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## Ethical Leadership: Guiding Principles for Educators and Administrators

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# Ethical Leadership: Guiding Principles for Educators and Administrators

Mary P. Sullivan

## **Abstract**

Rooted in Biblical principles, this discussion of eight values associated with ethical leadership will provide educators and administrators with “food for thought” as they adopt their own personal code of ethics or guiding principles on which to base their leadership style.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, ethical leadership, Christian leadership, principles of leadership, ethics

## Ethical Leadership: Guiding Principles for Educators and Administrators

Codes of ethics for professionals in numerous disciplines have taken on significance in recent years. The unethical conduct of chief executive officers and their colleagues in the business world and the horrendous sexual misconduct of teachers with students are just a few examples of unacceptable behaviors making headlines in America. In addition, the many incidents which never make the evening news but are handled more quietly within organizations or communities, potentially cause considerable harm, and consequences must follow.

Establishing a code of ethics for particular professions is a step toward creating an ethical environment. However, this simply is not enough. Each person within the organization must buy in to the standard and elect to operate within its moral confines. While some codes of ethics carry consequences for those who violate the standards, others exist simply as a guideline for professionals, in which violations are not explicitly punishable.

Though some rules or codes of ethics deal with moral issues, the codes do not fully cover the moral principles by which ethical, Christian leaders should conduct themselves. While educators may be bound by any number of codes of ethics as established by governing agencies and professional associations, ethical educational leaders must elect to govern themselves by the highest of standards. Despite one's leadership style, ethics remains at the core of effective leadership. Establishing a personal code of ethics to govern oneself in the professional capacity of an educational leader is an initial step toward creating an ethical environment for oneself and for one's subordinates.

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

*A personal code of ethics*

A personal code of ethics must encompass not only those professional behaviors essential to the organization, but also personal behaviors because of their potential impact on one's leadership capacity. A personal code of ethics also must reflect the person's worldview, for worldview is essential in determining the core values which must be central to the code of ethics. Among the values this writer identifies as essential are wisdom, vision, character, communication, service, work ethic, learning and commitment. The following provides a discussion of each of these characteristics.

*Wisdom*

Ethical leaders must seek first godly wisdom, knowledge, and guidance. Through prayer, Bible study and interaction with other Christians, ethical leaders can gain wisdom to guide their decision making. Proverbs is full of verses reminding Christians to seek godly wisdom. This is no less important for Christian leaders working within the educational profession. As Proverbs 2:3-6 (New King James Version) instructs:

If you cry out for discernment,/And lift up your voice for understanding,/If you seek her as silver,/And search for her as for hidden treasures;/Then you will understand the fear of the Lord,/And find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

It is essential that ethical school leaders seek wisdom and knowledge from God and that they trust in Him for insight.

Proverbs 8:12 reminds Christians, "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,/And find out knowledge and discretion." Wise leaders carefully consider situations and are discerning in their

judgment. The followers of such leaders can clearly see these characteristics in their leaders and may be more likely to trust them. Trust is built through ethical decision-making.

In essence, what is important here is spiritual wisdom. Christians are cautioned against worldly wisdom in 1 Corinthians 3:18: “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” Though Christian leaders are expected to have job knowledge and exercise discretion in dealing with people and situations, wisdom is a godly quality, achieved only through a mature relationship with Christ. A Christian leader must desire to demonstrate Godly wisdom, for as the scripture says in 1 Corinthians 2: 4-5, “And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” Ethical leaders lead such that their followers know their wisdom is not earthly wisdom, but spiritually-fed wisdom granted by God.

Wisdom is the foundation for leadership and it comes from God alone. As evidenced by Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord,/Like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes.” Christian leaders know from Whom they receive their instruction.

### *Passionate Vision*

Leaders are visionaries with a passion. They see the bigger picture and they look toward creating an improved future for all of their followers. Leaders, such as those in Hebrews, saw the far-away promise. Their leadership power for the present existed because of their vision for the future (Maxwell, 2002, p. 1512). These leaders led with passion, with confidence, and with resolve. Their passion was a result of their purpose, being on a mission for God. They believed in their purpose and its ultimate goal of bringing others into a closer relationship with God.

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

Their confidence was fed by their faith. They made up their minds to follow God's leading, allowing "their dreams, not their memories" to fill their hearts and minds (Maxwell, 2002, p. 1512).

