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STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

Values-based Ethical Leadership: Developing Leaders with Integrity

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Values-based leadership and ethical decision-making are hot topics. However, the expectations and frameworks surrounding these characteristics are often unclear. Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2007) state, “[l]eading with integrity is a complex process that includes the moral development of an individual, the influence of role models, values-driven leadership, and the organizational environment” (p. 209). One must “work through complex problems and engage in a process that includes reflection before action” (p. 180). Reflection may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for some students who have never directly articulated their values and/or their rationales for ethical decisions. Therefore, they sometimes struggle finding congruence between ethical intentions and actions. The purpose of this article is to analyze values-based, ethical leadership by defining values and ethics, summarizing values-based ethical decision-making frameworks, and examining how leadership educators (scholars and practitioners) can develop students who lead with integrity.

Definition of Terms

The words *ethics* and *values* are often used interchangeably, but they are not

the same. Pinnell and Eagan (1995) define values as core beliefs/desires guiding one’s attitudes and actions. Ethics “refers to standards of conduct that indicate how people ought to behave, based on values and principles about what is right...[e]thics deals with the ability to distinguish right from wrong and the commitment to do what is right” (Wilken & Walker, 2004, p. 2). In essence, “ethics is concerned with how a person should behave, in contrast to values, which concern the beliefs and attitude that determine how a person actually behaves” (pp. 2–3). College students often face competing “right” choices, which sometimes causes ethical dilemmas (Pinnell & Eagan; Wilken & Walker). To further understand the process of resolving ethical dilemmas, it is important to examine ethical decision-making frameworks. Ethical decision-making frameworks can help individuals “reach a more informed and carefully analyzed decision before [they] take any action...[t]oo often, we are tempted to quickly put out fires or react to pressing dilemmas without engaging in a process that would provide some assurance that the right decision was made” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007, p. 208).

Ethical Frameworks

Many ethical frameworks come from the Josephson Institute, an organization whose mission involves “improv[ing] the ethical quality of society by changing personal and organizational decision making and behavior” (Josephson Institute, 2012a, para. 1). This institute created The Six Pillars of Character—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—providing a “common lexicon” to help

individuals reflect on their own ethical decision-making processes as well as those of other diverse groups (Josephson Institute, 2012b; Wilken & Walker, 2004). The institute’s *Bell, Book, and Candle Test* offers another decision-making framework. The bell symbolizes being alerted and warned of an ethical issue. The book represents acknowledging any laws or policies that would hinder one’s choices. The candle shows how one’s decision will look in the light to conclude whether one acted with reason and fair-mindedness (Josephson Institute, 2010; Pinnell & Eagan, 1995).

Moreover, Kitchener (1984) identified five principles guiding ethical decision-making: (1) autonomy (the free will to make a choice and/or action); (2) nonmaleficence (doing no harm to others); (3) beneficence (promoting good for others); (4) justice (treating others equitably); and (5) fidelity (honoring commitments). These guidelines provide an ethical decision-making framework for identifying the problem and potential issues, considering ethical guidelines internally and consulting with others, pondering courses of actions and consequences associated with those actions, and implementing the best course of action. Kitchener’s framework offers the decision maker an opportunity to examine situations from multiple angles, weigh pros and cons, and attempt to find a utilitarian-centered outcome.

One other important framework is that of Starrat (2005), who states that, “[t]he honoring of ethical responsibilities of all domains creates the foundation for the leader’s invitation to move beyond transactional ethics and engage in transformative ethics” (p. 133). He identified five ethical “domains” of responsibility central to educational leadership: responsibility as a human, citizen, educator, educational administrator, and educational leader. According to Starrat, to foster creativity and imagination, leadership educators must develop environments that provide justice, care, and equity for all students. Promoting this educational environment encourages critical thinking and social justice in and out of the classroom.

Conclusion

This article analyzes values-based, ethical decision-making frameworks. Human beings are complex individuals; therefore, we do not posit that there is one particular methodology or framework to cultivate values-based, ethical leaders. Dialogue about core values, ethical considerations when making decisions, and the power of reflection can take place anytime, anywhere. Thus, leadership educators must challenge students to justify ethical decisions, moving past superficial rationales while supporting critical thinking and reflection in and out of the classroom. ■

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