion for others, and have an empathic understanding of the dreams and desires of their followers, including their desire or need to be led (Farkas & Wetlaufer, 1996/1998). Winston and Patterson (2006) described mature leaders as having insight, that is, “the ability

to grasp the true nature of a situation” (p. 12). They contended that good leaders also possess intuition, which they defined as “the act of knowing or sensing without the use of rational processes” (p. 13).

A Lack of Vanity and Narcissism. In addition to possessing a compassionate understanding of oneself and others, the ethical leader would have an appreciation of the human condition, emphasize the equality of all people, and have an all-inclusive philosophical view that “We’re all in the same boat.” In this regard, Hesselbein (2002) has called attention to a growing trend in the business world: a movement away from “the ‘tough’ leaders of the past,” and toward “leaders who demonstrate in language and behavior their appreciation and respect for the men and women of the enterprise” (p. 31).

Ethical leaders are respectful and tolerant of the

divergent opinions and beliefs of their followers. They do not denigrate or abase others, but affirm the individuality of each person, while inspiring harmonious relationships among those they lead (Drucker, 1998). Winston and Patterson (2006) have noted that the “great” or ethical leader “recognizes the diversity of the follower(s) and achieves unity of common values and directions without destroying the uniqueness of the person” (p. 8).

Teachers as Ethical Leaders

Inspirational teachers and educators have played important roles as ethical leaders at crucial periods throughout history. By inspiring others to think creatively about life and to develop new ideas and a fresh perspective on the world, they have generated a revolution of ideas that has had positive effects on humankind. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Anwar Sadat, the Dalai Lama, and numerous other teachers and gurus have made a significant difference in the lives of their students and have also provided the impetus for broad social movements that have advanced human rights issues for multitudes of people.

In summary, Gandz (2007) has described great leaders as possessing a combination of seemingly opposite personality traits. A truly great leader is “confident *and* humble, assertive *and* patient, analytical *and* intuitive, deliberate *and* decisive, principled *and* pragmatic” (Good as effective section, para. 3). “Principled and pragmatic” are two significant criteria that the authors have used to evaluate leaders along the lines of their adherence to ethical principles and their effectiveness.

Conclusion

The effectiveness and the ethics of a particular leadership may be evaluated by examining the positive or negative impact that the leader has on the overall enterprise and on the individuals involved. In analyzing the personality traits of a leader, one needs to apply both pragmatic and ethical standards. An effective leader who utilizes harmful methods to accomplish his or her goals is still destructive and therefore unethical. An ineffective leader, even though compassionate and humanitarian, would still be likely to have a damaging effect on his/her constituents and on the overall enterprise or government.

There are many reasons why people seek leadership positions. Some wish to become leaders as a way of asserting themselves, as a method for self-transcendence, or as a means of serving others. Some seek leadership out of a defensive need to compensate for feelings of inadequacy. Toxic or unethical leaders often use their positions to bolster an inflated self-image, to defend against feelings of insecurity and inferiority, or to deny their vulnerability to death. Their charismatic, narcissistic leadership styles resonate with and exacerbate feelings of fear, inferiority, and insecurity in their followers, especially during times of crisis and uncertainty.

The authors believe that insight into the dynamics operating in leadership-followership interactions is critical to understanding social and political issues in contemporary society. The role played by psychological defenses in fostering the political agendas of toxic leaders is an important and timely topic that compels our attention and concern.

Robert W. Firestone, PhD, psychologist and author, has been affiliated with the Glendon Association as its consulting theorist since its inception. His innovative ideas related to psychotherapy, couple and family relationships, suicide, parenting, and existential issues have been the inspiration and cornerstone of Glendon’s research and publications. His studies on negative thought processes and their associated affect have led to the development of Voice Therapy, an advanced therapeutic methodology to uncover and contend with aspects of self-destructive and self-limiting behaviors. You can preorder *Ethics in Interpersonal Relationships* at <http://www.karnacbooks.com/product.php?PID=26231>.

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