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Moral Identity, Self-Improvement, and the Quest for Greatness: A Leadership Responsibility

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A LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY

Abstract
The focus of this paper is on explaining how leaders can follow the path of self-improvement by more fully understanding their moral identity. We begin by briefly reviewing excerpts from the literature about personal development and self-awareness to lay a foundation for the importance of leaders seeking to achieve their optimal effectiveness. Following that introduction, we include a new definition of moral identity that builds upon identity theory as developed by Peter Burke and Jan Stets (2009). After describing the elements of Burke and Stets' identity standard, we identify nine traits that link moral identity and leadership. Integrating moral identity with the pursuit of personal excellence, we offer twelve insights about the leader's responsibility to honor moral duties owed to those whom they serve. Following that review, we suggest six significant contributions of this paper for academic scholars and for individuals who seek to become more honorable leaders and conclude the paper with thoughts about opportunities for additional research about moral identity.

Introduction

Among the most exciting ideas about the human potential is that each person can improve and achieve a higher potential than (s)he has ever imagined to be possible (Maslow, 1994). Despite our human foibles and imperfections, we each possess qualities that can be nourished and improved upon – giving us opportunities to not only change our own lives but to benefit others as well. Stephen R. Covey (2004, p. 98) was a lifelong believer in the untapped human potential that each person possesses and challenged leaders to "find their voice and help others to find theirs" as well. To Covey (2004), the concept of voice represented the unique significance and best version of self that each individual possessed – if only in embryo. Covey emphasized, however, that the obligation to examine oneself was especially important to the leaders of organizations.

Self-Awareness and Personal Development

The personal development process begins with the ability to clearly identify one's own strengths, characteristics, beliefs, and assumptions. The capacity to honestly "look in the mirror" to objectively examine who we are has long been recognized as an important starting

point for moving forward in our daily progress (Luft, 1961; Thomas, 1962). Examining oneself and identifying opportunities for self-improvement are common rituals – not just as annual New Year's resolutions but as part of the reflective process that occurs in each individual's life. Self-reflection and evaluating one's potential is not only a leader's obligation for her/his own improvement, but enables leaders to more fully meet the needs of employees, organizations, and society as well (Burns, 2010; Anderson, Ndalamba, & Caldwell, 2017).

Finding one's voice and reaching one's highest potential is nonetheless a difficult process that is filled with challenges (Bartz, 2018). The Johari Window, a well-respected tool for understanding the realities associated with some of those challenges, identifies the fact that individuals often have blind spots that limit their growth. *Figure 1*, shown below, is a diagram of the Johari window which identifies the importance of becoming more self-aware by being open to others' feedback (Luft, 1961).

Figure 1: **The Johari Window**
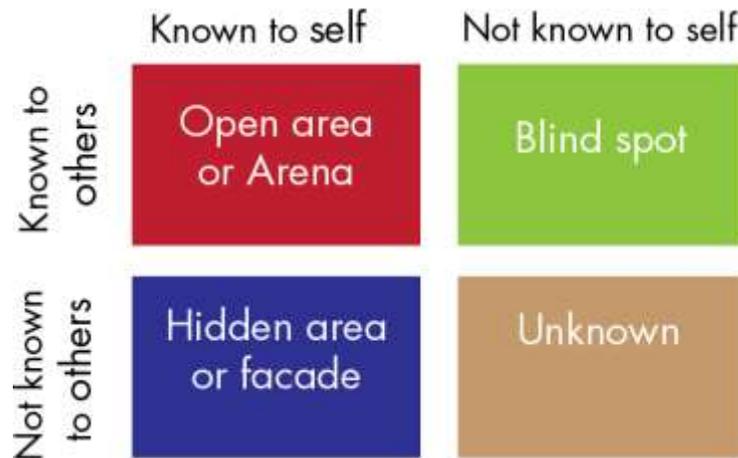
The Johari Window helps explain the importance of integrating that which is known to self with that which is known to others – including the importance of asking others for feedback and being open to others' insights. This window can also be a means of helping individuals to recognize that they may be guilty of not sharing information about that which can be of value to others (Saxena, 2015). The process of self-development demands open and committed personal honesty, a willingness to confront reality, and a passionate desire to overcome individual shortcomings (Duckworth, 2018). Rationalization, denial, and self-deception are barriers to becoming more self-aware, to overcoming weaknesses and bad habits, and to improving relationships (Caldwell, 2009). Leaders who view their responsibilities as a "covenantal" obligation to their organizations and to those whom they serve are more capable of striving for personal improvement than others who lack that same moral commitment (DePree, 2004; Covey, 2004; Pava, 2003).

