This chapter describes the behaviors of the ethical leader and explores the reasons why leaders do not always act ethically. The chapter also offers five recommendations to help educators integrate the practices of ethical leadership into their work with student leaders.

Inspiring and Equipping Students to Be Ethical Leaders

Arthur J. Schwartz

Rare is the student leader who has not had to make an ethical decision. Sometimes the situation will involve a close friend who has suddenly asked the student leader to look the other way. Other times the situation focuses squarely on the resolve and willpower of the student leader to do the right thing even if no one else is involved. Yet what do we know about how best to equip our student leaders to be ethical?

In recent years, there has been a verifiable explosion of attention given to the topic of ethical leadership. Scholars across many disciplines are beginning to conceptually map and empirically study the antecedents and outcomes of the ethical leader. Much has been discovered. Regrettably, and as I argue in the final section, most of what scholars have learned has yet to inform the thousands of educators who work with college or high school student leaders.

This chapter has five purposes. First, drawing on almost 2 decades of scholarship, I identify the core behaviors of the ethical leader. Second, I highlight what empirical data suggest are the benefits and positive outcomes associated with being an ethical leader. Third, I examine the multiplicity of reasons why leaders do not always act ethically. Fourth, I strive to answer the question: What motivates or inspires someone to be an ethical leader? Finally, I offer five recommendations to help college and high school educators integrate the practices of ethical leadership into their work with student leaders.
The Behaviors of the Ethical Leader

Based on nearly 2 decades of research, Linda Trevino and her colleagues have identified five core behaviors of the ethical leader (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000):

1. **Integrity**—the ethical leader is honest and trustworthy (“walks the talk”).
2. **Fairness**—the ethical leader is transparent and does not play favorites.
3. **Communicates ethical standards**—the ethical leader finds ways to explain and promote the ethical standards of the group as well as holds others in the group accountable for their own ethical behavior.
4. **Care and concern for others**—the ethical leader treats everyone with respect and dignity (see also Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006).
5. **Shares power**—the ethical leader listens to everyone’s ideas and offers members a real voice (see also De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008).

It is critical to underscore the importance of individual differences when it comes to these five dimensions of the ethical leader. For example, student leaders may show a tremendous level of care and concern for all the members in their organization, but they may lack the highest levels of reliability and trustworthiness, because they overcommit and overpromise. Other student leaders may be exceedingly fair and principled when it comes to decision making, but they may have difficulty sharing power and giving others in their group a real voice.

Most significantly, student leaders may have difficulty holding others in the group accountable for their own ethical behavior. For a variety of reasons, many of which are discussed later in this chapter, it may be far easier for student leaders to personally model honesty and fairness than for them to proactively and consistently communicate (and defend) the ethical standards of their team or organization.

The five behaviors of ethical leadership are easier to practice in the professional context. For example, leaders in businesses and nonprofits can make ethics an explicit part of their leadership style and agenda (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). They can experiment with the most effective ways to communicate and reinforce how essential it is for everyone in the organization to be honest, fair, and respectful. Business and nonprofit leaders can develop and implement tangible initiatives to reward positive ethical behavior, sharing power, or consistently showing care and concern for others (such as linking promotions to these core behaviors of ethical leadership). Moreover, leaders in the professional world can demonstrate to followers their willingness to discipline individuals who have failed to follow or abide by the clear and explicit ethical standards of the organization. Each...
of these concrete practices and steps may be difficult for a student leader to implement or embody, even if they are in positions of responsibility (such as a sports captain or the president of a fraternity or sorority).

Along an ethical continuum, Trevino and Brown (2004) identified four types of leaders. Some leaders are simply unethical. These leaders practice none of the behaviors described previously. Other leaders are hypocritical; although they may talk a good game (ethically speaking), the words of these leaders serve only to mask their self-interest and narcissism. Probably the most common type is the ethically silent leader. These leaders are fiercely honest and principled; however, they find it difficult—if not impossible—to communicate or defend their ethical standards to others in the group or organization. Finally, there is the ethical leader, the individual who consistently practices all five of the positive behaviors.

