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Leadership Theory



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Synonyms

[Charismatic leadership](#); [Ethical leadership](#); [Transformational leadership](#); [Unethical leadership](#)

Definition

Leadership theory focuses mainly on perceptions of followers' judgment of leadership behaviors. Perceptions of leadership behaviors are highly valuable, although it is not clear which behavioral criterion is applied in employee's perceptions. There are several criteria that can be used to assess the effectiveness or adequacy of the behavior, for instance, aiming for effective and efficient goal-realization (strategic behaviors); truth and correctness (constative behaviors); sincerity, authenticity, and truthfulness (expressive behaviors); rightness and morality (normative behaviors); and personal change and transformation (inspirational behaviors). Thus, for instance,

acting morally means applying rightness and morality criteria for evaluating behavior rather than strategic, constative, expressive, or inspirational criteria.

Description

To maximize perceptions of ethical leadership, one should be clear about what one means by *ethics* in ethical leadership. This presupposes however that leaders are able to construe different behavioral criteria and manage others in line with these. For instance, an issue might be defined in line with a moral criterion and/or an efficiency criterion. That is, aiming for effectiveness and goal-realization (strategic behaviors) or aiming for morality and justice (normative behaviors). A clear example is that public opinion considers larger bonus unethical – so an ethical problem – while top-level managers argue these on account of agency or labor market processes – so a matter of efficiency. Another example of ethical leadership behavior “*sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics*” (Brown et al. 2005), it may be asked why this is an example of particularly *ethical* leadership behavior? and how this is different from other types of leadership?

Habermas (1984, p. 329), building on the work of Austin (1975) and Searle (1975) on speech acts, distinguished five general types of “communicative behaviors.” In a speech act, we do something

by saying something, as when issuing an order (Bach and Harnish 1979). Speech acts are commonly taken to include such acts as ordering, promising, or changing/transforming. Since through a speech act, a person performs an act by the very activity of speaking, speech acts are part of communicative behavior. Habermas applied the concept of speech acts to communication behaviors in general. Communicative behavior refers to more than only speaking, for instance, ideas and norms can also be communicated by writing or by setting behavioral examples. Examples of Habermas' five types of communicative behaviors and related "speech" acts are: "I tell you to..."; "I advise you..."; "I confess to you..."; "By this I confirm..."; or "I change you into..." (see Table 1). The five communicative behaviors correspond to five *behavioral criteria*: aiming for effectiveness and goal-realization (strategic behaviors); aiming for truth and correctness (constative behaviors); aiming for sincerity, authenticity, and truthfulness (expressive behaviors); aiming for rightness or morality (normative behaviors); or aiming for personal growth, development, and change (inspirational behaviors). The fact that people can mix up *behavioral criteria* by reacting emotionally to factual (constative) behavior serves to illustrate the usefulness of these distinctions (Haidt 2001). Thus, following Habermas, classifying behaviors as *ethical* requires the application of a moral behavioral criterion (Treviño et al. 2006).

Applying Behavioral Criteria to Distinguish Leadership Types

Classifying behaviors as *ethical* requires the application of a moral norm (Treviño et al. 2006). That is, behaviors are ethical leadership behavior when an ethical behavioral criterion is applied in employee's perceptions: *what counts is the criterion, not the behavior*. For instance, the ethical leadership behavior, [my manager] *sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics* (Brown et al. 2005), may be classified following the classification of communicative behaviors in Table 1, as an instance of strategic, of constative, of expressive, of moral, or of

inspirational behavior depending on the criterion that is applied:

- Strategic: setting an example of ethical behavior may help achieve goals. Since setting an example of ethical behavior is not the same as *being* ethical, it could be an instance of strategic, purposeful communication. The manager is a strategist.
- Constative: setting an example of ethical behavior may help reach the truth. The manager may, through showing ethical behavior, help to uncover the facts in a work situation.
- Expressive: setting an example of ethical behavior may be truthful in the sense that there is no gap between what the manager does in the outer-world and what is felt or thought within the innerworld. Managers do what they mean or feel.
- Normative: setting an example of ethical behavior may be a demonstration of the correct behavior if it complies with an applicable moral norm. Here, the manager behaves ethically.
- Inspirational: setting an example of ethical behavior may inspire employees to do likewise and in that way be an intervention for personal transformation. In such cases, the manager is a change agent.

This example shows that this ethical leadership behavior, [my manager] *sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics*, will remain ambiguous with respect to which type of leadership it represents, as long as the criterion is not specified. Acting morally means applying a moral behavioral criterion rather than a strategic, constative, expressive, or inspirational behavioral criterion. In the specific case of ethical leadership, the moral behavioral criterion refers to both demonstrating ethical leader behavior and stimulating ethical employee behaviors. Moral awareness is essential, so that one can recognize that different behavioral criteria exist and that morality as a criterion is important in working life (Treviño et al. 2006). Deliberately neglecting the existence of distinct behavioral criteria, or enforcing, for

Leadership Theory, Table 1 Overview of illocutionary speech acts, behavioral criteria, communicative behaviors, as well as links with leadership types

