THE CASE FOR LEADER MORALITY

Marilyn Gist & Alan Mulally

The challenges in our world make leadership more important than ever. Whether we think of climate and ecology, government and politics, business, or our social support systems, tremendous work is needed. If we are to resolve key problems and leave a world that's healthy enough for the next generation to survive and thrive, leaders need to come together and truly work together to address our challenges. Instead, we observe many leaders who pursue personal agendas driven by their own egos or goals that provide organizational wins with limited concern for their larger impact. The time is ripe for the topic of morality to take a central role in discussions of leadership. By embracing morality, leaders can serve our larger self-interest and that of our families and communities.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks claimed that the divisiveness of our times can be traced to the loss of a shared moral code that guided us for so long. In his final, compelling book, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (2020), he began:

A free society is a moral achievement … Societal freedom cannot be sustained by market economics and liberal democratic politics alone. It needs a third element: morality, a concern for the welfare of others, an active commitment to justice and compassion, a willingness to ask not just what is good for me but what is good for "all of us together." It is about "Us," not "Me"; about "We," not "I."

Although leadership is widely discussed, interest in it often focuses on behavior, strategy, and systems with an eye toward improving outcomes. In business, those outcomes are typically financial and often driven by the short-term demands of investors. In legislative arms of government, the outcomes tend to emphasize winning in ways that appeal to one's constituents over others. In the nonprofit sector, outcomes focus on securing funding for service delivery, often with limited accountability for return on investment.

So, in selecting leaders who will deliver well on these outcomes, we typically emphasize personal drive and people skills. Largely missing from our discussion of leadership is morality—the core virtues an individual has that guide how he or she actually determines what is the right thing to do and behaves accordingly. This article explains what leader

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morality is and why it is important for us to elevate this topic in discussions of leadership.

Defining Morality

Let's begin by clarifying what we mean by leader morality. A current review of major dictionaries showed the following definitions of morality:

- Merriam-Webster indicates that morality means "conformity to ideals of right human conduct."

- Collins states that morality is "The belief that some behavior is right and acceptable, and that other behavior is wrong." It further states that "morality is a system of principles and values concerning people's behavior, which is generally accepted by a society…."

- Oxford defines morality as, "Principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong," "a particular system of values and principles of conduct," and "The extent to which an action is right or wrong."

These definitions are rather consistent. In essence, morality refers to human judgment that some things are right while others are wrong, and that social standards or norms exist to distinguish and guide those determinations. This implies two things:

1. Outcomes do matter. Not everything goes. Some things are right, and others are not.

2. Judgment about behavior and outcomes is not arbitrary. It is not entirely up to individual opinion but based on social norms (widely accepted expectations).

By extension, leader morality places these two considerations squarely in the context of leadership itself. Leaders have the power to direct and implement

outcomes. So, it is even more important that we acknowledge that outcomes do matter and that there are social norms for judging whether behavior and outcomes are "right." Further, "doing the right thing" means doing what is best for the greater or common good. This is quite different than the common practice we note of leaders pursuing ego-driven outcomes or results that benefit their own organization or constituents at the expense of others.

When Things Go Morally Wrong

There are many examples of problems that trace back to poor leadership decisions. Although some of these may rest on ignorance or simply bad judgment, many others result from a weak moral foundation. Let's briefly explore just two of these:

1. Decisions by some pharmaceutical leaders to encourage physicians to prescribe opiates widely for patient pain relief—despite knowing that these products are highly addictive. Although the courts have revealed prior knowledge and misdeeds, and financial settlements have been extensive, the harm to individuals and society of wide-ranging opiate addiction is tragic—and traces back to leadership.

2. Decisions by leaders of some social media platforms to use algorithms that widely distribute user posts that draw the most "engagement" (because this causes even more people to engage, thereby enhancing advertising revenue). Yet it's been known for some time that engagement is

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highest when content is inflammatory (e.g., when it generates outrage/anger because it is socially controversial, conspiratorial, or shocking though factually inaccurate). The negative impact on society includes increasing political polarization, escalating racism, and growing violence.