**The Benefits of Ethical Leadership**

Over the past decade researchers have identified an impressive range of empirical outcomes associated with the behaviors and practices of ethical leaders. The bottom line is unmistakably clear: the ethical leader is a more effective leader. When leaders are honest, fair, principled, and trustworthy there are real and tangible benefits for their group, team, or organization. Consider the following benefits of becoming an ethical leader. Your team members will:

- trust more,
- be more committed and exert extra effort,
- be less cynical,
- exhibit less counterproductive behavior,
- be more willing to report problems, and
- bully less.

Much of the research on the benefits of ethical leadership is grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that followers learn what to do (or not to do) by modeling the behaviors of those in positions of responsibility, authority, or leadership. In short, we learn what is ethical by listening to and observing others—whether it’s our parents and siblings, peers and friends, teachers in our schools, or supervisors in an organizational setting. Social learning theory helps us to understand why it is so critical for ethical leaders, including student leaders on our college campuses, to model ethical behaviors and reinforce the ethical standards of their group, team, or organization.

**Why Leaders Do Not Always Act Ethically**

At one time or another, all of us have fallen down the “ethical slippery slope.” No one is an ethical saint. Researchers have recently been
investigating the reasons why we are not always ethical (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). In some cases, it is nothing more than having insufficient knowledge or a lack of awareness (e.g., I didn’t know personal calls were not allowed). There are those times, of course, when our self-interest overpowers or trumps our ethical standards (e.g., I cheated on the test because I was afraid of failing). Research suggests, however, that peer pressure is the most significant reason why college students do not always act in an ethical manner (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001).

Historically, colleges and universities have sought to increase the ethical reasoning skills of students as a way to increase the students’ ethical behavior (Kiss & Euben, 2010). Recent research, however, has shown that there is only a modest correlation between ethical reasoning and ethical behavior (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). The problem is not that we cannot make an ethical distinction; it is that we do not have the courage or inner strength to act on what we know is the right course of action (Gentile, 2010).

The research also suggests that context is critical to ethical decisions and actions. Not all ethical situations are created equal. Some situations may evoke a strong ethical response (e.g., I could never steal from a member of my family), whereas other situations will fail to elicit such a visceral reaction. In 1991, Thomas Jones examined the “moral intensity” we give (or do not give) to any ethical situation. Jones (1991) argues that we are all ethical mathematicians, adept at computing the “magnitude of consequences” of an ethical issue (e.g., stealing one dollar is not the same as stealing one hundred). He also emphasizes the importance of “social consensus,” which is the extent to which we perceive the old idiom “everyone is doing it,” whether it be corruption in the workplace or drinking under the legal age.

Bandura (1999) developed a theory of moral disengagement to explain why we may act in an unethical manner. He sought to understand the different reasons why we “deactivate” the cognitive or emotional processes that usually stop or inhibit us from acting unethically. Bandura (1999) posited that there are eight reasons or mechanisms that we may use to morally disengage. All eight have been widely discussed in the ethical leadership literature; two of these mechanisms are especially salient for student leaders.

First, Bandura (2002) suggests that we sometimes act unethically when there is a “displacement of responsibility.” In this situation, members of a group will disengage from any ethical responsibility because they believe that the person in charge, perhaps a supervisor or an upper-class student, has told them that it is okay to engage in the behavior. Second, Bandura posits that we might engage in unethical behavior when there exists a “diffusion of responsibility” (p. 103). This type of moral disengagement occurs when no one in the group feels personally responsible for the group’s collective behavior (e.g., a keg party that gets out of control).

Building on the groundbreaking work of Jones and Bandura, scholars have identified a number of additional situational variables that may
influence our decision to engage in unethical behavior (e.g., Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy, 2013; Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). Following is a listing of these situations and an example of how each of these situations might occur within a university setting:

Performance pressure (us versus them; winning at all costs)—imagine a college athletic team culture in which everyone is so committed to winning that the team leaders look the other way when a few teammates start using steroids to increase their strength.

