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The Essence of a Strong Ethical Leader: Somewhere Between Scoundrel and Saint

Compliance and Ethics



My younger brother Joe is a big man. He is also a Catholic priest. During a recent visit to our hometown parish, St. Bernards, he put on his vestments and stepped out to the pulpit to deliver his homily. He was quite an imposing figure.

He began his homily rather dramatically, with silence. For several beats longer than the congregation was comfortable enduring, he stood still, letting the tension rise. He then blew their hair back by asking in a clear and authoritative voice, “Who are you?” He let the question hang in the air to give time for its full impact to sink in. Then, as though he expected an answer from every person sitting in the pews, he asked again, “Who are you?”

As you might expect, this made a visible impression on an assembly that was unaccustomed to this brand of oratory. It made an impression on me too. By confronting us all with this simple question, he was compelling us to undertake the work called for by the ancient and often repeated maxim inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know thyself.”

Parishioners at St. Bernards aren’t the only ones who struggle with this undertaking. We all do. It is, perhaps, the reason why, when we consider what needs to be done to build and sustain a strong ethical culture, we generally think about changing other people and their attitudes and behavior rather than ourselves. I call this the “It’s not you, it’s not me, it’s that one behind the tree” syndrome. Nevertheless, as difficult as it may be for each of us to take a hard look in the mirror and honestly evaluate our strengths and weaknesses, it is an essential exercise for anyone who strives to be an ethical leader, let alone build ethical leadership skills in others.

If you’re interested in undertaking this work, take a moment to turn your gaze away from others and look inward with the object of answering my brother’s question: “Who are you?” Specifically, to what

degree is your identity connected with the five attributes of a strong ethical leader? These are: knowing, wanting, choosing, habituating and securing the “good.”

Knowing the “Good”

Do you really know the rules associated with your role in the business? Have you read the policies and procedures applicable to your job? Have you studied the canons of ethics associated with your industry or your practice? Have you developed the analytical skills and moral sensibilities to make wise and defensible choices — not just between right and wrong — but also between right and right? Have you established for yourself moral chalk lines that you will not cross under any circumstances?

Wanting the “Good”

Do you possess a genuine passion for pursuing an ethical course? Is your desire to do right steadfast or does it waiver depending on the circumstances and the potential danger to your career?

Choosing the “Good”

Do you translate your desire to pursue the “good” into actions even when it is hard or unpopular? Do you stand up for others who have the courage to pursue an ethical course, or do you sit on the sidelines and let them take the heat for making hard choices? Do you speak truth to power, or tell everyone what they want to hear?

Habituating the “Good”

Do you exhibit the moral courage required to habitually pursue the “good?” Or, are your actions less consistent than they should be on this score?

Securing the “Good”

Do you possess the organizational savvy and social skills necessary to get the “right thing” done?

Few among us can honestly answer all of these questions in the affirmative. Instead, we find ourselves somewhere on the continuum between coward and hero, scoundrel and saint. We also find such questions difficult to grapple with because, instead of focusing on whether we have mastered certain leadership techniques we read in a book, they center on examining who we are. But there is no getting around the fact that the best way to exhibit ethical leadership is to “be” an ethical leader. In his book entitled *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Edwin Friedman captured this idea well when he said:

“What counts is the leader’s presence and being, not technique and know-how.

For it is the integrity of the leader that promotes the integrity or prevents the ‘dis-integration’ of the system he or she is leading.

[I]f a leader could learn to be a well-differentiated presence, by the very nature of his or her being he or she could promote differentiation and support creative imagination throughout the system. This would be the case not by focusing on techniques for moving others, but by

focusing on the nature of his or her own being and presence.”

If Friedman is right, your success or failure as an ethical leader will not be determined by how many policies or procedures you write, how many training courses you conduct or how effective your code of conduct is. Instead, it will be determined by the degree to which you “become” an ethical “presence” in the workplace.

This insight has significant implications for those of us interested in building and sustaining strong ethical cultures. It means that there are no quick fixes. Catchy company slogans about values and other similar superficial activities are unlikely to have a measurable effect. Instead, to really move the ball down the field we need to begin by taking a big dose of our own medicine by measuring ourselves against the five attributes of strong ethical leadership with the objective of “being” an ethical leader. This is not an overnight process. It is the work of a lifetime that never ends. But, like every important journey it starts by taking the first step and knowing, with certainty where you are going. It is only by choosing to find and follow this path for ourselves that we will know how to show others the way.

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