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The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaquaSaying sorry: Ethical leadership and the act of public apology^{☆,☆☆}Sanderijn Cels^{☆,1}

Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, 79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

A B S T R A C T

How do top representatives exercise ethical leadership in the context of public apologies? This paper examines public apologies made by corporate and government leaders for organizational wrongdoing. Conducting qualitative case-research, our deductive inquiry demonstrates that ethical leadership strategies that have been formulated for organizational contexts are utilized in the public arena and adapted to meet the particular demands of this context. We also inductively derive four aggregate strategies that leaders employ: “articulating values in relation to past and future”; “defining the wrongdoing”; “constructing moral communities” and “differentiating responsibilities”. We discuss the findings vis-à-vis the body of literature on ethical leadership, and identify some thorny ethical issues for further investigation.

Introduction

A decade ago, [Brown and Treviño \(2006, p. 595\)](#) argued that the field of “ethical leadership remains largely unexplored, offering researchers opportunities for new discoveries and leaders opportunities to improve their effectiveness.” Since then, much scholarship has sought to understand the notion of ethical leadership and unravel its workings, whether through efforts to conceptualize the phenomenon or empirical explorations of its manifestations. Underlying many studies, including this one, are the assumptions that norms and values guide actions and that we can study leaders' actions in order to identify and reveal these norms and values—for example, by investigating the decisions that they make in stressful situations ([Selart & Johansen, 2011](#)) or the way they deal with potential conflicts of interest ([Ritvo, Ohlsen, & Holland, 2004](#)).

Public apologies—those instances when leaders, on behalf of the organizations that they represent, acknowledge responsibility for violating a moral norm and express regret—are particularly revealing actions. Yet, such apologies have received surprisingly little attention in the field of ethical leadership, despite their increasing frequency over the last decades ([Gibney, Howard-Hassmann, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2008](#); [Maclachan, 2010](#)). Most news consumers could easily cite a few examples in recent memory. In 2009, for example, Toyota's president apologized in the Japanese National Press Club for a fatal crash that led to the recall of close to 4 million cars ([Tabichi & Maynard, 2009](#)). In 2010, British Petroleum (BP) CEO Tony Hayward apologized for the Gulf oil spill in a video advertisement. He referred to it as “a tragedy that never should have happened” and said that he was “deeply sorry” ([BP, 2010](#)). In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized in Parliament for laws and policies that inflicted “profound grief, suffering, and loss” to Aboriginal peoples ([Australian Government, 2008](#)). His successor offered government apologies in 2013 for past policies that encouraged unwed mothers to give up their babies for adoption to married couples. In 2015, in a video statement on YouTube,

[☆] This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

^{☆☆} The author would like to thank the members of her research team, Faraaz Mahomed, Juan Necochea, Gaylen Moore, and also thanks the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their comments which improved this work greatly.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sanderijn_cels@hks.harvard.edu.

¹ Fellow Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard Kennedy School.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.04.001>

Received 10 February 2016; Received in revised form 1 April 2017; Accepted 7 April 2017

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the CEO of Volkswagen said he was sorry for cheating to evade emissions compliance standards for some diesel-fueled car models (Volkswagen, 2015).

Apologies are relevant to the study of ethical leadership for at least three reasons. First, they are *moral* acts in the sense that they intend “to restore conflicts and somehow restore an antecedent moral order” of which both offender and victims are part, but which has been violated (Tavuchis, 1991, p. 113). (The terms ethical and moral are interchangeable in this paper.) Through apologies, leaders publicly re-subscribe to the moral principles that have been violated. In doing so, they have to make judgments about the nature and scope of the violation and the exact principles underlying the wrong, while considering the political, legal, and financial consequences of those judgments. For example, does a Dutch government representative apologizing for postcolonial misdeeds express regret for *all* the postcolonial atrocities that the Dutch army committed in Indonesia, or does he single out a few especially violent excesses? While the first option might inspire moral praise from Indonesian addressees the latter might be a prudent hedge against a massive number of potential claims for financial compensation.