Threats to self-efficacy (pressure to be successful)—engineering majors who cheat on a final exam because they are in danger of failing a required class.

Decision-making autonomy (nobody will find out)—a student spends club funds in an inappropriate manner because s/he is confident that nobody will ever find out.

Interpersonal conflict (who cares?)—a fraternity brother disregards the rules of his fraternity because the fraternity president is arrogant and a bully.

Bias (friends help friends)—a student leader bypasses an agreed-upon selection process to help a friend secure a coveted position in the organization.

Managing important relationships (wink-wink)—a residence advisor decides to look the other way when it comes to a minor house rule because she really likes and respects the student leader who had violated the rule.

In sum, researchers have identified a significant number of contextual levers that drive unethical behavior, both by single individuals and within groups and organizations (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Trevino et al., 2006). Regrettably, there is far less research on why some individuals (but not others) resist the temptations to engage in unethical behaviors.

What Motivates and Inspires Someone to Become an Ethical Leader?

The short answer to this question is role models (Perry & Nixon, 2005). Whether it is our mother or father, favorite uncle or grandparent, older sibling, or favorite teacher, we know from the literature that our ethical behavior, especially during childhood and early adolescence, is linked to our cognitive and emotional need to be seen in a positive light by those we look up to and admire (Tangney & Dearing, 2004).

But during adolescence, scholars have long posited that the pull and tug of the ethical role model loosens (Lapsley, 2007). What emerges during late adolescence and early adulthood is a psychological concept known as the moral self. Augusto Blasi (1983, 1984, 2004) pioneered understanding of the moral self and the ways in which it motivates and fuels our ethical actions. More recently, and based on Blasi’s initial conception, researchers have been modeling and testing the notion that ethical leaders have a strong
and stable moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Reynolds & Ceramic, 2007).

The idea that a person’s moral identity has motivational power is built on three presuppositions. The first is that individuals with a strong and stable moral identity have internalized a set of ethical commitments and beliefs, such as a commitment to being honest, fair, or kind. These commitments are central and essential to their identity; thus, these individuals are motivated to live by (and model) their commitments (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011). Clearly, identity-conferring commitments extend beyond the ethical domain. For example, some individuals have a strong commitment to their family whereas others have a stable commitment to the practices of a particular religious faith or to the standards of their chosen profession, such as a medical doctor or a military officer.

The second presupposition is that individuals with a strong and stable moral identity have a strong desire to act in ways that affirm and reinforce their ethical commitments. They look for opportunities to walk their talk. They seek out opportunities to enact their moral identity as a way to show fidelity to their own standards of integrity and self-consistency (rather than acting in ways that simply maintain their reputation as an ethical person). Furthermore, these individuals have honed a heightened sense of ethical awareness, a built-in ethical antenna that enables them to recognize when a particular situation or context is ethically charged, even when others might not be so ethically sensitive (Reynolds, 2008; Shao, Aquino, & Freeman, 2008).

Third, individuals with a strong and stable moral identity produce the willpower to overcome the barriers and temptations that we face in our everyday lives. Although all of us are tempted to behave and act in ways that are not fully ethical, individuals with a strong and stable moral identity have developed the resolve and courage, often through practice and the cauldron of previous experience, to resist temptation and firmly act in ways consistent with their identity-conferring commitments (Hannah, Lester, & Vogelgesang, 2005).

Self-authorship is at the heart of the moral identity concept (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Magolda, 1999). Ethical leaders act ethically because that is how they define themselves. They are not motivated to follow ethical standards because of some externally reinforced reason (such as the fear of getting caught or letting other people down); rather, they act ethically because that is the sort of people they authentically are and want to be (Hannah et al., 2005).

