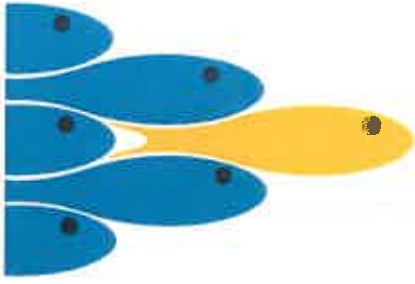




# ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

by LONNIE R. MORRIS, JR.



## 4 :: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

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### **Lonnie R. Morris, Jr.**

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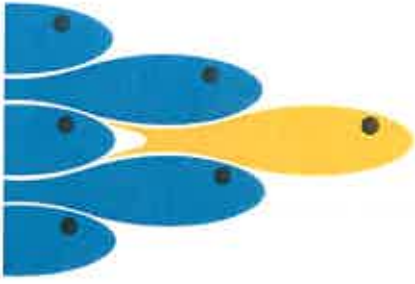
### INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR ETHICS

Generally speaking, leaders are expected to operate from a foundation of high morality and ethical discipline. Their actions should be in accordance with productive values and beliefs. It is from this leadership pedestal that ethical standards are expected to flow. Over time many have fallen from the leadership dais as a result of their own ethical loose footing. In the balancing act of social, judicial, cultural, political, and economics challenges, it has been revealed that our leadership protagonists sometimes moonlight as unethical, rule-breaking villains.

Recent workplace surveys show signs of ethical decline. Reports of ethical misconduct are met with acts of retaliation. Fearful of losing their jobs, employees are tempted to engage in unethical behaviors to meet unrealistic work expectations. More people are describing their work cultures as ethically weak. Images of greed and dishonesty are causing employees to lose confidence in their senior leaders.

Leaders often face ethical dilemmas brought on by unjust circumstances and organizational hardships. Ethical challenges can be more complex than merely choosing between right and wrong. Sometimes ethical conflict arises when what is right for the leader is in direct conflict with what is right for the organization. In those instances, the battle for ethical equilibrium is waged between the leader's ethical ego (personal righteousness) and the leader's altruism (concern for others). Even leaders with the high moral standards can approach ethical dilemmas with a situational sensitivity. Leaders may behave ethically in some situations and less ethically in others. Becoming a better leader is about leading with ethics, inspiring followers to apply a standard of moral evaluation, and creating a work environment that functions on an ethical autopilot.

In many instances, leaders are driving sales, profits, and market share with a vengeance. Yet they are coasting in neutral when it comes to ethics. When leaders are passive or ambiguous about ethical standards, employees improvise. They may guess at what behavior is appropriate. They may craft their own responses. Or perhaps they follow suit with whatever questionable behavior they observe. Becoming a better leader means actively modeling the principles of respect, service, justice, honesty, and community while simultaneously coaching and monitoring that behavior in others. This chapter explores what it means to be an ethical leader and the impact ethical leadership can have at the individual, group, and organizational levels.



## 4 :: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

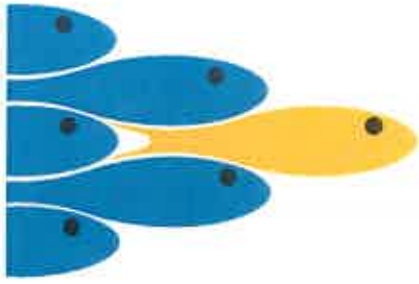
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### DEFINING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the social phenomenon of influencing others toward goal achievement. When we examine leadership through the lens of ethics, we are searching for behaviors that align with moral character and virtuousness. Our fascination with morals dates back to the teachings of Aristotle when courage, generosity, honesty, modesty, fairness and justice were among the traits attributed to a moral person. It was this moral fabric that ordained someone as fit to live well in a community amongst peers. Those classic virtues still apply in contemporary times. They are the ethical standards by which we measure leaders seeking to live well amongst others within their organizational communities.

