PERSPECTIVES ON CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP

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No less a leadership expert than General Norman Schwarzkopf has noted that leaders are more likely to fail because of a lack of character than a lack of competence (Mason, 1992). In writing about shortcomings in executive selection, George Hollenbeck (2008) argued recently that the desired approach to selecting organizational leaders should focus first on issues of individual character and then on leader competence and relevant competencies (in that order). In line with Gen. Schwarzkopf's observations, Hollenbeck attributes a good deal of the "widespread executive failure" (p. 134) to selection approaches that have focused on competencies and competence with little regard to leader character.
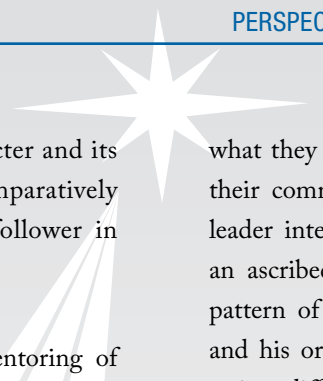
This raises the obvious question that if character is so important for leadership then why is there not more attention given to it in the scholarly and practical arenas? A secondary question is "what are some possible ways to better emphasize the importance of developing and selecting leaders of character?" In addressing these questions a good place to begin is with a definition of leader character. Bass (2008) defines the character of a leader as involving "ethical and moral beliefs, intentions, and behavior" (p. 219). From this definition it is apparent that much of the onus with regard to character is on the individual leader, especially in terms of internalized character traits (e.g., Platonic virtues of honesty, justice, courage, among others).

Kohlberg (1981, 1984) was among the first in the modern era (with all due respect to Plato) to focus on the topic of moral development as a rightful domain of scholarly theory and research. His groundbreaking scholarship has served as the foundation for others interested in the application of moral development to understanding ethical decision-making in general (Rest, 1979; Reynolds, 2006) as well as more specific issues associated with individual ethical decision making in organizational contexts (Jones, 1991; Treviño, 1986). More recently, I have proposed with colleagues that moral development must be an inherent part of the leader development process because (a) nearly every decision a leader makes has ethical implications, (b) leaders serve as role models and are the focus of identification and emulation by followers, and (c) leaders shape the ethical and moral climate of their respective units (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). All of these approaches put forward a number of

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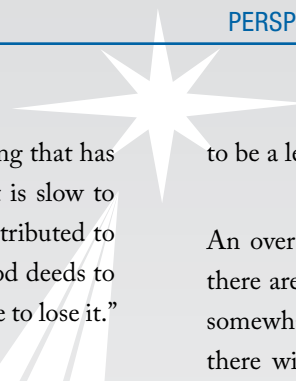
leader-centric perspectives on character and its development. What has received comparatively little attention is the role of the follower in defining the character of a leader.

It was through the tutelage and mentoring of Bob Lord that I first came to appreciate the role of the follower in shaping leadership processes. The theoretical and empirical work of Lord and colleagues has demonstrated the importance of leadership perceptions (e.g., Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984; Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986; Lord & Maher, 1991). In many ways, followers determine through their perceptual and categorization processes which individuals are seen as "leader-like." This is a relevant concern because it is followers who make leaders successful by producing the desirable effects that are generally attributed to their leaders (Lord & Brown, 2004). In short, if you do not perceive someone as a leader then you are unlikely to allow that individual to influence you and influence is often considered to be essential to effective leadership. In similar ways, the notion of leader integrity is something that is defined by followers through interactions with their leaders and potential leaders.

Bass (2008) noted that "the virtue of integrity is at the core of character and ethical leadership" (p. 222). Integrity is typically conceptualized in terms of leaders keeping their promises, doing what they say they will do, and following up on their commitments. A variant of this view of leader integrity is behavioral integrity, which is an ascribed trait in which followers perceive a pattern of alignment between someone's words and his or her deeds (Simons, 2002). Looking at it a different way, behavioral integrity can be considered the opposite of hypocrisy when the latter is defined as the inconsistency between talk and action. These perceptions and attributions are made as a result of followers' experience and history with their leaders. In this way, behavioral integrity is retrospective in nature whereas the related concept of credibility is prospective. Similar to the related construct of trust, credibility is forward looking and is built on a foundation of behavioral integrity from what has occurred in the past.

