

Servant Leadership, Ethics and the Domains of Leadership

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The author argues that many of the questions of leadership ethics may be addressed through the lens provided by two essential questions. First, is the process of leadership ethical? Is it ethical to use an influence relationship of any type to attempt to determine the values, objectives and goals of a community? This initial question may, in turn, be further reduced to the determination of whether the leadership process is non-coercive and engaged in voluntarily by both followers and leaders, and whether the degree of mutuality of the agreed upon goals is adequate. Transactional, transformational, and servant leadership may be sequentially applied to satisfy these requirements of ethicality. However, the requirements are not fully satisfied until servant leadership is employed. The second essential question is whether the content of the leadership, that is, the change intended by the community is itself ethical. Classical theories of ethics may be used to address this latter question.

The Relationship Between Ethics and Leadership

Before one can address the relationship between ethics and the servant leader as a world changer, our central domain, one must first address the broader question of the relationship between leadership and ethics in general. Perhaps the most pressing issue here is the lack of scholarly research and writing on the subject of leadership ethics as distinct from business or management ethics (Ciulla, 1995; Rost, 1995). Indeed, the seminal issue in the minds of at least some authors is the lack of definitional precision. Rost (1993), who offered the leadership community what was arguably the most precise definition of leadership when he said, “Leadership is an influence

relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 102), later returned to and modified this definition. Contemplating the relationship between leadership and ethics, he subsequently substituted the word *collaborator* for *follower* in order to adapt his definition more fully to what he believes is the postindustrial, 21st century world of leadership (Rost, 1995). While Rost can be strident and therefore off-putting in his criticism of other scholars, he offers a useful lens through which to view the issue of leadership ethics. Rost (1995) argues that this question can be subdivided into a duality of analyses. First, he argues, is the issue related to the process or performance of leadership. He argues that the scholar, when analyzing this aspect of leadership must ask: “Is the way that leadership is being done at this moment in time ethical” (p. 135)? Secondly, he maintains that one must address the content of leadership, asking: “Are the proposed changes (decisions, policies, positions) that the leaders and collaborators intend for the organization morally acceptable or, in a word, ethical” (p. 135).

The Process Issue

Rost (1995) argues that, in assessing the ethicality of the leadership process, a further two considerations must be assessed. The first, he maintains, is the character of the influence relationship, while the second is the degree of mutuality present in the determination of the purposes and the changes sought. He rather quickly addresses these by arguing that ethicality is assured if “...the people in the relationship (not just the leaders) use noncoercive, multidirectional strategies to influence people and if the changes that the leaders and collaborators agree upon reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 135). Other scholars, however, argue that ethicality in the influence relationship is far from this simple. Hollander (1995) argues that the leader-follower relationship, that is, the influence process, is central to the question of ethicality and fraught with its own issues “...concerning how followers are involved, used, or abused” (p. 56).

Ethics and the Influence Relationship

I would argue that before we can consider the nature of the influence relationship, we must grapple with the ethical questions posed by its very existence. At the core of this issue is the question as to whether it is at all ethical for leaders to attempt to influence the values, purposes, and goals of

the followers, or does the very act of influence deprive them of free will? Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) bring this question to the surface, noting that the modern (or should we say postmodern?) propensity for individual liberty, justice and utility create an atomistic view of human action wherein individual goals and purposes must take precedence over those of the community. Indeed, they note that libertarians, the likes of Robert Nozick and Ayn Rand, would object to any exercise of leadership. They would, according to Bass & Steidlemeier (1999), view any such exercise of influence as antithetical to the exercise of individual liberty and free will. Bass and Steidlmeier later dismiss this criticism, noting that, by definition, the leadership process involves community rather than individual action. Leadership has more in common, they note, with the Human Relations Movement, given the movement's focus on "...shared values, equality, power sharing, consensus, and participative decision-making"(1999, p. 14).

