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Values-Based Leadership in a Time of Values Confusion



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Echoes from the Past

Values-based leadership is slipping, perhaps morphing into an ill-defined expediency without the weight or anchor of moral principles while neglecting common decency, genuine care for others, and a vision of democracy as a moral egalitarianism. Values, without a moral anchor, can easily slip into ethical relativity and narcissistic navel-gazing where a moral view of others hangs hopelessly by the threads of expedient decision making (Hester, 2012). This we see in the current political and business climate of 2018 as we live and work in an atmosphere of selfishness ignoring self-giving service to others. Will this last, or will we be able to revive our democratic ideals and moral principles and transpose these into our everyday lives, business practices, and political processes?

In 1951, and in the afterglow of the atomic explosions over Japan and with the weight of the Cold War bearing down on the American consciousness, Edgar S. Brightman provided the following insight:

As the second half of the 20th Century opens, freedom, reason, the rights of man, the worship of God, the love of truth, beauty, and goodness – all of man’s highest values—are threatened by ‘military necessity,’ the totalitarian state, materialistic theories and practices, and ruthless competition.

A conflict of ideals is raging in the world. It is not merely a conflict between East and West, or between science and tradition, or between communism and capitalism, or between political and economic democracy, or even between totalitarianism and freedom. It is a struggle ‘in the minds of men’ about ultimate values (Brightman, 1951).

We are not only living during a time in which values matter, but in a time of values confusion. Value choices can no longer be taken for granted. Ours is a period in which our values are under strain. As Brightman said in 1951, there is a conflict going on in our world – in our homes and schools, in our churches, places of work, where we gather, and within the halls of Congress. It is a conflict in the minds of individuals about basic value choices. Understandably, the tug and pull of social and political gravity, including our most basic faith commitments, are very real. Stepping outside one’s cultural adaptations and the unspoken assumptions they carry and starting anew remains a difficult undertaking. New ideas and innovative processes are fundamentally constructed from the living tissue of life, past and present.

For this reason, Darrell Young and I began our definitive work on leadership with “beliefs,” “values,” and “purpose” (Darrell & Hester, 2013). Experience had taught us that value-based leadership is an inside-out undertaking. Our cultural beliefs, transposed as values,

define our purposes – individually or as a business, in politics and in any organization, profit or nonprofit. Those who begin with a “mission statement” first, often neglect these three cultural ingredients. This loss is often demonstrated at the “top” as values-based and servant leadership are neglected or just given a half-hearted nod.

Change is perhaps the one constant in our lives. But what kind of change brings with it the improvement of people and society? I would suggest it is deliberate change created by people of value who consistently use rational decision making in their lives. Speaking of reason, I am not talking about just any kind of thinking; rather, thinking that is creative and critical, positive and developmental, and supports the ethical dimensions of a democratic society. Our thinking requires a context. Whether we are a businessperson or engineer, a scientist or minister, our thinking is and should be molded by the ethical principles supportive of our lives and livelihoods. Such thinking implies understanding the moral underpinnings of democracy and the courage to apply these principles and practices in daily activities and decision making, especially in the halls of government where the pressures to conform are exerting a negative influence on dialogical communication.

Although our values, like culture, are fluid, they tend to become fixed in some and, in others, undergo modification. The acculturation process has provided us with a set of ready-made values—effective or ineffective, good or bad. Every new idea and experience, and every human association adds to our values mixture. We all wonder who we are and from whence we came. Within organizations and businesses, dialogue, especially listening, is needed. To develop values-based organizations patience is required for there are no automatic 5, 10, or 12 steps to this process. It will take time for consistency to emerge as we strive to situate our purposes within the halo of moral and ethical acuity. Important is education, formal or informal, as the discovery of new information can bring clarity to the values we daily articulate and assist in evaluating their effectiveness in day-to-day living. An open and receiving mind is necessary. This sounds simple and many have provided steps to efficiently facilitate this process, but it’s not that simple: President Johnson said as he signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, “It is difficult to fight for freedom. But I also know how difficult it can be to bend long years of habit and custom to grant it” (Meacham, 2018). So, within the political environs of 2018, it is perhaps a time to stop, refresh our memories and our thoughts about an old idea and the values it contains: “Servant Leadership.”