Although research on behavioral integrity is only just beginning to emerge (e.g., Simons, Friedman, Liu, & McClean Parks, 2007), it offers a potentially valuable addition to theory and research on leader character and integrity. In particular, this follower-centric approach to character emphasizes that behavioral integrity is subjective in nature (which makes it especially difficult to manage), is ascribed as a trait to leaders by followers, is attributed at multiple levels (individual and groups of individuals), and contains "an asymmetry between the ease of confirming…and violating it" (Simons, 2002, p.

25). The latter point refers to something that has been observed about trust – that is, it is slow to build but can disappear quickly. As attributed to Benjamin Franklin, "It takes many good deeds to build a reputation and only one bad one to lose it."

This raises the interesting question of whether behavioral integrity is really about character at all. It has been said that someone's reputation is what other people think of him (or her) but character is what (s)he really is (Anonymous). The issue becomes how to know what people "really are" apart from their words and deeds, and the alignment between the two. This could be why character is rarely explicitly considered in most leader development programs and initiatives. Nonetheless, attempting to understand it from others' perspectives helps to bring home the point that whether you call it character, reputation, or something else it is at least partly constructed by others in the interpersonal environment. Others' perceptions matter and they matter a lot in leadership. From recent theory and research on behavioral integrity, it seems that others' perceptions matter as well in the construction, maintenance, and management of leader character. As initiatives move forward at the United States Air Force Academy in terms of further integrating character development with leadership development, it would also be wise to keep the critical role and perceptions of followers in focus as integral components of what it means to be a leader of character.

An overarching theme of this brief essay is that there are multiple perspectives on character. Put somewhat differently, in the leadership domain there will always be various stakeholders and a difficult task for any leader involves managing his/her own behavior in ways that maximize behavioral integrity. From a research perspective, this will involve studying character and integrity as socio-perceptual phenomena in ways similar to how Lord and colleagues have done in the leadership domain.

This does not mean that character exists only in the eye of the beholder; however, followers are important leadership stakeholders. Yet followers are not always a homogenous stakeholder group as research in areas such as leader-member exchange (LMX) theory attest. Research on LMX (see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995 for an overview and summary) has shown that leaders develop different relationship qualities among their followers, which might contribute to inconsistencies in terms of how a leader is perceived. Thus, a relevant concern involves (among other things) studying how consistently leader character or behavioral integrity is viewed across stakeholder groups. One group might see as a leader as adaptable by changing strategy to reflect changing situational circumstances whereas another group may see the same action

as breaking promises. These are important issues to understand because the higher a leader rises in the organizational hierarchy the more visible the leader becomes and the more politicized the climate. Under such conditions behavioral integrity is especially difficult to manage. It is not only a test of a leader's character but also challenging on an interpersonal level.

In closing, character is most certainly a critical issue for developing leaders and building leadership in any organization. But it is not solely an issue of what is in a leader's heart, soul, or temperament. Character is also something that is constructed by those who are affected by a leader's actions. One of the many things the USAFA Center for Character and Leadership Development can do through research, education, and training is help leaders build character and manifest behavioral integrity across multiple stakeholders and dynamic environments.

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LEADERSHIP, ETHICS, AND COGNITION; NEW THEMES AND NEW APPROACHES

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Leadership, ultimately, involves the effective exercise of influence (Yukl, 2009). What must be recognized here, however, is that leadership can be exercised for good (e.g., Roosevelt) or ill (e.g., Stalin). Indeed, in studies of leadership it is common to distinguish between socialized and personalized leaders (Mumford, 2006). Organizations, and society as a whole, however, do not and cannot seek to develop personalized leaders. Thus, in the literature on leadership, many theoretical models, for example Authentic Leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and Transformational Leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), present models expressly intended to account for prosocial, character-based, Leadership.

