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Humility, Forgiveness, and Love – The Heart of Ethical Stewardship

In their best-selling and widely respected book, *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2016) include “Encouraging the heart” as one of the Six universally important leadership behaviors necessary for leaders and organizations to be optimally successful. As leaders struggle to increase employee commitment and improve organization performance, they often overlook the reality that the trust that they seek to build is the byproduct of their own personal trustworthiness (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). It is this personal trustworthiness that influences the hearts of followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Leader trustworthiness is a function of individually discerned (“perceived” used three times in this sentence) and ethically-based personal qualities that are perceived through the subjective mediating lens of each employee (Clapham, Mayer, Caldwell, & Proctor, 2014; Caldwell & Hayes, 2007) and are understood at both the rational and emotional levels (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Because trustworthiness is such an ethically-based concept, leaders who seek to influence and inspire others can exponentially increase followership by becoming ethical stewards who demonstrate by their actions that they are worthy of follower trust (Hernandez, 2008 & 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to identify the nature and importance of ethical stewardship as a powerful contributor to the trustworthiness of leaders – focusing on humility, forgiveness, and love as three leadership qualities that are at the heart of ethical stewardship. We begin by defining ethical stewardship and equating it with Six characteristics of personal trustworthiness. Following that introduction, we explain why humility, forgiveness, and love are vitally important leadership qualities essential to becoming an effective ethical steward and include six propositions relating those three qualities to ethical stewardship. We then offer six insights about humility, forgiveness, and love that can assist those who wish to improve their ability to become ethical stewards to improve their success. We conclude the paper with a challenge to leaders to adopt ethical stewardship as their leadership paradigm.

The Nature of Ethical Stewardship

Stewardship is one of several theories of governance and is a theory of governance in which managers are stewards whose motives are aligned with the objectives of several parties (Davis). Governance theories generally focus on

- (1) *how an organization seeks to optimize performance and accountability,*
- (2) *how values and goals are integrated within the systems and structures that are created,*
- (3) *how leaders develop and maintain relationships that generate the commitment and cooperation of those who work with and for them, and*
- (4) *how principles of leadership and management are formally applied in the conduct of organizational business* (Caldwell, Hayes, Karri, & Bernal. 2008, p. 154).

A leader's philosophy of governance influences all organizational systems, processes, structures, and policies that frame an organization's basic culture and how organizational work gets performed (Schein & Schein, 2016).

Stewardship encompasses the ethical responsibility to act on behalf of others and to honor the responsibilities of service, rather than to pursue one's own self-interest (Block, 2013). Hernandez (2012) is one of many scholars to explain that stewardship is a "covenantal" relationship requiring that leaders honor quasi-sacred responsibilities owed to others and demonstrate pro-organizational behaviors that serve all stakeholders. By serving as ethical stewards, leaders honor the psychological contracts that employees expect from their organizations in the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995).

The fundamental thesis of ethical stewardship is that optimizing long-term economic wealth serves the best interests of the principals and all of the various other stakeholders collectively, while also maximizing social welfare and the long-term economic and social benefits owed to society (Caldwell & Karri, 2005, p. 251). Ethical stewardship integrates long-term wealth creation with the organizational systems and policies that reinforce both instrumental and normative organizational goals associated with a firm's operations (Caldwell, et al, 2008). The underlying premise of ethical stewardship is that employees are ends in and of themselves and not simply the means to achieving an organization's purposes. The empirical research about ethical stewardship indicates that leaders who demonstrate this stewardship philosophy are perceived to be honoring duties owed to employees and are considered to be high in trustworthiness (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010).

Ethical Stewardship and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is achieved by leaders when they honor the expectations of others – thereby demonstrating that they are worthy of the commitment and followership of others (Hayes, Caldwell, Licona, & Meyer, 2015; Caldwell, 2018). Ethical stewards demonstrate five qualities commonly identified as essential to achieving trustworthiness and credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2011; Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

Character – Stewards put the interests of others first, honor commitments, and demonstrate the personal integrity that builds relationships.

Caring – Stewards are committed to the welfare and growth of those with whom they work and treat others fairly.

Competence – Stewards understand what needs to be done and have the technical knowledge and skills required.

Capacity – Stewards understand how to execute a plan of action and to translate an organizational strategy into a reality.

Conscience – Stewards demonstrate the inner capacity to do what is right and recognize that they have a moral obligation to others and to society.

These five qualities are well-recognized as essential qualities of successful leadership and as characteristics required to be perceived as trustworthy. *Diagram 1* indicates the relationships of these Six qualities for leaders and ethical stewards.