By finding their highest potential and developing their own unique capabilities, leaders not only set an outstanding personal example but take upon themselves the obligation to support employee efforts by creating organizational systems that help employees to learn, to grow, and to be empowered (Beer, 2009). A leader's personal example models the way – but more importantly it demonstrates to employees that their organization cares genuinely about them

as partners and as people, rather than simply as hired task performers who contribute to an organization's bottom line (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Moral Identity and the Leader's Role

Moral identity is the predictor of the likelihood that a person will engage in moral or immoral conduct and has begun to be widely recognized as an important part of the leader's responsibility (Yang, Cai, Yong, & Shi, 2020). Hardy and Carlo (2011, p. 212) described moral identity as the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual. According to identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), each person's identity involves an ongoing set of ethical choices about daily conduct. This "identity standard" is often established at the subconscious level but plays a major role in influencing an individual's actions and self-perceptions. The process used in personal growth, self-development, and the moral identity is presented as *Figure 2* below.

Figure 2: **The Identity Standard**
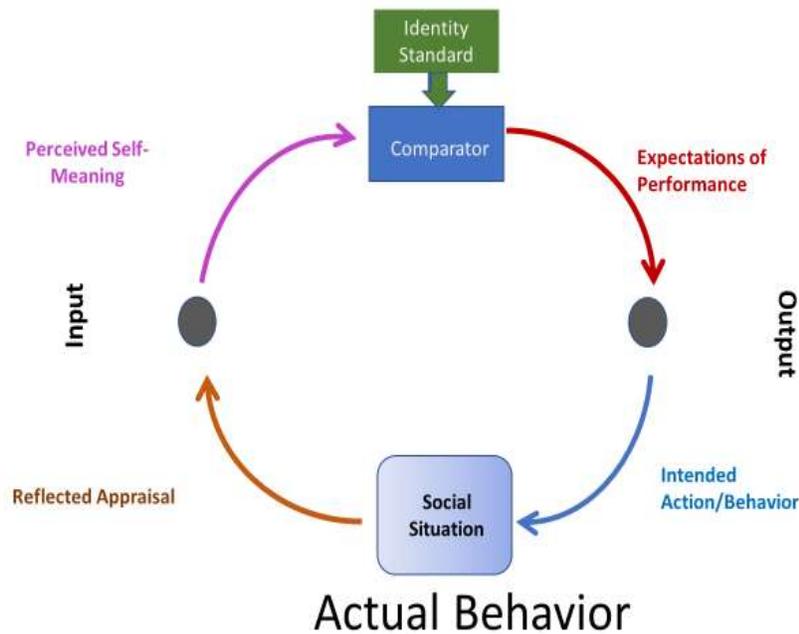
Each of the eight elements of this model applies to the leader's responsibilities in honoring duties owed to employees (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021). *Table 1* briefly describes each of the eight elements of this model and clarifies the moral and ethical nature of each of the elements.

Table 1: **The Identity Standard and Its Moral and Ethical Nature**

Identity Element	Description	Moral Component	Comment
Comparator	The comparator is a set of general ideals by which a person defines his/her own standards for guiding personal conduct.	These standards typically incorporate moral variables about duties, rules, relationships, and responsibilities.	Moral identity incorporates this comparator as a generalized definition of beliefs and values.

