

Effective Leaders are Ethical Leaders

Thomas F. Kelly
Dowling College

We are faced with pervasive anxiety about the ineffectiveness of many of our organizations, indeed all of our institutions: business, educational, political, etc. The failure we see in our organizations and institutions must be seen as a failure of leadership. In the long run successful organizations have ethical leaders. The reverse is also true. In the long run unsuccessful organizations have unethical leaders.

Concern about ethics not only in regard to leadership but also in all areas of our society has been growing for at least a decade. It is a reflection of the general state of moral ambiguity permeating western culture. Since western civilization has traditionally based its moral standards on religion, efforts to improve this problem without reference to it in our secular society have been problematic at best. Nonetheless any attempt to deal with ethics or morality given this reality must be done without reference to religion for the possibility of general acceptance. Compounding the challenge, we still have a very large segment of our culture that is religious. The dilemma then is to come up with an ethical system that is acceptable to both secular and religious people.

This article presents an approach to ethics that can be easily recognized and accepted by virtually all. It can be used to create a climate for developing high ethical standards among all people.

Many approaches to deal with the problem base their efforts on values. “Whose Values?” is the rapid response of the moral relativists who dominate our media and much of our culture whenever the question of character or morals is raised. This assertion, often loud, intending intimidation and generally condescending, stifles discussion of this vital topic. Meanwhile most would agree that we are living in deeply troubled times. Discipline problems plague our schools, moral failings contribute mightily to our economic, business and personal problems. Respect is ever harder to find and the quality of life in American culture generally is in a state of decline.

How then are individuals and especially leaders to deal with this debilitation state of affairs?

At the root of this problem is a logical fallacy: CATEGORICAL CONFUSION. The categories we are confusing are virtues and values. Frequently used interchangeably, they are not the same.

Aristotle tells us that the first step in logic is definition of terms:

VALUES ARE THINGS I WANT.

VIRTUES ARE BEHAVIORS THAT MAKE ME GOOD.

Values are relative. \$10 dollars is a value. \$50 is greater than \$10.

Virtues are absolute. Kindness is always good. Responsibility is always good. Justice is always good, etc.

The knee-jerk response from the moral relativists is “Whose Justice?” Honest People can disagree over what is just in a particular case or under particular circumstances. People have been doing this at least since Plato wrote “The Republic.” Affirmative action is a good current example. Is it just or unjust? We disagree. But we do not disagree on the larger concept: justice is good. If we possess the virtues of tolerance and respect, we will disagree quite civilly. Lacking these virtues, we escalate a disagreement to a conflict. (Tolerance and respect, of course, are always good.)

The categorical confusion between virtues and values is extremely destructive. For example, many believe that freedom and responsibility should be in balance, as though they are of equal importance. They are not. Freedom is a value, something I want. Responsibility is a virtue, a behavior that makes me good.

Our culture has placed freedom before responsibility. The impact has been disastrous. Values should never take precedence over virtues. In fact, responsibility is more important than freedom. Without responsibility I cannot be free. The freest people we know are the most responsible. The greater my responsibility, the greater my freedom. The more irresponsible I am, the less my freedom. Is a drug addict free? Irresponsible people forfeit their freedom to their irresponsibility. They are the slaves of their own vice.

Responsibility is to freedom as light is to reading. Just as light is a necessary condition for reading, so responsibility is a necessary condition for freedom. Without light I cannot read. Without responsibility I cannot be free. For an irresponsible person, freedom is a curse. It is the means to their own unhappiness and problems they cause others.

Abraham Maslow was the first of the great modern psychologists to recognize that psychology was being practiced backwards. Psychologists were looking for the sickest, unhappiest people they could find and studying them to see why they were like that. Maslow observed that what we should be doing is looking for the healthiest, happiest people we can find and studying them to see why they were like that. His insight begins modern psychology’s escape from the determinism and pessimism of Freud and Skinner. He proposed a hierarchy of human needs with the happiest and healthiest people at the top. He called them self-actualizing people.

