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## *Misconceptions of Ethical Leadership:*

# How to Avoid Potential Pitfalls

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Corporate leaders have enjoyed life in the national spotlight. That spotlight used to shine brightly on their accomplishments, but today its glare scrutinizes the ethical misdeeds of far too many business leaders. Anyone who has followed the wave of corporate scandals that began with the collapse of Enron Corp., in 2001, will recognize names like Ken Lay, John Rigas, and Bernie Ebbers. They are but a few of the high-profile leaders who fell from grace because of their involvement in corporate scandals. With so many examples of leaders behaving badly, many questions come to mind: Why have so many of our business leaders demonstrated poor ethical leadership? Were these leaders good people gone bad, corrupted by the attendant wealth and power of the executive suite? Or were these individuals rotten from the beginning? Can we develop more ethical leaders?

Unfortunately, we will never know for sure why these particular leaders did what they did. However, business ethicists and leadership researchers have been studying leaders (both positive and negative) in order to develop a better understanding of ethical leadership in the workplace. Ethical leadership seems easy in theory. After all, if every leader (and employee) acted honestly, treated others the way that they wanted to be treated (i.e., The Golden Rule), and remained

immune to greed, then there would be no leadership scandals to discuss. Recent events remind us that ethical leadership is more difficult in practice.

The simplest and most obvious explanation for the ethical lapses of our business leaders is poor character, but it would be a serious mistake to blame all of their misdeeds on personal weaknesses and defects. In fact, the tendency to attribute others' behavior to individual factors such as character more frequently than to acknowledge alternative influences (e.g., peer pressure) on behavior has a name. Psychologists call it the *fundamental attribution error*, and it occurs frequently whenever people try to explain why leaders do the things they do.

Clearly, leaders' character influences their ethical performance at work. Many management scholars have emphasized the role that strong character and principles play in effective leadership of self and others. Leaders must rely on their "inner compasses" to point them in the right direction. Without one, a leader is like a captain of a ship sailing aimlessly along. However, piloting a ship requires more than a good sense of direction. Good captains have a good compass and know how to use it, but they also must know how to sail a ship, motivate a crew, and manage a journey. Similarly, decades of research on ethics and leadership

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indicates that leadership (ethical or otherwise) is a function of many factors and not just the result of the “right” character and integrity. So what is ethical leadership?

## WHAT IS ETHICAL LEADERSHIP?

Ethical leadership has typically been defined in terms of *normative* business ethics. A normative approach to leadership and other subjects in business ethics is concerned with defining how individuals “ought” to behave in the workplace. For example, philosophers and theologians have considered which frameworks and principles ought to be used to make ethical decisions, debated whether a particular leader is an ethical leader, or judged whether a certain style of leadership or type of influence is ethical.

Fewer theorists and practitioners have focused on the perceptual aspects of ethical leadership. What are called *descriptive* approaches to business ethics attempt to understand how people actually perceive things like ethical leadership as well as to investigate the antecedents and outcomes of those perceptions. Questions such as—How do people define ethical leadership? What characteristics are associated with perceived ethical leadership? And, what are the consequences of being perceived as an ethical leader?—have only been recently considered by leadership scholars following a descriptive research agenda.

In one of the first descriptive studies of ethical leadership, Linda Treviño and colleagues interviewed senior executives and ethics officers in a variety of industries to understand how people describe ethical leadership. The researchers found that ethical leaders were described as *moral persons* who are honest, trustworthy, and fair. Ethical leaders were seen as principled decision makers who care about people and the greater good of society. They are known for behaving ethically in their personal and professional lives.

The researchers also found that ethical leaders were described as *moral managers*.

Moral managers proactively attempt to influence followers’ ethical and unethical behavior. They make ethics salient by communicating clear ethical standards, intentionally role modeling ethical behavior, and by using rewards and discipline to hold followers accountable for ethical conduct.

Treviño and colleagues’ research indicates that an ethical leader can be described as someone who is a moral person and moral manager. Perceptions of ethical leadership are a function of who the leader is (i.e., a moral person with strong character) as well as what the leader does (i.e., a moral manager who leads others to behave ethically). Leaders must have both elements in order to be seen as an ethical leader by those around them. In subsequent research, my colleagues and I defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making.”

The purpose of this article is to address the “fact and fiction” of ethical leadership. There are many misconceptions about ethical leadership (like the idea that ethical leadership is solely a function of character or other individual factors). Ignorance about these myths can lead even a well-intentioned leader to commit the same ethical missteps made by others. It is essential then, to help leaders chart these potentially treacherous waters so that they can lead themselves and others more ethically and effectively.

## MISCONCEPTION #1: ETHICAL LEADERS MUST NOT WORRY ABOUT HOW THEY ARE PERCEIVED BY OTHERS

Most would agree that ethical leaders are individuals who do the right thing, even when it is unpopular. Ethical leaders should be guided by their own inner compasses and must have the courage of their convictions. McClelland argued that great leaders should

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