Educational leaders must also follow this pattern. Educational leaders must have a vision for improving the educational system and opportunities for children and teachers under their direction. Leaders have to be able to see the bigger picture and make decisions based on that. All too often their decisions may be questioned by those who cannot see how various issues affect the whole. Leaders must stand confidently, knowing they have weighed the issues and made informed decisions in the best interest of all.

Educational leaders need purpose. They cannot haphazardly make decisions. An ethical leader develops a master plan, inspired by God's wisdom and guidance. Decisions must then be made in accordance with the plan. This plan should be shared with the stakeholders. Followers need to know where they are going so that if they are not in tune with the ultimate goal, they can get tuned in or get off the ship.

As Maxwell (2002) points out, "vision always drives leaders, especially when they believe God is its source" (p. 1560). Divine visions, he continues, are revealed, are not optional, are designed to meet needs and serve others, are based on obedience to God and, by purpose, glorify God (Maxwell, 2002, p. 1560). Ethical educational leaders also need to internalize these aspects of vision as they passionately carry out their God-given visions in their place of work.

### *Character*

Educational leaders must conduct themselves with an ethical consciousness. They must be self-disciplined to "do what is right even when it is difficult" (Maxwell, 2002, p. 989). Their personal character must consist of integrity, honesty, fairness, justice, kindness, sexual purity,

and personal responsibility with family and finances. To be respected as a leader among people, one should be above reproach. By conducting oneself this way, one can earn respect and credibility.

The Bible provides evidence to support these characteristics. About honesty and integrity, Proverbs 11:1 states, “Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord,/But a just weight is His delight” and verse 3 continues, “The integrity of the upright will guide them,/But the perversity of the unfaithful will destroy them.” Certainly, leaders should exercise honesty and integrity if they are to be respected by others.

Kindness is a leadership quality that sometimes gets overlooked by leaders who attempt to lead through control. “What is desired in a man is kindness,” states Proverbs 19:22. This point is expanded further in Proverbs 20:28, “Mercy and truth preserve the king,/and by lovingkindness he upholds his throne.” Followers are much more willing to work for kind leaders who are both truthful and merciful, thus the leader will more likely maintain the position of leader when these characteristics are evident. Christians are further told, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due/When it is in the power of your hand to do so” Proverbs 3:27. Treating others justly and fairly also is a characteristic of ethical leadership. “To do righteousness and justice/Is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice” (Proverbs 21:3).

Sexual immorality is addressed in Proverbs 5 and 6. Christian leaders must exercise caution in this area. They should avoid the types of situations where this could occur. The scripture advises men to beware of the lure of immorality, “For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil” (Proverbs 5:3). Similarly, Proverbs 6:25-29 advises the following:

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

Do not lust after her beauty in your heart,/Nor let her allure you with her eyelids./For by means of a harlot,/A man is reduced to a crust of bread;/And an adulteress will prey upon his precious life./Can a man take fire to his bosom,/And his clothes not be burned?/Can one walk on hot coals,/And his feet not be seared?/So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife;/Whoever touches her shall not be innocent.

Though the scripture specifically speaks to men about avoiding immoral women, Christian women should also allow this scripture to speak to them as well concerning their sexual behaviors. Sexual intimacy for Christian leaders should be based on biblical teachings.

The old adage about sweeping around one's doorstep applies to ethical leadership, as well. Taking care of one's personal life is an important first step in leadership. After all, if personal finances or family life are out of sync, why should someone follow this leader? Multiple verses in Proverbs instruct Christian parents to heed their family responsibilities by appropriately teaching and correcting their children. For example, see Proverbs 22:6, which states "Train up a child in the way he should go,/And when he is old he will not depart from it" and Proverbs 22: 15 which states, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;/The rod of correction will drive it far from him." It is difficult for educational leaders to maintain credibility among students, parents and teachers when their own children misbehave without appropriate correction.

Where personal finances are concerned, Christian leaders should also exercise responsibility through tithing and paying their debts on time. Christians are instructed to "Honor the Lord with your possessions,/And with the first fruits of all your increase;/So your barns will be filled with plenty,/And your vats will overflow with new wine" Proverbs 3: 9-10. Educational

leaders are often called on to manage public money. Their credibility may be determined by how they exercise responsibility with their personal finances.