Woodall's (1996) discussion of leader influence in the context of cultural change continues to explore this question. She notes that the very attempt to carry out organizational change, particularly cultural change, is fraught with ethical peril. She analyzes two parallel cultural change processes using Lewin's Unfreeze – Change – Refreeze theory and chronicles a number of ethical questions that trouble her. First, the very need for an organizational change may present ethical issues. Who determines the need? Is it management? Is consensus reached concerning the need? Does the very change upon which the organization is embarking represent the free will of the members or have they been coerced? Who determines what the future state of the organization will be? Have the members participated and reached some level of consensus or is it a future state promulgated by the leadership and to which the members acquiesce out of fear and trepidation?

We can only conclude that the very existence of leadership and the accompanying influence relationship raises ethical questions that must be addressed. In the real world of organizations that must move forward and change with some degree of expediency, we can only strive to maximize the degree of ethics in this relationship, recognizing that any relationship between humans will be flawed to some degree. We cannot hope for perfection, but only strive for the best practical outcome in which none of the individuals in the relationship is harmed, but recognizing that some will benefit more than others. Thus, we are forced, if you will, to apply the Utilitarianism model to the influence relationship. We must strive for the greatest good for the greatest number and endeavor to avoid a zero-sum game

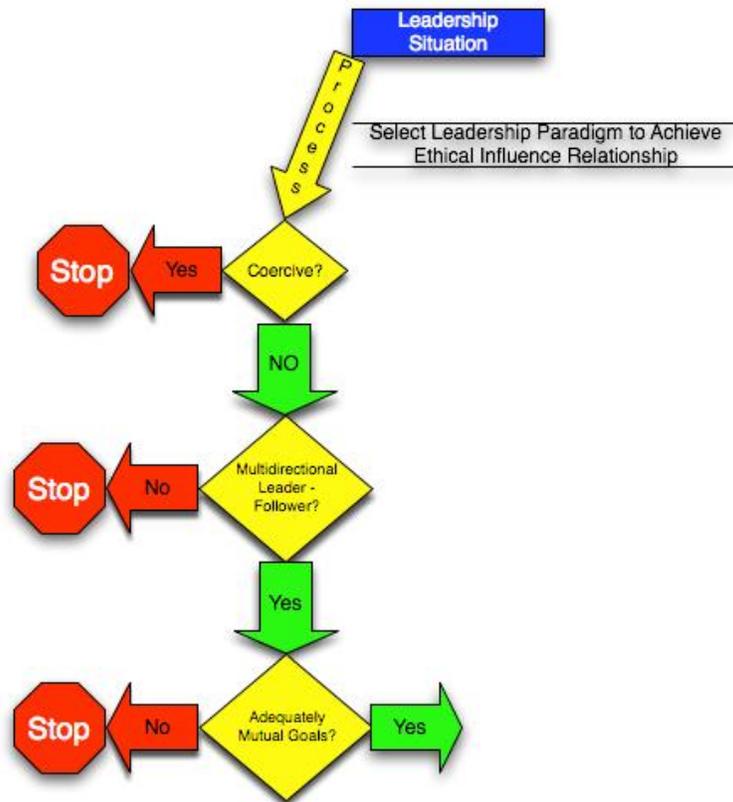
with any of the participants. I propose, below, a model that may be useful in helping us think through the ethicality of the leadership process itself.

Maximizing Ethics in the Leadership Process

Let us take, as a starting point, Rost’s (1995) exhortation that the leadership process may be viewed as fundamentally ethical if the conditions of noncoercive behavior, multidirectional influence, and mutuality of purpose are met. Figure 1, below, illustrates the thought process involved.

