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A Lack of Willpower May Influence a Leader's Ability to Act Morally

Introduction

Many leaders in business seem to strive to instil true moral leadership. There are, however, potential professional and personal drawbacks involved with assuming a moral stand, including risks affecting career, finances, mental wellbeing, and physical health. While many, therefore, regard moral considerations in leadership as a test of character, a closer look is warranted. In this article, I discuss this symbiotic relationship of principled leadership and individual character and propose the more nuanced hypothesis: morality in decision-making is, in many cases, certainly a test, but not a test of character *per se* or even of depth of character, but a test of willpower. I argue that it is a leader's potential lack of willpower that influences his or her ability to act morally, rather than defining who they "are" in terms of character traits, virtues, and cultural or social breeding.

Acts of leadership have a moral dimension. The readiness to take professional and personal risks for the sake of principle is essential for leaders, but experience shows that the readiness to take such action for ethical reasons is difficult to inculcate. Examples of unethical activity in the workplace include, *inter alia*, the poor treatment of employees, environmental degradation, fraudulent activities, and the use of flawed business models, corruption in business dealings, grey-zoned contractual arrangements, abuse of executive pay options, and the use of favouritism for various purposes. One response to confronting and exposing unethical behaviours in the workplace lies in the legal subterfuge of whistleblowing. Research on whistleblowing presents a frequently studied case with moral dimensions. Common consequences of whistleblowing include depression and anxiety, feelings of isolation and powerlessness, increased distrust of others, declining physical health, financial decline, and familial problems (Rothschild & Miethe, 1999), collectively demonstrating the high risks associated with taking ethical stands in the workplace. It is therefore safe to argue that leaders who take risks for the sake of ethical principle are leaders who must have some kind of moral courage, i.e., an ability to maintain integrity at the risk of losing friends, employment, privacy, or prestige (Putnam, 1997).

Morality is obviously, at its most basic level, about choices and how people treat others. There is a long philosophical tradition where morality is explained in terms of virtues. Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas and others enumerated such virtues, defining them as positive traits of character. Acting in the best interests of all affected stakeholders by carefully weighing competing claims also has a long history in philosophical reflection. Philosophers such as Leibniz and Descartes tried to construct a moral system free of feelings. Kant argued that "doing the right thing" was a consequence of acting rationally, although this conception of morality has lately been contested by findings

in neuroscience. When people are confronted with moral dilemmas, the unconscious automatically generates emotional reactions (Lehrer, 2009). It is only after these reactions result in decision-making that people invent reasons to justify their moral intuition. The capacity to make moral decisions is therefore innate. While principled decision-making is inherent in most healthy people, psychopaths lack the capacity to empathize with others (Rizzolatti *et al.*, 1999). Morality is thus based on reciprocity of respect and espousing a sense of fairness as well as on empathy and compassion (de Waal, 2009). Yet, if human beings have an innate capacity for making moral judgments, a capacity based on inherent traits, why are moral considerations still difficult to inculcate in leaders? Ostensibly, the potential losses and inherent dangers involved are too great to make the ethical decision, or, perhaps, the inability to lead in this manner could be a direct result of cowardice...or a lack of willpower.

Hypothesis: A Leader's Capacity for Morality is Dependent upon Willpower

Few will contest that a leader's moral considerations involve potential harms – as do many decisions in business and organisational life. Risk in this context is the potential that a chosen act of leadership (including the choice of inaction) will lead to a loss or an undesirable outcome. Almost any human endeavour carries some risk, although some activities are much more perilous than others. As argued above, taking a moral stand from a leadership position is potentially risky. Professional losses may include loss of power, status, authority, influence, control, acceptance, relationships, alliance partners, and opportunities. These losses are linked to deep-seated human needs (Sheldon, 2004; Reiss, 2005) and to a person's personality structure, as well as to important drivers of leadership behaviour (Karp, 2012). Additionally, such losses may be of a personal nature and include the loss of employment, friends, social standing, income, self-worth, and self-esteem – all factors linked to a person's mental wellbeing, identity, and social position. It therefore takes courage to exercise moral leadership.

