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Letter to Editor

Ethical Leadership- How Deeply We Care?

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Abstract

Moral leadership has become the most vital ingredient for successful organizations in the present world. However, enabling such a deeply ethical attitude towards leading others is becoming increasingly difficult due to the short term outlook of business leaders and their incapacity to build a culture of trust and transparency within teams. This article explores the various challenges associated with developing moral leadership within organizations. Highlighting cases where immoral leaders have caused huge financial and reputational loss for their organizations, this article suggests techniques of "organizational development" as a tool for developing moral leadership within organizations. Authors highlights useful aspects of organization development which, when effectively utilized, can create a culture of mutual trust, transparency and ethical collaboration among teams within organization.

1. Introduction:

Moral leadership is perhaps the most vital aspect of humanity in present times that defines a great leader. Moral leaders are the people who make the people see a common purpose, develop a sense of shared identity in them and include them to act towards achieving those common goals. In present times, when we are seeing the world getting divided into factions of extremes, cultural supremacists trying to justify their culture over others, moral leadership permits us to see different sections of society with a humanistic lens. Such leaders respect the diversity among people and build bridges that can help others navigate the complexities without deviating from the "path of morality".

Ensuring morality in society is quite a challenging task as often people develop their moral sense based on their cultural upbringing, socio-political environment, and the perception of what defines a "success" for their life. A study conducted by Duke University recently found that 56% of students in the United States pursuing a master's degree in business administration admit to cheating—the highest rate of cheating among graduate student groups.[1] When everyone around us is cheating and yet getting the desired results, it reinforces the image that cheating is a price that all students have to pay to be successful. Such cases form a wrong sense of morality early in our lives.

Unethical attitudes are rampant across various sections of corporate world as well. It would be relevant to bring forth the example of Ford Pinto here.[2] Ford Pinto was a car that had become notorious for its faulty mechanism that led to collisions leading to causalities and death for many. Investigation into the design revealed that, due to the intense competition from Volkswagen, company rushed into production even though internal engineers had discovered a potential danger of ruptured fuel tanks in preproduction crash-test stage itself. A deeper level analysis revealed how these managers were thinking when they were making the decision. Apparently, because they thought of it as purely a business decision rather than an ethical one, they conducted

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traditional cost-benefit analysis, estimated cost for a redesign, potential lawsuits, and even compensation for casualties and ultimately concluded that it would be cheaper to pay for lawsuits than go for a design overhaul. They viewed it entirely from a business case scenario and failed to view it from a moral lens which gave rise to a disastrous unethical behavior.

2. Ethical Leadership

Several types of biases also lead to lack of moral leadership in organizations.[3] When people overlook the outcome of a bad decision thereby falling prey to self-serving bias, it leads to group-think which can hinder an ethical issue from becoming a prominent agenda of discussion in meetings. Overemphasis on "know it all" attitude and "authoritative" forms of leadership has damaged the fabric of organizations and created individuals who are more competitive than collaborative. It has perpetuated a culture where self-censorship prevails in groups and psychological safety is missing for inclusive participation. Such cultural underpinnings form a crooked foundation for ethical leadership and makes it tougher for such leaders to take centre-stage in organizations.

But you may wonder that our organizations have also developed better control mechanism to counter such unethical behavior. Most of the organizations, nowadays, have a code of conduct in place along with mechanisms like corporate governance scrutiny, ombudsman etc. Despite that, they often lack the zeal while implementing such practices. The need of the hour is for leaders to enact a system that integrates ethical and moral practices in their culture. But how should leaders enable such an integration?

Leader's personal commitment is their strongest moral force where they "lead by example" and "live by" such ethical values themselves. It is evident in practice when CEOs set example by regulating their own salaries to ensure an equitable pay-culture within organizations. It makes employees trust them and gives rise to an equitable and trustful culture. It is also needed that they have a high "Say-Do" ratio, otherwise it reduces the credibility of leaders, and gives an impression of hypocritical attitude towards culture. While they attempt to live by such values, leaders have to be conscious to explore their own assumptions and assess its potential pitfalls. They must recognize that, in present times, directive and commanding style of leadership does not influence people and hence they should pursue coaching as a technique to allow others to visualize their best self and get intrinsically motivated to achieve it.

Great organizations are created when leaders bring in ethically motivated individuals to carry the baton of moral leadership. Hence it becomes pertinent that they must be vigilant of the kind of people entering their organizations. As Prof. Adam Grant mentions in his book "Give and Take", leaders should not only encourage "givers" (those who prioritize team's goals over their personal ones) but more importantly, weed out the "takers" (those who are self-centered just on their own goals) from their organizations.[4] Such "takers" are self-centered, tend to be unethically motivated and they can rapidly spread a toxic culture when they occupy senior managerial positions.

The primary characteristic of an ethical leader should be the spirit of service: "one who serves the community" rather than the "one who controls the community". They have to be accessible, approachable, and accountable to their employees. They should leverage their influencing skills to create a free-space within organizations that fosters psychological safety and encourages employees at all levels to speak up their mind. When leaders adopt such humility, it creates a chain reaction of followers who are truly inspired by such ethical values.

We need leaders who emphasize on planned, systemic wide changes, where they use the group collaborative processes to build teams and transform organizational culture. But they have to be careful that they are not just focused on ends but also adopt an ethical path as means to achieve those ends. It helps them to overcome their pre-conceived notions of leadership, encourages openness to feedback, and surfaces any bias or blind spots present among individuals. It is highly relevant as it enables to develop a morality centric organization where ethics lays the foundation for a just and humane organization.

As our way forward, we should remember what Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of United Kingdom, once said "*When everything that matters can be bought and sold, when commitments can be broken because they are no longer to our advantage, when shopping becomes salvation and advertising slogans become our litany, when our worth is measured by*

how much we earn and spend, then the market is destroying the very virtues on which in the long run it depends."

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