Chapter 2
Reflections on Ethical Leadership

Robert J. Sternberg

Abstract This chapter discusses why ethical behavior is more of a challenge than it would first appear to be. In particular, ethical behavior requires a person to (1) recognize that there is an event to which to react; (2) define the event as having an ethical dimension; (3) decide that the ethical dimension is significant; (4) take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem; (5) figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem; (6) decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution; (7) enact the ethical solution, meanwhile possibly counteracting contextual forces that might lead one not to act in an ethical manner; (8) deal with possible repercussions of having acted in what one considers an ethical manner. In some ways, therefore, behaving ethically is nontrivial in the same ways as is bystander intervention, itself an ethical challenge. The challenges are put in the context of a theory of ethical leadership.

"I am very proud of myself," I told the 17 students in my seminar, Psychology 60, The Nature of Leadership. I had just returned from a trip and was about to fill out the reimbursement forms when I discovered that I could actually get reimbursed twice. The first reimbursement would come from the organization that had invited me, and required me merely to fill out a form listing my expenses. The second reimbursement would come from my university, Tufts, upon my submitting the receipts from the trip. I explained to the class that I had worked really hard on the trip speaking about ethical leadership, and so I was pleased that by getting reimbursed twice, I could justify to myself the amount of work I had put into the trip.

I waited for the firestorm. Would the class – which had already studied leadership for several months – rise up in a mass protest against what I had done? Or would only a half-dozen brave souls raise their hands and roundly criticize me for what was obviously patently unethical behavior? I waited, and waited, and waited.

R.J. Sternberg
Dean Arts & Sciences, Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Ballou Hall, 3rd Floor, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155, USA
e-mail: Robert.Sternberg@tufts.edu

Nothing happened. I then decided to move on to the main topic of the day – I do not even remember what it was. All the time I was speaking about that main topic, I expected some of the students to raise their hands and demand to return to the topic of my double reimbursement. It didn't happen.

Finally, I stopped talking about whatever the topic was, and flat-out asked the class why no one had challenged me. I figured that they would, to a person, be embarrassed for not having challenged me. Quite a few of them were embarrassed. Others thought I must be kidding. What I did not expect, though – especially after having taught them for several months about ethical leadership – was that some of the students would commend me on my clever idea and argue that, if I could get away with it, I was entitled to receive the money.

This experience reminded me of how hard it is to translate theories of ethics, and even case studies, into one's own practice. The students had read about ethics in leadership, heard about ethics in leadership from a variety of real-world leaders, discussed ethics in leadership, and then apparently totally failed to recognize unethical behavior when it stared them in the face. (Full disclosure: I did *not* really seek double reimbursement!) Why is it so hard to translate theory into practice, even after one has studied ethical leadership for several months?

I was reminded of the work of Latané and Darley (1970), which showed that divinity students who were about to lecture on the parable of *The Good Samaritan* were no more likely than other bystanders to help a person in distress who was in need of – a good Samaritan! Drawing upon their model of bystander intervention, I here propose a model of ethical behavior that would seem to apply to a variety of ethical problems.

The model is also grounded in a theory I have proposed of good and effective leadership, called WICS. WICS is an acronym for wisdom, intelligence, and creativity, synthesized (Sternberg 2003a, b, 2005, 2008). The basic idea is that gifted leaders excel in having a creative vision for where they wish to lead people; in being able to analyze whether the vision is a good one (analytical intelligence); in being able practically to implement the vision and persuade others of its value (practical intelligence); and in ensuring that the vision wisely helps lead stakeholders toward a common good.

Keywords Balance · Common good · Ethics · Extrapersonal interests · Intrapersonal interests · Interpersonal interests · WICS · Wisdom

2.1   A Model for Ethical Behavior

According to the proposed model, enacting ethical behavior is much harder than it would appear to be because it involves multiple, largely sequential, steps. To behave ethically, the individual has to:

Recognize that there is an event to which to react.
Define the event as having an ethical dimension.
Decide that the ethical dimension is significant.

Take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem.

Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem.

Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution.

Enact the ethical solution, meanwhile possibly counteracting contextual forces that might lead one not to act in an ethical manner.

Deal with possible repercussions of having acted in what one considers an ethical manner.

Seen from this standpoint, it is rather challenging to respond to problems in an ethical manner. Consider the example of the supposed double reimbursement.