Principled leaders generally experience imperviousness from threat, challenge, or difficulty. They are undaunted in their positions and convictions regardless of opposition from followers, peers, superiors, customers, or other stakeholders. They need to show persistence and complete challenging tasks. Hence, many link a lack of *moral* behaviour to a lack of character, although this is a premise that should be better defined. Character consists of personality traits that assist an individual to recognize another's differences that are ingrained as well as those shaped by environmental factors subject to change (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character is plural and dynamic; it is difficult to talk about as it is unitary and categorical, i.e., as if one either has character or not.

Many have discussed the strong bond between character and courage. Courage is a character trait and an emotional strength that involves the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In one recent study, findings indicated a close link between acts of leadership and the exercise of will (Karp, 2012). A natural hypothesis is, therefore, that a leader's capacity to choose the moral decision is dependent upon his or her willpower and ability to exercise will when decisions are particularly challenging. The willpower needed to undertake potentially risky actions to achieve a moral purpose are often poised against difficult odds. Balancing competing claims and agendas requires an ability to deal with and accept uncertainty and opposition at the

risk of personal loss. It is hence not the neurology that limits leaders' moral courage, but their possible lack of willpower.

On the Freedom of Will

Philosophy has been characterised by raging debates about free will for more than 2,000 years. The ontological status of free will may be resolved if free will is contrasted with determinism, although some philosophers regard free will as compatible with determinism. Originating from Leibniz's principles of reason, causal determinism posits that a specific set of antecedents necessitates one *and only one* set of consequences, although no human being may have the requisite skills to analyse the contingency that is ultimately based on complex laws of nature (e.g., biochemical principles which govern neurological processes and subsequent behaviour). If determinism is true, it is arguable that we do not have free will. To address this problem, philosophers have proposed "compatibilist" and "incompatibilist" theories of free will. Compatibilist theories maintain that ontological determinism is compatible with the notion, *freedom of action*. In such theories, *determinism* and *freedom of will* are regarded as incompatible, assuming indeterminacy of the will does not, however, imply that behaviour is random, but rather allows it to be purposeful (Kane, 2002; Clarke, 2005). Kane (1996) suggests that those choices most relevant to people's autonomy involve the exercise of will as part of the deliberation process. These are choices that involve a conflict of will, where duty or long-term self-interest competes with a more immediate desire. In struggling to prioritise values and hence exercise moral decisions, the possible outcomes of choices are indeterminate. This indeterminacy, Kane believes, is essential to freedom of will.

The freedom of will is obviously linked to people's ability to exercise willpower. The concept of willpower is hence deeply embedded in people's view of themselves. Such argument is criticised by a school of neuroscientists who argue that willpower in general is phantasmagorical, i.e., that neurotransmitters in the brain largely explain why some people do better than others at resisting temptation and controlling their impulses. They point to chemical changes in the brain that are almost impossible to resist. Michael Lowe, Professor of Clinical Psychology, states, "Willpower as an independent cause of behaviour is a myth." Arguably, then, there is no such thing as willpower (Seligman, 1999:81). Some attest that scholars need to switch from value judgments to biological determinism in seeking to analyse the reasons why people commit to a particular course of action and resist short-term impulses to capitulate.

What is certain is that fundamental religious and cultural narratives (e.g., the Bhagavad Gita, Thora, Odyssey, Bible, and Koran) have, at all times, shaped problems involving the exercise

"WE MUST BELIEVE IN FREE WILL. WE HAVE NO CHOICE."

— ISAAC B. SINGER

of will. The view of will and willpower is therefore fundamentally embedded in the story of sin, with its emphasis on moral conflict and temptation versus long-term self-interest, and in

mythology, as echoed in Ulysses' temptation when exposed to the Sirens singing. Rather than taking sides in a never-ending ontological debate on the existence of free will, I focus on a belief in free will and its effect on leadership. The notion of free will allows people to