Figure 1

The Leadership Model – Process



Transactional Leadership – The First Plateau

Progressing through the sequential tests of this model requires us to evaluate and select the leadership paradigm that is most useful and ethical. Let us turn first to transactional leadership, the oft-maligned concept that transactional leaders will elicit follower behavior through the exchange of rewards for actions (Daft, 2005). While this conceptualization of leadership can be made to appear unseemly and ethically questionable, it is a component of all leader follower relationships in, at least, the business world. I do academic work in exchange for a degree. I work for clients in exchange for compensation. Many of us work for employers at least in part for compensation. The conferring of rewards in exchange for action, movement and change in the transactional leader – follower relationship is not inherently unethical. It becomes unethical when the first test of the model, that of coercion, is failed. Providing rewards, for example, to employees to induce actions to which they are opposed is unethical if the economic situation prevents their exercise of free will and they are not able to leave in preference to carrying out the actions. However, if all parties have willingly agreed to the transaction under conditions of full and informed consent, then we can conclude that the influence relationship has attained the first level of ethicality.

Transformational Leadership – The Next Plateau

However, this first level is only necessary, but not sufficient. The leader who fails to progress beyond the level of transactional leadership is in peril of failing the subsequent tests. The presence of a mutually agreed transactional exchange may result in a unidirectional influence relationship as the leader reasons that nothing beyond the provided reward is required. He may, if he remains at the transactional level, conclude that one-way influence is all that is necessary, the followers' actions having been bought and paid for by the exchange. When this occurs, the influence relationship and the leadership process become unethical, as they fail the second test, that of multidirectionality.

Continued successful progression through the tests of leadership process ethicality requires the adoption of a leadership style that more readily facilitates multidirectional influence. The transformational leadership paradigm rises to this challenge through its ability to foster interaction between leaders and followers in a fashion that raises both to higher levels of morality (Burns, 1979). This multidirectional influence is more clearly posited by Landy and Conte (2004) when they say, "Transformational leadership is the interplay between leaders and followers in which each raises the

other to higher levels of morality and motivation. The leader transforms the followers by appealing to their nobler motives such as justice, morality and peace” (p. 462). The movement along the continuum of transactional to transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) is not without its own set of ethical hazards, however. Numerous writers (e.g. Hollander, 1995) have cautioned against the inauthentic, charismatic leader masquerading as a transformational leader. Indeed, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) themselves warn of the pseudo transformational leader. We can, however, discern this imposter by examining his actions in light of the four components of transformational behavior – idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Pseudo transformational leaders seek power and position at the expense of their followers (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). True transformational leaders are concerned about the good that can be achieved for the community as a whole. The inauthentic transformational leaders are concerned about the good that can be achieved for themselves (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). The intellectual stimulation of the pseudo transformational leader contains false assumptions designed to allay the fears of the followers (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Individualized consideration, too, takes on a wholly different aspect under the aegis of a pseudo transformational leader. While an authentic transformational leader seeks to develop the followers into leaders, the inauthentic one seeks to maintain their dependence (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Servant Leadership – The Ultimate Level of Ethicality

Thus, it can be concluded that the inauthentic transformational leader who is prone to the abuse of power is readily identifiable. Moreover, we can conclude that the authentic transformational leader moves us beyond the plateau of multidirectional influence in the model and onto the threshold of mutuality of purpose. However, the author would argue that passing over this threshold is reserved for servant leaders, those leaders who place the good of the followers as a group ahead of their own best interests (Laub, 2004). It is only when the interests of the leader are subjugated to those of the led, and therefore, the community as a whole, that the highest level of ethicality in leadership can be reached. At this level, all coercion must disappear because the best interests of the followers take precedence. True multidirectional influence has occurred as the leader has learned of and internalized the needs of the followers as his primary goal. Finally, mutuality of purpose must exist as the purposes unique to the leader have been banished from consideration.

Patterson's (2004) theoretical model of servant leadership is illustrative here. Each of the virtuous constructs she posits serves to respond to the ethical dangers of transformational leadership while simultaneously reinforcing the ability to successfully pass each of Rost's (1995) tests for the ethicality of process.

