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Ethical Leadership in Intercollegiate Athletics



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Abstract

Ethical leadership and a values-based culture should be two sides of the same coin in intercollegiate athletics. Needed are ethical leaders serving as role models of integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, fairness, and respect for others. Ethical leaders model how values should guide actions and decisions as well as implement reward systems that hold others accountable for ethical conduct. Athletic directors and other athletic administrators with the moral courage to do what is right regardless of circumstances can nurture values-based cultures as they shape and develop the lives of athletes and colleagues they influence. The purposes of this theoretical work are to explicate ethical leadership, explain the connection between ethical leadership and a values-based culture, and propose a model for developing and sustaining ethical leadership in a values-based culture.

Introduction

Leadership determines the ultimate level of success of any organization, including the business of intercollegiate athletics. Although leadership gurus and consultants have espoused hundreds of definitions of leadership, its fundamental meaning embraces a moral relationship among people (Ciulla, 2004). Hester and Killian (2010) conclude, "Leadership is about relationships and relationships are sustained by shared moral values; therefore, leadership is value based" (p. 69). That is, basic moral principles comprise the foundations of effective leadership behavior. Ethics, or the principles of determining what is right or wrong or the relative worth of virtuous behaviors (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2012), is

inextricably connected with leadership. The ethics of leadership dramatically shapes the workplace and impacts values-based decisions, as ethical leaders establish a vision and influence the behaviors of others (Gini, 2004).

Adherence to a core ideology — which Collins and Porras (1994) describe as core values embraced, nurtured, and perpetuated by individuals throughout an organization — forms the bedrock for success for any organization. Core values, they argue, are essential and enduring tenets or guiding principles that should never to be compromised. For example, integrity is often chosen by organizations and individuals as a core value. Integrity explicates what a person most deeply believes in and values (Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). When a leader's beliefs and values are positively connected to what is true and good, integrity is readily evident (Morris, 1997). A person with integrity, suggests Morris, will not deviate from his or her values for immediate gain or instant gratification with truth and goodness governing decisions made regarding right and wrong. As Sanaghan (2009) concludes, values are non-negotiable, with core beliefs and guiding principles governing daily behaviors, communication, and decision making of organizational leaders.

Lencioni (2002) states that core values are “the deeply ingrained principles that guide all of a company's actions” (p. 114). Core values set an organization apart, clarify its identity, serve as cultural cornerstones, and guide behaviors. As fundamental and strategically sound beliefs, core values permeate and are integrated throughout an organization's culture and should guide every employee-related process and action, suggests Lencioni. Schein (2010) adds that keeping vision and values central creates psychological safety for people in any organization — resulting in more effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency.

“...[C]ore values are considered to be a key component in defining the brand of an organization or university” (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012, p. 436). If, as Hutchinson and Bennett (2012) claim, athletics serves a pivotal role in shaping a university's image or brand, then it is essential for an institution's core values to be congruent and aligned with those displayed by its athletic program. For example, when the University of North Carolina offered hundreds of phony courses that awarded bogus grades to students (many of whom were athletes), it failed to adhere to its core values and besmeared its image and brand. Rather than recounting a litany of examples of ethical misconduct in intercollegiate athletics, however, this theoretical work argues that to prevent such misbehavior, ethical leadership based on core values housed within a values-based culture is needed. Specifically, the purposes are to explicate ethical leadership, explain how ethical leadership contributes to and thrives within a values-based culture, and propose a model for how to develop and sustain ethical leadership in a values-based culture.

Ethical Leadership

Leadership is fundamentally about relationships among people and how the leader influences others (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Ciulla, 2004; Hester & Killian, 2010; Trevino et al., 2000). Rath and Conchie (2008) describe how leaders build relationships by demonstrating adaptability, connectedness, empathy, harmony, inclusion, and positivity. These and related constructs describe interpersonal interactions, such as when leaders inspire and motivate others. “Leadership is fundamentally about value-choosing, and this is a value-laden activity...” (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2006, p. 9). This ostensibly occurs through forging relationships.

Before describing how leadership relates to values, we must understand ethics. "... [T]he word *ethics* is derived from the Greek *ethiké*, meaning science of morals and character" (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003, p. 4). Simply stated, ethics is the study of right and wrong and moral and immoral. Also, ethics is about how people treat other human beings or how an individual's behavior affects others. Trevino et al. (2000) suggest ethical leadership encompasses being a moral person and moral manager with both characterized by honesty and integrity. However, they emphasize being an ethical leader is more than just being an ethical person. The "...ethical leader must also find ways to focus an organization's attention on ethics and values and to infuse the organization with principles that will guide the actions of all employees" (p. 128).