work for, and anticipate, a better future, and hence, free will is needed to experience accomplishment, autonomy, control, dignity, and positive relationships (Kane, 1996; Clarke, 2003). It may hence be argued that a belief in free will and its concomitant sense of self-efficacy have important implications for organising economical and societal systems (Alesina & Angeletos, 2005) and for bringing about the leadership needed to make this happen. Belief in free will is thus functional: without it, people would not be able to feel they can control and manipulate their environment and future. The absence of free will would produce devastating consequences for psychological wellbeing as illustrated by research on learned helplessness (Peterson, *et al.*, 1995). Belief in free will also provides people with a feeling of stability and control (Bargh, 1997) as it enables them to define, and act with, moral responsibility. Belief is a powerful matter, and in the words of the Jewish-American writer and Nobel laureate Isaac B. Singer, “We must believe in free will. We have no choice.”

The Power of Willpower

A belief in free will means a belief in the exercise of willpower in order to instil moral considerations. The social psychologist, Roy Baumeister (2011), argues that willpower is a quality that predicts positive outcomes in many areas of life and ranks it as one of the most important factors in this respect. The importance of willpower has been widely acknowledged in academic research. However, in leadership research, willpower is a capacity that is less studied...although some argue that wilful leaders achieve results (Collins, 2001; Bruch and Ghosal, 2004). Willpower, or volition, is regarded as the cognitive process by which an individual decides on and commits to a particular course of action. Willpower is the colloquial, and volition the scientific, term for states of human will. It is commonly understood as purposive striving and is one of the primary human psychological functions besides affection, motivation, and cognition. After World War II, the topic lost interest as academic research increasingly focused on themes of motivation. Only recently have researchers in the field of psychology re-established an interest in, and advanced a renewed relevance of, willpower.

The distinction between willpower and motivation can be traced to a debate in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century between two psychologists, Narziss Ach and Kurt Lewin. Ach’s research at the time concluded that before a person’s intention could become a deep personal commitment, he or she had to cross a threshold of some sort. He distinguished motivation – the state of desire – before crossing this threshold, from willpower – the state beyond it – when the individual converted the wish of motivation into the will of resolute engagement (Ach, 1910). Alternatively, Lewin’s field theory (1951) denied that motivation and willpower were distinct. Political events played their part in this science. The ruling German National Socialistic party adapted the language of will as its political ideology relying upon philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. When the war ended, Ach’s works were discredited, while Lewin, who had immigrated to the United States, was acclaimed for his theories. His influence is one reason why concepts of leadership often tend to focus on motivation as the most important driver in acts of leadership (Bruch and Ghoshal, 2004).

One of Ach’s important conclusions, however, was that an unwavering commitment lies behind decisive action. Leadership is about getting things done (Eccles and Nohria, 1992), and obviously, to get things done, leaders must act themselves and mobilise the collective action of others. In order to close the “knowing-doing gap” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000), it is obvious that an important challenge for leaders is to execute determined action to achieve

some kind of purpose, of a moral or other nature, often against difficult odds (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004). Although external challenges in an organisation can make this difficult, the most critical barrier is often not outside the individual but inside. Research indicates that leaders need more than motivation to spur actions (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004). This is especially true when it comes to moral leadership. Ambitious goals, high uncertainty, and extreme opposition underscore the limitations of motivation, and leaders need to rely on their willpower, according to these researchers. They argue that willpower goes a decisive step further than motivation: “Willpower – the force behind energy and focus – goes a decisive step further than motivation. It enables managers to execute disciplined action, even when they are disinclined to do something, uninspired by the work, or tempted by other opportunities” (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004:13).

Willpower, therefore, seems to matter when leaders face some kinds of challenges such as moral decision-making while simpler tasks do not engage the will with the same intensity. According to Bruch and Ghoshal (2004), ambitious goals, long-term projects, high uncertainty and extreme opposition are examples of some forces that stimulate willpower. Other forces may obviously be of a moral nature, and include considerations that often involve challenges, opposition, and high personal and professional risks. Wilful leaders tend to overcome such barriers, deal with setbacks, and persevere to the end, and moral acts of leadership hence appear to be emblematic of psychological strength. If moral leadership is at all related to individual qualities, such qualities would appear to include the ability to deal with resistance and opposition.