Expectations of Performance	Expectations of performance translate the general ideals into more specific guidelines for actions and personal conduct.	Expectations are generalized but are nonetheless moral and ethical, principle-centered, and value-based.	These expectations translate general ideals into much more specific guidelines for relationships with others.
Output	The output constitutes criteria about one's identity and what a person believes to be his or her specific obligations.	Outputs are morally and ethically important identifiers that equate with how one ought to act in relationships.	Outputs are the metrics by which a person evaluates his or her standards and conduct.
Intended Actions or Behavior	The output is equated to specific actions and behaviors that demonstrate a person's commitment to beliefs and values.	Actions or behaviors are anticipated responses that are duty-based but often situation-dependent as well.	Intended actions and behaviors are the means whereby standards are equated to conduct.
Social Situation	The social situation is the context in which a person interacts with others and includes her/his capacity to act in that situation.	The social situation determines whether intended actions are more or less likely to be realized.	Although intentions are the best predictor of a person's actions, intervening factors can also occur.
Reflected Appraisal	Reflected appraisal includes feedback from others but also is made up of how actions, compare with intentions.	The reflected appraisal can result in guilt about actions or can reinforce positive intentions actually carried out.	This reflected appraisal provides the opportunity to assess one's conduct, based upon a situation.
Input	Input is the value-based self-assessment that results from one's personal choices and affirms or disconfirms one's identity.	Input becomes a moral and ethical self-assessment opportunity based upon the criteria of the comparator.	This assessment of value is a positive or negative data point for evaluating personal conduct.
Perceived Self-Meaning	A perceived self-meaning is the inference that a person draws about her/his ability to conform conduct to the identity standard.	The perceived self-meaning can reinforce values or cause a person to reevaluate his/her future comparator.	Rationalizing can occur to protect one's self-esteem or can inspire a person to make a greater effort.

Consistent with the leader's role, the obligations of moral identity require honoring the duties of being just, fair, and compliant with established rules (Kohlberg, 1984) but also include caring about others and fulfilling responsibilities that assist people to become healthier and happier individuals (Gilligan, 2016; AlSheddi, Russell, & Heggarty, 2020). Caldwell and Anderson (2021) have suggested that the moral identity applied to leadership incorporates the identity theory model. We have defined moral identity as "*the constantly evolving conscious and subconscious standards by which an individual establishes the criteria by which (s)he will interact with others in honoring duties owed and which reflect the complex expectations which govern that individual's behavior.*" Elaborating on that definition, we have identified nine leadership traits related to moral identity (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021) which

apply to self-improvement and to serving others. *Table 2* explains each of those leadership traits and identifies the linkage between moral identity and leadership.

Table 2: **Nine Leadership Traits Related to Moral Identity**

Leadership Trait	Trait Description	Impact on Moral Identity	Comment
Commitment to Fairness	Fairness includes the ability to understand the contextual implications of a situation in recognizing the priority of conflicting values that may exist.	Universal rules may sometimes be in conflict and fairness requires the wisdom to know which ethical priorities most apply.	Moral behavior acknowledges the importance of recognizing the circumstances of choices that affect fairness-related outcomes.
Persistent Effort	The ability to be unyielding in one's dedication to achieving desired outcomes applies to moral decisions in the same way it applies to other goals.	Working on overcoming personal shortcomings and developing the ability to make the best possible choices in a difficult world takes this persistence.	The reality of life is that individuals constantly learn from their experiences and that achieving success demands constant effort and persistence.
Clarity of Vision	Clarity is the capacity to focus on factors that most influence outcomes and the ability to recognize the cause-and-effect relationships of choices.	Making moral choices demands understanding how those choices affect self and others. Clear vision is a necessary rational capacity.	Seeing the implications of choices and recognizing both long-term and short-term impacts are acquired skills that improve decision quality.
Self-Understanding	Recognizing one's tendencies and being aware of how one thinks in situations is a critical acquired skill of enhanced self-awareness.	Knowing oneself and being aware of one's past mistakes and their impact are part of the moral learning process that applies to everyone.	Self-deception occurs when individuals fail to make the effort to assess their past choices and their implications on self and on others.
Caring Concern	Being deeply committed to the implications of one's actions and being sensitive to the needs of others are at the heart of caring concern.	The ability to care authentically for others and to make moral choices based upon others' needs are keys to caring actions.	The capacity to love others and to be committed to their welfare, growth, and wholeness is a profound virtue and is fundamental to caring.
Self-Discipline	The ability to control oneself and to act effectively to achieve what is best for self and others are key qualities of an intelligent person.	Self-discipline enables individuals to make the personal choices that allow them to best respond in difficult situations.	Learning to be self-disciplined and to control one's responses in emotionally charged situations are acquired skills.
Passionate Engagement	Passionate engagement drives personal commitment and enables	Passionate engagement requires being personally committed to a set of	The ability to recognize the ultimate value of principles, values, and