Ethical leadership resides within the leader (i.e., who this person is based on deeply held values) as well as disseminates outward from the leader (i.e., how this person thinks and behaves). Ethical leadership is "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown & Trevino, 2006, pp. 595-596; Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) suggest an intertwining of leadership and ethics with most leaders' decisions made and actions taken having ethical implications...that is, they affect other people.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) identify six core values fundamental in human interactions: **wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence**. Leaders who internalize core values like these display moral courage as they act on and make them integral parts of their respective organizations. Northouse (2009) offers these principles of ethical leadership: **respecting others, serving others, showing justice, manifesting honesty, and building community**. Trevino et al. (2000) argue **honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity** are essential traits of ethical leadership. Bill George, former head of Medtronic, succinctly states, **"...we need leaders who lead with purpose, values, and integrity; leaders who build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer service, and create long-term value for shareholders"** (Avolio & Gardner, p. 316). Note how each of the authors cited directly links values with interpersonal relationships as critical components of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders understand they will inevitably face ethical challenges to their core values with Day et al. (2009) concluding,

Much of a leader's work has moral and ethical implications. Leadership situations often involve aspects that are characteristic of an ethical dilemma....Recognizing ethical dilemmas when they occur, understanding various courses of action and their relative implications, and acting in the most appropriate manner that is consistent with core values and beliefs requires a fairly sophisticated level of moral reasoning. Thus, developing moral reasoning and ethically grounded behavior is critical for all leaders....The failure of moral courage and the problematic ethical standards exercised by some of the most successful companies in the world (e.g., Enron, Siemens, Worldcom) argues for greater attention to the moral development of all organizational leaders (p. 71).

Sometimes, though, ethical leadership is lacking, such as when the temptation to overtly or covertly cheat pervades intercollegiate athletics because of an almost singular focus on winning and revenue generation (Lumpkin et al., 2012). That is, achieving these goals often challenges or conflicts with espoused values and ethical decision-making. Other examples

of ethical conundrums in intercollegiate athletics involve whether to play concussed athletes, change athletes' grades to keep them eligible, violate recruiting rules, have tutors complete work for athletes, require athletes to spend more than the allowed number of hours dedicated to their sports, and give cash to players (Lumpkin et al., 2003).

Additionally, a culture of "everyone else is doing it, so we should too" appears to permeate intercollegiate athletics and society overall (Callahan, 2004). This claim has become a commonly used excuse or rationalization for unethical behavior. As succinctly addressed by Johnson and Ridley (2008):

Professionals of all stripes function in a society defined by creating relativism, increasingly complex ethical quandaries, and a public that is weary of the unscrupulous – and sometimes shocking – behavior of people in positions of power. When professionals fail to abide by bedrock ethical principles and fundamental moral virtues, the quality of their performance goes down, claims of malpractice soar, cynicism and defensiveness become commonplace, and the cost of doing business goes up. Ethical challenges are notorious for stimulating powerful emotions such as anxiety, anger, and unnerving confusion. They also can lead to counterproductive behaviors such as denial, avoidance, and rationalization. And far too often, otherwise upstanding professionals worsen ethical transgressions by lying or blaming others for their own missteps. In this unsavory environment everyone pays a price (p. xiii).

For many, being an ethical leader in intercollegiate athletics is not easy. The pressures and challenges from stakeholders (e.g., fans, alumni, boosters, faculty, advisory boards, etc.) can at times seem overwhelming. Doing the right thing requires moral courage because ethical quandaries are often complex, nuanced, fluid, and continuous while involving competing obligations or options. Fallible humans, who may demonstrate self-interest and can easily rationalize their choices, often make unethical decisions (Johnson & Ridley, 2008). Dealing with and not succumbing to such pressures requires integrity, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, commitment, and authenticity.

Thinking positively, ethical leadership powerfully and profoundly can impact intercollegiate athletics. Athletic directors and other athletic administrators need to intentionally and consciously model high ethical standards and hold those they lead accountable for ethical conduct. Ethical leaders will "walk the talk" based on their espoused values. As they influence and motivate others to act ethically, ethical leaders have become catalysts for establishing values-based cultures.

Ethical Leaders Building a Values-Based Culture

When defining leadership, everyone inevitably agrees that values always come first! With a society bombarded by ever-changing and advancing technologies and the pervasiveness of relativism, complex ethical quandaries run rampant because of unscrupulous behaviors of powerful people as well as individuals envious of those who are powerful. Sadly, when faced with ethical challenges, too many succumb to powerful emotions and commit transgressions like lying, stealing, and cheating. As Callahan (2004) argues persuasively,

immense rewards dangled in front of people have lethal effects on personal integrity throughout society, including within the ambit of intercollegiate athletics.