Agapao Love Agapao Love is the cornerstone of the servant leader – follower relationship (Patterson, 2004). It is “...doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons” (p. 3). Patterson (2004) continues, telling us that servant leaders “...show more care for the people than the organization's bottom line, are genuine and real without pretense shows [sic] appreciation, is [sic] sympathetic, listens [sic] actively, communicates [sic], and is [sic] empathetic” (p. 3). Thus, the presence of agapao love may be seen to contribute to all three tests of ethicality proposed in our model – lack of coercion, multidirectional influence, and mutuality of purpose.

Humility This construct is particularly important in satisfying the tests of ethicality in the leadership process. It embodies the desire and ability to avoid focusing on the self and to, rather, focus on others (Patterson, 2004). Patterson tells us that servant leaders “...feel accountable to those served and openly receive criticism and advice as a welcomed opportunity to serve” (p. 4). Humility, as practiced by servant leaders may be seen to promote the multidirectionality of influence required for the process to be ethical.

Altruism Altruism is more than good intentions and being well meaning. It is about the concern for the welfare of others (Wilson, as cited in Patterson, 2004). The servant leader is concerned about the future, where the organization is headed, and whether this future state will serve the best interests of the followers (Patterson, 2004). Thus, altruism in the servant leader may be seen as contributing significantly to the third of our tests, mutuality of purpose.

Trust The presence of trust, an environment where people feel comfortable, which is open, and where everyone has a voice and works collaboratively (Patterson, 2004) is essential for a noncoercive environment to exist. The collaborative nature of the environment serves also to strengthen the multi-directional influence and the mutuality of purpose necessary for an ethical influence process.

Empowerment The relinquishing of power to others as is inherent in a servant leader – follower relationship is, arguably, the most important contributor to the ethicality of the relationship. If

the leader relinquishes power, then the opportunity for coercive influence must necessarily diminish. Coercion cannot exist in a relationship in which both parties are equally powerful.

Service This construct is, of course, at the core of servant leadership. Service is the choice of the interests of the others over self-interest (Patterson, 2004). If self-interest is disavowed, then mutuality of purpose, as required for an ethical influence relationship must replace it.