Values-Based/Servant Leadership

Service and moral acuity lie at the foundation of values-based leadership. Servant Leadership not only expresses a functional idea, but one that is perhaps fluid and often unarticulated: the cultivation of reason and civility. Stephen Carter reminds us that civility will include prudence and moral veracity. He says, “Civility involves the discipline of our passions for the sake of living a common life with others” (Carter, 1999). And civility builds on itself and is accumulative. Seeing others giving and serving their community, churches, workers, etc., excites in many the desire to do the same. Indeed, experience is our greatest teacher.

Difficult as it is, servant leadership can be cultivated in the ethnic and religious diversity which we are. It asks that we be objective and impartial, knowing this will be complex, thorny and demanding as values have become politicized, twisted, and colored by opinions that divide rather than unite people. Servant leadership ask that we give rather than always

taking, supporting the least among us. Providing support for all in an organization not only supports its mission (profit or nonprofit) but the integrity and dignity of the organization itself, within and without. Thus, self-evaluation is important as we are challenged to extend our moral applications to include cultural and religious diversity, acknowledging the importance of multiplicity in the makeup of our democratic culture. Within organizations and businesses, sensitivity to the needs of those with whom we work requires constant maintenance and open dialogue.

Understandably, all societies have core values they call the “common good.” This is true of businesses, as well as churches and community organizations. A point needs stressing: in promoting civility where shared values are openly expressed, we will be challenged to acknowledge the core values of others, all others. Our involvement in this delicate undertaking is a reminder that our identity is deeper and more many-sided than any one articulation of it. Our mission statements must harness this ideal, including the beliefs and values of our staffs and workers as well as our outside customers. Most have strong commitments to the ideals of rationality and benevolence. We admire people who live up to this ideal, but are sometimes too quick to condemn those who fail or who are too confused even to accept it, and feel wrong when we fall below it ourselves. Searching in ourselves for a “moral ideal” is never easy, but listening and sharing our views and blending them with others are even more difficult. Values-based leadership is a learning and maturation process. Setting aside the negatives, a positive and determined attitude is necessary, along with patience and guidance to make a values-based organization come to fruition. Building positive relationships is required for relationships constitute the scaffolding of our organizations.

In all areas of life and work, relationships matter. As Schwartz and Sharpe tell us,

[Our]...well being depends critically on being part of a network of close connections with others. And well-being is enhanced when we are engaged in our work and find meaning in it...Engagement is about throwing yourself into the activities of your life. And meaning is about connecting what you do to the lives of others—knowing that what you do makes the lives of others better (2002).

This echoes the insights of Fritjof Capra (1964) who pointed out many decades ago that we are suffering from a *crisis of perception*, “It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world.” This worldview divides and separates us into parts for analysis. Capra continues, “Ultimately – as quantum physics showed so dramatically – there are no parts at all. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.” Capra began this theme in his 1989 book, *Uncommon Wisdom*, where he said:

The material world is a network of relationships; a web of relations between various parts of a unified whole. ... Life is understood and exists through mutually consistent relationships; the consistency of this interrelatedness determines the structure of the entire web (1989).

Capra’s view and those of Schwartz and Sharpe remind us that servant or values-based leadership is a moral imperative seeking a balance that enhances the lives of others, all

others. Positive relationships are the life-blood of any vibrant and functioning organization or business.

Dialogic Communication

Experience teaches that our conversations with others will be meaningful to the extent they are infused with dignity and mutual respect, and when all seek honesty and are able to freely express their interests and concerns. When they (whoever they are) join the conversation with the same attitudes, we are optimistic that a shared values-based for our organizations can be found. This will include the franchised and the disenfranchised, the powerful and those who lack political and economic power. From the janitor to the board room, we will discover in our mutual conversations we are forever connected and that our mutual decisions expose the imprint of our ethics and common humanity.

On the other hand, traditional leadership involves the exercise of power by one (or those) at the “top of the pyramid” almost always rejecting a mutual exchange of ideas and exposing values – personal or organizational – to open discussion. By comparison, the servant-leader shares power putting the needs of others first assisting people develop and perform as highly as possible. Robert K. Greenleaf, in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970, says:

The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

According to Greenleaf, a servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power and puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. He says,

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them (<https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership>).

The force of Greenleaf's proposal was the joining of the capitalistic and moral impulse, showing patience and not always responding to the expedient. This, as has been proven, is not always an easy association. In the 1970s, Greenleaf's ideas *defied* traditional notions of leadership which are neglected in many businesses, religious organizations, and governments today.