In keeping with this trend, the topic of ethics and ethical decision-making among leaders has in recent years begun to receive some attention (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Society, organizations, groups, and people all seek leaders who will make ethical decisions. Ethical decision-making, however, is a complex phenomenon in its own right. Nonetheless, in recent years we have made substantial progress in our understanding of ethical decision-making (Mumford, Devenport, Brown, Connelly, Murphy, Hill, & Antes, 2006). Our intent in the present efforts is to examine the implications of these advances in our understanding of ethical decision-making for this development of leaders. Before turning to the implications of findings with regard to ethical decision-making, however, it might be useful to consider the role of decision-making and ethical decision-making in leadership.
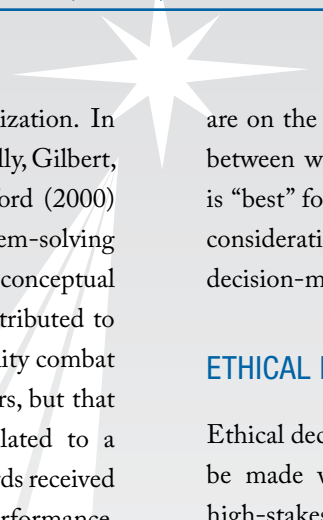
LEADER DECISION-MAKING

The fundamental importance of decision-making to leadership and leader performance, is aptly summarized in a quote from former President George W. Bush: "I am the decider." In fact, the available evidence indicates that cognitive characteristics contributing to effective problem-solving, and hence viable decision-making, are critical to the performance of leaders. For example, Mumford, Campion, and Morgenson (2007) found, in a study of foreign service officers, that the cognitive demands made on leaders increased

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as they advanced through the organization. In another study along these lines, Connelly, Gilbert, Zaccaro, Threlfall, Marks, and Mumford (2000) found not only that cognitive problem-solving skills, for example problem definition, conceptual combination, and idea evaluation, contributed to effective decision making in a low fidelity combat simulation presentation to army officers, but that these problem-solving skills were related to a variety of leader outcomes such as awards received (e.g. medals won), critical incident performance, and rank attained.
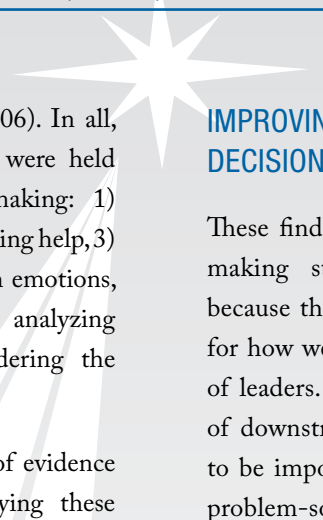
Clearly cognition and decision-making are critical to leadership performance. What should be recognized here, however, is that the decisions presented to leaders are highly complex. Leaders serve in boundary role positions (Jacobs & Jaques, 1990). In boundary role positions leaders must take into account the needs and concerns of various stakeholders – workers, the organization, customers, suppliers, etc. What must be recognized here is that the concerns and interests of these stakeholders in a decision are not always well-aligned. This lack of alignment brings to fore the question "who wins and who loses?" – an inherently ethical question. The importance of these ethical aspects of leaders' decisions is accentuated by three other considerations. First, leaders must make decisions not only for today but also for stakeholders tomorrow (Jaques, 1989). Second, the stakes in these decisions are high (Bass, 1990). Third, the leaders' own careers

are on the line (Yukl, 2009) – creating a tension between what is "best" for the leaders and what is "best" for the stakeholders. As a result, ethical considerations necessarily permeate leader decision-making.

ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Ethical decisions are typically decisions that must be made with respect to complex, ambiguous, high-stakes issues in which stakeholder interests are not well-aligned. Recognition of this point led Mumford and his colleagues to propose a sense-making model of ethical decision-making (Kligyte, Marcy, Sevier, Godfrey, Mumford, & Hougen, 2008; Mumford, Connelly, Brown, Murphy, Hill, Antes, Waples, & Devenport, 2008). Essentially, this model holds that prior personal and professional experience, along with the demands made by the problem situation at hand, define the structure surrounding peoples' ethical decision-making. People must then frame the problem and manage emotions in such a way as to permit the forecasting of the likely outcomes of decisions for various stakeholders – now and in the future. With reflection of these forecasts, sense-making, or understanding of the ethical problem, occurs which, in turn, provides a basis for ethical decision-making.