2.1.1 Recognize That There Is an Event to Which To React

The students were sitting in a class on leadership, expecting to be educated by an expert on leadership about leadership. In this case, I did not present the problem as one to which I expected them to react. I was simply telling them about something I had done. They had no a priori reason to expect that this was something for which an authority figure would require any particular kind of reaction, perhaps, except for taking notes. So for some students, the whole narrative may have been a nonevent.

This, of course, is a problem that extends beyond this mere classroom situation. When people hear their political, educational, or religious leaders talk, they may not believe there is any reason to question what they hear. After all, they are listening to authority figures. In this way, leaders, including cynical and corrupt leaders, may lead their flocks to accept and even commit unethical acts.

2.1.2 Define the Event as Having an Ethical Dimension

Not all students in the class defined the problem as an ethical one. It became clear in the discussion that some students saw the problem as utilitarian: I had worked hard, had been underpaid, and was trying to figure out a way to attain adequate compensation for my hard work. In this definition of the problem, I had come up with a clever way to make the compensation better fit the work I had done.

Cynical leaders may flaunt their unethical behavior – one is reminded today of Robert Mugabe, but there are other world leaders who might equally be relevant here. When Mugabe and his henchmen seized the farms of white farmers, the seizure was presented as one of compensating alleged war heroes for their accomplishments. Why should it be unethical to compensate war heroes?

As I write, the Chinese government is attempting to manipulate media to downplay the dimensions of an event with a huge ethical component (Atlas 2008). On May 12, 2008, an earthquake in Sichuan province killed an estimated ten thousand school children. But there was an irregularity in the buildings that imploded during

the earthquake. Schools for children of well-connected party leaders, as well as government buildings, withstood the earthquake with no problem. In contrast, schools housing poor children crumbled to dust. It turned out that the schools had been built in ways that could only poorly withstand an earthquake. Presumably, the money that was supposed to have supported better construction went to line the pockets of Party functionaries (Atlas). The government has done what it can to suppress these basic facts.

Lest one believe that only other governments engage in such attempts to lead people to believe that events do not hold ethical dimensions, McClellan (2008), even by the most charitable interpretation, makes clear that the administration of George W. Bush engaged in such a constant barrage of half-truths and outright lies that it is unclear whether all its members were even able to distinguish their lies from the truth, or cared.

2.1.3 Decide That the Ethical Dimension Is Significant

In the case of my having sought double reimbursement, some of the students may have felt it was sketchy or dubious, but not sufficiently so to make an issue of it. Perhaps they had themselves asked for money twice for the same cause. Or perhaps they had sometimes taken what was not theirs – say, something small like a newspaper or even money they found on the ground – and saw what I was doing as no more serious than what they had done. So they may recognize an ethical dimension, but not see it as sufficiently significant to create a fuss.

Politicians seem to specialize in trying to downplay the ethical dimension of their behavior. The shenanigans and subsequent lies of Bill Clinton regarding his behavior are well known. On the day I write this chapter (June 5, 2008), a state senator in Massachusetts was arrested the day before for attempting to grope a woman on the street (Senator faces list of assault allegations 2008). He apparently has a record of harassing other women over a period of years. What is more amazing than his pleading innocent after being caught red-handed is that, when asked his name, he gave the name of a colleague in the state senate as his own name! He thereby sought to duck responsibility for his own unethical behavior.

2.1.4 Take Responsibility for Generating an Ethical Solution to the Problem

The students may have felt that they are, after all, merely students. Is it their responsibility, or even their right, to tell a professor in a course on leadership how to act, especially if the professor is a dean? From their point of view, it was perhaps my responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of the situation, if any.

Similarly, people may allow leaders to commit wretched acts because they figure it is the leaders' responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of their actions. Isn't that why they are leaders in the first place? Or people may assume that the leaders, especially if they are religious leaders, are in a uniquely good position to determine what is ethical. If a religious leader encourages someone to become a suicide bomber, that "someone" may feel that being such a bomber must be ethical. Why else would a religious leader suggest it?

2.1.5   Figure Out What Abstract Ethical Rule(s) Might Apply to the Problem

Perhaps some of the students recognized the problem I created for them as an ethical one. But what rule applies? Have they ever had to figure out reimbursements? Perhaps not. So it may not be obvious what rule would apply. Or even if they have, might there be some circumstances in which it is ethical to be dually reimbursed? Maybe the university supplements outside reimbursements, as they sometimes do fellowships? Or maybe the university does not care who else pays, so long as they get original receipts. Or maybe what I meant to say was that I had some expenses paid by the university and others by the sponsoring organization, and I had actually misspoken. Especially in new kinds of situations with which one has little familiarity, it may not be clear what constitutes ethical behavior.

