Life AFTER Sports: Moral Leadership and the Robinsons

Chris Hamstra

Davenport University
Life AFTER Sports: Moral Leadership and the Robinsons

Examples of questionable leadership surface every day through newspapers, magazines, and electronic articles on the web. The failure of leadership and leader scandals seems to follow a well-known script, which can be highlighted in every aspect of personal and professional life. Political parties battle between different ideologies and use manipulative techniques for personal gain. Education instructors are sentenced for the misuse of their position and inappropriate relationships in the learning environment. Even the church and religious organizations are not immune. Stories about embezzlement and abuse grab the popular press headlines each week. Sports industries around the world are rocked with examples of cheating and unethical behavior. A quick review cites classic examples about the misuse of leadership from WorldCom and Enron (see for example: Higgs, 2009); and even the Nazi empire (Kellerman, 2004). Within institutions of higher education many of these case studies are written up and discussed in programs around the globe. These examples highlight leaders who “…have lost their moral purpose and sense of idealism” (Maldonado & Lacey, 2001, p. 81). Bennis (2007) is encouraged in this recent development and suggests this may be a healthy phenomenon because of the ongoing realization that leadership is multi-focused and multi-faceted. This paper presentation suggests that this over-emphasis on questionable leadership is a detriment. As humans are social creatures and seem to learn from previous situations, a positive and moral focus around leadership should be encouraged, studied, and reported.

While examples of questionable leadership continue to emerge and grab headlines, comparatively little in the past twenty years appears to be offered about leadership centered on shared values and a moral focus. Maldonado and Lacey (2001) are just two authors encouraging an examination of moral leadership. This is an important emphasis because “Moral leaders
represent values that are not confined to the secrecy of boardrooms and centers of power but are universally recognized as the fundamental building blocks of a life worth living” (Becker, 2009, p. 10). Much like a tripod, leadership is made up of three interdependent elements: one leg is the leader(s), one leg is the follower(s), and one leg is a focus on goals or values. “None of those three elements can survive without the others” (Bennis, 2007, p. 4). A view of moral leadership provides an important perspective for individuals, for communities, and for organizations. Kouzes and Posner (2002) suggest that Moral Leadership has the ability to release human potential and can balance the needs of the individual and the needs of the community so that everyone is encouraged to live a life worth living.

This paper presentation highlights the moral leadership of two people: Jackie and Rachel Robinson and their lives AFTER baseball. Together Jackie and Rachel Robinson are examples of moral leadership. While Jackie Robinson is best known as the first African-American to play Major League baseball in the United States, the work of Jackie and Rachel after he retired as a professional athlete is a focus in this scholarly presentation. Both played pivotal roles in releasing human potential during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s and Rachel continues this work today through the ongoing advocacy and education in the Jackie Robinson Foundation. Penned just before his death in 1972 Jackie comments in his auto-biography that “we [Jackie and Rachel] can honestly say that each of us has stood at the center of the other’s existence; that we have honored and loved each other” (p. 269). Specifically the Robinsons exhibit moral leadership because of their ability to speak out and call out. The Robinsons consistently took a stand and spoke out on the important issues of the day, but they also called out and encouraged the best in others. This paper presentation begins with a brief outline of moral leadership found in the academic literature; including the history and dominant themes. Part II traces briefly traces
the careers and history of the Robinsons with a focus on their lives after Jackie’s Hall of Fame baseball career. Part III of the paper will provide examples of how the Robinsons spoke out and called out and link these examples to moral leadership through influence, interaction, and voice. It is hoped that a better understanding of the practice and thought about moral leadership is advanced through this examination of the Robinsons. This understanding fits well with the Robinson’s quote that “A life is not important, except in its impact on the lives of others” (Robinson, 1995).

Literature Review

Leadership is one of the most debated and most discussed topics of the modern century. In one of the famous works about the study of leadership, Bass (1990) notes “Leadership is one of the worlds’ oldest preoccupations” (p. 3). The modern academic study of leadership entered a new phase in the 20th century and the rise of the Industrial Revolution. Northouse (2001) identifies at least 65 different classification systems about leadership that have been developed in the past 50 years (p. 2). Leadership has been dissected and analyzed from the different themes of: traits, behaviors, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, and the occupation of administrative power (Yukl, 2006). Even with this established baseline, the study of leadership continues to be debated with new thoughts and perspective emerging. Trying to quantify and understand all of the separate definitions of leadership can be a frustrating endeavor.

Learning from the character and behavior of leaders in history is an important step in the modern study of leadership. An early way to learn about leadership was the study of effective leaders through history. Individuals like: Mao Tse-tung, Julius Ceasar, Alexander the Great, Abraham Lincoln, and Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Each of these great leaders from the past are still studied today. Additionally the techniques and thoughts about leadership
continue to be considered. Early writings from Chinese general Sun Tzu (2nd century B.C.) and Nicolo Machiavelli who wrote in the 1500’s, are still being used in modern day leadership programs. This practice is an important learning tool because “the spirit of morality…is awakened in the individual only through the witness and conduct of a moral person” (Gini, 1996, p. 2). Jackie and Rachel Robinson exhibited moral leadership after baseball through the witness of their work in business, in politics, and in education.

