



The Ethical Dilemma of 21st Century Organizational Leadership: A Four-Chapter Critical Review of the book “Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow”

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Abstract

The 21st century leader of any organization is faced with a number of ethical dilemmas that may have an overall impact on the performance of the organization regardless of its context. Globalization and its effects count for ethical wellbeing of both leaders and the led as a result of the advent of technology. The contexts in which ethical issues occur assume that the subject has become more imperative to leaders and would be leaders to understand. The ethical issue is even more complicated with the fact that organizations have individuals and groups that may have varying beliefs and values, each carrying their own view about what they need from the organization. Creating an ethical inclusive organizational climate, therefore, becomes imperious in this age and time. The general role of ethics in any leadership setting must be seen to be a very important ingredient for any organizations as leadership without ethics and integrity, combined with personal and corporate accountability can be harmful both for the organization and its affiliates in society. This paper, therefore, reviewed and evaluated how leaders in this modern era and time can shape ethical contexts. It discusses how to build an ethical small group, the notion of ethical organizational climate and how leaders can meet the challenges leaders find in their ethical dilemmas in this global society. It also highlights what studies say about ethical crisis leadership and also argues on the need for the realization of the ‘common good’ by leaders as an important element of ethical leadership.

Keywords: Ethical accountability, moral pitfalls, Collaborative leadership, ethical climate, organizational citizenship, ethical decision

Reviewed Book Source:

Johnson, C.E. (2020), Meeting the Ethical challenges of Leadership: Casting light or shadow (7th edition). SAGE, p. 283-431.

Introduction

This paper is a critical review of part four of the book by Johnson (2020), a long-standing professor emeritus of leadership studies at the George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon, where he is an established scholar teaching leadership, ethics, management and communication courses. He is a powerful author of several leadership books and scholarly research journals on leadership with much emphasis on ethical leadership. He draws much of

his experience not only in research but also by holding volunteer leadership positions in a variety of religious and non-profit organizations. His book is guided by seven principles where he argues that he has adopted the allegory of light and shadow as the central metaphor of the book from Palmer (1996) in which the later emphasizes that leaders have the power to do significant benefit or substantial harm, in which case leaders are in a literal sense makers of the differences between life and death for their followers (Johnson, 2020, p. xiii).

Main ideas in Part Four

Part four of the book under analysis discusses “shaping ethical contexts” and brings out the various ways by which leaders of organizations can

shed light in a variety of situations, given the fact that the discipline of ethics is to some extent a situational undertaking. Robertson, Crittenden and Brady *et al* (2002) suggested that organizations should be more focused in ensuring a sound and consistent healthy based ethical climate with culturally dependent ethical guidelines and policies suiting the immediate society and its norms. Leaders must be cognizant of issues pertaining to both inside and outside organizational situations that would cause the followers to adjust their moral decision making. Johnson (2020) acknowledges the fact that leaders in their call of duty spend much of their time working in and with small groups or teams in accomplishment of organizational goals and objectives. Given the fact that any failure or success of any organization dependent on the behavior of its members, it creates a dilemma on the part of leaders and others in the organization on how to create and foster ethical accountability and encourage everyone to “fulfil their expectations of their moral responsibilities to the rest of the group in leading themselves, cooperating and doing there share in an honest and justifiable manner” (p.286).

Ethical Accountability

Fostering individual accountability and responsibility has been found to be the first most important step in realizing group accountability and responsibility in organizations. Laal, Geranpaye and Daemi (2013) clearly clarified that individual accountability is that belief that everyone will be able to account for their performance in a given setting and that it can only occur when such performance by the individual can be evaluated and feedback discussed with group members and the individual in order to identify those that need more assistance. As Johnsons and Johnson (2009) claimed: one's actions may promote the success of others or obstruct the success of others; they might not have any effect at all on the success or failure of others and hence anyone pursuing individual goals is likely to ignore the needs of others. Johnson (2020) is therefore of the view that team leaders in organizations need to ensure that they and their followers complete their tasks by promoting self-leadership. He defined self-leadership as “exercising influence over one’s personal thoughts, actions and behavior” (p.287).