As Tolstoy wrote, “To study the laws of history, we must completely change the subject of our observation; must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common and infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved” (Tolstoy, 1952:470). Barker (2001) states that the infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved in organisations are their individual wills, values, needs, and a sense of purpose or direction. One such human quality is the willpower of those who take a moral stand. Willpower, thus, has a collective dimension, although it is the willpower (and interests) from those taking charge outmatching the willpower (and interests) of others that seems to govern outcomes in leadership situations. This can be recognized as individual agency within a collective dimension.

The “will to power” was a vital concept in the philosophy of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1887). The will to power describes what Nietzsche believed to be the main driving force in a human being: the striving to reach the highest possible construction of one’s self. Will is the function by which people direct and sustain their attention, imagination, and actions toward an objective or intention. The “directing” is not a forced effort; it is the active decision of a person to attend to one phenomenon and not a different one, i.e., undertaking acts of moral leadership. The decision is enacted via the selection of a thought, image, feeling, energy, or action. This selection directs a person’s attention. The “sustaining” is a commitment to the original direction. It may therefore be argued that the will is the primary expression of people’s state of being – the source of their initiatives. And, in this context, such initiative is moral.

According to Holton (2003), willpower is thus the capability a person actively employs in circumstances in which one senses a moral or other struggle – where that individual encounters some form of resistance from one’s inclinations or desires. Those assuming

moral leadership may use willpower to direct their attention away from a desire not to act in order to form, retain, or execute their original intention (Henden, 2008). Hence, in situations requiring moral direction, those assuming leadership overcome their desires by fighting or redirecting their attention. These may be desires to leave (or not to enter) a challenging situation, or not to act when action is needed. Willpower is thus the capability that governs the internal struggle against one's own desires not to do as the initial neurological firing leads people to act (before they after-rationalize their eventual non-actions).

Willpower as a Leadership Capability

According to Baumeister (2011), willpower may well have a genetic component, but it seems amenable to nurturing. Therefore, it may be argued that leaders are wholly capable of developing their willpower capabilities if they are so motivated. Bruch and Ghoshal (2004) have deconstructed willpower as a capability and rather argue that a person's willpower relies on a combination of his or her *energy* and *focus*. Energy is defined to relate to a person's degree of personal commitment and involvement towards a purpose or cause while focus signals how well the person channels his or her energy towards the desired outcome. More specifically:

Energy is defined in physics as the capacity to work and comes from four primary sources in human beings: the body, emotions, mind, and spirit. Mentally, it may seem that the ability to commit to a clear, moral purpose makes a difference in terms of strength of willpower. The link between the degree of commitment and purpose is key as the process is more important than the content. Energy balance also plays an important role: if one regards willpower as something more than a metaphor, it must be described in terms of what is happening in neural circuits. Freud once theorized that humans use a process called sublimation to convert energy from its basic instinctual sources into more socially approved ones. His energy model was not embraced by psychologists of the 20th century nor were his thoughts on sublimation mechanisms. Baumeister (2011), however, developed Freud's ideas further. Following the release of Freud's thoughts on self, i.e., the ego, the term *ego depletion* was conceptualised to describe people's diminishing capacities to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and actions. People can overcome mental fatigue, but if they had depleted energy by experiencing forms of ego depletion activities, they would eventually not be able to follow their commitments and might hence capitulate to their desires not to act morally. The body's glucose level may therefore be an important regulator not only of people's energy balance but also of their willpower level. People's diet can have an effect on their ability to exercise willpower, and hence, their ability to assume moral leadership stands.

It is thus important that people raise their self-awareness of their energy balance in terms of what factors drain and fuel their energy reservoirs. Examples of these factors include socializing behaviour decisions involving company, situations, and activities. Some researchers, therefore, recommend that leaders should spend more time on managing their energy – not their time – as time is a finite resource while energy is not (Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007). Energy can be systematically expanded and regularly renewed by establishing specific rituals and/or behaviours that are intentionally practiced and scheduled with the goal of making them unconscious and automatic. Developing a personal discipline is hence one way for leaders to better marshal their energy. Relatedly, this should also enhance the strength of their willpower.

