

The Invisible Hand of Ethical Leading

Insights from the multi-professional roundtable informing
the Washington Ethical Leadership Summit

BY PROFESSOR TONY WALL



Introduction

It is too easy to find stories of unethical leadership wherever you are in the globe. Just turn on the news or open up social media, and you'll notice political leaders being accused of fraud, indecent behaviour, or the instigation of war. We may not notice other stories ^{vi}. For example, technology leaders have just genetically modified the spinal cord in dragonflies to be able 'steer' them, thereby turning them in to micro cyborg drones. A 'micro-bio-medical-solution' innovation, and a clue as to today's landscape of ethical leading.

However, we do not need to go online – (un)ethical behaviour is all around us ^{iv}. Imagine this real-life scenario: at a board meeting of a multi-million-dollar corporation there were anxious discussions about the workloads and stress of staff. They had a tough time ahead. One team member asked, 'what can we do to care for the well-being of our team?', hoping there would be a discussion of what exactly that might entail. Without discussion or delay, the leader said, 'we can't afford that – we need to focus on our targets'. Such a scenario gives us another clue into the minds of (un)ethical leaders.

To explore the subtle and hidden dimensions of these issues, a cross-disciplinary event was held in September 2017. It brought together senior professionals from fields including economics, politics, international relations, activism, whistleblowing, law, regional economic development, public affairs, leadership and business, informatics and computing science, biological sciences, stem cell research, education, linguistics, journalism, the media, and psychology. This snapshot outlines the key insights from the event, and provides a platform to launch the *Washington Ethical Leadership Summit*, a new annual catalyst for making a difference to ethical leading.

(Un)ethical behaviour is all around us – we don't need to look far.

Comments about the event:
 "Fantastic!"
 "The best event of my life!"
 "Invigorating!"
 "Cool!"
 "I feel human again!"

INSIGHTS INTO ETHICAL LEADING

The event brought together different perspectives and generated multiple personal and practical insights for participants. Some of the insights from the event are outlined below.

Barriers to ethical leading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking the other way 2. "I just don't know what to do." 3. "That's not how we do things."
Enablers to ethical leading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking at what people do, not what they say they do 2. Defining moments 3. Provocative images and stories
Strategies for ethical leading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Targeting ruptures in sense-making 2. Choosing between conflicting choices 3. Making ethical behaviour 'normal'

The Roundable took place on 13th September, 2017, at the Virginia International University Campus, Fairfax, VA, USA.

The **Washington Ethical Leadership Summit** is a partnership between *Virginia International University, University of Chester, and LeaderShape Global*, and is sponsored by *Routledge*.

An idea that invites you to be involves as part of an emerging community of practice.



Washington Ethical Leadership Summit



BARRIERS TO ETHICAL LEADING

1

1. Looking the other way

It can be frustrating to think that some leaders might ignore or 'look the other way' when unethical behaviours occur, especially in every day settings, such as racial or sexist slurs or jokes in the office. Some of us will recall moments when our own neighbours, work colleagues, or even friends, have witnessed an unethical event and did not act. 'Looking the other way' can be seen at many different levels, such as one-on-one, familial, organisational, and even national levels, all of which inhibit the ethicality of leader behaviour. This might be because the leader (or others):

- See the situation, and its significance, differently to the way you do, and therefore, they do not think they should act.
- Are actively protecting their own circumstances and position, which can be closely tied to their identity, or how they see themselves.
- See other significant consequences, such as to their family's safety.

2. "I just don't know what to do."

Ethical leading can involve facing contradictions, dilemmas, and double-binds (no-win situations) which can lead to paralysis, or not knowing what to do – thereby limiting any action in the face of an ethical issueⁱⁱ. Imagine the leader who discovers that the executive board has been involved in bribery with local government officials, which has enabled the company to create more jobs. The leader's internal dialogue might look something like this:

"If I blow the whistle, I am upholding my commitment to openness and transparency as well as the law – but if I do, it risks all those new jobs – but if I don't, the company may not survive from the litigation, and then what would happen to my family: we need to pay the bills – but if I do blow the whistle, what will "they" do to me, my career, and my family, we still have the bills! – I am damned if I do, damned if I don't."

3. "That's not how we do things."

There are some environments where (un)ethical activity seems to be so infused in the way things are typically done that leaders and followers may not even notice it. As this is part of the fabric of an organisation or culture, it can implicitly frame what is legitimate practice (and conceal what is not) per taken-for-granted values and assumptions. This can make it difficult to act in ethical ways, for example, in relation to how we treat other people, the planet, and its co-inhabitantsⁱⁱ. These assumptions involve implicit hierarchies, such as:

- Assumptions that *profits* are more important than *people*, which means it can be legitimate to prioritise sales over well-being.
- Assumptions that *profits* are more important than *animals* or *insects*, which means it can be legitimate to change the genetic makeup of dragonflies for human gain (including for the purposes of warfare).
- Assumptions that *the news story* is more important than *privacy*, which means it can be legitimate to tap in to the personal phone lines of celebrities.

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Cultures implicitly
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ENABLERS TO ETHICAL LEADING

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1. Looking at what people do, not what they say they do

Wars have been 'justified' on the grounds of '*what is best for humankind*'. We see this in corporate life, too, in terms of mission statements espousing '*the highest standards of responsibility and ethics*', but then (1) design their job in ways which lead to stress and sickness and (2) use materials which pollute the earth. It can potentially be too traumatic for the leader to directly consider different interpretations of how they act. A useful alternative perspective is making sense of and tackling ethics at the behavioural level which provides a useful and practical perspective into ethical leadingⁱⁱ. For example:

- Looking at behaviour in leader development can avoid attacking personal identity (e.g. '*you are not being ethical!*') which limits new awareness. A behavioural approach might re-orient the question to '*when the decision to choose this supplier was taken, what process was used?*', or in a survey, '*how often do you consider the view of others...?*'.
- Looking at behaviour in media or mass communication spaces can bring new awareness, or counter-interpretations, to wider groups of people.