Leaders with a propensity for ethics embody positive values, exhibit good moral judgment, and apply both as active agents in their personal leadership philosophy. Their keen sense of moral responsibility manifests through communication, action, and decision-making. Some of these leadership drivers correspond with our expectations of leaders in general. Ethical leaders model fairness by making principled decisions, practicing impartiality, and taking responsibility for their own actions. Ethical leaders model empowerment by actively engaging others in decision-making, listening to others' ideas, and supporting employee voice. Ethical leaders model transparency by clarifying expectations, delineating performance targets, and allowing open communication about individual and group goals. Ethical leaders model people-orientation by showing genuine concern for others, supporting subordinates and peers, and ensuring everyone's needs are met. Other drivers of the leadership experience are specifically correlated with leader virtue. Ethical leaders model ethical guidance by communicating regularly about ethics in the workplace, explaining the ethical expectations of employee behavior, and promoting ethical conduct among the ranks. Ethical leaders model ethical awareness by considering the impact of their work beyond the immediate environment, demonstrating care for society at-large, and promoting internal and external sustainability.

The gift of ethical leadership comes wrapped in a bow of integrity. It is the unspoken expectation that leaders operate from a platform of high morality and ethical discipline. It is the consistency of words and deeds. It is the congruence of the moral person and the work persona. Leading ethically is a great responsibility and a difficult leadership task. However, when executed properly, the re-gift of ethical leadership can positively affect individuals, groups, and the organizational as a whole.



## 4 :: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

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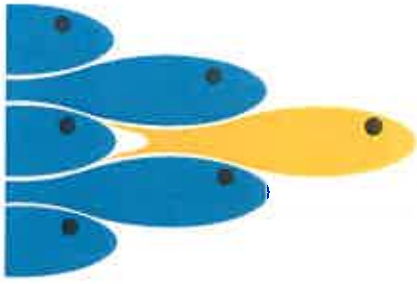
### THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP ON SELF

The propensity for ethical leadership has an internal barometer. With experience leaders can develop an acute sense of self-awareness regarding their individual role within the organization in relation to others. This awareness becomes a predictor of the leader's cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses within the organization. As it matures, the leader develops a distinct commitment to organizational members who share similar values. This metamorphosis is when ethical leadership begins to take root. Leaders begin to see subordinates, peers, and superiors as an extension of self. What was once a casual and figurative scan across the organization becomes more reflective. It is an exercise akin to looking at oneself in the mirror. The commitment to righteousness, fairness, and integrity is enhanced because the leader sees himself in others. The leader's level of concern is raised when others encounter issues of work injustice. Deviations from normatively ethical behavior are deemed violations of trust. The communal needs of some are adopted as the collective needs of all.

The act of leading ethically also has an external gauge of leader progress. Leadership with an exhibited propensity for ethics can prove beneficial for the individual's career trajectory. There is a sense of egotism associated with leading ethically. A team leader focused on driving her team to be the top company performer is indeed concerned for others. But this drive also shines an impressive spotlight on her role as the team leader. Leading her peers to this goal creates a gateway for upward mobility. Bonuses, raises, promotions, and greater responsibilities are likely to ensue. Additionally leaders who exhibit high levels of ethical leadership behavior can stand out against ethically neutral work backgrounds. This attracts attention from superiors and increases leader promotability.

### THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP ON WORK GROUPS

Leaders with a high propensity for ethics embody principles associated with happiness in the workplace such as honesty, trust, and fairness. Work groups that perceive their leaders to be ethical experience a greater sense of collective well-being. The positive emotional state of the work group is enhanced because individuals experience less feelings associated with fear, anxiety, and anger. The transparent nature of ethical leadership encourages regular communication within and between work groups. As a result, interpersonal disputes decline and effectiveness thrives. The ethical leader's proclivity for open communication regarding performance objectives enables more work groups to cross the norming-to-performing threshold. As a result, productivity