	an individual to continue to endure, despite challenges and disappointments.	moral values, even under circumstances when change and growth have not occurred.	outcomes demands a heart-based commitment to moral priorities in order to sustain effort.
Unyielding Integrity	Integrity goes beyond being simply honest and includes establishing one's personal standards and holding to them.	Moral choices often require the ability to hold true to one's values, despite the pressure from others.	Integrity requires being absolutely sure of one's values and priorities and consistently honoring those standards.
Personal Humility	Humility includes knowing oneself, being open to others' feedback, caring about others, and being dedicated to constant improvement.	Moral growth is the ultimate personal learning process and requires he application of each of the capacities of personal humility.	Being committed to constantly learning and having the courage to make necessary changes require humility and consistent application.

Each of these nine leadership traits relates closely with the nature of moral identity and enables leaders to be worthy to lead others. Leaders who exemplify these traits earn the right to be perceived as trustworthy exemplars who demonstrate that they are deeply committed to their organizations, their employees, and the needs of the greater society (Gini, 1997; Cameron, 2011).

Leadership Insights about Moral Identity

We suggest that individuals who excel as moral leaders increase that effectiveness when they possess twelve important insights that are closely associated with their moral identities. These twelve insights also enable those leaders to bridge the gap of distrust that prevails in many employer-employee relationships today (Clifton & Harter, 2019; HR Research Institute, 2019). Each of these insights is consistent with findings suggested by a variety of other leadership experts and affirms the validity of the link between leadership and moral identity.

1. *Moral Identity emphasizes the pursuit of long-term rather than short-term value creation*. Becoming committed to achieving what is best for themselves and others, leaders who refine their moral identities recognize that it is both dangerous and dysfunctional to compromise long-term value creation for short-term outcomes that compromise the future. Their moral identities enable leaders to recognize their responsibility to society to add optimal value and generate long-term wealth (Manville & Ober, 2003; Anderson, Ndalamba & Caldwell, 2017).

2. *Leaders with a clear moral identity learn from their mistakes but are not defined by their past*. The ability to understand the nature of self-improvement and the nature of the identity affirms to leaders that their life is about overcoming mistakes and affirming their values (Fromm, 2006). Leaders with a clear moral identity choose not to define themselves in terms of their mistakes but use past experiences to help them to learn and to strive to be better (Burke & Stets, 2009).

3. *Leaders with a clear moral identity have learned to love and respect themselves, despite their imperfections*. According to M. Scott Peck (2003), love is the commitment to someone's welfare, growth, and wholeness. Loving oneself means recognizing that one is

worthy of self-love without being required to be perfect – and one loves oneself best by never giving up and constantly improving (Fromm, 2006). The ability to love oneself is a necessity for leaders if they are to also show love to others (Anderson, Caldwell, & Barfuss, 2019).

4. *Moral identity enables leaders to fully recognize the great value of others with whom they work*. Moral identity provides perspective. Leaders who understand their role in improving themselves, building others, and optimizing the success of their organizations recognize that others, like themselves, have incredible potential and great worth (Covey, 2004). Moral identity is enhanced when leaders increase their ability to care about others and appreciate their potential (Owens & Hekman, 2016).