Ethical and Moral Leadership

To begin identifying influential areas in the Robinsons lives it is important to develop a few themes of moral leadership. Moral leadership is classified within the larger umbrella of ethical leadership. Authors most commonly cited within ethical leadership are: Ron Heifetz (1994), James McGregor Burns (1978 – Transformational Leadership), and Robert Greenleaf (1971 – Servant Leadership). Ethical theories of leadership fall into the two broad domains of a leaders’ external conduct and a leaders’ internal character (Northouse, 2001, p. 251). It is interesting to note that in addition to the leader’s conduct and character, that followers are also an important part. Bass (1978) suggests early in the writing that moral leadership resides in the leader-follower dyad and “moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of the followers” (p. 4). This begins to form the three legs of the leadership tripod. Gini (1996) comments that “without the ‘witness’ of moral leadership, standards of ethics in business and organizational life will neither emerge nor be sustained” (p. 11 of 14). From the literature a small sample of articles informs this discussion in the areas of value influence, interaction, and voice.

*The Morality of Moral Leadership*
Leadership is amoral. An accepted assumption within leadership studies is the idea that leadership is value neutral; there are no positive or negatives. Individuals practicing and thinking about leadership infuse moral or immoral behaviors and decisions (Gini, 1997). Becker (2009) makes the point that business actions – just like all other human actions – are based on a moral dimension. This can’t be ignored and proves the point from Becker “that ethics defines our very humanity” (p. 13). At the heart of moral leadership is the desire among individuals of influence (positive or negative) on the lives of others. “Influence is the essence of leadership, and powerful leaders can have a substantial impact on the lives of followers and the fate of an organization” (Yukl, 2006, p. 417). Maldonado and Lacey (2001) comment, “moral leaders are defined as those who have a positive, lasting effect or influence on others and/or the world” (p. 80). Leaders seek to make an impact through the influence inherent in the leadership process. Values are applied every day in leadership and are an important consideration. “To make a change in other people carries with it an enormous ethical burden and responsibility” (Northouse, 2001, p. 254). Jackie and Rachel Robinson were aware of this aspect of leadership and consistently provided their influence during the Civil Right movement, in politics, and in the community and education through the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

The Interaction of Leadership

Moral leadership and the influence that is realized rests on interaction between humans. Leaders and followers have a relationship “not only of power but of mutual needs, aspirations, and values” (Bass, 1978, p. 4). This leader-follower interaction and the relationship formed and maintained, is a key component in leadership studies. Northouse (2001) supports this idea by suggesting that “the leader-follower relationship is central to ethical leadership” (p. 257). One of the important thoughts here is that leadership is about change at a fundamental level and this
change only occurs where there is some sort of interaction and relationship. In a study focused on educational leadership, Bush (2007) suggests two dimensions: 1) moral leadership is centered in the leader who provides the principles, or 2) moral leadership is “the capacity to act in a way that is consistent with an ethical system and is consistent over time” (p. 400). Called “moral confidence” this second idea is a focus when examining the lives of the Robinsons. Jackie exhibited “moral confidence” through his syndicated national newspaper column and interacted with the prominent figures of the day including: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Richard Nixon, among others. Rachel continues the practice of “moral confidence.” Not only has Rachel participated in the work of Civil Rights and the ongoing work of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, Rachel recently worked with and spent time with those involved in the movie ‘42’ which profiled the life of Jackie. Articles from *Sports Illustrated* (Kennedy, 2013) and the *New York Daily News* (2013) mention Rachel’s involvement in the making of this movie so that the legacy continues. “It [leadership] is a process in which leaders and followers influence each other as the relationships evolve over time” (Maldonado & Lacey, 2001, p. 419). This interaction, especially in the academic fields of leadership and communication is an ongoing mystery an opportunity for future research.

*Finding a Leadership Voice*

Maldonado and Lacey (2001) conducted a qualitative study centered on the definition and behaviors of moral leadership. Primary themes that emerged when trying to define the term include: leading by example, taking a stand and speaking for others, and calling forth the best in others (p. 85). These definitions center on the process of communication. Additionally when examining the behaviors and attributes of moral leadership a primary behavior discovered was the importance of listening and dialogue. Schultze (2000) suggest that when we communicate
“we don’t just exchange messages; we leave ourselves temporarily in order to enter into someone else’s experience” (p. 36). Not only did the Robinsons speak out on important issues with their voice, they also provided a voice to others who may have been silenced. “To find a voice is to find an identity and the possibility of agency in the world” (Ranson, 2000, p. 268). ‘Voice’ is a loaded word in the literature but in this writing is focused on two ideas: 1) Voice is the literal meaning in which the speech, the tone, the pattern all conveys a message to another person. 2) Voice also contains a representational perspective in which the “qualities and feelings conveyed by the speakers words, gives insight into the metaphorical perspectives and worldviews that individuals inhabits” (p. 6). The concept of voice in leadership is an ongoing challenge. A leader’s voice is used but it is also a space in which the encouragement and development of voice in others is recognized. This is an important quality in moral leadership because voice “is the inescapable capability of young people required to flourish at the turn of the century” (Ranson, 2000, p. 267). The Robinsons used their voice throughout their time after baseball in the prominent discourses of the day. This ongoing encouragement and development of voice in others continues through the work of the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

To quickly summarize moral leadership is found through the tripod of leadership in which influence, interaction, and voice are encouraged and supported. A fuller understanding of each of these areas will be examined in the next section in the lives of the Robinsons.