Most of us have learned, in one way or another, ethical rules that we are supposed to apply to our lives. For example, we are supposed to be honest. But who among us can say he or she has not lied at some time, perhaps with the excuse that we were protecting someone else's feelings? By doing so, we insulate ourselves from the effects of our behavior. Perhaps, we can argue that the principle that we should not hurt someone else's feelings takes precedence over not lying. Of course, as the lies grow larger, we can continue to use the same excuse. Or politicians may argue that they should provide generous tax cuts to the ultra-wealthy on the theory that the benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of the population. So perhaps one is treating all people well, as we learn to do – just some people are treated better than others with the rationalization that eventually the effects will reach all the others.

2.1.6   Decide How These Abstract Ethical Rules Actually Apply to the Problem so as to Suggest a Concrete Solution

Perhaps the students had ethical rules available and even accessible to them, but did not see how to apply them. Suppose they have the rule that one should only expect from others what one deserves. Well, what did I deserve? Maybe, in application, they saw me as deserving more because I said I did. Or suppose they had the rule that one should not expect something for nothing. Well, I did something, so I was

only trying to get something back that adequately reflected my work. In the end, they may have had trouble translating abstract principles into concrete behavior.

This kind of translation is, I believe, nontrivial. In our work on practical intelligence, some of which was summarized in Sternberg et al. (2000), we found that there is, at best, a modest correlation between the more academic and abstract aspects of intelligence and its more practical and concrete aspects. Both aspects, though, predicted behavior in everyday life. People may have skills that shine brightly in a classroom, but that they are unable to translate into real-world consequential behavior. For example, someone may be able to pass a written drivers' test with flying colors, but not be able to drive. Or someone may be able to get an A in a French class, but not speak French to passers-by in Paris. Or a teacher may get an A in a classroom management course, but be unable to manage a classroom. Translation of abstracted skills into concrete ones is difficult, and may leave people knowing a lot of ethical rules that they are nevertheless unable to translate into their everyday lives.

If one follows reports in the media, there are any number of instances in which pastors who are highly trained in religion and ethics act in unethical and unscrupulous ways. They may be able to teach classes on ethics, but they fail to translate what they teach into their own behavior. One may tend to be quick to blame them, but as a psychologist I know that there are many competent psychologists who are unable to apply what they do in therapy to their own lives. Being a psychologist is no protection against personal strife, any more than being an ethicist is protection against unethical behavior.

2.1.7   Enact the Ethical Solution, Meanwhile Possibly Counteracting Contextual Forces That Might Lead One Not to Act in an Ethical Manner

You sit in a classroom and hear your teacher brag about what you perhaps consider to be unethical behavior. You look around. No one else is saying anything. As far as you can tell, no one else has even been fazed. Perhaps you are simply out of line. In the Latané and Darley (1970) work, the more bystanders there were, the less likely one was to take action to intervene. Why? Because one figured that, if something is really wrong, then someone among all the others witnessing the event will take responsibility. You are better off having a breakdown on a somewhat lonely country road than on a busy highway, because a driver passing by on the country road may feel that he or she is your only hope.

Sometimes, the problem is not that other people seem oblivious to the ethical implications of the situation, but that they actively encourage you to behave in ways you define as unethical. In the Rwandan genocides, Hutus were encouraged to hate Tutsis and to kill them, even if they were within their own family (see discussion in Sternberg and Sternberg 2008). Those who were not willing to participate in the massacres risked becoming victims themselves (Gourevitch 1998). The same

applied in Hitler's Germany. Those who tried to save Jews from concentration camps themselves risked going to such camps (Monroe 1996, 2004; Totten et al. 2004).

2.1.8 Deal with Possible Repercussions of Having Acted in What One Considers an Ethical Manner

One may hesitate to act because of possible repercussions. Perhaps students in my class saw me as grossly unethical, but did not want to risk challenging me openly and thereby potentially lowering their grade. In genocides, opposing the perpetrators may make one a victim. Or one may look foolish acting in an ethical way when others are taking advantage of a situation in a way to foster their personal good. Even before one acts, one may be hesitant because of the aftermath one anticipates, whether real or merely imagined.

We would like to think that the pressure to behave ethically will lead people to resist internal temptations to act poorly. But often, exactly the opposite is the case. In the Enron case, when Sherron Watkins blew the whistle on unethical behavior, she was punished and made to feel like an "outcast" (Person of the Week: Enron Whistleblower Sherron Watkins 2002). In general, whistleblowers are treated poorly, despite the protections they are supposed to receive.