Ethical leaders do not simply follow the rules when an ethical situation arises. They are constantly and proactively looking for opportunities to develop personal projects that align with and express their ethical commitments. For example, I know of one student leader who decided to stop saying the word “try.” He avoided telling his friends that he would “try” to get to their game or event, because he was concerned that if he did not
show up he was deceiving his friends. Keeping his promises was important to this student, and he developed a personal project to always keep his promises and to avoid making a promise he thought he might not be able to keep. Indeed, there is growing body of research suggesting that ethical leaders have developed the capacity to (a) critically reflect on past ethical decisions, and (b) self-regulate their future behaviors based on that critical assessment (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011).

Over time, consistently acting in an ethical manner becomes a part of the leader’s character (Hannah & Avolio, 2011). The leader’s ethical commitments, combined with the desire and resolve to act in accordance with those commitments, become the source, standard and fuel of the leader’s ethical behavior (see Chapter 2 in this volume). The most current research suggests that ethical leaders have honed a set of cognitive and affective resources, such as values, goals and behavioral scripts, that they “access and activate” when an ethical situation arises (Aquino et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). As an example, imagine this scenario: during a fraternity meeting a popular member suggests a new pledge activity. The ethical leader will quickly recognize the potential ethical implications of the activity and be able to “access and activate” the appropriate response (a “script”) that results in the fraternity brothers openly discussing whether the activity is or is not an example of hazing. The “script” is often just a few words that enables the ethical leader to properly frame the issue (e.g., “Guys, we made a decision not to haze our new pledges, so before we go any further we need to talk about whether this activity is hazing or not”).

Scholars and researchers are currently testing the moral identity model to explain and predict the motivations and behaviors of the ethical leader, especially in situations or contexts where other leaders, in response to similar pressures and influences, might fall down the slippery ethical slope (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012; Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). In sum, the growing evidence is compelling: a leader who has a strong moral identity—an identity central to his or her sense of self—will be more likely to act in ways consistent with his or her ethical commitments than leaders who do not have a strong moral identity. The real challenge, and one that has yet to be examined by scholars, is to understand why some leaders have developed a strong moral identity whereas other leaders have not.

**Five Practical Recommendations**

Many of the behaviors of ethical leadership are already embedded in various leadership models discussed and used on college campuses and some high school programs, including servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), the exemplary practices of leadership developed by Kouzes and Posner (2007), and the relational leadership model developed by Komives, Lucas, & McMahon (2013). The following five recommendations are offered as
suggestive stepping stones for professionals seeking opportunities to more intentionally integrate the ethical domain into the support they currently provide to student leaders.

**Recommendation 1: Use the Language of “Live Your Values”**. It is folly to think that a traditional-age college freshman or sophomore has formed a strong and stable set of ethical commitments. Yet are we doing enough, as educators, to help our students identify what they stand for from an ethical perspective?

The idea of “living your values” often helps people understand the ways in which their values and beliefs dynamically shape who they are and the decisions they make (Thompson, 2009). Like the idea of a “moral compass,” the notion of “live your values” orients us. It tells us the direction to take, especially if we are lost or disoriented.

The language of “live your values” is suggestive, because it is personal (compared to suggesting to students that they work on their moral identity). During their high school and college years, we can find ways to inspire and challenge our students to identify and live their values. In short, the language of “live your values” suggests that students can begin to “own” their ethical commitments rather than merely “borrow” the beliefs and values of their parents or religious tradition (for a review on the importance of “psychological ownership,” see Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003).

*Questions to ponder*: What are you doing to help your student leaders to “live their values”? How are you integrating the language of beliefs and values into your leader development programs and expectations?

**Recommendation 2: Do Not Underestimate the Power of Ethical Priming**. There is a growing body of research that focuses on the benefits of subconscious priming on ethical behavior (Welsh & Ordonez, 2014). The notion of subconscious priming is simple: we do not always respond to an ethical situation as if we were ethical accountants tallying the ethical bottom line. Sometimes we reflexively and automatically respond in an ethical manner without forethought. The emerging research suggests that we do so because our ethical beliefs and commitments are “triggered” through exposure to related stimuli. A classic example: a student reads a story about bravery and courage for a morning class and in the afternoon he or she immediately responds in a fair or honest way to an ethical situation, without consciously thinking about it.