Diagram 1: Character, Competence, Caring, Capacity, and Conscience

As indicated in *Diagram 1*, Conscience directs a steward’s decisions about Caring and Character and is an essential element in applying skills and knowledge associated with his or her Competence. Capacity, or the ability to translate a strategy into reality, is a condition precedent to accomplishing any worthwhile tasks and demonstrates the ability to execute rather than to simply develop an action plan (Pfeffer, 1998).

Each leader is evaluated by his or her employees and the decision as to the leader’s trustworthiness is based upon how each individual person equates that leader’s behaviors and actions with that individual’s interpretation of what (s)he believes to be the standards of trustworthiness – for trustworthiness is a personal assessment based upon each individual’s subjective experience, personal history, and expectations about the psychological contract (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, (2007). Leaders who demonstrate high levels of trustworthiness are viewed by each employee as an ethical steward (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010) and earn the trust and followership of those with whom they associate.

Humility and Stewardship

Humility has increasingly been recognized as a quality of effective leaders, to a great measure because of the research of Jim Collins (2001) and his research team. Although Collins was initially reluctant to believe that a leader’s role made a significant difference as organizations made the transition from good to great, his team’s findings told a different story. Collins and his colleagues concluded that leaders who combined humility and a fierce resolve for success, labeled “Level 5 Leaders,” played a vital role in the success of their organizations (Collins, 2001).

Building on the work of Collins (2001), Owens and Hekman (2016) developed a model of humility that consists of three major pillars.

Self-Awareness – Individuals with humility had a clear and precise understanding of who they are and their identities which enables them to accurately assess their strengths, as well as their shortcomings. Although those with humility acknowledge and recognize their shortcomings, they also are fully aware of their own potential. Although they may view this potential as quite high, they nonetheless are also fully aware of the fact that they have much to do to improve. This clarity of vision or “correct understanding of themselves” enables those who possess humility to take personal responsibility for their weaknesses and to be accountable for the mistakes of their organizations. At the same time, this humility enabled them to give others full credit for the successes achieved by cooperative effort, rather than representing others’ accomplishments as their own.

Commitment to Learning – Humility recognizes that continuous improvement is not only possible but that it is a personal moral requirement and obligation in honoring oneself and in serving others. This dedication to continuous learning motivates individuals to constantly strive to improve themselves, overcome personal weaknesses and shortcomings, and become better informed so that they can make a greater contribution to others and to society. This commitment to learning is motivated by a sense of personal responsibility and a duty to others and is part of an ethical obligation to become the best possible version of oneself – a quest which, in reality, never ends throughout one’s life.

Appreciation of Others – Humility enables individuals to also see others clearly and to recognize the potential greatness that is within them. Seeing others through the lens of humility, individuals recognize the need to “treat others so well that they come to recognize their greatness and strive to achieve it” (Covey, 2004, p. 98). This acknowledgement of the greatness of others is spurred by a recognition of the greatness of the individual demonstrated by the French philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin, who is quoted as writing, “We are not human beings having spiritual experiences. We are spiritual beings having a human experience” (Koelzer, 2013). This reverence and awe about self and others motivates an individual with humility to not only give credit to others when they succeed, but to recognize the need to help others to become their very best.

These three qualities that define humility enable individuals to gradually polish their lives and improve their relationships until they are able to fully align their behaviors with each of the three pillars of humility – thereby enabling them to treat others with grace and kindness. By so doing, such individuals are able to create relationships and build organizations that inspire and motivate others (Owens & Hekman, 2016; Owens, Bednar, & Jiang-hua, 2016; Anderson & Caldwell, 2018). Consistent with this information about the nature of humility, we present our first two propositions.

P₁ Individuals who consciously seek to incorporate the principles associated with the three pillars of humility in their own lives and in relationships with others are more likely to be trusted by those with whom they associate than individuals who do not incorporate these principles.

P₂ Leaders who consciously seek to incorporate the principles associated with the three pillars of humility in their own lives and in relationships with others are more likely to be perceived to be ethical than those individuals who do not incorporate these principles.

Ethical stewardship and humility are closely related concepts because both focus on the qualities of caring, character, and conscience associated with trustworthiness that are so important in creating high trust relationships (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

Forgiveness and Stewardship

Forgiveness, or the capacity to respond to perceptions of unfairness or injustice without expressing feelings of resentment or anger, is deemed to be a universal virtue of every major religion and is a virtue that demonstrates both great self-control and a profound sense of perspective about the human condition (Cameron & Caza, 2002). Unfortunately, the reality in life is that disappointments frequently occur, wrongs are committed, and injustice is common. As Desmond Tutu (1999) has observed, the maturity to accept disappointment and to forgive

is an acquired trait that is possessed by the greatest of leaders and is a quality that demonstrates magnanimity of spirit and a remarkable sense of perspective and inner peace.