Insuring oneself is firmly grounded in Christian principles is essential for ethical leaders. Jim Hunter, author of *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, stated in an interview that “the single most important quality of leadership is character” (Maxwell, 2002b). He further stated,

Character is moral maturity. Character is our level of commitment to doing the right thing, even when it costs us something. Character is winning the battles between what we should do and what we want to do . . . . Effective leaders have developed habits of character aligned with proper values and therefore do the right thing when it comes to leading their people (Maxwell, 2002b).

Christian leaders are aware that their character is under scrutiny at all times by their followers and others on the outside of the organization who may have hopes of destroying the leader.

Doing the right thing is the right thing to do.

### *Communication*

Effective leaders communicate well. Ethical leaders are not only well-spoken but also truthful; they listen to all sides, and their words are encouraging and motivating to their people. Leaders also know when to speak and what to say. Even when a leader must correct someone, a Christian leader is led by the scripture, “A soft answer turns away wrath,/But a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). Keeping the peace by avoiding stirring up resentment is a critical factor in leadership. Speaking tactfully is a skill that educational leaders must hone.

Being a master communicator is an essential leadership skill. Leaders insure that their words are truthful and are used to correct problems, not add to problems. Proverbs 5:2 and 5:4

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

address this: “The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly” and “A wholesome tongue is a tree of life.” When a leader operates within God’s will, even those who oppose the leader will be at peace according to the scripture, for it is written in Proverbs 16: 6, “When a man’s ways please the Lord,/He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

Yet another quality ethical leaders should exhibit is that of listening to all sides before making a judgment. All too often leaders may jump to conclusions before gathering all of the information. An ethical leader should seek all pertinent information before determining right or wrong in a situation because “The first one to plead his cause seems right,/Until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17). This is one of those times when that God-given wisdom must come into play. Leaders must be able to sort out truth from perspective, as all parties most likely view their side as truth.

### *Service*

Ethical leaders are servants. They seek ways to meet the needs of their followers and to build leadership skills within those followers. Christian leaders seek to serve, not to be served. This theme of servanthood is described by Jesus in Mark 10: 42-43 when He said to the disciples:

You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

To humble oneself is necessary in order to become a servant leader. A servant leader cannot allow pride in one’s position or level of authority to prevent serving others.

Servant leaders are empathetic. They understand and feel the situations of their followers. Servant leaders rely on persuasion, not top-down authority. They attempt to bring about group consensus. They have foresight to understand the realities of their decisions and their consequences on the future. They are committed to the personal growth of their employees and they seek to build community among them (Hampton, 2003). These qualities of servant leadership are characteristics that should be a part of the guiding principles of ethical leaders.

Many times leaders find themselves in positions of authority and begin to exercise power over their subordinates, when in actuality, ethical leaders should seek to work with their subordinates to build the organization. Servant leadership, meeting the needs of one's followers, is just one way for leaders to demonstrate care and concern for their subordinates. According to Jim Hunter, "Great leaders build trust and influence by serving their people, i.e. by identifying and meeting their legitimate needs (not wants)" (Maxwell, 2002b). After all, people are more likely to perform at a higher standard when they know that their leader cares about them and their needs, not just about their work performance.

Like Barnabas in Acts 11, servant leaders don't seek "the limelight" but rather focus "on giving, not getting"; servant leaders "rejoice with other's victories" and aren't concerned "about [their] own fame" (Maxwell, 2002, p. 1339). As Maxwell emphasizes, a servant leader "must love ... people more than ... position" (Maxwell, 2002, p. 1339). Servant leaders do not fear losing popularity or position by serving others. They serve others because it is the right thing to do.

### *Work Ethic*

A strong work ethic is a characteristic of an effective, ethical leader. Throughout Proverbs, Christians are urged to work hard. From Proverbs 10:4, "He who has a slack hand

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

becomes poor,/But the hand of the diligent makes rich” to Proverbs 12:24, “the hand of the diligent will rule,/But the lazy man will be put to forced labor,” the idea of working for what one gets is evident in the scripture.

Educational leaders must work hard. The challenges of the job often require long hours and much thought. Leaders ask others to put forth one hundred percent effort, thus they, too must be willing to put in full effort to insure their organizational goals are met. As Proverbs 20:13 says, “Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty;/Open your eyes, and you will be satisfied with bread.” Leaders work hard to achieve their organization’s purpose, and ultimately, God’s purpose. In the end, Christian leaders will be rewarded for their hard work and dedication to fulfilling God’s purpose in their lives and in their work, for Proverbs 22:29 promises, “Do you see a man who excels in his work?/He will stand before kings;/He will not stand before unknown men.” Hard work is greatly to be admired and God recognizes the hard work of His people.

