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Values-Based Leadership: *Creating a Culture of Hope*

by Joseph P. Hester
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“Hope instills possibility and possibility, vision”

If nothing else is written or spoken about values-based leadership, one should understand – in all its forms – values-based leadership encompasses the purpose of creating a culture of hope within institutions, businesses, governments, churches, and families. Hope carries the power of possibility and when enhanced by moral vision engenders the courage needed for the activation of leadership that is values-based. Using a Biblical metaphor, the Apostle Paul was able to activate his faith-vision through the energy his hope provided. Paul provided a clue, “faith, hope, and charity.” One should notice in Paul that “charity,” or activating the potential of values-based leadership, carries the greatest weight. Hope is positive as it is moral, seeking the betterment of humanity, all humanity. Although processed through skill and intention, the moral dimension of hopeful leadership is intrinsic, discovered within the hearts of leaders, and can neither be quantified nor set to the tune of artificial intelligence.

But, let’s be realistic. Institutions – secular and religious – are from time to time a sanctuary for our biases and not a dynamic force of moral transformation. Thus, we are tasked with renovating our attitudes and actions toward others. Ethical renewal is possible as our humanity beckons, for it is our capacity for introspection, self-judgment, and creating positive relationships that are urging our moral capability making us fit for living with others. This is our hope, expressed as a vision of the possible.

Now arching toward maturity and supported by continuous research, we have learned above all else that the intrinsic purpose of values-based leadership is to create within society and the institutions of society, a culture of optimism and expectation. And this is not merely a social aspiration as expressed by utilitarian thinkers, or a spiritual hope found in major religious institutions, but a moral hope urging servant, spiritual, transformational and authentic leadership practices. From the feminist ethic of care, to those providing good reasons for being moral, values-based leadership possesses a nurturing quality seeking to support, in positive and explicit ways, all who come within its definitive wicker.

Writing as a retired educator and one who was trained in theology and moral philosophy, I cannot speak for business or governmental leaders. I have been an educational leader serving in the central office of a large school district and for a time, a church leader and university professor. Through trial and error, I learned how to lead. Experience was my teacher. I discovered that leadership requires skill and patience, courage and care. By watching and listening to others, I gathered the courage to identify my values and activate these while lead-

ing church members, students, and staffs. Looking back and examining my motives, I discovered that if we are attentive to the voices around us, we learn that in every society, culture, and civilization, there can be discovered those who embrace moral principles and ethical behaviors. Along the way, analyzing their commonalities and differences, I discovered that fairness, equality, honesty, and service to others were attitudes and actions desired by all. For me, at least, their activation in my work allowed my growth and, hopefully, that of others as well. Even in times of disagreement and failure, through moral consistency, challenging and supporting those in my care was a source of hope.

Although we are a nation of immigrants, we have discovered certain democratic and religious values we share with each other. Uncovering these values could be a way of uniting Americans in a common social order. This was an issue at the beginning of the American Revolution separating those in the New England states from slave holders in the South. It remains an issue today as we are divided politically revealing the shaky underbelly of American moral values, especially our doubts and our fears.

The struggle of living together, of finding a common ethic to guide us, remains a persistent moral task. We are challenged to become more open, taking in the values, traditions, and cultures of others and learning from them. Some don't want this; they have a desire to keep those who are different out of America, out of their schools and out of their churches. They want to build a wall and close the doors to gender and racial immigration. They represent what is called "a closed society." Closed societies are problematic because they are supported by two fallacies:¹

- *The Privacy Fallacy* occurs when we think the values and beliefs, we use in public discourse cannot be critically discussed by others. We assume that because matters of conscience are private in the sense of being unforced and unlegislated, they are also private in the sense of personal preference. But is the public sphere a "conscience-free zone"?
- *The Liberty Fallacy* claims we're free to believe anything we desire to believe without any consequences. There is an inner connection here to the *Privacy Fallacy*. Somehow, the democratic principle of *freedom of belief* has mutated into an unthinking assumption that matters of belief and opinion don't really matter; but they do. We discovered this during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and we are re-discovering it in 2019 as many desire Confederate statues to be removed from public places and walls built to keep Hispanics out. Choosing not to interfere with the freedom of others, some have supposed that one's values are immune from critical public inquiry. Yet, when our values are applied in the public square, we open ourselves to public scrutiny and criticism. Self-reflection and social adjustment are required.

Let's think carefully about this for when we broaden our moral view to include our friends, work associates, communities and nation, our tendency is to agree there are certain virtues and moral principles that should be widely followed. This seems to be commonsense because we share many values in our cultural heritage and most all of us express faith in the principles of democracy. But what are those values which we commonly share? In 2019, it is difficult to tell.

¹ Dacey, A., *The Secular Conscience, Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* (Amherst, New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008).

If nothing else, values-based leadership is challenged to create within corporations, churches, and governmental bodies a culture of hope imbued with a sense of decency, honesty, and integrity. Hope instills vision and values-based leadership is tasked with projecting a moral vision. As Arthur Schopenhauer says, “Our brains are not the wisest part of us. In the great moments of life, when a man decides upon an important step, his action is directed not so much by any clear knowledge of the right thing to do, as by an inner impulse—you may almost call it an instinct—proceeding from the deepest foundations of his being.” This impulse Schopenhauer calls “*the great power of moral discernment: it is something that a man instinctively feels to be his salvation, without which he were [is] lost.*”² Is moral discernment missing in our religious and political wranglings? Without a doubt, values-based leadership awakens us to a new awareness of others, to purpose, hope, and to creative possibility. This is its authenticity as a leadership practice, carrying with it the possibility and responsibility of moral transformation.

Joseph P. Hester is an independent scholar and regular contributor to the *JVBL*. His extended biography is provided, *infra*.”

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² Schopenhauer, Arthur Op. Cit.