5. *Moral identity enables leaders to develop and improve their Emotional Intelligence.* Emotional Intelligence is an amalgam of greater self-knowledge and self-control, increased empathy in understanding others, uncommon clarity in recognizing the most effective ways to address problems, and a deep motivation to use those skills to solve problems and help others (Goleman, 2005). Leaders who have grown in their understanding of their moral identities also increase the level of their Emotional Intelligence because they see themselves and the world more clearly and accept their obligation to serve (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021).

6. *Leaders with moral identity are deeply committed to justice, fairness, and openness*. One's moral identity enables a leader to realize that (s)he is obligated to live a life based upon moral principles (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Treating others with respect and kindness (Haskins, Thomas & Johri, 2018), creating organizations that enable others to thrive and grow (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2003), and being open to others' ideas (Schein & Schein, 2018) are all consistent with the best elements of moral identity and enable leaders to be more effective.

7. *Moral identity inspires leaders to be unyielding in their commitment to excel and to improve*. The commitment to persevere and the passion to endure are highest when leaders clearly understand who they are, what they can achieve, and why self-improvement matters (Duckworth, 2018). The experience of seeing oneself improve and accomplish what once seemed impossible is a thrilling part of the moral identity process and compels leaders to renew their efforts – even when disappointments occur (Caldwell, Dixon, Atkins, & Dowdell, 2011).

8. *Moral identity drives leaders to help their organizations and their employees to optimize potential.* As a leader increases her/his moral identity, (s)he recognizes the level of responsibility that leadership imposes on individuals and organizations (Burns, 2010; DePree, 2004; Pava, 2003). Being "good" is no longer good enough (Collins, 2001). The clarity that moral identity provides motivates leaders to rethink their obligations to others and to understand with insightful precision what they and their employees need to do to become their best (Beer, 2009; Covey, 2004).

9. *Leaders achieve a clearer moral identity as they pursue a course which puts service over self-interest.* A moral identity constantly reinforces to a leader the reality that (s)he is first and foremost a servant to others (Greenberg, 1998; Van Dierendonck, 2011). As stewards to others, leaders with a clear moral identity recognize the importance of putting service over self-interest (Block, 2013). Their stewardship role is fraught with a deep commitment

to not only doing their best but to helping others to also achieve their best (Hernandez, 2008 & 2012; Caldwell, Bischoff, & Karri, 2003).

10. *Moral identity is enhanced when leaders align their lives with universal truths.* Self-awareness and moral identity are closely connected constructs and leaders who strive to live in harmony with universal truths become more self-aware (Covey, 1992 & 2004), expand their potential to grow (Hayes & Caldwell, 2016), and increase their moral identities (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021). The constant process of self-assessment enables leaders to strengthen their moral identities as they strive to understand their choices at the conscious level (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

11. *Leaders with a clear moral identity recognize the virtue of forgiving self and others.* The process of constant assessment and improvement that is the foundation of the moral identity is founded on the importance of learning from past experiences and using that knowledge to reframe the identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Guilt can be a positive motivator when an individual recognizes the need to make changes. At the same time, a strong moral identity acknowledges that forgiveness is also necessary to become one's best – including forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others (Okpala & Caldwell, 2019; Caldwell & Dixon, 2010).

12. *Moral identity inspires leaders to adopt a "power with" rather than a "power over" relationship with others.* Because the moral identity inspires leaders to become their best and to help their organizations to excel (Covey, 2004, p. 99), they recognize the importance of the "power with" collaborative leadership approach, rather than the emphasis on a "power over" relationship with others (Follett, 2013). The evidence about empowerment and engagement clearly confirms that top-down authoritative management models are not effective in enabling organizations to become their best (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Human Resource Research Institute, 2019).

These insights about leadership apparently are not understood by many of today's leaders who persist in treating employees like commodities rather than like valued partners (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Block, 2013; Christensen & Raynor, 2013) – confirming an overwhelming body of evidence that suggests that those who lead struggle to be trusted by their employees (Edelman, 2021). Rather than continuing to adopt a leadership approach that has proven to be unsuccessful, perhaps leaders can begin to see the wisdom of honoring their moral obligations to others and incorporating insights about moral identity into their leadership approach (Cameron, 2012; Beer, 2009; Pfeffer, 1998).