Second, apologies require leaders to define specific moral entities. These include at least a party to which the apology is addressed (often called the “victim group”) and a party that violated a norm (the “perpetrator” or “offender” group) on whose behalf leaders speak (Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). They have to decide who exactly owes the apology and who owns a moral right to receive it. These are consequential decisions. Does the Toyota chief speak on behalf of the entire company or does he single out a specific department that has committed a wrong? Does the BP executive address merely those directly affected by the oil spill, or does he extend the message to the public at large (BBC, 2015)?

Third, apologizers have to establish themselves as moral authorities who are capable of directing people's attention to the issues at stake (Trevino et al., 2000). For their statement to carry weight they must be seen as persons who can speak decisively about norms and values (Friedman, 1990). More precisely, they have to make sure that 1) their audiences accept their judgments in matters of right and wrong; 2) they appear capable of leading their organization towards higher moral ground; and 3) they are able to implement practical measures to do better and not repeat the wrong. The German CEO of Volkswagen, who apologized for cheating over emission standards compliance, asked explicitly for trust in his leadership and do better, but he was fired just a few days after making his statement (Volkswagen, 2015).

In a highly-mediatized arena, leaders' vulnerability as moral authorities is on vivid display. Having to admit wrongdoing does not enhance their moral standing, and doing so before a wronged party while cameras are rolling increases their vulnerability. The addressees may well refuse the gesture. Leaders can do their best to generate a favorable response, but it remains to be seen if the victims and the wider public are willing to accept the statement. If they do not, their reply will “...presumably be understood by the offender as the withholding of forgiveness,” states philosopher Griswold (2007, p. 58), which could further embarrass the apologizer.

Moreover, media outlets are free to spin the story however they like, and the media's “wish for décor, plots, for cliffhangers, or for [...] conflicts” (Hajer, 2009) gives the resulting productions and presentations their own “media logic” (Berger, 1988, p. 204). This logic often follows a “logic of drama” that tends to paint actors as villains and victims—“characters which lie in men's minds,” in the words of philosopher Mead (1934, p. 257). It is often the fate of the apologizer to play the first character and meet the expectations that come with it—by profusely accepting blame. (Media may well enjoy the spectacle of a well-paid CEO crawling in the dust.) Thus, leaders must satisfy the media's hunger for a full mea culpa while trying to avoid alienating those they lead by implicating them all in villainy. In attending to the media logic on one side and the representative function of the leader on the other, the act of apology becomes something of a tightrope walk.

Up until this point, public apologies have been discussed in studies of ethical leadership from a practical and normative point of view (Barling, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Kellerman, 2006). Little theorizing has been done around this phenomenon. There are several reasons for this. First, descriptive studies in the field have tended to focus on *organizational* leadership, directing attention towards every day, internal actions within organizations rather than performances made in the public arena. We have no data of internal apologies that are offered behind closed doors in organizational contexts – which is unfortunate, because this internal act of ethical leadership would lend itself well for research that is informed by theories of organizational ethical leadership. Next, despite the recent increase of *public* apologies they are still relatively rare. They are not an obvious starting point for research—especially when research aims to arrive at generalized statements about specific leadership interventions and their effects. As a result, the body of literature on ethical leadership does not provide a full conceptual framework for qualitative analysis of public apologies by organizational leaders. To arrive at such a framework, those who wish to study these acts can borrow concepts from works that are tightly positioned in other academic areas. (Apologies have been the subject of theoretical study in many disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology.) Alternatively, they can ignore existing frameworks and rely on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A third option is to identify a framework in ethical leadership theory that can function as a starting point for empirical research, and to pair deductive analysis with inductive inquiry. Looking to theory avoids the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water: before engaging in grounded theory approaches, one can establish if, and how, existing frameworks fall short.

Through deductive and inductive inquiry of government and corporate cases, we aim to identify the strategies that apologizers employ to exercise ethical leadership in the context of public apologies. These strategies have remained understudied, and our expectation is that the avenue of analysis taken in this paper will enable scholars to build on and expand theory of ethical leadership. We will end this article with a discussion of the findings, their relevance vis-à-vis the body of literature on ethical leadership, and suggestions for further research.

Approach

The question that we seek to answer is how leaders assert ethical leadership—consciously or not—when they apologize in public.

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