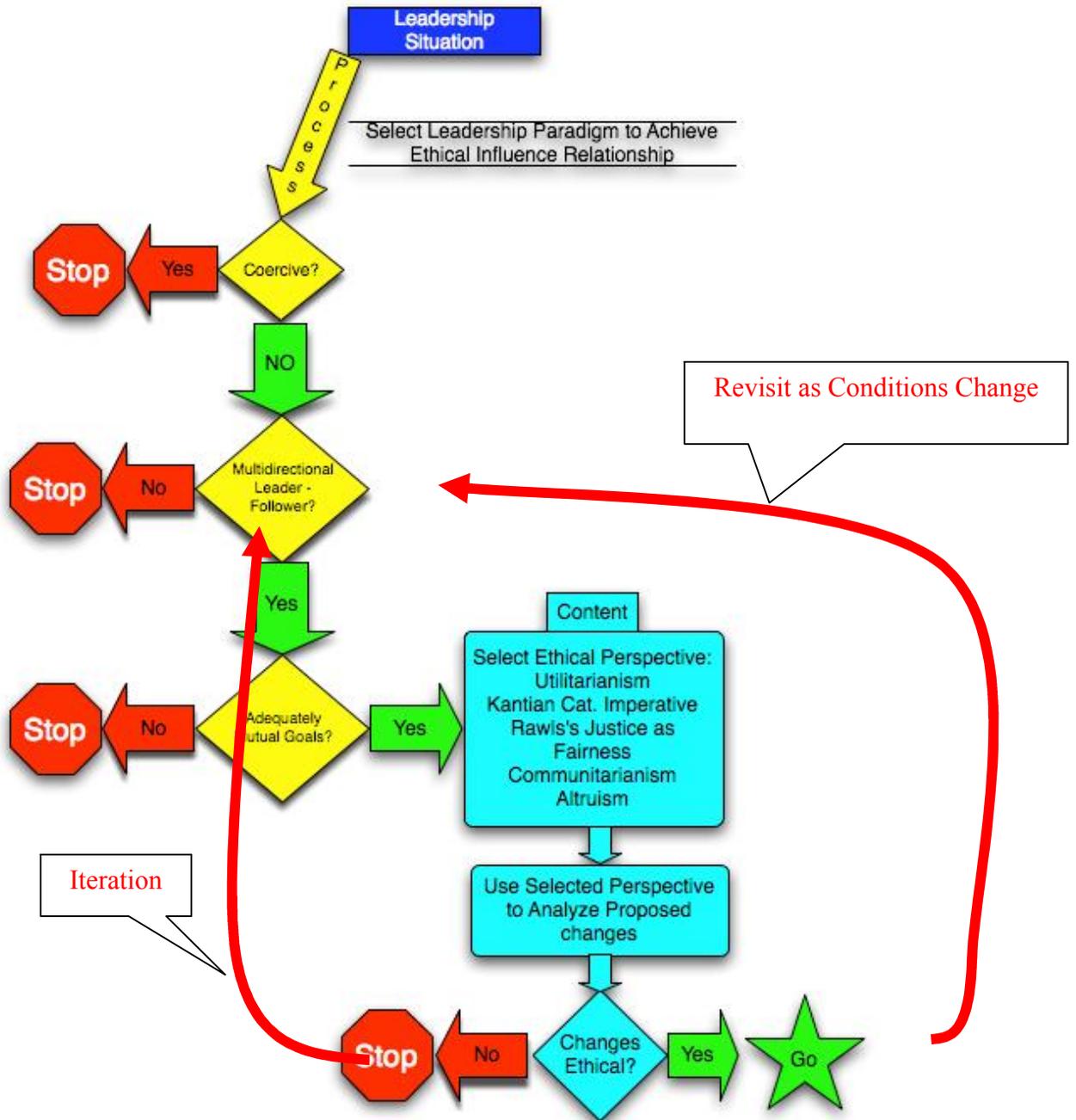
If transformational leadership can bring us to the threshold of truly ethical leader – follower relationships and leadership processes, then servant leadership is necessary for these relationships to go beyond this threshold. Only when servant leadership is practiced can we truly say that all three tests of an ethical leadership process will be continuously met.

The Content Issue

Having assured ourselves that we can ascertain the degree of ethics in the process of leadership, we must move on to context, that is, the ethicality of the changes sought as a result of the leadership process. We can, therefore, expand our model as shown in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2

Adding Content to the Model



It is at this point that we must evaluate not how the leadership is being carried out but what it is that the community is proposing to do. The community as a whole must necessarily carry out the ensuing two-part process, insofar as the goals and purposes may now be viewed as genuinely mutual.

Selecting the Perspectives

First, the leader and members in unison must select the appropriate ethical perspectives from which to view the proposed actions. The choice of which perspectives to use will depend, to a very great extent, upon which domain of leadership the proposed actions address. It is important to note, as elaborated upon below, that no single perspective is adequate to fully evaluate the ethicality of proposed actions and changes. The organizational community must attempt to employ as many as possible to evaluate each action.

Utilitarianism In many organizations, particularly those in the commercial world, choices are made according to a cost-benefit calculus. The utilitarian objective of providing the greatest benefit to the most members (Johnson, 2007) is a starting point in evaluating proposed actions and changes and certainly may be employed in any of the leadership domains. While we admittedly want to maximize the benefits, this approach leaves open the possibility that some members of the community will be subject to a zero – sum game in which they will be suffer a significant loss while the community as a whole gains. Certainly, there are times when this is unavoidable to prevent the demise of the overall organization. However, as Bass and Steidlmeier (1995) point out, it is all too easy for the leaders to justify actions designed to enrich one large set of stakeholders – the shareholders for example – and themselves while throwing others in the organization to the proverbial wolves. Clearly, this perspective is only a starting point in the ethical analysis of leadership content.