In short, ethical reminders work! The research by Welsh and Ordonez (2014) is confirming what we already know from practice: subtle signals in a variety of contexts can make a difference, ranging from ethical symbols, posters and slogans to a variety of ethical rituals, stories and ceremonies.

*Questions to ponder*: Are you using subconscious priming on your campus? Have you explored the different ways that symbols, posters, slogans, rituals, stories, and ceremonies can serve as ethical cues?

**Recommendation 3: Talk to Your Students About the Dark Side of Leadership**. In his book *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership*, Craig
Johnson (2001) applies Parker Palmer’s language of shadow and light to help us better equip our students with the tools to be ethical. Johnson (2001) argues that leaders have a unique set of ethical challenges, and four of these are especially salient to the college student leader: *the challenges of power, privilege, deceit, and loyalty*.

No matter a person’s age or the context in which he or she leads, all leaders struggle with the shadow of power and its corrosive effect. The literature is replete with examples of leaders who abuse their position because of their inability to recognize the shadow of privilege. The shadow of deceit concerns the various ways leaders violate the privacy of others, use information for personal benefit, or prevent members of the group from sharing information that others have a legitimate right to know. Perhaps most significantly, leaders engage in unethical behavior because of their (misplaced) loyalty. Clearly, the shadow of loyalty is a burden that confronts almost all student leaders.

**Questions to ponder**: Have you integrated the “shadow side” into your leadership programming? In what ways do you openly discuss with your student leaders the challenges of power, privilege, deceit and loyalty?


The time is ripe for student affairs professionals to help crack the moral identity code. In ways large and small, they spend every day finding ways to develop and strengthen the moral identity of their students. College campuses, and especially the ethical challenges that student leaders face, offer a wonderful arena for scholars and researchers to learn more about the ways in which a moral identity forms and coheres.

**Questions to ponder**: As a student affairs professional, what have you learned that might be useful to moral identity researchers? Might there be opportunities for you to collaborate with scholars on your campus interested in ethical leadership and moral identity?

**Recommendation 5: Gently Prod the “Ethical Silent Leader” to Be Less Silent.** This is the most challenging recommendation and perhaps the most critical. Recall that the ethically silent leader is a highly ethical person but one who is unable (or unwilling) to influence others in his or her group to be ethical. This likely describes many student leaders. We know from personal narratives that there exists a real cost to students who take a principled stand against the status quo. It is often far easier for a student leader to comply, stay silent, or simply go along when the group is engaged in unethical behavior—even if doing so compromises his or her values and commitments. Moreover, recent scholarship suggests that individuals who do the right thing are often resented by those in the group who don’t (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). In sum, it is not easy to take the
ethical high ground when it means that you are more or less telling your friends that they are on the low ground.

But ethical silence is a powerful form of communication, sending a powerful message. It is critical, therefore, for educators to find ways to equip their student leaders with the skills and confidence to explicitly communicate the ethical expectations of their group, team, or organization, as well as holding others (especially their friends) accountable for their ethical behavior. In short: leaders do not let their friends act unethically.

Questions to ponder: How do you help your student leaders find ways to explain and promote the ethical standards of their group or organization? What strategies have you used to help student leaders hold others in their group accountable for their own ethical behavior?

Conclusion

The study of ethical leadership is no longer in the theoretical wilderness. Hundreds of scholars and researchers are trying to understand this essential approach to leadership. If there is one area that scholars in the field all agree upon, it’s that ethical leadership is not easy. Gray areas abound. There exists a band of acceptable dishonesty that we cannot just wish away (Ariely, 2012).

Yet we are also beginning to conceptually understand and empirically confirm that leaders who have a strong and stable moral identity are more ethical. Our core challenge as educators is to help our students recognize that they will need a moral compass to effectively navigate the myriad of challenges they will face as leaders.

References


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