

Ethical Leadership for Human Resource Professionals

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There is no shortage of the need for ethical leadership within the human resources resource profession. The current economy challenges people's sense of ethics; our sense of right and wrong becomes warped in tough times, yet that is when we most need our ethical leaders. Where does one look for role models?

As we, the HR leaders, straddle the needs of management and the employee constituents, a tough economy requires a well developed internal ethical compass. An HR leader, one who is well versed in law, strategy, and ethical leadership can provide a guide post and sound advice. In order to maximize our professional and personal effectiveness as an ethical leader, we need to dig deep within ourselves and find our moral compass. To do so require we have knowledge of ethical leadership and its possible influences. Only then can we assess our moral compass and modify our direction.

What is Ethical Leadership?

Ethical leadership begins with understanding and knowing our core values and having the courage to live them in all parts of our life in service of the common good. According to the Institute for Ethical Leadership, there are universal moral principles of "trust, respect, integrity, honesty, fairness, equity and compassion" that guide our ethical behaviors.

Do we as HR leaders exemplify these moral principles? The Center for Ethical Leadership offers reflective questions to ask on our personal journey toward ethical leadership:

- *"Will you be the same person at work? At home? In the community?"*
- *"Will you have the courage to live out your values when there is pressure to compromise or rationalize?"*
- *"How do your values contribute to the common good?"*

By responding to these questions, we gain an understanding of the strength of our core values. It is not enough to know your values. You must also consider: How do our values affect our vision for ourselves – what do we want to be remembered for? Are our behaviors aligned with this vision? Do you give voice to these values, i.e., communicate through both your words and your actions? Finally, do your values, vision, voice and behaviors contribute to the "common good", not just to our own personal "good"?

A more practical discussion of ethical leadership for HR professionals can be found in the SHRM Code of Ethics and Professional Standards:

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As ethical leaders, HR professionals are expected to act ethically in every professional interaction and question possible actions by self and others to ensure the ethics of the decision and subsequent implementation. HR professionals must promote and foster fairness and justice for all employees and their organizations by treating others with respect, dignity and compassion. In order to protect the interests of our organization and our professional integrity, we must avoid all actual, potential, and perceived conflicts of interest. We do this by not using our authority for personal, professional or financial gain and by not giving or seeking preferential treatment.

Once we know where your internal compass points, we can then decide what change in direction we want to make.

What impacts the development of ethical leadership?

Unlike being born with DNA which may dictate how tall we will be at age 15, we are all capable of learning and developing our ethical leadership as much as we desire, and we have the ability to develop in this area for our entire lives. So, simply put, it is not too late!

In *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Success*, Karl Albrecht discusses two intelligences that impact the development of ethical leadership the most:

- **Social Intelligence** - awareness of and interactions with others (Albrecht)
- **Emotional Intelligence** - self-awareness and self-management (Goleman)

In *Moral Intelligence: Enhancing Business Performance & Leadership Success*, Lennick & Kiel suggest that there is a third intelligence contributing to the development of ethical leadership:

- **Emotional intelligence** - internally oriented, intrapersonal
- **Social intelligence** - externally oriented, interpersonal
- **Moral intelligence** - values oriented, inter- and intrapersonal

The researchers agree that individuals can develop these competencies through greater awareness of these intelligences and of our attitudes and behaviors.

What can we HR Professionals do to develop our personal Ethical Leadership?

The Institute for Ethical Leadership encourages the development of ethical leadership competencies through the use of personal reflection, dialogue and

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practice. Our personal reflection would begin with an assessment of our Emotional Intelligence – our awareness of our self and our reactions to others, our Social Intelligence – awareness of our interactions with others, and Moral Intelligence – our values and their impact on ourselves and on others.

Daniel Goleman's examples of emotional intelligence can serve as a personal assessment. How well do we:

- Know our emotions; our reaction to situations and others
- Persist in face of frustrations
- Motivate ourselves, rather than look to others for motivation
- Control our impulses and delay gratification
- Regulate our moods and keep distress from swamping our ability to think
- Feel empathy for others?

To evaluate our social intelligence, we can refer to Albrecht's examples. How well do we:

- Understand the cultures and subcultures comprising the world we share
- Value collaboration over conflict
- Express ideas clearly and honestly
- Seek to understand before reacting to others?

Finally, using Lennick & Kiel's examples of moral intelligence, we can assess how well we:

- Have a guiding awareness of (personal) values and goals
- Voice views that are unpopular and go out on a limb for what is right
- Act ethically and above reproach
- Build trust through reliability and authenticity
- Admit mistakes and confront unethical actions in others
- Take tough principle stands even if they are unpopular?

As with any developmental activities recommended by HR professionals, we would complete this self-assessment and then seek out others for their feedback. Once we have this information, we can then identify those areas we wish to develop. Perhaps we are not comfortable in admitting mistakes. We can "practice" this behavior and receive feedback on our efforts.

It is a journey for all of us.

As you progress in your journey of ethical leadership, you may find that you become more aware of your impact on others and of others' behaviors. As with any process, you may find the benefits as "not the destination, but the journey". Thus, this reflection, dialogue and practice approach to ethical leadership is not one-time event, but an ongoing journey.

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*“How long the road is. But for all the time the journey has already taken, how you have needed every second of it in order to learn what the road passes by.” —
Dag Hammarskjöld*

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