Johnson also adds that while individual accountability is a vital step in improving a groups’ ethical performance, team members may want to cooperate and work hard but fail to work together effectively. He suggests that “group leaders must be

closely attentive and assertive to forms of interaction among group members during their deliberations, especially in encouraging productive communication patterns that enable members to establish positive bonds and make wise ethical choices” (p.290). In trying to establish the link between ethical leadership and employees' ethical behaviors, Walumbwa, Chad and Misati (2017) found that ethical leadership significantly relates to group learning behavior and that this relationship is partially explained by group ethical conduct and peer justice. They proposed three related mechanisms which can help improve ethical leadership by means of group learning namely; (a) group ethical conduct, (b) justice climate and (c) peer justice. In Johnson’s (2020) argument, “ethical communication skills and tactics among them, comprehension, critical listening, supportive communication, emotional intelligence, productive conflict management; and impression of minority opinion can to a large extend establish positive bonds and foster wise ethical choices among groups in organizations” (p.290). Results from a study by Ren and Chadee (2020) showed that career identity salience has positive influence on communication competence, which positively influences ethical leadership. They further found that the more frequent the communication, the more positive the relationship between competence in communicating and ethical leadership.

Group Leadership

Johnson (2020) also highlights the aspect of group leadership for the common good, one area that most leaders fail to come to terms with within their execution of duty. He assumes that many problems found in society which those in leadership are accountable for are too complex for one group or organization to solve and hence may require what he calls integrative or collaborative leadership. He claims that “collaborative leaders tend to bring diverse groups together to promote the common good” (p.307). Such leaders are said to have an inherent ability of recognizing situations which require combined effort and then get the right groups and organization together to tackle the problem. A study by Klenowski and Ehrich (2016) found that school principals were involved in a range of practices, including problematizing their current way of working with staff and students; implementing a variety of programs to support equity; engaging in moral dialogue

with staff; and acting as role models. Moreover, they were involved in the collaborative interpretation of data and were active in building an ethic of learning within their schools. Given the foregoing, it would be wise then to say that group leaders whose practices are for the common good mainly focus on the tasks at hand, mediate conflicts, promote health communication and elicit commitment to the institutional projects (p.307). In describing what integrative leadership is, Ihama (2017) states that integrated leadership is the capability to impact ones organization with firm moral codes so much so that any decision and possible act is henceforth guided by a prescribed set of values and ethical standards that are flexible in nature. He claims that it is only when people in any organization are given an opportunity to think, discuss and be able to perform founded on the same value system, that they may have the best assurance for profitable organizational growth. Shaikh (2018) developed a framework of integrative leadership in which he set sub objectives to achieve the key objective thereby forming a characterization, background hypotheses and items and investigating on the content validity of recently established integrative leadership measure. In the same study, he sought to determine and conceptualize the various leadership styles and their scales by the review of literature. He therefore built an integrative leadership explanation and its framework by way of integrating the well-known leadership types, namely (a) transformational, (b) authentic, (c) ethical servant, (d) spiritual and, (e) transactional).

Ethical Climates

Another aspect of part four of the book under review pertains to creating an ethical, inclusive organizational climate. Johnson argues that healthy ethical climates are usually marked by the foretated elements and names important tools for building an ethical climate as including organizational climate, core ideology, codes of ethics, prevention and eliminating destructive behaviors, fostering diversity, socialization, and training. Mihelic, Lipicnik, and Tekavcic (2010) agree that *ethical leaders think about long-term consequences, drawbacks, and benefits of the decisions they make in the organization. They argue that such leaders are humble, concerned for the greater good, strive for fairness, take responsibility*