## 4 :: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

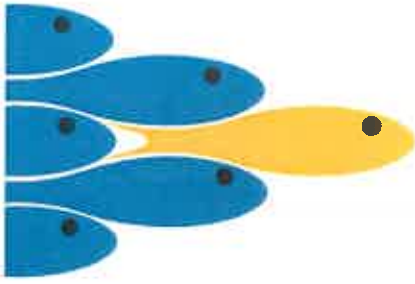
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soars. When ethical leadership is modeled, normatively appropriate and socially responsible group behavior is an outcome. The work group develops a collective conscientiousness that fuels interdependence, collective diligence and consolidated effort. Ethical leadership paves the way for constructive group voice. Members readily make suggestions for improvement, share new ideas, and problem solve. When ethical leadership is modeled it positively influences feelings of group belongingness. Individuals begin to openly and readily identify with the work group. In turn, work groups develop a collective sense of pride with the association. Group behavior mimics the ethical leadership behaviors modeled. Association with the group becomes a source of social capital.

### THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP ON THE ORGANIZATION

Ethical leadership has a cascading effect within organizations. Ethical leadership behavior from the top of the organization influences behavior and actions throughout the ranks. When senior-level managers exhibit strong moral character in their intentions, actions, values, and visions, similar practices are embraced by mid-level managers. Then mid-level managers pass along those associated behaviors and actions to employees on the front lines. As ethical behavior flows through the leadership ranks it permeates the organization.

This cascading effect is pivotal in creating ethical organizations. Organizations in which ethical conduct is modeled, supported, and reinforced have work climates in which ethical leaders thrive. Organizational leaders are the primary source for ideology and core values associated with desired organizational outcomes. Thriving ethical leadership promotes organizational integrity, organizational trust, cross-functional collaboration, and risk-taking. When ethical leadership is modeled, it influences how behavior is interpreted, how decisions are approached, and how problems are solved across the organization. Since ethical leaders measure, control, and reward ethical behavior, the organizational conscious develops in concert with those standards. As organizational members emulate ethical leadership behavior, a higher moral paradigm shepherds how behavior is interpreted, decisions are approached, problems are solved, and crises are averted. Heightened sensitivity to ethics and morality transcend individual and group performance. Members are aware of potential ethical dilemmas and have a unified organizational understanding of how to accommodate ethical concerns and how to solve problems within ethical parameters. Altruism begets collegiality. Informal working relationships triumph. Ethics codes are established. Ethics training is standardized. Members begin to



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assume personal responsibility for ethical challenges. They surrender personal interests for the ethical interests of the organization. Ethical conflicts are readily confronted. Ethical standards are upheld.

Ethical norms that develop from the infusion of ethical leadership into the organization are important. These standards serve as a behavioral compass for organizational members even in the absence of an ethical leader. Ethical organizational practices lead to fiscal stability. Ethical organizations are successful organizations.

### CONCLUSION

Becoming a better leader is broader than the typical performance measures. Becoming a better leader is modeling better behavior. Leading with ethics means folding personal morals into your leadership approach. Apply fairness in decision-making. Empower employees by soliciting their input. Approach goal setting with transparency so everyone is clear about where you are going and how to get there. Consider all vantage points before taking action. Question how your decisions impact the external environment. Actively engage in conversations about workplace ethics.

Morals, virtues, and ethics are critical to the workplace. The ethical leader should be a reflection of the ethical person. The leadership influence should be one of social responsibility and integrity. Leading with ethics is a catalyst for personal growth. It positively impacts personal development and career trajectory. Ethical leadership triggers positive group behavior. Under the influence of ethical leadership group members experience stronger feelings of belongingness and begin to associate group membership with social capital. Leaders who incorporate ethics into the standard of how they operate witness how those standards being adopted throughout the organization. Ethical behavior norms guide organization-wide understanding of how to resolve ethical dilemmas.

The case for becoming a better leader in respect to ethics is simple. You can never go wrong when you do the right thing.