Breaking the Ideology Chain

Servant leadership has striven to break the long *ideology chain* of top-down and ruthless leadership practices. Objectivity and inclusion may be a goal of values-based leadership, but it's difficult to procure and sustain. Although claiming to express things as they are, *ideologies* are, in reality, a means of protecting and defending a particular point of view or situation. Ideology, no matter its substance or source, supports a moral superiority that often negates positive value discussions. Ideologies, in a word, are growth inhibitors. Eric Shyman lends this comment, "From this perspective, ideologies are, by nature, resistant to change, as they are almost always developed and applied from a protective standpoint — that is to preserve a system that is to be defended by a particular group" (Shyman, 2013). Personal commitments, archaic beliefs, and political pressure often get in the way. When talking about America's early pioneers, George Packer demonstrated the birth of an ideology with this analogy, "The people that built the roads followed the animal paths. And once that path is set, it takes a tremendous amount of effort and energy to take another path. Because you get in that set pattern of thinking, and it's passed down generation to generation to generation" (Packer, 2013).

An example of breaking the mold of top-down leadership comes from the efforts of students in Florida and around the United States who have organized and demonstrated for more gun control. They are making an effort to break the ideology chain and exert a vision of a moral high ground. Young people are sensitive to the values of their parents and, if they are religious, the values taught in their churches. This sensitivity often biases their understanding and their rationality, *but not always*. Many are reaching beyond their cultural horizon to a more holistic and inclusive ethical view. Thus, theirs is not a lock-step procedural ethic, but one based on what Charles Taylor calls "a different vision of the qualitatively higher" (Taylor, 1989). Taylor reminds us that when moral value is discussed, many focus on the principles, injunctions, or standards which guide action at the neglect of our sense of respect for and obligations to others, our understanding of what makes a full life, and the range of notions pertaining to human dignity – commanding attitudinal respect for those around us. He says, "Morality is narrowly concerned with what we ought to do, and not also with what is valuable in itself, or what we should admire or love" (Taylor, 1989). Our young people, not being so solidly locked into the traditions of the past, are seeking a moral sense of community in a divided world (Hester, 2018). The pressures are many and the growing pains will be severe.

Taking this into consideration, attention needs to be given to the language used in moral discourse as there can be a slippery slope effect to the language of leadership as it often hides unexposed biases. These biases can become engines of "un-change" effectively entrenching many into an amoral mindset. One such ideology is the prized value of "utility" as expressed in "the greatest good for the greatest number" transposed in American history as "manifest destiny," and sometimes expressed in the archaic aphorism "a rising tide lifts all boats." This is associated with the idea that improvements in the general

economy will benefit all participants in that economy, and that economic policy, particularly government economic policy, should focus on the general macroeconomic environment first and foremost. This is true only generally as many are falling through economic cracks and in the main are ignored by larger, economic policy makers. According to an analysis that excludes pensions and social security, the richest 1% of the American population in 2007 owned 34.6% of the country's total wealth, and the next 19% owned 50.5%. Thus, the top 20% of Americans owned 85% of the country's wealth and the bottom 80% of the population owned 15% (Egan, *CNN*, 17 Sept. 2017). Facts speak for themselves.

This is the futility within the reality of American politics today. But we should not acquiesce; students are asking if there are universal principles definitive of "morality" and, if so, what are they. They often look to their parents, teachers, and religious leaders for support. They may even look to their political leaders, but when these value-sources fail them they turn elsewhere. It appears that many believe there are universal moral principles. Indeed, the appeal to our foundational documents, the *Declaration of Independence*, and the *Constitution* and to what America's founders identified as "inalienable rights" — rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — are central to this dialogue. Of course, such rights must be defined within our contemporary environs, given a recasting and applied consistently. It is within the interpretative speech of today's dialogue (or un-dialogue) where meanings are blurred, expediency exposed, but where benevolence and service to others, often neglected, will originate.