In these and many other situations, leaders may be optimizing profit but do so at great expense to others. Since our world is diverse and we interact globally, leader morality must consider the global and downstream reach of leaders' behavior. A solid moral foundation doesn't guarantee effective leadership, but it is a necessary condition for it. Power in the hands of people *without* strong, moral behavior is very dangerous—whether in business or government. Thus, we are making a clear and strong call for leaders to embrace morality as the proper foundation for decisions and action. In Figure 1, we offer the following model of leader morality:

Leader Humility is primary because it drives the moral virtues of honesty and courage. Marilyn Gist, in the 2020 book *The Extraordinary Power of Leader Humility*, defines humility as feeling and displaying deep regard for others' dignity (sense of self-worth). This requires genuine, rock solid respect for others' dignity. And because none of us exists in isolation, regard for an individual's dignity must include regard for the systems that help the individual survive and thrive. This is often called the "Greater Good." However, we have found that the term "Greater Good" is often construed to mean what is good for one group (i.e., mine) over another's. An alternative term, "the
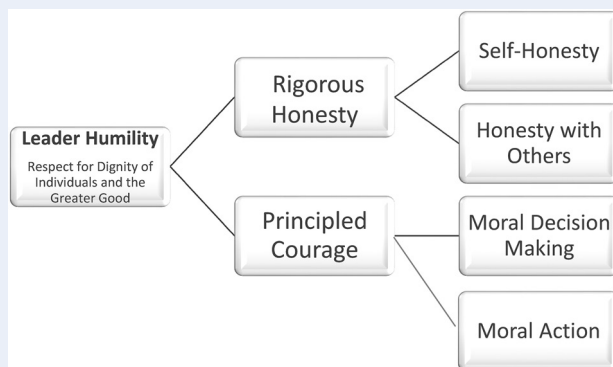
Commons" clarifies here that we are referring to goods, services, and systems that support shared community life—that which serves the greater good for all people (such as this planet). When we refer to the Greater Good or the Commons, we mean, profitable growth for all, governance that solves problems in ways that benefit all, nonprofit services that aid the needy and provide strong accountability to funders, and so on.

So, leader humility encompasses:

- **Respect for all individuals** – Leaders must recognize that, across our differences, we all have and need a sense of self-worth. What comprises our sense of self-worth is individualized yet still must be respected when we interact. Leader humility guides leaders to embrace such behaviors as keeping one's ego in check, no joking at others' expense, including others in decisions that will affect them, contributing to their development, etc.

- **Respect for the Greater Good –** Leaders need to pursue not only personal, short-term, narrow gain, but beneficial growth for all because we are interdependent. In supporting the Greater Good, leaders must consider the planet (its health and climate), health and housing, and the highest social order of humankind (democratic principles, diversity/equity/inclusion, education, wholesome vs. damaging products). Because leader humility requires respect for the Greater Good, humility requires leaders to genuinely balance the needs of competing stakeholders, short-term profit with public needs, etc. Common concepts such as servant vs. autocratic leadership and a focus on "We" vs. "I" are geared toward respect for the Commons. In an excellent article, "Innovating for the Greater Good," Michele Hunt (2017*, Leader to Leader*) highlighted the B Corporation's "Declaration of Interdependence," which is purpose-driven and creates benefit for all stakeholders. She described several additional organizations that have had significant, positive impact on the Commons.

FIGURE 1. TOP THREE MORAL VIRTUES FOR LEADERS

Although these summaries show that humility—respecting the dignity of individuals and the Greater Good—is behavioral, humility is deepened, amplified,

Love recognizes that all people are inherently valuable.

and most consistent when leaders are oriented toward love and service. Love recognizes that all people are inherently valuable—meaning they are worthy of love and respect. Thus, we will want to support individual dignity. And the orientation toward service helps us willingly pursue the Greater Good for all.