Mumford, and his colleagues, have identified a set of strategies people might apply to help them make these decisions (Mumford, Connelly, et al,

2008; Mumford, Devenport, et al, 2006). In all, seven strategies were identified that were held to contribute to ethical decision-making: 1) recognizing your circumstances, 2) seeking help, 3) questioning judgment, 4) dealing with emotions, 5) anticipating consequences, 6) analyzing personal motivations, and 7) considering the effects of actions on others.

Broadly speaking, four distinct lines of evidence have pointed to the value of applying these strategies in ethical decision-making. First, Mumford, Devenport, et al (2006) have shown that the effectiveness with which people execute each of these seven strategies is strongly (R=.50) related to their ability to make ethical decisions in their professional field. Second, in a series of experimental studies (Beeler, Antes, Mumford, Devenport, Connelly, & Brown, 2009; Caughron, Antes, Mumford, Devenport, Connelly, & Brown, 2009) it was found that application of each of these strategies made a unique contribution to ethical decision-making. Third, each of these strategies made a contribution to prediction of ethical decision-making over and above other relevant variables, such as narcissism (Mumford, Devenport, et al, 2006). Fourth, instructional programs intended to encourage application of these strategies resulted in strong pre-post gains, gains that were maintained over time, in peoples' ethical decision-making (Brock, Vert, Kligyte, Waples, Sevier, & Mumford, 2008; Kligyte, et al, 2008; Mumford, Connelly, et al, 2008).

IMPROVING LEADER ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

These findings with regard to ethical decision-making strategies are noteworthy, in part, because they have some important implications for how we seek to develop the next generation of leaders. For example, forecasting (prediction of downstream consequences) has been shown to be important in leader vision formation and problem-solving (Shipman, Byrne, & Mumford, in press). Given the findings obtained with regard to anticipating consequences in ethical decision-making, it seems plausible to argue that instructional interventions that encourage leaders to think about the long-term and short-term consequences of decisions for various stakeholders may contribute to both leader performance and ethical decision-making.

Along similar lines, Strange and Mumford (2005) have provided evidence which indicates that the ability of leaders to reflect on and appraise their past life experiences contributes to both vision formation and effective problem-solving. Again, the findings obtained with regard to analyzing personal motivations suggest that instruction intended to encourage reflection on personal motivations vis-à-vis the motivations of key stakeholders may help leaders make not only better decisions, but also more ethical decisions.
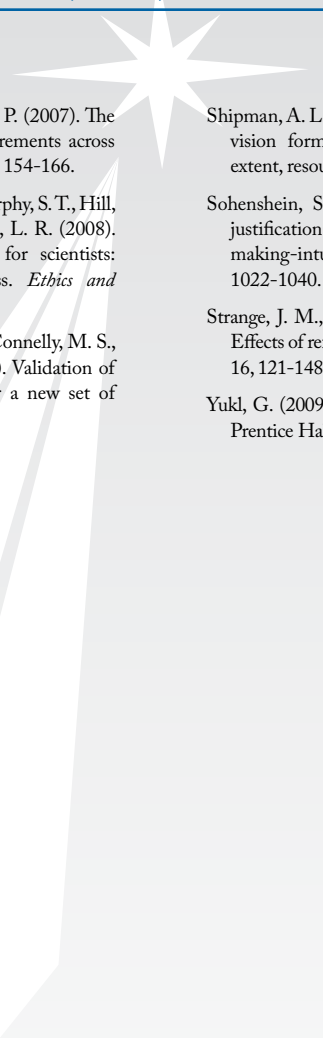
Finally, the extensiveness of leader sense-making activities has been shown to influence leader performance especially as leaders must come to grips with crisis situations (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazansain, 1999). When these findings are considered in light of the importance of recognizing circumstances and the importance of sense-making in ethical decision-making (Sohenshein, 2007), they suggest that instruction which encourages leaders to construe or understand situations from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups should improve both leader performance and ethical decision-making by leaders.

CONCLUSIONS

Of course, evidence directly bearing on the effectiveness of leadership development interventions in enhancing ethical decision-making is lacking. However, this is one of the missions to which the *Journal of Character and Leadership Scholarship* has devoted itself. By showing how variables relevant to character, such as ethics, shape leadership and organizational performance, the JCLS may do much to advance this research arena. Hopefully, this project will contribute to our ability to develop high performance leaders who make the ethical decisions individuals, groups, organizations, and society all expect and deserve.

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