

ETHICS IN LEADERSHIP

“Minds are like parachutes – they only function when open.”

– Anonymous

CORPORATE CRIME...SCANDALS...ALLEGATIONS...MORAL DECAY OF SOCIETY...How often do we see words like these gracing the headlines? Probably a bit too often for the likes of most people. We continually hear about the “downfall of America” and how leaders (judges, pastors, presidents, to name a few) are often allegedly at the heart of many such problems. Does our society still have ethical standards? Morals? Values?

Based upon various polls conducted throughout the last decade, several researchers have concluded that Americans do not believe people in power ethically sound. One study concluded that 55% of the American public believes a majority of business executives are dishonest, and an even higher percentage feels white collar crime occurs on a regular basis. Even studies of executives themselves show that a majority believe executives they know “bend the rules” to get ahead.

When leaders are perceived as unethical, it is easy for those around them to follow suit. Consider the business world, for example: often when the head honchos are viewed as unethical or immoral, workers respond in kind by being absent more frequently, stealing supplies from the office, performing poorly, or becoming apathetic or indifferent. If you don't think your ethics are on display as a leader, think again!

Despite the continual discussions of ethics, the subject is a challenging one to address. It is difficult to “teach” ethical behavior, but it is possible to introduce situations about which you might contemplate the most ethical responses. One person's ethical standards may differ from another's, however, because we all have varying views on what is “right” and “wrong.” Take some time to consider the following situations and how you believe you should – and would – respond. Then, discuss these issues with others to find out if and how your views differ from each other.

- Some of your group members want to sponsor an extremely controversial event on campus (i.e., a lecture by a leader of the Ku Klux Klan). By simply allowing your group name to be associated with this event you risk losing credibility and being accused of racism (or sexism or ageism, depending on the situation). How do you handle this? Does this controversial person have the same freedom of speech as, say, Mother Theresa?
- You are the only student in a meeting with all of the influential, prominent faculty and staff members on campus. They are praising your ingenuity and creativity in a successful program you organized and are offering letters of recommendation, status and so on. The only problem is you didn't actually create the program – one of your first-year recruits did. What do you do? Because the new member created the program for the group you lead, can you take credit? Is it OK to take credit if the person will probably never find out?

- You are concerned with the morale of your group and decide to talk with each person individually to see if you can find out what the problem is. You assure each person all responses will be strictly confidential. Through the interviews, you discover several people mentioning that Jim, your group treasurer, has been stealing money from the group's account for his own personal use and threatening anyone who suggests they might report him. How do you handle the situation and maintain your promise of confidentiality? What if you decide to report the problem to the authorities and they refuse to take action unless they have the names of the group members who are suspicious?

In your leadership positions as well as in other aspects of your life, keep in mind some basic principles for ethical behavior:

Respect autonomy. Don't let your freedom of choice be neglected – as well as that of others.

Be fair. Treat people equally. Be impartial and objective.

Avoid harm. Take every possible measure to avoid physical, emotional and psychological harm or threats to one's self-esteem.

Be true. This means telling the truth as well as keeping your promises and maintaining loyalty.

Be beneficial. Do what you can to contribute to the general well-being of others, whether it is taking time out of your schedule to help them or simply treating them with kindness.

Reference:

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