Illocutionary speech act	Behavioral criterion	Communicative behavior	Type of leadership	Example items
Directive (<i>I order ...</i>)	Effectiveness and goal-realization	Strategic	Transactional	... gives me special recognition when my work is very good ^a
Assertive (<i>I know ...</i>)	Truth and correctness	Constative	Rational/expert	Has considerable professional experience to draw from in helping me do my work ^b
Expressive (<i>I am/feel ...</i>)	Sincerity, authenticity, and truthfulness	Expressive	Authentic	... says exactly what he or she means ^c
Commissive (<i>I promise...</i>)	Rightness, morality, and justice	Normative	Ethical	..gives credit to others when credit is due
Declarative (<i>I change ...</i>)	Growth and development	Inspirational	Transformational	... has ideas that have challenged me to reexamine some of basic assumptions about my work ^d

Based on: Austin (1975), Bach and Harnish (1979), Searle (1975)

Note

^aMLQ

^bRahim (1988)

^cWalumbwa et al. (2008)

^dPodsakoff et al. (1996)

instance, a strategic behavioral criterion as the dominant managerial criterion, amounts to “moral disengagement.”

Whereas in current research ethical leadership refers to a leader behaving ethically or stimulating employees to behave ethically, in our approach based on the Habermas framework ethical leadership means *stimulating or ensuring, through proper communicative actions, that specific behavior (such as being earnest) is assessed or valued according to a moral criterion rather than, for instance, to a strategic or expressive criterion*. Again, the leader may apply a moral criterion him/herself or stimulate employees to frame or conceive the situation using rightness and morality criteria. The distinction between applying an ethical criterion or exhibiting ethical behavior has the advantage that whereas framing a situation as ethical can be measured, however evaluating actual ethical leader behavior poses problems since this presupposes that such behavior and therefore the specific situation has already been assessed using application of a morality criterion.

As stated earlier, ethical leadership in the sense of applying a morality behavioral criterion instead of effectiveness or correctness may be denoted as moral awareness. So in our view, ethical leadership involves stimulating moral awareness among followers (Treviño et al. 2003). For instance, in a group discussion about top manager bonuses, the manager would stimulate thinking about what types of arguments or behavioral criteria are allowed, or are applicable, or actually used, in a discussion. Are that arguments of effectiveness (e.g., in solving an agency problem), and/or of sincerity (e.g., openness or transparency), and/or of morality (e.g., justice) – so, business rationality or societal responsibility? Another example is the appropriate criterion in reacting to an employee’s complaint. Should one take the employee to court, or admit the truth? In such discussions about behavioral criteria, the most interesting responses are those that are ambiguous. Admitting the truth and taking the blame can be argued for on the grounds of good publicity (a strategic criterion),

or the employee being right (a truth criterion), or justice (a moral criterion).

Ethical Leadership: Managing Conflicts Between Different Behavioral Criteria

In a society where communities meet and have to work and live together, people have to get along together in their moral behaviors but without completely given up their ethical principles. This requires at least being able to communicate about your own and others' moral norms in order to reach some sort of workable agreement (Habermas 1984).

In such situations, there may well be conflicts between different behavioral criteria. Take for example the statement: *"I will do everything to save my organization."* This can be the basis for a conflict between different:

1. Behavioral criteria: for instance, arguing about large bonuses on the criterion of effectiveness and goal-realization using agency and labor market reasons or on the criterion of morality and fairness using reasons of social justice.
2. Instances of various normative behavioral criteria, that is, between different ethical principles: for instance, all human beings are equal ↔ you should take care of your own employees particularly within the organization (see e.g., Eisenbeiss 2012).

To explain the second point on basis of various distinct normative criteria, behavior can be denoted as ethical, for instance, because it is instrumental in achieving a valued result for the greatest number of people, or because it complies with a general moral principle, or because it agrees with what is considered a virtue in the current situation. However, in a Habermasian perspective, ethical leadership involves influencing the behavioral criterion that is applied in a given situation and focusing specifically on an ethical norm by communicating about ethical norms in an open "power-free way" (Habermas 1984). For instance, in a group discussion about different criteria of morality, the latter would have to include (a) explaining the criteria of morality

that are in use and (b) discussing the effects of these different ethical criteria on the assessment of the rightness of specific behaviors.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership means explicating different behavioral criteria and influencing employees in the appropriate, obviously situationally contingent use of a moral criterion. By doing so, these leaders ensure that employees both know and understand which concrete behaviors belong to a given norm. We have distinguished ethical behaviors as behaviors where a behavioral criterion of morality /rightfulness applies, from strategic (effectiveness/goal realization criterion), constative (truth/correctness criterion), expressive (sincerity/authenticity criterion), and inspirational (growth and development criterion) behaviors. Since this list of speech acts is not exhaustive, more leadership types are possible.

Since the debate on ethical norms can never be closed, ethical leadership will forever be a dynamic, open construct, and other conceptualization of ethical leadership remain well possible (e.g., Eisenbeiss 2012). Communicative behavior refers to more than only speaking, for instance, ideas and norms can also be communicated by writing, or by setting behavioral examples. Therefore, leaders could be trained in these communicative behaviors. Important concepts in conversations about ethical norms are, for instance, framing/sensemaking, background narratives, moral imagination/reflective equilibrium, and the role of disagreement.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Ethical Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Leadership Integrity](#)
- ▶ [Leadership Moral Foundations](#)
- ▶ [Narcissistic Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Toxic Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Transactional Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Transformational Leadership](#)

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