Forgiveness accepts and looks past the faults of another and seeks to reconcile a relationship despite a perceived betrayal (Caldwell, Davis, & Devine, 2009). Forgiving another person for failing to honor a perceived duty restores the ability of both individuals to work together (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010). Lennick and Kiel (2016) explained that a leader's responsibility to serve others reflects compassion and forgiveness – even if that forgiveness does not mean excusing followers from being accountable or condoning mistakes. Nonetheless, a culture in which individuals are willing to forgive others' mistakes creates a sense of safety and allows individuals to take initiative and be proactive, knowing that the goal is to minimize possible risk and harm while seeking to benefit an organization and achieve a benefit for others (Collins & Hansen, 2011).

Forgiveness, when combined with humility, becomes much easier to extend to others. Recognizing that we are each imperfect allows us to be more generous in forgiving others – just as we want to be forgiven for our own faults and foibles (Cameron & Caza, 2002). The ability to let go of a perceived wrong, to avoid responding with anger and frustration, and to accept what often seems to be an injustice is a refined skill that enhances both the person who forgives and the recipient (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010). The consequence of forgiveness in relationships is that both parties are more able to focus on shared goals – rather than feeling vulnerable about possible ill feelings and concerns about damage that may have occurred in the working relationship due to the wronged person's expressions of anger and frustration when a perceived harm occurred.

When integrated, humility and forgiveness provide a greater sense of perspective – not only about the unavoidability of errors in each of our lives but because of the ability of humility and forgiveness to enable individuals to grow in patience toward others (Caldwell & Long, 2018). Forgiveness of self is also made easier when we see ourselves as traversing a journey toward perfection – while acknowledging that we may yet be far from perfect (Anderson & Caldwell, 2018). Based upon this review of the relationship between forgiveness and interpersonal relationships, we present two additional propositions.

P₃ Individuals who consciously seek to forgive others of their perceived wrongs are able to establish better relationships with the people that they forgive than individuals who withhold forgiveness.

P₄ Individuals who consciously integrate both humility and forgiveness in their relationships with others are perceived as more trustworthy than individuals who do not integrate these two qualities.

Ethical stewardship associated with forgiveness has a profound positive influence in touching the hearts of others because it is directly related to the trustworthiness qualities of both caring and conscience.

Love and Stewardship

Increasingly, scholars and practitioners have recognized that love has a profound positive impact in leader-follower relationships within the context of the modern organization (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015) and generates positively deviant extra-role behaviors in employees (Cameron & Caza, 2002). Scott Peck (2003) has defined love as a commitment

to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of the self or of another. This same commitment to which Peck refers regarding the welfare of others within a work context is a quality present in servant leadership, transformational leadership, and transformative leadership perspectives wherein leaders recognize that they have a moral obligation to assist their employees to grow and to flourish as part of the employer-employee relationship (Caldwell, 2012; Caldwell, 2018). A commitment to the welfare of employees is not only viewed as an absolute obligation of the organization but as a strategy by which organizations can build high trust, high commitment, and high performance (Beer, 2009; Pfeffer, 1998).

Specher and Fehr (2005, p. 230) explain that love is “focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other(s), particularly when the other(s) is (are) perceived to be suffering or in need.” From a practical standpoint, that description of others who are in need aptly describes the condition of employees who often are scrambling to produce better results with fewer resources in today’s competitive work context. Authentic love is commonly focused on contributing to the good of others and on performing acts of service that demonstrate a willingness to give unselfishly and without conditions or reciprocal expectations (Peck 2003). Koestenbaum (2002, pp. 194–195), described love as the surrendering of one’s freedom to another which he described as “the ultimate act of love” inasmuch as freedom is “the greatest gift you can ever give.” Pellicer (2008) described love as “a sacred trust” and “the essence of moral leadership.” Erich Fromm (1956) described love in terms of giving the precious gift of oneself to another so that another might benefit.

The genuine caring commonly associated with love within the context of work is repeatedly described in the leadership literature as a means of building relationships, increasing commitment, and honoring the duty of leaders and organizations to those working for their companies (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010; Autry, 1991). When genuine love is combined with humility and forgiveness, leaders have the opportunity to inspire others to discover their best selves, to duplicate the leader’s behaviors, and to redefine their lives (Covey, 2004; Owens & Hekman, 2016). *Diagram 2* is a pictorial model of the ideal relationship that we suggest exists between love, humility, and forgiveness.

As virtues, all three of these qualities have the ability to touch the hearts of others. We suggest that forgiveness becomes much easier when an individual possesses humility – and that humility and forgiveness are possible when we love ourselves and genuinely love others. Ultimately, it is our ability to love and to care deeply about the welfare of others that is the defining quality that enables men and women to connect with others and to touch their lives (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

The fifth and sixth propositions that we present reflect the importance of love in touching the hearts of others.

