

Looking Gift Horses in the Mouth: A Guide for Ethical Leadership and Gifts

[Leadership Advance Online](#)– Issue XXVI

by Aaron Perry & Eric R. Hallett

Since the 4th century, we have been told not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Sure, the language of origin was Latin and its current form has come through a couple of English modifications, but the principle is the same. Actually, the principle likely extends back much beyond the 4th century. The principle? Don't criticize a gift. As horses age, their gums recede, leaving the appearance of longer and longer teeth. (This is also where we get the phrase "Long in the tooth.") If someone was giving you a horse, you might be tempted to see just what kind of horse you were getting—a young horse, with nice, short teeth, or an old horse well on its way to that eternal pasture. Ah, but equine inspection was not to be encouraged. A gift is a gift is a gift. You take the horse and you better *not* look at its mouth.

We think this is bad advice—especially for leaders, and even more for leaders of non-profit organizations and churches. Forget what you've heard. Look that horse right in the mouth. This must be done cautiously and with care because every true gift matters to the giver, but, with subtlety, we think you should figure out if the horse has been using *Crest* or *Colgate*.

How counterintuitive! Not just because of the longevity of the principle, but because of the nature of leading in non-profit settings. Leadership concerns value. It *always* concerns value. Leaders determine what is and is not of value, and act accordingly. Why found a school and not a manufacturing plant? Why raise funds rather than establish services? Why go *here* rather than *there*? Why sacrifice production for fair trade? Why emphasize living wages and not profits? The

movement, achievement, or goal of leadership is always a determination of value. In non-profit worlds, leaders quickly learn to see value where no one else does. This is not simply the skill of due diligence, but the character of grace, mercy, and hope.

And along comes the gift. Gifts seem to be the value jackpot. After all, the nature of the gift is free, right? Wouldn't something of no cost be all value? Not only does seeing the flossing condition of the horse seem potentially rude, but unnecessary. A gift is a gift is a gift...value, value, value! But ethical leadership, a formulated way of intentional leadership, has helped us think otherwise.

Ethical leadership is still about value, but has significantly shifted the specifics. Ethical leadership is a style of leadership concerned with demonstrating appropriate conduct by developing *meaningful relationships*, modeling *right behavior*, and reinforcing this leadership through *communication and decision making* (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). Trustworthiness, honesty, care, and fairness are deep, driving concerns not only for leaders, but for their followers, too. Leadership, both in personal character and action, gives dignity and worth to followers and works to ensure dignity and worth is communicated systematically.

No longer is the generating question of leadership, "What do we need to get done?" No longer is the determining question of leadership the final justification for an act: "Will what's done be worth it?" Instead, while the significance of value is still present, ethical leadership shifts the focus to that of *people* and, for their sake, *process*. What is of value is not the bottom line, but those at the bottom rung of the organizational chart. What is of value is not simply the destination, but the journey. Along the way, are people treated as beings of dignity by their leaders? How do established processes protect and communicate worth—the value of people—all along the way? Another way this can be said is that ethical leadership is concerned with the *Other* (Knights & O'Leary, 2006).

Which brings us back to the dental inspection of certain equines. Ethical leadership provides a reminder for leaders that there is more to receiving gifts than getting something for nothing. Gifts impact the Other. Gifts impact those whom we lead in ways that we must consider. Gifts also impact the giver. Gifts cannot simply be considered in terms of something for nothing, all value-no cost. Gifts are fun and gifts are serious. With that in mind, here are four questions ethical leadership asks of gifts.

Question 1: Whose horse will this be, anyway?

(How does this gift create a ripple effect personally for people other than you as the leader?)

Ethical leadership is reminded of its responsibility to the Other. This includes one's followers. Gifts create expectation that extends not only to the leader, but to the follower, as well.

Let us share an example. A high quality volunteer recently offered services on a task team. The person was qualified, talented, and *they volunteered!* However, as leaders, we are responsible not just for the gift, but for its ripple effect. In this case, the task team, which was previously comprised of people familiar with each other and their professional dynamics, now faced change. The team was, in some ways, back to square one. We had not fully considered the ripple effect in receiving this valuable gift. Was it wrong to accept it? No. And it certainly was not wrong for it to be offered. But we had not considered who would actually receive the gift. We had neglected the ripple effect and our full responsibility to the Other.

Question 2: How does this horse fit in the stable?

(How does this gift create a ripple effect organizationally?)

A gift's ripple effect is not just personal, but organizational. Ethical leadership is responsible not just for the Other as an individual, but for the narratives, memories, and symbols of organizations. Gifts are powerful: they can change narratives, make memories, and make new symbols.