Morally speaking, values-based leadership is a petition to common sense and a common humanity—to the dignity and obligations of a democratic nation to the ordinary life of its citizens. And be put on guard, practices prevalent in our society such as political correctness and moral relativity, including an appeal to our heritage to support our unhinged prejudices, could just be the patina concealing the hidden biases through which Constitutional rights are defined and defended. We also discover this in homes, churches, and businesses. As we most assuredly know, our myths, including the veiled assumptions about our genealogical past, cannot be dispelled by facts alone. They lie quietly within and operate in the background of our logic and beliefs hidden deep inside with an emotional force helping us to get our bearings in a world of confusing ethical messages. Many remain in denial about their veiled cultural assumptions, living in the popular ideologies of the present ignoring history past. The psychological and social (cultural) factors that reinforce prejudice, a politics of bigotry, or a culture of freedom and dignity for all are difficult to admit and even more challenging to identify. Many of our unarticulated values and beliefs live quietly within us often as a collective opinion providing reassurance, considered natural and difficult to vanquish. *Reasonableness*, not reason is the mantle of such a singular point of view. This I believe is what Alan Olson meant when he and his colleagues wrote that *culture often renders successfully vague common standards of rationality* (Olson et al, 2003).

The Blurred Edges of Values-Based Leadership

Robert Reich has correctly said that no dialogue about American values is possible without a set of common moral assumptions. In his commentary, Reich does not imply the standardization of morality or the death of individualism, only that we are challenged to identify certain moral assumptions that can unify humanity and consistently guide our behavior and decision-making. Fortunately, in the halls of leadership, Greenleaf didn't acquiesce and put his idea of moral or servant leadership forward as a national priority. His

was a voice supported by commitment and courage. Unfortunately, for many in government and without, Greenleaf's moral vision of servant leadership has lost its appeal as economic and political narcissism has grounded its edges into a compromising relief.

To identify the moral assumptions implied by values-based leadership will include an evaluation of our personal and organizational values. And if our goal is to seek a common moral point of view, we need to proceed slowly and patiently. Time and effort are required to effectively interact with ideas such as "democracy," "inalienable rights," "the rights of minorities," and "dialogic civility." Furthermore, we should remain sensitive to gender equality, the LGBTQ community, and religion and race inclusion. Some will be open to dialogue on these issues, many will not. Cognitive and emotional development, as we know, is a maturation process as well as an educational strategy (Turiel, 1983). All of this requires commitment and effort and it is a matter of moral survival, even the survival of democracy.

We carry our value assumptions with us, most of the time without the support of fact or reason. Understanding this, values-based or servant leadership provides the following assumptions, but supports them with a rationality centered solidly in the *a priori* ideals of human decency, benevolence, and care which are arguably the foundations of ethics:

Assumption #1: Moral leadership requires us to think and reconsider our value assumptions

Blurred Edges! What a concept that ethical thinking involves blurred edges and yet, this is a reality within our democracy. There are so many ways to consider ethical thought, and ultimately, ethical actions. This does not mean that there is not a right way to act. What it does mean, is that our ideas and ultimately our actions have consequences and are informed by our thinking and considerations of the ideas and actions of others. And with this in mind, we often times find that we need to think or rethink our assumptions. And this is where the conversations come into play – conversations with friends and work associates, and even conversations within our own mind. "Conversations" lay the framework of how we look at the world. This is an essential part of the democratic process where re-assessment remains an important ingredient.

Assumption #2: Civil Behavior is the foundation of values-based leadership

Values-based leadership is founded on civil behaviors. The National Civility Center (Reich, 1987) provides several keys to civil behavior: these are trust, process, people, and dialogue. The NCC reminds us that our moral value is derived from our capacity to generate knowledge, collaborate with others, and engage in critical thinking and problem solving. According to the NCC, each of us should take a pledge to the following civil behaviors:

- 1) View everyone in positive terms.
- 2) Seeing everyone as a potential resource and agent of change helps to level the playing field and engage all stakeholders.
- 3) Develop a common language. The language we use can either unite or divide people. How can we discuss change if we don't understand each other? Being aware of this problem, and agreeing on the terms to be used, is a good start.
- 4) Build strong relationships and trust. It is impossible to overstate the importance of trust, which builds bridges across boundaries and makes relationships solid.

- 5) Remember our shared humanity. It's easy to forget we are all human, with more commonalities than differences. Common sense and history tell us we can work together to solve common concerns – and that when we separate ourselves, we are less effective.
- 6) Value both the process and the results. The gap between causes and results is the reason many people give up on collaboration. Results-oriented people need actions with observable outcomes, and process-oriented people focus on continuing the methods that drive the action. Both are crucial for improving communities, businesses, and governmental organizations.
- 7) Look both within and outside the community for guidance. People living in communities need to take responsibility for their problems and find actions that will address them. But we also need to recognize when to accept and use resources that are available from outside of the community. All resources need to be leveraged around a healthy attitude toward self-improvement. This can also be applied to community and national improvement and moral improvement between nations.