Diagram 2: Love, Forgiveness, and Humility



P₅ Individuals who view themselves as being deeply committed to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of others are perceived as more ethical than others who lack this same commitment.

P₆ Individuals who integrate elements of love, humility, and forgiveness in their lives are perceived as more ethical than others who have not integrated these elements.

Ethical stewardship is a philosophy of governance that integrates love, forgiveness, and humility in the lives of those who lead and enables those individuals to have a profound effect on those with whom they work. Although becoming an ethical steward is a high standard to achieve, it enables those who seek to follow that standard to have more satisfying relationships with others and to be more productive in their lives.

Six Insights about Ethical Stewardship

As those who seek to lead contemplate the difficult challenge of leaders in the modern organization, the evidence is clear that many employees are only partially invested in their jobs and are often uncomfortable with their organizations and their relationships with their supervisors. According to a recent Gallup survey, 51% of all U. S. employees are actively looking for a new job or watching for new job openings (Harter, 2017). Those who lead or who desire to lead may wish to thoughtfully contemplate how they can reassess their lives and incorporate humility, forgiveness, and love in their relationships with others. We offer Six insights about these three important qualities for employees seeking to become ethical stewards who honor their employees.

1) Conduct a Regular and Thorough Self-Inventory

Being completely honest about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, and your commitment to serving others is a vital first step to developing the humility required to make deep change in your life (Quinn, 1996). A number of powerful resources are available to assisting leaders to conduct such an inventory, but the results are guaranteed to be futile if the commitment to improve is not genuine and wholehearted. This examination must encompass all aspects of one's life and include duties owed to the others to whom a leader owes responsibilities in his or her many life roles (Covey, 2004). This self-assessment is a fundamental pillar of humility and a necessary step in changing your life (Anderson & Caldwell, 2018).

2) Make a Commitment

Integrity demands complete honesty with oneself in using the information from a self-inventory to change one's life. Self-deception is the holding of two conflicting ideas in one's mind at the same time without acknowledging the conflict (Caldwell, 2009). The self-improvement process and the road to discovering a you that you never dreamed was possible demands that you not only conduct an honest inventory but that love yourself enough to make the changes that you know in your heart of hearts that you need to make (Covey, 2004). Love yourself enough to recognize that the outcome of changing your life will be worth the effort.

3) Create a Self-Improvement Partnership

Hold yourself accountable. Make your commitment to improve public by sharing your commitment with the people who will be affected by your changes (Hansen, 2018). Explain that you understand that there are areas that you need to improve but that you

are trying to change. Forgive yourself if you aren't perfect and ask others for their support, their patience, and their honest feedback (Hansen, 2018).

4) *Identify Challenging but Realistic Goals*

Change is rarely easy, especially when you are dealing with character flaws, habits, and mental paradigms that have been years in the making. Chunk your goals into small but challenging pieces and keep track of one improvement at a time. Attempting to do too much or setting unrealistic goals will only generate discouragement and disappointment. Make your goals doable, but have the integrity to challenge yourself as well (Hansen, 2018; Covey, 2004).

5) *Seek Ongoing Feedback*

Have the courage and commitment to build in a process of obtaining feedback – not only about your specific goals but about other areas in your life that you may have overlooked. Care enough about yourself to take yourself seriously; to make your quest for improvement legitimate; and to obtain information from the people you serve, care about, and need to accomplish what matters most to you in your life.

6) *Celebrate Your Progress*

Recognize that you need to reward yourself, acknowledge your progress, admit where you need to work harder, and modify what does not seem to work (Covey, 2004). But be good to yourself. Take heart in knowing that, although you may not be where you would someday like to be yet, you have been wise enough to begin the journey. Love yourself enough to make this process one of the great successes of your life.

These six simple steps are not rocket science. They are simple principles of truth. They are steps to progress that we all have read about and heard before. But they are steps that will work . . . if only we will work.

The Challenge

If we believe that our lives matter, that life has a purpose, and that we and other people are important, than we must reflect on what we want our lives to mean. Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader, declared, “Become the change that you want to see in the world.” Gandhi’s life was his message, and the simple reality is that for each of us how we live our lives is our message to the world. It is our message to those who we say we love and care about. It is a message to those with whom we live and work. It is our message to our God.

The challenge for each of us is to “find our voice,” to discover the greatness within each of us, and to become true ethical stewards who honor the gifts which life has given to each of us of twenty-four hours in every day and the right to make choices (Covey, 2004). Marianne Williamson offers each of us a challenge that rings true as we contemplate who we really are, what we ought to be, and what we each often fear.

Our Deepest Fear

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other
people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of
God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.

As individuals we each have the opportunity to choose to be ethical stewards. As we tap into the freeing power of humility, forgiveness, and love, that opportunity can become a reality.

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