These people are not as rare as we might think. The existence of these people can easily be verified from your own experience. Think of someone who you know that you admire, hold in very high esteem, a happy successful person, an outstanding human being. Think for a few moments of how you would describe that person. Although I have never met the individual you are thinking of, I can describe that person to you.

THAT OUTSTANDING PERSON IS:

HUMBLE

COURAGEOUS

LOYAL

SELF-DISCIPLINED

MODERATE

FORGIVING

PATIENT

GENEROUS

PERSEVERANT

HONEST

RESPECTFUL

HOPEFUL

RESPONSIBLE

JUST/ FAIR

SIMPLE

KIND

SPIRITUAL

LOVING

TOLERANT

HARD WORKING

Amazing! I can accurately describe the outstanding person that you are thinking of although I have never met him or her. Indeed I have never met you! Is there anything on the list of virtues not characteristic of your outstanding human being? I've asked this question of thousands of people. They all agree that their "outstanding human being" can be described by these virtues. The reason is quite simple. Outstanding human beings are virtuous people.

St. Patrick's Day came again last March. I thought, "how many times in my life have people told me (Kelly) or clearly implied that I'm good because I'm Irish?" Hundreds at least. It's not true. Irish doesn't make me good any more than it makes me bad. I'm fascinated by all the current interest and effort in the area of self-image and self esteem. I hear things like, "we've got to teach them their cultural heritage." This assumes membership in a group with some cultural identity will cause a positive self-image. Group identification is a value, not a virtue. It doesn't make me good any more than makes me bad. You'll notice on my list of attributes of outstanding people that I do not include such categories as:

VALUES CONFUSED WITH VIRTUES:

MALE

RICH

FEMALE

POOR

BLACK

ATHLETIC

WHITE

GOOD LOOKING

YOUNG

STYLISH

OLD

ETC.

The above listed attributes do not make me good or bad and are randomly distributed among outstanding people as well as others.

William Glasser, in his landmark book "Control Theory," identifies five basic human needs: physical, power, freedom, belonging and fun. In fact, these outstanding, happy, successful people in Glasser's terms are "need satisfied". Virtue is the means to satisfy my basic human needs. There is no other means. If I want to be happy, I must develop my own virtue. To the extent I am virtuous, I will be happy, free, belong, etc. Aristotle tells us, "If you want to be happy, be good."

At the root of any human conflict is an ethical failure least one side. Someone has been impatient, disrespectful, intolerant, etc. Until we recognize this fundamental truth, we will continue our present precipitous political, business, educational and cultural decline. To the extent our culture is moral (i.e. virtuous) it will be a need satisfying culture. To the extent it is not moral, it will be a need frustrating culture. We must recognize that we cannot solve moral problems with political, educational or economic solutions. Virtue is the only means to successful leadership, personal growth and happiness, and social peace and justice.

We must understand the need to put virtues before values. When we put values before virtues, necessary consequences inevitably follow:

1. For individuals loss of self-esteem (I'm a bad person).
2. For leaders loss of influence and staff support.
3. For interpersonal relationships – lose of friendship, animosity, broken relationships (you are a bad person).
4. For international relations – wars, genocide, ethnic cleansing (you are a bad racial, religious or ethnic group, a bad country).

At the root of all of these unfortunate realities is an identifiable ethical flaw in at least one participant.

REFERENCES

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. Harper Business, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, N Y.

Deming, W. E. (1986). *Out of the Crisis*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Publisher, Cambridge, Mass.

Deming, W. E. (1994). *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education*. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Publisher, Cambridge, Mass.

Glasser, W. (1985). *Control Theory: A New Explanation of How We Control Our Lives*. Harper & Row, New York, NY.

Glasser, W. (1965). *Reality Therapy: A New Approach to Psychiatry*. Harper & Row, New York, N Y.

Kelly, T. (2012). *We Can do More and Better With Less*. Infinity Publishing, West Conshohocken, PA 19428-2713. This paper is a selection from this book.

Kelly, T. (1996). *Practical strategies for school improvement* (2nd ed.). Wheeling, Illinois: National School Services.