The Justice as Fairness Perspective For our actions to be truly ethical, we must go beyond the utilitarian perspective and apply a more rigorous test. Ethical questions in the Change and Innovation, Organizational Learning, and Behavior and Culture domains may benefit from an analysis through the lens of Rawl's perspective (Johnson, 2007). Organizational entities exist, it seems, in perpetual states of resource shortages and allocations. Projects and investments must be prioritized with the inevitable result that the work done by some members will be deferred or dismissed. Proposed changes in strategy must be evaluated and selected. Monetary rewards available for compensation and rewards must be distributed according to some rational formula. Inevitably, some members of the organization

will enjoy participation in selected products, strategies, and change events and will enjoy commensurate rewards while others will be disappointed and less richly rewarded. Rawls's perspective possesses an important distinction separating it from the Utilitarian perspective. While we endeavor to maximize the good and to equally distribute it; there is a minimum level of reward acceptable for each member. No member of the community must be disadvantaged and suffer as a result of the proposed action. This perspective, if applied, will reduce the potential for zero - sum games to adversely affect some members. In addition, it may be seen to address the issues of distributive justice that are so prevalent as senior executive compensation soars skyward while employees are terminated and benefits are reduced (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Communitarianism This perspective seems particularly well suited to issues in the domains of Behavior and Culture as well as Globalism and Multiculturalism. The promotion of shared moral values inherent in this perspective, along with the proposition that members must devote time, energy, attention and resources to shared projects and goals (Johnson, 2007) are particularly germane to issues of collective culture and behavior. The seven C's of effective communities as proposed by Brown and Isaacs (as cited in Johnson, 2007) – commitment, competence, contribution, collaboration, continuity, conscience, and conversation must all be present in an organizational, or indeed national cultural community if it is to be perceived as ethical.

Kantian Categorical Imperative Kant's exhortation to do what is right regardless of the consequences (Johnson, 2007) is clearly applicable in questions arising in the Ethics and Leadership domain, particularly in the subdomain of organizational governance. Indeed, it is not only applicable here, its application is mandatory. Many of the most recent corporate ethical scandals may be seen to have resulted, at least in part, from a failure to adhere to this perspective. The temptation to "adjust the numbers" to satisfy investors and to avoid delivering bad news to the ever present analysts is a clear violation of this principal. Doing whatever is right regardless of the consequences means reporting results forthrightly, forsaking the temptation to hide bad news, taking immediate and visible actions when ethical transgressions are identified, and acting with transparency in all these matters. Ethical issues are not fine wine; they do not improve with age.

Altruism This perspective may be seen as the capstone perspective and test of ethics in leadership content. Its application is mandatory in all cases. As noted above, altruism carries with it a

concern for the welfare of others that is superior to our concern for our own interests. Applying this perspective and test to any ethical question in any domain will result in a powerful force toward ethical good. If leaders unfailingly act out of a primary regard for the welfare of the other stakeholders and insist that their own interests be subservient to the greater interests of the organization, then many ethical issues can be prevented. More importantly, leaders adhering to this perspective will more often make the more correct strategic and tactical choices for the right reasons. Even when their actions are less successful than desired, their motivations will not be questioned, for they will fail to prosper along with the rest of the organization!

Ethical Analysis is Iterative

When viewing a rather linear model such as the one proposed in this paper, it is tempting to view the analysis of ethics in leadership as an event rather than a process. One may be tempted to believe that a simple trip through the sequential steps of the model will result in optimum ethicality. This is not the case. The process is iterative for two important reasons. First, as the ethically constituted and led group, benefiting from ethical leadership processes, begins to assess the content of the leadership, that is, the proposed actions, they may become disquieted with the results of the analysis in light of the various ethical perspectives. This will necessitate a trip back to the process portion of the model as additional multidirectional influence is undertaken to modify the mutual objectives. Secondly, situations and the environment change. Objectives, plans, and strategies change. As they do, revisiting the ethics of the revised actions will be necessary.

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