The Robinsons as Moral Leaders

While several authors have suggested the need and desire to hear about and learn from moral leaders, few suggestions have been offered (Maldonado & Lacey, 2001). During this virtual conference the hope for this year is that many examples of moral leadership are examined from different perspectives, different industries, and different parts of the global environment.
This paper contributes to this discussion by suggesting that Jackie and Rachel Robinson were examples together of moral leadership through their influence, their interaction, and their voice in their lives AFTER Jackie’s Hall of Fame baseball career.

While not the global phenomenon of futbol, Major League Baseball continues to be an important part of the fabric in the United States. Within baseball the 10-year career of Jackie Robinson is one of the most iconic. After being a four sport athlete at UCLA in California, Jackie was the first player to break the color barrier in Major League baseball on April 15, 1947. While not a focus in this paper presentation this single act has been identified by many as one of the most important steps in the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Several books and recently the movie ‘42’ released in the Summer 2013 do a great job of describing this pivotal time in America but also in the lives of the Robinsons. While Jackie is remembered throughout baseball, Rachel has also been an important leader. “She is the living record of the triumph of a few people over the forces of oppression aligned against them” (Bauman, 2013). Rachel graduated from UCLA and has served as a nurse, nursing professor, and Director of Nursing. Her leadership has also been acknowledged with honorary degrees from multiple higher education institutions and her work with the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

While great leadership is typically examined among individuals, this examination suggests that moral leadership can also be seen in the lives of Jackie and Rachel Robinson. This couple and their lives together after his baseball career provide several examples of moral leadership and the influence, the interaction, and providing and supporting voice. In his autobiography Jackie acknowledges the impact of Rachel on his life and also her individual accomplishments. Jackie acknowledges the impact of Rachel on his life in his Baseball Hall of Fame speech when he said “who has been such a wonderful inspiration for me. And the person
who has guided and advised me throughout our entire marriage. I couldn’t have been here today without her help.” (Robinson, 1962).

With the tagline that “A life is not important, except in its impact on the lives of others” the life of Jackie Robinson continues through the ongoing work of his wife Rachel Robinson. Both of them contribute to the community and can be examined through the lens of moral leadership. Jackie and Rachel Robinson are great examples of moral leadership because of their focus and emphasis in the areas of when individual stake a stand and speak out but also when individuals call out for the best in others. Jackie and Rachel Robinson will be examined through the three areas listed earlier in terms of moral leadership: Having influence, interaction, and voice.

**Having Influence** – The Robinsons continue to provide influence in the ongoing work of the Jackie Robinson Foundation. Founded soon after Jackie’s death in 1973 the organization seeks higher education opportunities among underserved populations around the United States. The foundation provides 4-year scholarships to individuals wishing to pursue opportunities at colleges and universities. As of this writing the Jackie Robinson Foundation has 87 students at different institutions around the country.

**Having Interaction** – The Robinsons have interacted with prominent leaders around the United States throughout their lives. During the Civil Rights marches on the 1960’s Jackie and Rachel marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to protest and bring attention to this vital topic. Additionally Jackie notes in his autobiography that he personally sat and talked with those in politics (for example: Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Rockefeller). Multiple times Jackie outlines conversations and interactions with different people to express his point of view but also with the desire to understand the other perspective.
An interesting area to consider within interaction is that at times Jackie and Rachel also learned from these interactions. Jackie notes that three important people in his life were Branch Rickey (Baseball), Bill Black (Business), and Nelson Rockefeller (Politics). While the Robinsons served as leaders in multiple areas, as moral leaders they also recognized the importance of learning from others to be more effective.

*Creating and Sustaining Voice* – The Civil Rights protests of the 1960’s were the most important times for the Robinsons and their ability to speak up but also in their desire to call out and encourage others to use their voice. Rampersad (1997) has multiple stories in which Jackie supported and led fundraisers for the NAACP. It is in these times that the Robinsons used their influence and ability to connect with others so that the voices of those silenced could be heard.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Moral leadership rests on the idea that leadership is a value driven activity and the moral leadership is best seen and understood when looking at and examining the lives of others. It is through examining the lives of Jackie and Rachel Robinson that a clearer understanding of moral leadership can be discovered. Jackie and Rachel Robinson influenced others, interacted with others, and used their voice so that others could speak out during their lives. There is much more to moral leadership than telling others what to do. “The vision and values of leadership must have their origins and resolutions in the community of followers, of whom they are a part, and whom they wish to serve” (Gini, 1996). The Robinsons are a clear example moving forward of the ongoing legacy of moral leadership.
References