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Practical approaches
which focus on how
people behave opens
up spaces for greater
awareness.
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2. Defining moments

A defining moment can be something so small, it doesn't seem to warrant the life-changing meaning that it generates. It is the moment when we look at something that we potentially see every day, but see something differently to before. Such moments can prompt new ways of thinking for the leader, including about themselves and what they do – and as such, can enable new ethical leading behaviours. Such moments can be prompted by emotionally charged events (such as the unjust actions of a leader) or through prolonged reflection, whether guided or not.

Some examples include:

- When a leader looks at their pest removal corporation, and after witnessing the death of some ladybirds in their own office, then see the company as a life-extermination organisation.
- When a leader looks at their chicken restaurant chain, but after seeing the gruesome nature of the burger production process, then see the company as a key link in the battery chicken farming industry.

3. Provocative images and stories

The media is a powerful channel for influencing how we see what is going on in the world, so much so, we have to question what is 'true or fake'. Part of that influence is the way in which images and stories speak to us – they can instantaneously spark strong emotions such as anger, hate, and love ^{vii}. They also work in other subtle ways, too, and embed implicit models of relating to each other (just like cultures). Examples of stories which guide action include:

- Stories that emphasise why an organisation was established, for example, to stand up to large corporates who were seen to be taking advantage of local communities or natural resources.
- Stories that connect people to leaders' own defining moments (as above) and demonstrate the values-in-action of the leader.

STRATEGIES FOR ETHICAL LEADING

3

1. Targeting ruptures in sense-making

Leaders can intentionally use words, metaphor, stories, and images as part of change efforts towards more ethical behaviour. For example, a shift in terminology from '*supplier*' to '*partner*' indicates the start of a new story about how a corporation might work with the overseas communities which offer them raw materials ^v. In this way, the leader is intentionally trying to rupture assumptions about what might count as (un)ethical behaviour. In practice, this can be implemented in a variety of settings, including, for example ^{viii}:

- Amidst a conversation, in the moment, where the leader carefully chooses which assumptions they want to rupture – and then crafts or recalls a metaphor to shift thinking.
- As part of visioning and strategic planning processes – in terms of establishing guiding ideas of future-oriented, evocative stories.
- As part of branding processes – in terms of communicating to the outside world how it should expect to work with the organisation.

2. Choosing between conflicting choices

When people become aware of the possible contradictions, dilemmas, and double-binds (no-win situations) which can lead to emotional pain and paralysis, leaders can support sense-making ⁱ. The key point here is showing that there is always a choice. Making a choice that may not be '*the best*' option, but perhaps '*the least worst*' which the individual is able to live with afterwards.

These processes include becoming aware of the competing aspects (e.g. values, beliefs, and goals), assessing the possible consequences of alternative decisions, and then reflecting on the relative importance (or hierarchy) of the competing aspects. This is about making a judgement about *'which is most important, right now, and at various future points?'*. Leaders might be able to help guide these processes or provide mechanisms to do so – both of which model the importance of ethical behaviour in practice.

3. Making ethical behaviors 'normal'

The task of the leader seems to be related to making it 'normal' to consider and deal with ethics on an everyday basis ^{iv}. In a broad sense, this is about dealing with the impacts of the leader and the organisation on current and future stakeholders. More specifically, ethical leading may have different meanings and expectations in different industries or countries, so it might also mean challenging these wider influences to make ethical behaviour an everyday habit. Practical starting points include:

- Start with own self-transformation journey, as a model for others.
- Ask leaders to (1) visualise what an ethical culture looks like, (2) identify what needs to happen to get there, and ask how many of such changes would be good for business (usually, most if not all are!), and (3) identify how they would know they had got there ⁱⁱ.
- Review the implicit frames that are embedded in policies (as discussed above) – and start changing in consultation where possible ^v.
- Act courageously to influence wider industry-culture influences – for example, find ways to work with professional or governmental bodies.
- Act with patience – it takes time to change hearts and minds.

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CONCLUSION: Creating movements

In today's world, it seems that we need to create movements around the world to raise the profile of ethical leading. The metaphor of 'movement' attempts to represent a shift, at the grass-roots as well as at the tree top levels. Leaders are well placed, and can influence both places. But the metaphor of *movement* is also intentionally chosen over the alternative metaphor of *'fighting'*, which signals a different way of thinking about the problem and the solution ^{viii}.

Practically, and importantly, these movements can live in every conversation within office blocks, around the dinner table with family, and within the wider communities in which we live, shop, and work. The shaping and influencing of such movements for greater reach and impact is the work of the ethical leader. This is a tall order as it can involve emotional pain in the short term. But it can also involve the longer-term pleasure of seeing just and fair practice. This is why patience, persistence, and resilience can be important capacities in social change.

However, these movements can also be activated on a wider scale, on a global level. And this is the role and work of the *Washington Ethical Leadership Summit in 2018*, aspiring to be a global catalyst for change – where fresh insights and personal actions are generated through different people and perspectives connecting and sparking. The insights shared above only touch the surface of the deep and meaningful discussions and action planning that emerged as a result

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We invite you to be part of a movement to create a world where ethical leading is the norm, not the exception.
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of this year's event. Now, we invite you to contribute and be part of our movement to create a world where ethical leading is the norm, not the exception. A world where people, planet and its co-inhabitants can live '*a life worth living*'.

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