and show respect for everyone. They further are of the view that ethical leaders also set high ethical standards and act in accordance with them and consistently stimulate ethical values in the organization by the way they behavior. Leaders aid as role models of their subordinates by reflecting the behavioral restrictions that are laid down in an organization and hence are expected to show honesty, to be trustworthy in all seasons, to show courage and to be seen as leaders of integrity. When the leader “walks the talk,” by deciphering co-opted values into action, there is a high likelihood that even the level of trust and respect will grow from ones’ subordinates. These virtues are also outlined as the most essential elements of ethical leadership by Johnson (2020) and as signs of healthy ethical climates. According to him, ignoring them may cause some unique ethical challenges in organizations. There is also mounting empirical evidence that, in addition to the personal characteristics of employees, cues in the organizational environment and culture play an important role in determining unethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2009; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman, Round, Bhattacharya, & Roy, 2017) as cited in Kuenzi, Mayer, & Greenbaum (2020). In analyzing the link that exists between ethical leadership and ethical organizational climate, Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2006) claimed that it is important to understand factors that lead to an ethical organizational climate, such as leadership. They defined Ethical leadership as “the show of standardized suitable behavior by way of actions that persons display, and how they relate one to the other, and the advancement of particular conduct to followers through reciprocal communication: reinforcement, and decision-making” (p.120). In that vein, an organization’s climate can be seen as one tool the organization can use to help employees make sense of the work environment, by helping employees discern how to behave appropriately. Because climate is more tangible to employees and easier to change than culture, much of the research conducted has placed emphasis on ethical organizational climate (Kuenzi, Mayer, & Greenbaum, 2020).

Organizational Structure versus Ethical Standards

Johnson (2020) claims that the structure of any organization should not in any way undermine the ethical standards put in place for the members but instead , these structures should encourage high

ethical performances not only on the part of followers but also on leaders. The book outlines four elements of an organization's structure that have particularly strong impact on moral behavior as (a) monetary and nonmonetary reward systems, (b) performance and evaluation processes, (c) decision making rights and responsibilities, and (d) corporate governance. He argues that these by all means possible encourage higher ethical performance on the part of both leaders and subordinates. Fox and Reece (2012) saw ethical standards as a requirement at both the individual and system levels of the information organization enterprise. They argue that systems and individual catalogers generally have the same interests, but the imbalanced distribution of power and agency can lead to excesses and abuses of power at the expense of the weaker. They further lament that as a result of this imbalance, a singular ethical framework does not always hold the same consequences for user, catalogers, and system, and, at times, frameworks may conflict. They therefore call for the need for a sustained reflection on the appropriate ethical standards that protect all persons: both the individuals acting within the domain of corporate power and the corporate persons themselves. Paine (1994) is of the view that leaders must be able to understand that it is their role to determine organizational ethics and grab this chance to generate an organizational structure that can strengthen existing relationships and standings on which their organizations' success depends. He observes that many people rarely see the connection that exist between organizational factors and individual behavior especially in situations where such is seen as a misconduct with reservations that it would water down people's sense of individual moral responsibility and that it is grounded on an incorrect dichotomy of holding individual wrongdoers and the systems accountable.

Ethical challenges of Leadership in the era of Globalization

The other important element discussed by Johnson (2020) is how leaders can meet the ethical encounters in this global era. Given the much emphasis that the world has globalized in every facet of life, there are ethical issues that may arise on the way as regards to differences in value systems that may be because of differences in cultural orientation. He therefore hints on both the dark side and the light side of globalization given the fact that ethical global leaders acknowledge the

shady part of globalization and recognize the difficulty that may arise in making moral choices in a cross-cultural setting. The book recounts the various shadows of globalization that could create moral complexities as a result of cultural differences. It mentions power, privileged, mismanaged information, inconsistency, misplaced and broken loyalties and irresponsibility as the main global shadows cast by leaders in a globalized environment. VanderPal and Ko (2014) aptly considers global leadership as having been shaped by three major forces of change: (a) liberalization in terms of trades, policies, and other facets, (b) globalization and technology development. In their evaluation of the precedence of exponential variation faced by organizations, they note that an emerging style of management is showing up that there is an extensive selection of practices to define leadership practice and its minutiae.