### *Learning*

Ethical leadership is more than merely following a prescribed code of ethics. Ethical leaders have a “moral obligation to know enough to do the job right” (Sheldon). This requires a commitment to learning, and learning is a life-long process. Educational leaders should continually seek knowledge and incorporate that into their daily operation. Building specific skills for the job and deciphering the laws, rules and regulations associated with schools are just some of the things that school leaders need to do regularly.

To become more effective, leaders accept constructive criticism and learn from their mistakes. According to the Bible, those who accept correction are wise, for “The ear that hears the rebukes of life/Will abide among the wise” (Proverbs 15:31). Leaders should also help their followers become more effective by gently correcting them as well when they make mistakes.

Effective leaders never know enough. They continually seek new information and work to build their repertoire of skills and body of knowledge. They gather wise counsel around themselves for leaders know that the members of their “inner circle” can make or break them. Maxwell bases his points about advisors on Proverbs 11:14, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall;/But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” He suggests that leaders gather others who are creative, loyal, wise and intelligent, those who have faith, integrity, complementary gifts and influence, along with those who share the same vision (Maxwell, 2002, p. 757). This group of advisors should aid a leader in carrying out the organization’s purpose, and add to the leader’s learning.

### *Commitment*

A final quality necessary to ethical leadership is that of commitment. As Maxwell (2002b) notes, “Commitment, because it is a character trait, is revealed, not built, by adversity.” Until situations become difficult, commitment is typically easy. It isn’t “until things get tough” that one’s level of commitment is tested, and is, therefore, revealed (Maxwell, 2002b). Maxwell (2002b) further asserts that “the only way to sustain commitment is to link it with the personal values of an individual.... Values are what drive your choices; they transcend your talents and skills and they stand up under the tests of adversity.”

Spiritually speaking, leaders must die to themselves and be wholly committed to being used by God in order to be fully committed. Job 13:15 illuminates this point: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him” as does Galations 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Christian leaders are designated by God and have a purpose designed by Him. The point at which Christian leaders are willing to

*Christian Perspectives in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2009

truly follow God's leading, they place complete trust in Him and fully commit to His plan. This is the ultimate in commitment and there is no half-doing or turning back.

*Becoming an Ethical Leader*

The ideals presented herein are lofty goals for educational leaders, yet they are not impossible to achieve. Becoming an ethical leader requires a re-centering of one's life. Viewing the world from a biblical perspective is a must. Preparing oneself through careful Bible study is one key to becoming more like Christ, the ultimate leader. Scripture also provides numerous other examples of positive leadership qualities.

Leadership, according to Maxwell (2002b), is not about the things we do; that is management. Leadership, he insists, "is the person who we are – our character inspires others." Leadership is about influence, and "moral leadership begins with moral leaders" (Lashway, 1996, p. 3). Leaders teach with actions, not just with words. What one does is who one is. Thus, to become an ethical leader, one must do more than follow a set of rules. Lashway (1996) notes, "The leader's responsibility is complex and multi-dimensional, rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity" (p. 3).

While there are certainly earthly goals to be achieved by educational leaders and their followers, leaders should keep in mind that it is their life's ultimate purpose to influence others for Christ. Others notice the way a leader conducts both personal and professional affairs. These observations determine a leader's true leadership capacity. Christians, like everyone in America, need a job to earn a living. For Christians, perhaps, this job should be considered a home mission field, a significant part of one's personal ministry. By continually conducting self-reflections, a Christian leader can more easily stay on course with this personal ministry and insure that the model one presents is a model worth imitating.

*A Final Thought*

Educational leaders influence a vast number of people, from students, to teachers, to parents. No matter what leadership style or combination of styles one adopts, leaders must realize that their influence is what counts. For example, consider a school administrator in a school serving over seven hundred students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, with a staff of more than seventy. A leader in this environment contacts nearly eight hundred people daily. Add to that the parents of the students, siblings not enrolled in the school and other relatives who may live in the home, plus the spouses and families of the staff members, and the number rises to well over one thousand. What an incredible number of people this educational leader influences daily! The question is, are educational leaders making the most of this opportunity to influence people for Christ? Simply by the way leaders conduct themselves, they witness for or against Christ.

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