Focus is energy channelled towards a specific outcome. Many argue that focused leaders are goal-oriented in some way in addition to having a clear purpose (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004). This is confirmed by research within *future time perspectives*, defined as the tendency to think about or attend to the future as opposed to the present or past (Nurmi, 1991). Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) trace the concept to Lewin's (1939) life-space model of development in which adolescence was regarded as the period when future time perspective increases in response to the need to plan for the transition to adulthood. One theory predicted that the outcome of increased concern about the future is reduced when future rewards are discounted (Steinberg *et al.*, 2009). Also, survey findings (Romer *et al.*, 2010) indicate that the ability to delay gratification – i.e., the ability to exercise a future time perspective – may be an important source of willpower and additionally augment positive motivation for success-oriented individuals (Gjesme, 1996).

“Where attention goes, energy flows” is a popular saying. Goal-setting is one means of exercising a future time perspective and involves many different techniques and practices outside the scope of this article. One important point about goals and moral considerations, however, is that goals should not be conflicting. The result of conflicting goals, which is especially relevant when it comes to the exercise of moral decision-making, is that people who worry a great deal get less done and their mental and physical health suffers (Emmons & King, 1988). Other common advice includes setting goals that are well defined, concrete, possible to identify with, and found to be personally challenging (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004).

Psychologists have debated the merits of short-term versus long-term objectives without agreeing on a conclusion. Studies illustrate that short-term goals produce improvements in learning, self-efficacy, and performance, while findings also show the efficiency of long-term goals in many situations. Some also argue that the making of plans enhances the achievement of goals. This is because the human memory makes a distinction between finished and unfinished tasks, something which is known as the *Zeigarnik* effect (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Uncompleted tasks and unmet goals tend to pop up in people's minds – something which drains energy. The unconscious mind is, in this scenario, asking the conscious mind to make a plan, and once a plan is formed, the unconscious stops reminding the conscious mind. Research suggests that the related planning need does not require great detail or many specifics, as the importance is the mental process of having made a plan, not the plan itself. The Field Marshal of the once powerful Prussian Army, Helmuth Graf von Moltke, has been given credit for the saying, “Planning is everything. Plans are nothing.” Research findings during the last three decades confirm Moltke's policy, indicating that a high orientation towards future time, a high instrumentality of activity, as well as a focus on future goals, are positively related with individual achievement (Gjesme, 1996). It is therefore the mental preparation that is important as far as the exercise of willpower is concerned, evidencing a direction of energy towards certain commitments and objectives.

Conclusion

Many leaders in business and other sectors seem to strive to instil true moral leadership. However, potentially significant professional and personal risks are involved with taking a moral stand, including risks affecting one's career, financial matters, mental wellbeing, and physical health. While many, therefore, regard moral considerations in leadership as a test of character, a closer look is advised, as this discussion and the noted research would

suggest. Morality in decision-making is, in many cases, certainly a test, but not a test of character *per se*, or even of the depth of one's character. It is a test of willpower. I have argued that it is a leader's potential lack of willpower that influences his or her ability to act morally rather than that person's character traits, virtues, or cultural and social breeding. In this sense, willpower may be regarded as the converted energy from basic instinctual sources reinforced by deep commitments and objectives. It is a mental capability with genetic and nurtured components. It may be developed and trained throughout one's life by disciplined focus and raised awareness – all while the motivation to do so continues to exist.

A lack of moral decision-making in acts of leadership is a complex social phenomenon with many variables on which it is difficult to theorise and generalise. This discussion has been kept conceptual, but it has also been based on a recent research study (Karp, 2012). It may be argued that many acts can be seen as both moral leadership and not moral leadership, depending on the observer and his or her implicit definition of morality and of leadership. I think, however, that the conclusions are interesting, especially for practicing leaders themselves. Becoming better aware of willpower, as well as developing willpower, may prove to be one of several promising ways to better perform as a leader as well as to succeed in life generally. A positive side effect is that stronger willpower will most likely enhance a leader's capability to display moral judgment in difficult and challenging acts of leadership, even though such acts may carry professional and personal risks.

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