Gifts can shape futures. Some horses don't just alter a stall, but an entire stable. In our circles, a multi-million dollar gift is such a stable altering horse. In this case, it literally changed the landscape of the organization. The gift provided a beautiful location for the use of an entire community. Yet, the gift had long-term implications for the organization. Was the gift wrong? Not in the least! But the stable must now always consider this horse.

Question 3: Does a horse divided against itself stand?

(How does a gift create dynamics of competition and inequality in your team?)

Ethical leadership not only takes seriously meaningful relationships among leader and follower, but also facilitates meaningful relationships in the team dynamic. Gifts can create relationships, but they can also create inequality and imbalance. Ethical leadership reminds the leader that gifts must be considered for the inequality and imbalance that may arise within the relationships of followers. We have seen this most keenly in our experience in churches where departments are expected to raise their own budgets through targeted giving to specific segregated funds. For example, the student ministry targets and obtains funds for its activities, while adult ministry targets and obtains

funds for its activities, etc. What may happen is that congregants may give to their preferred projects or to the best fund raisers, causing inequality and imbalance to develop between ministry departments. Lencioni (2006) spells this out most clearly as “silos” where teammates are competing for limited goods. Lencioni captures this ensuing conflict as a turf war. The fallout is that gifted fundraisers gain more influence in the organization and the ongoing gifts they obtain create organizational imbalance.

Ethical leadership considers the potential inequality created by the gift and seeks to emphasize and maintain meaningful relationships not only in the leader-follower relationship, but in the relationships of the organization.

Question 4: Sometimes the horse dies. Can you bury it?

(Every gift comes with a risk. Can you afford it—literally and figuratively—if it goes wrong?)

In the previous examples, we have discussed gifts that came with risks. The truth is that every gift comes with a risk. Every horse comes with teeth. Sometimes the risk is immediately known; sometimes it only becomes clear in time. My (Eric’s) experience brings this to light. A contractor made a generous donation of materials and labor on a certain project only to go bankrupt halfway through, leaving the organization with the task of raising necessary funds to complete the work. While even more diligence may or may not have picked up on the precarious nature of the donor’s company, ethical leadership takes seriously the risks involved in the gift and how it may be taken to completion should it not come to full fruition.

While this direction in receiving gifts may not be unique to ethical leadership, it is in its consideration to the gift giver. Gifts half given can easily result in bitterness, frustration, and shame. Ethical leadership considers affording the potential half-given gift *for the sake of the giver*. In the case where the horse dies, a proper burial can also put to rest the fallout. Ethical leadership works to ensure the initial giver is valued and honored.

Conclusion

In all of this, it should be clear that it is the *horse* under inspection, not the giver. When there is a horse who doesn’t fit the stable, it is not a judgment on the giver. As a result, when employing ethical leadership in the realm of gift giving, we urge the following mindset: **Everyone’s got a healthy pony. (Everybody has some gift to give that is dignifying.)** Not everyone can give a fully grown, healthy,

short-toothed horse. Not everyone has such a gift to give. However, everyone has something of value to give. Ethical leadership sees value in the Other and, as a result, recognizes that every person has something of value to give. There is dignity in gift giving. Ethical leadership in gift giving sees the value laden in each potential giver, not for what they give, but for who they are. Even in the cases where the gift is not accepted, the dignity of the giver can be recognized, affirmed, and blessed. So, look that gift horse in the mouth. Get him to open wide and say “ahh.” Consider running some x-rays. It’s your responsibility as leader. It’s the right thing to do.

About the Authors

Aaron Perry (M.A. Theological Studies, Asbury Seminary) is Associate Pastor of Centennial Road Church in Brockville, Ontario and a Ph.D. student in organizational leadership at Regent University. He is editor of “Developing Ears to Hear: Listening in Pastoral Ministry, the Spiritual Life, and Theology” (Emeth Press).

Email: aaron@centennialroad.com

Eric R. Hallett (D.Min., Asbury Seminary) is Lead Pastor of Centennial Road Church in Brockville, Ontario. He serves as part of the ministry training faculty of The Wesleyan Church’s FLAME program.

Email: eric@centennialroad.com

References

- Brown, M. E., Trevino, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 97, 117–134.
- Knights, D., & O’Leary, M. (2006). Leadership, ethics, and responsibility to the Other. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67, 125-137.
- Lencioni, P. (2006). *Silos, politics and turf wars: A leadership fable about destroying the barriers that turn colleagues into competitors*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.