

Ethical Leadership: How to Do Well by Doing Right

By

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When company scandals dominate the news, people start to bat the word “ethics” around as though it were a conversational shuttlecock or a nicety that merits an occasional nod. Neither a fad nor a trend, ethics is the foundation upon which successful organizations build their structures—the base upon which all else depends. Further, ethics underpins our capitalistic system and defines how we do business: We agree that I will provide a product in a certain quantity, at a given price, by a pre-determined date. You agree to pay me. If we both follow the rules of engagement—the ethics or rules involved—we both emerge satisfied. If one of us abdicates responsibility, all else fails. It’s really quite simple.

Well, it should be quite simple, but because human perceptions come into play, of course, it isn’t. For instance, at one point in U.S. history, the constitution allowed for the ownership of slaves and prevented women from voting. Great minds considered both “right” and in the best interest of the common good. Similarly, at one time, people considered a person’s private life separate from his professional life, but things change.

Point that out to former Boeing CEO, Harry Stonecipher, whom the board ousted in 2005 for an extramarital affair. Apparently the affair did not violate a specific company prohibition because the female executive did not directly report to Stonecipher. However, the conduct violated Boeing’s business Code of Conduct that prohibited acts that “hurt the company’s reputation.” Ironically, Stonecipher was responsible for implementing the ethics code, which he forced all Boeing employees to sign once a year, that ultimately cost him the job.

Sometimes timing and cultural mores play a role in the perception of ethics, as they did for General Joseph Ralston, former vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In June of 1997, most thought Ralston would advance to the number one military position—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Certainly, former Defense Secretary William Cohen did. Then Cohen learned that Ralston had engaged in an extramarital affair thirteen years earlier while Ralston and his first wife had been separated. Initially Cohen stated that the affair wouldn't "automatically disqualify" Ralston from becoming the nation's No. 1 military officer. However, coming on the heels of the Kelly Flinn incident, it did.

Flinn, an Air Force Academy graduate and the first female B-52 pilot—a top performer by any measure—faced court-martial in May of 1997 for disobeying an order to end an affair with a civilian who was married to an enlisted woman in Flinn's chain of command. (Flinn was later allowed to resign). Both Ralston and Flinn had violated the military code of conduct, The Uniform Code of Military Justice, which prohibits adultery, and both paid a price.

Many sympathized with Ralston since, although technically married at the time of his affair, he was separated from his wife. Cohen and others at the Pentagon invested time and energy trying to show why Ralston's transgression wasn't as severe as Flinn's. According to them, whereas Flinn had lied about her affair and disobeyed an order to stop seeing her boyfriend, Ralston had his fling while separated. Further, when Ralston had his affair, he was attending the National War College and had no troops under his command, and therefore, according to Cohen, didn't compromise "good order and discipline" as Flinn had. All this happened seven months before their Commander in Chief uttered his infamous line: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." General Ralston withdrew his name from consideration

for the Chairman position and continued to serve on active duty for six more years; Kelly Flinn resigned; and Clinton became the quintessential butt of late-night humor—all related to differing and changing views of ethics.

Integrity is not a raincoat you put on when conditions indicate you should. It is a condition that guides your life—not just a set of protocols. Successful leaders don't acquire their ethical foundations solely by learning general rules. They also develop them—those deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable them to put their understanding of integrity into practice in ways that are suitable—through practice. Similarly, these leaders understand that they can't "teach" ethics to others by requiring their signatures on a statement. Instead, they *exemplify* and model ethics in their personal and professional lives.

At a visceral level, effective leaders understand Hemingway's observation that "What is moral is what you feel good after. What is immoral is what you feel bad after. Going beyond awareness to actually practice integrity is one of the things that separates great leaders from the also-rans.