It has also been stated that today's leaders need to encourage and develop tomorrow's leaders as a strategic initiative, providing them with the tools they need to succeed. An organization that insists on maintaining a culturally thin concept of management is going to be less capable of using the special talents of tomorrow's leaders for competitive advantage in the markets that matter (Caldwell, 2013). Also, in these days of organized and universally fused business environment, studies have suggested that it is becoming vital for organizations to not only attract, choose and grow culturally sprightly leaders but ensure a climate of cultural nimbleness among all followers (Lundby, 2013). Global leaders can also resonance this credence by making suggestions that organizational employees in all settings can work in a productive manner in any given global atmosphere. To create such an environment, others have recommended that business professionals implement the idea of "set the right tone at the very top." In this vein, top leaders play an important part in generating the vision and support the consequence of global participation (VanderPal and Ko, 2014). Some encourage senior and influential leaders to contribute to global issues, to highpoint global initiatives, to identify and encourage global success, and to highlight the necessity of globalization in line with long-term success regarding the organization (Lundby, 2013). Similarly, VanderPal and Ko (2014) emphasize that leadership in an international scale will definitely run into conflicts occasionally and that conflict resolution, cultural toleration and education

are important aspects in which people interrelate in all learning spheres and hence calls for creation of a psychological acknowledgment of distinction. It is only subsequently that the world would make passage in the course of building respect and tolerance among people of different backgrounds.

Lundby and Caligiuri (2013) recognized that organizational climate can promote desired behavior and that “global and aspiring global organizations stand to benefit from having a culturally agile workforce (not just leaders), and hence they set out to create a measure of cultural agility climate” (p.27). A study by Jones and Millar (2010) reviewed a huge challenge to ethical leadership in the twenty first century and concluded that the need for global ethical leadership is not so much simply a desirable option, but rather – and quite literally -a matter of survival. They admit that the crises of the recent past reveal huge, and in some cases criminal failures of both ethics and leadership in all sectors of society.

Facing the ethical Challenges

Johnson (2020) in chapter eleven also highlights ways in which society needs to address attitudinal obstacles to ethical behavior, search for moral common ground with people of other cultures, and the need to identify strategies for making decisions in cross-cultural settings. From a global perspective, Stükelberger, Fust and Ike (2016) are of the view that there is noticeable consensus and rejection of the world and its governance structures as it is currently experienced because many believe that it was meant to be different and much better. They argue that these worldwide challenges do not in any way leave society in apathy or lethargy, but challenge renewed, urgent and value-driven action to redeem humanity at this time. They admit that despite the many successes recorded against hunger, diseases and world poverty, the information in global connectivity and media communication, space travel and ability to feed over seven billion human beings daily with several technological achievements, there are still other difficult challenges posed by

- Wars and terror
- A rise in global insecurity due to poverty and economic uncertainty.
- Growing agitation for inclusion by many citizens leading to political turmoil and migrations in nations.

- The challenges and abuse of technology which today controls people and not people controlling technology.
- Sual calamities and the climatic variations experienced in almost the whole world due to environmental degradation.

It can therefore be contended that it is not that these complications are new, but they seem to have taken larger magnitudes and increased in their force. It is further observed that “on-going disregard for human life and the dignity of all people, and the seeming lack of political will and value-driven-leadership to solve these problems pose urgent imperatives on the discipline of ethics to call humanity to order” (p.45).

Ethical Leadership in crisis situations

With much of the subject of shaping ethical leadership discussed, Johnson (2020) concludes his book with an examination of ethical leadership in crisis situations. He regards crises as a major unexpected event that can largely pose significant threats to groups and organizations. He highlights that ethical leaders have a series of tasks they carry out during what he calls the three phases of crises (precrisis, crises event, and postcrisis). In the last chapter, he also identifies seven ethical principles and strategies that he thinks are essential to fulfilling the leadership moral duties. These principles include but are not limited to; “assuming broad responsibility, practicing transparency, demonstrating care and concern, taking decisive action, engaging both the head and the heart, improvising from a strong moral foundation, and building resilience” (p.402). He ends his book with an analysis of the ethical demands of extreme leadership. Bauman (2011) claimed that leading a corporation through a crisis requires rational decision making guided by an ethical approach. He listed three such approaches as virtue ethics (Seeger & Ulmer (2001, p. 369), an ethic of justice, and an ethic of care (Simola, 2003). In his study, he considers the efficiency of these styles for leading an organization after a disaster and he used the above as a standard by illustration from current studies that scrutinize how people incline to counter to business accidental ills. He resolved from these studies that an ethos of care approach seem to be operative for handling professional crises when it comes to participant anxieties and by employing strategies for managing a crisis using an ethic of care.