When leaders genuinely hold the virtue of humility, they recognize that they cannot respect the dignity of others without being honest. Dishonesty violates others' dignity and is fundamentally immoral, yet too many leaders lack this critical moral virtue. The practice of rigorous honesty is essential for trust and helps others work with the leader more effectively. However, being honest with others requires us to first be honest with ourselves.

- **Self-honesty**: Some leaders lack self-awareness; in turn, they lack self-honesty, so they are unable to be honest with others. It takes confidence to review one's behavior, acknowledge weaknesses, mistakes, and personal motives. Self-objectivity often requires feedback from others. Leaders need to seek this out and encourage truth-tellers so that they are honest with themselves.

- **Honesty with Others**: We acknowledge that leaders handle sensitive information that often should not be disclosed. However, rather than sharing what they can or indicating that there are some things they aren't at liberty to disclose, some leaders intentionally lie and mislead. Others engage in behaviors like using excessive spin about their goals and behavior, game-playing, outright cheating,

taking credit for others' work, etc., which are all forms of dishonesty. These have negative effects on others (and others' dignity) in the long run.

There is often a gap between what leaders say is important and what they do when it's time to make decisions or act. To demonstrate genuine humility, leaders must also summon the principled courage that is required for moral decision making and action.

- **Moral Decision-making –** Achieving goals (ends) does not justify any means. Leaders need moral courage to make the right decisions in the face of ethical dilemmas. Certainly, there are gray areas for which reasonable people may make different choices (in these, multiple options will be considered ethical or appropriate). But there are many situations in which the pressures from boards, bosses, vendors, customers, or other stakeholders can urge leaders to behave immorally. Also, money, sex, and fame lure many leaders to immoral behavior. Having the courage/fortitude to discern what is morally right is critically important for leaders. James K. Dittmar's article, "Ethical Decision-Making: Getting Better at Doing Right" (2021, *Leader to Leader*), provides excellent guidance on identifying ethical situations and using careful process, virtuous perspective, and your person to resolve them. In describing "person," he clarifies that, "the phrase moral agent refers to your capacity and ability to act morally or ethically…" [to] take a hard look into the mirror and ask, "Am I able and willing to live out my moral values?"

- **Moral Action** – Finally, principled courage calls for moral action. This may be as straightforward as working hard to achieve goals, delivering one's best vs. over-delegation or reliance on political behavior to achieve, and embracing accountability for outcomes as opposed to blaming others or scapegoating. However, it may also mean taking controversial action such as: advocating for policies and practices that are less popular with senior leaders or boards, challenging peers whose behaviors violate the dignity of others, or refusing to engage in business practices that may bring financial advantage but are morally wrong.

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Implications and Recommendations

As our world has become more divided and individualized, we need a return to core moral virtues of humility, honesty, and courage to guide leader behavior. In the words of Frances Hesselbein, "Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. It is the quality and character of the leader that determines the performance and results."

The model above clarifies the top three virtues all leaders should have. Yet it also leads to an important question: What are right and wrong visions, strategies, plans, beliefs, values, and behaviors? This can be answered by thinking about the Greater Good—the good of all our stakeholders. For example:

- Do we want our children to have a healthy planet on which to live?

- Do we want a social order that respects all people and has little crime?

- Do we want to resolve problems like poverty and extreme wealth disparity? Access to affordable housing and health care?

In our failure to come together, we have created extensive problems. And people are watching leaders in all sectors with three questions in mind: Who are you? Where are we going? Do you see me? It is now critical for us to come together in a way that will keep the world going. Doing that requires that we move beyond our current level of divisiveness and fragmentation. We need leaders to create an environment that truly values all people.

It is time we place the spotlight on leader morality—on doing the right thing relentlessly for individuals and the Greater Good. Our selection and voting practices need to advance leaders who have three moral virtues to help us move forward: humility, honesty, and courage. And we need for all leaders to come together so we can work together on solutions to our pressing challenges.

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