In contrast to such negativity, Schein (2010) calls for leaders to serve as role models for ethical conduct based on high moral standards, take responsibility for the moral development of others, hold everyone ethically accountable, and deal fairly and respectfully with each person. O'Reilly and Pfeffer (2000) suggest leaders can potentially transform cultures to continuously exemplify ethical values. Leadership and values are and should be inextricably intertwined. Day et al. (2009) summarize the importance of ethical and moral development of leaders for these three reasons: “(1) nearly every decision a leader makes has ethical implications; (2) leaders serve as role models to others and are the targets of identification and emulation of followers; (3) leaders shape the climate of their respective organizations” (p. 71).

Ethical excellence is a remarkable concept and lofty ideal, but the feasibility to attain this ideal in the popular cultures of intercollegiate athletics which has a singular focus on winning may remain elusive. Johnson and Ridley (2008) identify 75 key elements contributing to ethical excellence and cluster these around 11 primary themes:

- (1) **Taking the high ground** (matters of integrity);
- (2) **Doing no harm** (matters of non-maleficence);
- (3) **According dignity** (matters of respect);
- (4) **Benefiting others** (matters of beneficence);
- (5) **Exercising caution** (matters of prudence);
- (6) **Caring for others** (matters of compassion);
- (7) **Seeking fairness** (matters of justice);
- (8) **Promoting autonomy** (matters of self-reliance);
- (9) **Being faithful** (matters of fidelity);
- (10) **Delivering your best** (matters of excellence); and
- (11) **Making ethical decisions** (matters of sound judgment).

Always doing the right thing, as suggested by these characteristics of ethical excellence, we admit, remains challenging. With increasing pressures to win in intercollegiate athletics, for many people the temptation to do whatever it takes to win, even if ethically wrong, becomes insurmountable. To prevent such wrongdoings, ethical leaders must communicate ethical values and utilize reward systems holding everyone accountable for unethical conduct and praising those who rise above the fray (Brown, 2007; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Trevino et al, 2000). These values shape an organization's culture as discussed *infra*.

Stringer (2002) defines culture as “the unspoken assumptions (i.e., values, beliefs, myths, traditions, and norms) that underlie an organization” (p. 14). Schein (2010) characterizes culture as “...a pattern of behavior of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (p. 18). Schein identifies three levels of culture which includes *artifacts*, or visible or observable structures, processes, and behaviors (i.e., climate); *espoused beliefs and values*, including ideals and goals; and *underlying assumptions*, or taken-for-granted beliefs and values shaping behaviors and feelings. Culture, Schein claims, includes observed behavioral regularities when people interact, group norms, espoused values, a formal philosophy, rules of the game, climate, embedded skills, habits of thinking, mental models, and/or linguistic paradigms, shared meanings, integrating symbols, and formal rituals and celebrations. In

short, organizational culture defines and mirrors how the people in an organization work and interact.

Schein (2010) emphasizes the foundation, standards, expectations, and consequences of working and thriving in a values-based culture. First, he categorizes six primary embedding mechanisms leaders use to teach people how to perceive, think, feel, and behave:

- *What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis;*
- *How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises;*
- *How leaders allocate resources;*
- *How leaders deliberately serve as role models, teachers, and coaches;*
- *How leaders allocate rewards and status; and*
- *How leaders recruit, select, promote, and fire.*

Building on these primary embedding mechanisms, Schein (2010) suggests the need for these secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms: organizational design and structure; organizational systems and procedures; rites and rituals of the organization; design of physical space, facades, and buildings; stories about important events and people; and formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds, and charters. Building on these components within a values-based culture, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) argue emotionally intelligent leaders develop and nurture loyalty through caring about others and inspiring employees to share an organization's core values. The need for ethical leaders to possess emotional leadership highlights how leadership at its core is about relationships between people.

Culture is essential in intercollegiate athletics just as it is in other organizations. For example, based on an examination of athletic handbooks from 35 NCAA Division I-A institutions ranked in football or men's basketball in the top 20, Southall and Nagel (2003) report athletic departments consistently ascribe to the belief that intercollegiate athletics builds and develops character. That is, if a values-based culture is espoused, college sports are more likely to teach values, although very few studies provide empirical evidence to support this claim (Beller & Stoll, 1995; Bredemeier & Shields, 1984; Doty, 2006; Doty & Lumpkin, 2010).