Frunză (2017) in his study also clarified that ethical leadership is the best retort in the crisis state of postmodernist man and that it is a paradigm that leads to individual conversion, structural effectiveness, enhanced relational communication and the attainment of a shared podium for proficient action. The study emphasized that its expansion has also a valuable effect as it conveys ethics back to the core of civic action, to the front line of administrative life and personal development. He argues that whether it follows a spiritual model or a model ensuing from laicized sacred values, leadership understanding is based on a personal advance procedure that trails an originating edifice in a world consisting of value practices in individual ethical action. This, he states, is pleated by an ethics systematized process in which organizations turn into a component of ethical and operative communication in and outside the organization. In the same study, a reliable leadership assumes postulating the leader as being at the heart of an ethical structure in which realizing public good is carried out by means of tools of personal progress, ethics supervision and executive ethics, ethical accountability and tolerance, anthropological condition enhancement, spiritual makeover and legitimacy. It settles by adding that it is the leader's individual effort of participation in the organization and hence ethical leadership depend on ones' inclination of developing an ethical philosophy in professional conditions and in all life involvements.

In another study by Dorasamy (2010) he examined the challenges facing ethical leadership in the global crisis equation and an interrogation as to whether a simple rejoinder to the crisis without completing it with a thoughtful ethical emphasis is passable for satisfying an effective and efficient civic deal. In addition to probing the consequence of the crisis on the public sector and ingenuities to governor the impact of the universal crisis on South Africa with a special focus, the study sightsaw the level to which the crisis would place greater stress on ethical leadership. The study argues that approaches in response to the crisis must be buttressed by more effective activities promoting ethical leadership.

Discussion and Conclusions

It has to be admitted that the studies in ethical leadership are farfetched and a lot has to be done to orient both leaders and would be leaders to choose the path of learning how to deal with situation as they come and also the ability to know the

difference given the circumstances if we have to create a more justifiable society, where all actions by leaders will be done for the common good. The four chapters by Johnson (2020) as found in part four have reviewed a number of grey areas that scholars in the area of leadership may follow, and leaders of organizations may adhere to. Despite not making mention of the scriptural source of most of the concepts made, the author elaborated a number of Biblical principles pertaining to how individuals, leaders inclusive must relate and treat each other. Principles such as fairness, justice, integrity, accountability as aspects that may add to the ethical climate are well documented in the scriptures (proverbs 31:9; James 2:1-5; Psalm 106:3; Hebrews 6:10).

There has always been considerable public concern about issues pertaining to ethical leadership. The climate to which ethical leadership is practiced is many times full of compromise and leaders fail to act for the 'common good' in most of their decision making. I would argue therefore in this paper that the enterprise of ethical leadership should not be left to the few advantaged people but must constitute all forms of training in all the field of academics in the larger society. Ethics training must therefore be part and parcel of all training in various fields of study. When emphasizing about the common good, Jaede (n.d) states that one way of synthesizing this matter is to say that, in organizations that are deeply divided in terms of moral issues, there is a need to construct a shared notion of the "common good" as part of the transition from organizational conflict to harmony. He notes that the common good has been an important concern of moral and political philosophy since ancient times, and it is often contrasted with undesirable vices and the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Pre-modern thinkers like Aristotle linked the common good with higher drives and a virtuous life, which can only be realized in any model organization. All way through, Aristotle used various equivalents when refereeing to a good community or organization, including koinon agathon ("common good") and koinêi sumpheron ("mutual advantage"). Aristotle seemed to have in mind the peoples' happiness or good life, which he understood to consist of "noble actions" (Aristotle (1998, p. 81). It is in this vein that leaders in the 21st century organizations should adhere to aspects of moral campus, which would in turn make followers adjust various moral facets in the organization, the

goal being an establishment of an organizational climate that erases suspicion but creates trust among members. Ethical leadership therefore assume that a great level of accountability towards each other will positively affect the performance of any organization and that this relationship has not been studied extensively in the area of leadership and administration (Han & Hong, 2019). Moreover, there would be no accountability without shaping one's ethical dimension in any setting of an organization.

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