Six Contributions of the Paper

As a topic of focus for scholars and practitioners, understanding the moral identity can provide rich opportunities for academic research and for the improvement of leaders and organizations. This paper makes six contributions to the current academic and practitioner literatures about the relationship between the moral identity and ethical leadership.

1. *In explaining the nature of personal improvement, it emphasizes the moral obligations of leaders and organizations to others.* Constant improvement is an important goal for leaders and organizations and includes the responsibility to not only improve oneself but to honor obligations owed to employees, to organizations, to society, and to God (Covey, 2004; Pava, 2003).

2. *By emphasizing identity theory's ethical and moral elements, this paper provides added insights about the nature of moral identity.* This is the first paper that has explained moral identity in terms of identity theory's eight elements and identifies the importance of those elements from a moral perspective (Burke & Stets, 2009).

3. *In linking nine leadership traits to moral identity, the paper emphasizes the importance of moral and ethical duties that merit greater application.* Those nine leadership traits have powerful potential for leaders and organizations and can help leaders to restore trust that is often lacking in today's organizations (Harrington, 2017).

4. *By offering twelve insights about expanding a leader's moral identity, the paper provides opportunities for leadership scholars to explore and test the application of those insights in academic research.* A growing body of research about the importance of thoughtful self-reflection and honoring moral duties has been undertaken by outstanding scholars (Cameron, 2012; Kouzes & Posner 2017), but that research and its implications apparently are not being practiced in many organizations (Human Resource Research Institute, 2019; Clifton & Harter, 2019).

5. *In identifying leadership insights that practitioners can apply, the paper affirms the importance of leaders increasing their self-assessment efforts in understanding their moral identities.* Moral identities can be strengthened and enhanced when leaders increase their conscious understanding of their moral and ethical responsibilities. The twelve insights provided herein reinforce the importance of self-reflection in becoming moral leaders (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021; Caldwell, 2020).

6. *By clarifying the importance of understanding the moral identity at the conscious level, the paper confirms the validity and importance of the identity standard and its practical value*. The nature of the identity is often subconscious and understanding the importance of the identity standard and its elements at the conscious level is extremely important in the quest for self-improvement (Hayes & Caldwell, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2009; Maslow, 1994). Increasing that conscious understanding of their moral identities can enable leaders to increase their ability to honor the many ethical responsibilities implicit in leadership (DePree, 2004).

Each of these contributions provide opportunities for an enhanced understanding of the practical value of the moral identity, as well as its theoretical importance in the scholarly literature.

Opportunities for Additional Research

Although the evidence is growing about the need for leaders and organizations to adopt a better approach to working with employees, there is a great need to research the practical implications of better leadership models and strategies for improving organizations. Acknowledging that the 21st century has brought extremely difficult challenges, the compelling opportunity exists to begin to examine more thoroughly the "inside-out" approach to improving leadership effectiveness advocated by Stephen R. Covey (1992, 2004, 2013) and a host of other scholars (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011; Dutton, Glynn, & Spreitzer, 2005; Quinn, 1996).

Further research can build on efforts to integrate practitioners and academics in studying the problems facing leaders and organizations today (Human Resource Research, 2019; Anderson, Ndalamba & Caldwell, 2017; Poff & Caldwell, 2018; Caldwell & Anderson, 2017;

Caldwell, 2014). Clearly, leaders and organizations need a "revolutionary approach" to rethink yesterday's approaches to the problems facing organizations today and in the future (Szalek & Caldwell, 2020). Although the data has not been universally confirmed that moral identity and effective leadership improve organizational success, there is compelling evidence -- and powerful logic -- that suggest that leaders who increase their self-awareness and understand their moral identities will be able to not only achieve their own greatness but help others and their organizations to do so as well.

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