While culture encompasses deep-seated values, beliefs, myths, and norms often transmitted through traditions and stories, the overall climate is comprised of assumptions, operations, and practices important to organizational effectiveness. That is, daily functions — such as what is rewarded, supported, and expected — characterize climate. Associated values and meanings foster the underlying culture (Schneider, 1987). A morally healthy, psychological climate and culture yield perceptions of fairness with interpersonal trust essential for long-term, effective relationships, states van Dierendonck (2011). Both culture and climate directly influence ethical (or unethical) behaviors in organizations.

Schroeder (2010) states, "Culture is intricately linked with leadership" (p. 100). Culture embeds what leaders espouse, create, and manage while these are constrained and stabilized by group members through a dynamic process making it impossible to separate leadership from culture as if they are two sides of the same coin (Schein, 2010). For example, intercollegiate athletics embraces norms characterized by cultural meanings and ideologies of society with resultant positive and negative cultural consequences. Intercollegiate athletics prospers and grows in popularity by reinforcing ideals and values

embedded in societal culture, as society and college sports share emotionally charged beliefs and values or ideologies and patterns of behavior reflecting these (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). These two authors claim intercollegiate athletics embraces cultural rites with pep rallies, banquets, and press conferences with coaches and players. Characteristics of intercollegiate athletics include repetition, regularity, emotionality, drama, quantification, rationality, symbolism, bureaucracy, collectivism, and conformity. The cultural ideology of intercollegiate athletics bonds people together.

Every intercollegiate athletic program has a culture unique unto itself. This culture is largely (or perhaps even solely) dependent on core values communicated, modeled, and rewarded by the athletic director and other athletic administrators. Through ethical actions, statements, decisions, norms, and expectations of leaders, a values-based culture can inspire others to conduct themselves ethically.

Proposed Model of Ethical Leadership in a Values-Based Culture

Brown and Mitchell (2010) claim that the more employees identify with an organization, the greater the likelihood they will adapt their behaviors to organizational norms and values. This may be especially true in intercollegiate athletics when employees form allegiances with teams and the overall aura and focus on winning in college sports. As ethical leaders establish core values and expect conduct congruent with these values, individuals who share these values are more likely to enjoy higher levels of trust and communication (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). As a result, according to Brown and Trevino (2006), “subordinates’ perceptions of ethical leadership predict satisfaction with their leader, perceived leader effectiveness, willingness to exert extra effort on the job, and willingness to report problems to management” (p. 597). Through observing a leader modeling ethical behavior, employees may internalize similar core values and emulate behaviors they see modeled (Brown & Trevino, 2006). That is, having an ethically positive role model during one’s career makes it more likely an individual will become an ethical leader (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Furthermore, Brown and Mitchell (2010) report, “Ethical leaders are seen as having greater potential for promotion for senior management positions, especially in contexts in which there is a high pressure to perform” (p. 586). Like in other organizations, this applies in intercollegiate athletics.

Figure 1: Proposed Model for Ethical Leadership



Figure 1 depicts the proposed model for ethical leadership in a values-based culture. Ethical leadership requires character based on high ethical standards and core values. Ethical leaders serve as role models for integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and respect for others. Ethical leaders communicate that ethical values are required to guide decisions and actions of every employee. Ethical leaders implement a system that rewards employees for ethical conduct. These components coalesce to form a values-based culture that can, and should, permeate an entire intercollegiate athletic program.

The application of this model in intercollegiate athletics calls for athletic directors who, as ethical leaders, personally and empathetically communicate what they believe in and are ethically committed to uphold. That is, by articulating inviolate core values like integrity and modeling, ethical leadership through every interpersonal interaction and decision made, an athletic department's values-based culture is firmly established. Over time, as employees are rewarded for behaving ethically and displaying high ethical standards, ethical leaders within intercollegiate athletic departments garner reputations for being highly principled and gain the respect of all with whom they interact.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership and a values-based culture can be perceived as two sides of the same coin when ethical leaders make ethically sound decisions based on core values and establish and uphold ethical standards within their organizations. Ethical leaders have a vision and passion for doing what is right and helping those they lead behave in ethically responsible ways. When faced with morally challenging dilemmas, ethical leaders consistently model principled actions aligned with core values. Ethical leaders succeed through nurturing the leadership abilities of others through effective communication espousing core values and a reward system requiring ethical conduct. Core values inextricably associated with and modeled by ethical leaders will permeate throughout organizations to build and reinforce values-based cultures. Athletic directors and other athletic administrators as ethical leaders need to commit to nurturing values-based cultures that shape and develop the character of athletes and colleagues they influence.

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