



Leadership for the Future in a Culture of Change

In a 1987 speech, George Weyerhaeuser, Sr., who at the time was the CEO of the forestry company that bears his family name, said, “I consider integrity to be our number one corporate value and asset...It doesn’t come by inheritance but by vigilance, and it isn’t easy.”

What Weyerhaeuser says is true. But the reason I quote him, and the reason you give it a second thought, is because of who he is as much as because of what he said.

And that encapsulates the connection between leadership and ethics. For ethics to mean anything, it has to be tied in to the power structure of the organization.

If leaders do not “walk the talk,” then “the talk” becomes just that—talk. In fact, subordinates will discern what the organization *really* values by watching the leaders, and if their behavior does not square with the official values statements, the official values statements will be largely discounted. Leaders are walking talking manuals of behavior. In the words of Walter Wright of the De Pree Leadership Center at Fuller Seminary, “All I have to do is watch employees at work and I will have some idea what values their leaders hold.”

To put it this generally is to risk oversimplifying. Those of us who work in large and complex organizations know that it’s too simple to equate the behavior of particular leaders and the established values for which the organization stands. But at the same time

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we have to acknowledge a deep truth in the generalization that people of integrity lead organizations of integrity and that organizations that lack integrity are led by people who don't care about integrity.

This is because “the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.” When I read this line in Max De Pree’s book *Leadership is an Art*, I balked. What does he mean, they define reality? Does that mean that leaders can define hunger and loneliness and illness and nakedness out of existence? Surely not. What it does mean, however, is that leaders can define hunger and loneliness and illness and nakedness as issues *worth* attending to and *worth* expending resources on—or not. Peter Drucker is famous for having said that management is doing things right and leadership is doing the right things. De Pree goes further and says that the things leaders determine are the things worth doing become, by their saying so, the “right things.”

For those of us committed to Christian ethics, it is very important that leaders define reality in congruity with the values found in Jesus. One of the principal values we find there is the value of teaching. Jesus did not have mere “yes-men” or “go-fers.” He had “disciples.” This is a word with distinctly religious overtones now, but in its original significance its meaning is roughly equivalent to today’s “mentee.” My point is that Jesus as leader took his subordinates inside his thinking so that they would not only see the overt behavior but also understand the rationale and motivation behind it.

This is critical to ethical leadership. Ethics is not a set of pronouncements or orders. Ethics is not just doing the right thing. Ethics is doing the right thing for the right reason. Ethics grounds action in principles. It offers an answer to the question why. So if a leader

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is simply issuing orders (no matter how sound those orders) without explaining those orders in terms of the values that lie behind the orders, the leader is not providing *ethical* leadership.

One of my favorite books in organizational ethics is Frederick Bird's *The Muted Conscience*. The day-to-day decisions of managers and senior leaders in organizations often require ethical deliberation, and they know it, says Bird, but the accepted language of organizational life seldom validates talking about these decisions in ethical terms. Consequently, one of the biggest contributions that a leader can make is to facilitate and model "good conversation," by which Bird means conversations about "the good," about what would be right and worthwhile and fair.

At a meeting I was at recently, Commissioner Todd Bassett said that by the time issues come to his desk they are seldom black and white. It is the mark of a good organization that it frees the time and the mind of its senior leaders for the really tough issues. And good leaders don't shy away from the decisiveness that is called for in such situations. But I think it is especially then that leaders can show that they are ethical leaders by helping others to see the reasoning they use. They exercise leadership in part by communicating the sort of practical wisdom that good leaders call on, the wisdom that tells them not only how to be clever in connecting means with ends but also which are the best "ends."

None of this is to imply that integrity is the responsibility of senior leaders only. Christian ethics calls everyone to ethical maturity. Christian ethics also tells us, as George Weyerhaeuser did, about the fragility of integrity. Good leaders, knowing this, will

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appreciate the value of those subordinates who are prepared to challenge them. There's a fascinating example of "ethical leadership from below" in Matthew's Gospel (15:21-28). The story records the courage of a woman who challenges Jesus himself to live up to the principles of non-discrimination. Whether she taught Jesus a lesson (as some Biblical scholars think) or whether Jesus used it as an occasion to teach a further lesson to his male disciples (as I think), the point is that Jesus welcomed and rewarded someone with the spine to call him to account on a matter of profound ethical importance.

It exemplifies something still needed today. Students I have had in ministry, medical and nursing ethics classes have told of how hard they found it to stand up to a superior. But they have also told me how essential it was if they were to keep faith with their "clients," cultivate any integrity of their own, and have any enduring respect for the superiors to whom they were accountable. If William Booth needed a George Scott Railton to push him to clarify and defend certain policy decisions, those of us with lesser leadership responsibilities shouldn't turn away those who call us to the highest standards.

(A pertinent footnote. Looking into who George Weyerhaeuser is, I discovered not only that he was a victim of a nasty-but-botched kidnapping when he was only nine years old, but also that, incredibly, his family's company ended up hiring Harmon Waley, one of the kidnapers, after he got out of Alcatraz! Doesn't that add credibility to Weyerhaeuser's fine words about integrity?!)

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