2.2 Is There an Ethical Giftedness?

Gardner (1999) has wrestled with the question of whether there is some kind of existential or even spiritual intelligence that guides people through challenging life dilemmas. Coles (1998) is one of many who have argued for a moral intelligence in children as well as adults. Is there some kind of moral or spiritual intelligence in which some children are inherently superior to others? Kohlberg (1984) believed that there are stages of moral reasoning, and that as children grow older, they advance in these stages. Some will advance faster and further than others, creating individual differences in levels of moral development.

The perspective of this chapter is perhaps a bit different. People can certainly differ in their moral reasoning and moral development, but we can teach children as well as adults to enhance their ethical reasoning and behavior simply by instructing them regarding the challenges of thinking and acting in an ethical way. It is not enough to teach religion or values or ethics. One needs to teach children about the steps leading to ethical behavior. In this way, they will be able to recognize the challenges involved in behaving ethically. They need education and they need inoculation against the forces that are likely to lead them to fail to behave ethically because they do not make it through all eight of the steps as described above.

From this point of view, ethical giftedness is not some kind of inherent characteristic, but something we can develop in virtually all children (assuming they are not

psychopathic). But such development is difficult because, as we have seen, thinking and acting ethically is more of a challenge than would appear. Merely going to religion or ethics classes will not, in and of itself, produce ethical behavior.

2.2.1 Foolishness as the Opposite of Ethical Giftedness

In speaking of the challenges of leadership, and particularly of leaders who become foolish, I have spoken of the risk of ethical disengagement (Sternberg 2008). Ethical disengagement (based on Bandura 1999) is the dissociation of oneself from ethical values. One may believe that ethical values should apply to the actions of others, but one becomes disengaged from them as they apply to oneself. One may believe that one is above or beyond ethics, or simply not see its relevance to one's own life.

There are other fallacies that lead people to be foolish (Sternberg 2008). They include.

2.2.1.1 Egocentrism

The person comes to believe that his or her leadership or power is for purposes of self-aggrandizement. Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski, currently in prison for tax evasion, ran the company as though it was his own personal piggybank (Timeline of the Tyco International Scandal 2005). Ethics took the back seat to Kozlowski's desire to enrich himself and his family.

2.2.1.2 False Omniscience

Some people come to believe themselves as all-knowing. The surprising thing about the behavior of a Bill Clinton or a George W. Bush, in quite different domains, is not that they made mistakes, but rather, that they kept making the same mistakes over and over again. Clinton correctly viewed himself as very intelligent, and perhaps thought that his intelligence and excellent education gave him levels of knowledge that he did not have. George W. Bush appears to have believed that he could trust his gut. He was wrong, over and over again, but was so lacking in intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner 1983) and self-reflection, that he learned little, if anything, from his mistakes.

2.2.1.3 False Omnipotence

Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia stands as one of the great historical monuments to false feelings of power. Napoleon believed himself to be extremely powerful. His invasion of Russia was politically pointless and strategically flawed; but he wanted

the prize nevertheless. The invasion was the beginning of the end for Napoleon. Like so many other powerful leaders, he over-reached, and his feelings of omnipotence led to his doom.

2.2.1.4 False Invulnerability

Perhaps Eliot Spitzer, as governor of New York State, felt himself not only extremely powerful, but invulnerable. He must have felt pretty close to invulnerable, because as a former prosecutor, he must have known that police agencies had multiple ways of tracking patrons of prostitutes. He nevertheless engaged in a pattern of repeated reckless behavior (Spitzer is linked to prostitution ring 2008), which eventually cost him the governorship.

2.3 Conclusion

People may differ in their ability to behave ethically, but, to my knowledge, there is no evidence of intrinsic differences in "ethical giftedness" or "moral intelligence." The difference in people's behavior appears rather to be in their skill in completing a set of eight steps that, conjointly, produce ethical behavior. Failure of an earlier step is likely to lead to failure to execute the later steps. Teaching children abstract principles of ethical behavior or ethical rules is unlikely, in itself, to produce ethical behavior. Rather, children need to be taught the sequence of processes leading to ethical thinking, and to inoculate themselves against pressures – both external and internal – to behave in unethical ways. If we want to produce ethical giftedness, we have to develop it, not hope it will be a given in some group of intrinsically gifted children.

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