Assumption #3: Relationships and dialectical interaction shape our values

Dialectical learning is the practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of ideas and beliefs in active dialogue, sometimes arguing with each other in heated exchanges. During these discussions, patience is required as we reconsider what we and others have said and are saying. This give-and-take is an important educative task. In the home, classroom, and workplace such interaction calls for respect, tolerance, and understanding. Above all, it requires a disciplined exchange of ideas.

When we willingly engage in such conversations we will likely find connections to our cultural histories. These connections will add ethical perspective in a world beset with mixed value-messages. These connections imply relationships. Some of these are positive and others are negative. Values-based leadership is built on a foundation of positive relationships:

- 1) Relationships are essential to social cohesion.
- 2) Relationship-building is a powerful but fragile phenomenon, constantly changing and easily lost.
- 3) Relationships reveal our character.
- 4) Relationships and human interaction rule our lives and hold the keys to our value.
- 5) Either positively or negatively, our stature as individuals-of-value is created in our relationships with others (Colvin, 2015).

Assumption #4: Universal values can be discovered to support values-based leadership

Anthropologist Donald E. Brown (1991) has identified a list of what he calls “human universals” found in every culture. He says they are features of culture, society, language, behavior, and consciousness for which there are no known exceptions. These universal values are supportive of values-based leadership. Among these universals, Brown cited the following:

- Empathy,
- Generosity and disapproval of stinginess,
- A concept of fairness, and an understanding of reciprocity,
- Pride in our accomplishments,

– Leadership

Brown is not claiming that these values are innate, that we are born with them securely intact. What is important he says is that *all of them involve human social interaction and apparently apply to all human beings*. He points out that understanding them will help us figure out how best to serve each other ethically.

Conclusion

Given that ethics reveals numerous conflicting ideas, many continue to write and think about morals and offer solutions to important ethical issues. Such as been the course of values-based leadership. These individuals are called “philosophers,” “people of wisdom,” “magi,” “ministers,” “politicians,” and/or “prophets.” Some are even called “teachers.” Multiple disciplines are also engaged in these discussions including law, psychology, education, sociology, the business community, journalism, medicine, and science itself. No one is exempt. Values-based leadership touches our lives no matter who we are or with whom we live and work.

Ethics is something in which we all take part as our moral values stretch the boundaries of our relationships and are essential for communal living. No one is left off the hook as society is held together by common, everyday relationships, and the ethical commitments we make. Relationships reveal our character. They are “the eye of needle” defining our moral obligations. Relationship-building is a powerful but fragile phenomenon, constantly changing and easily lost. We are daily confronted with making an effort to understand how empathy, generosity, fairness, reciprocity, pride, and even leadership figure into our relationship-value-equation.

In time we learn that our lives are largely built on a scaffolding of relationships. Understanding this takes many years as most of us learn this lesson late in life. Relationships – good and bad – create the web of our lives. Finding purpose in our web is difficult for much that happens to us is either incidental or accidental. Purpose is intentional and a difficult and foreboding task. When we discover our purpose we are able to maneuver through life in more productive ways.

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Dr. Joseph P. Hester, a retired educator and long-time consultant, has written many books and films, as well as professional papers, for students, teachers, and the general public, many of which are based on his research in critical thinking, ethics and leadership. With his diverse background, he has been able to expand his writing to include ideas from many sources.

He earned the B.A. degree in the Social Sciences from Lenoir-Rhyne University in 1961, the B.D. and Th.M. degrees from Southeastern Seminary in 1964 and 1967, and the Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Georgia in 1973, where he held a teaching assistantship in the Department of Philosophy and a research assistantship with the Georgia Studies of Creative Behavior. In the middle of his career, he shifted to public education, completed two years of post-doctoral studies in education, and earned teaching and administrative certifications in several different areas. He spent 37 years in college teaching and public-school education. He has served on the editorial board for the *Journal of Values-based Leadership* since 2010 for which he is a frequent contributor and now is on the advisory board for the *Humanities Bulletin*. His latest book is *A Summoned Life*, an explication of the Golden Rule, published in 2017.

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