Leadership vs. Management: The Difference Is Ethics

By Cindy Campbell

BEFORE JOINING THE STAFF AT IPI, I spent more than three decades working on a university campus. Over the years I learned about management style and technique from a wide range of managers and supervisors. I paid attention to the way they interacted with peers, subordinates, and the public. For me, it was more than wanting to emulate a style or technique I'd seen; it was about observing the way these individuals made others feel about an interaction or outcome that got my attention. In time, I developed my own leadership style, and much of it was based on these observations. I came to realize that I was consistently drawn to leaders who exhibited ethical practices.

> *"Ethics must begin at the top of an organization. It is a leadership issue, and the chief executive must set the example."*
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> —**Edward Hennessy**

> *"Divorced from ethics, leadership is reduced to management."*
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> —**James Macgregor Burns**

As often happens, we not only learn from those with a style we appreciate—we also learn from those we don't want to emulate. You've undoubtedly experienced interacting with someone who demonstrated the wrong way of doing something—methods and attitudes that are disrespectful, unhelpful, and even unethical. We walk away knowing that we never want to be like THAT guy or girl. Our observance of these practices helps us to avoid making those costly professional missteps.

Ethics

According to the Oxford Dictionary, ethics are "moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity." According to Patricia Pinnell and Shirley Eagan from West Virginia University Extension, there are four common questions to ask when determining if an action is ethical:

- Would your action be considered appropriate, even if your children are watching?
- Would your action be considered appropriate if it became the front-page story in your local newspaper?
- Would you be comfortable on the receiving end of this action or decision?
- Would it be OK if everyone in the world behaved or acted that way?

If you can answer yes to all, the action or behavior is likely an ethical one.

Why is it critical to apply the concept of ethics to leadership? Staffing and recruiting firm Y Scouts describes an ethical leader in this way: "It may be difficult to define exactly what 'right' is, but a leader who is ethical is not afraid to do what they truly believe to be right—even if it is unpopular, unprofitable, or inconvenient." An interesting fact supported by research: The impact of ethical leadership isn't limited to how you are perceived—your leadership style sets the tone and affects how all staff and services will be perceived within your organization.

Along with the concept of ethical leadership comes the theory of social learning, which assumes that new behaviors can be acquired purely by observing and imitating others. What we learn is also reinforced when we observe how rewards and punishments apply to our behavior. We learn about the work culture by observing how others who came before us approach tasks. Social learning explains how people learn new behaviors, values, and viewpoints through exposure and observation.

Manager or Leader?

What examples are you providing to others as a leader? What culture are you creating? There is a direct relationship between the ethics and attitudes of managers and those of their subordinates. This means that based on how ethical we behave as leaders, coupled with the social learning environment we promote and reward, we have the unique ability to negatively impact or positively influence our organization.

Anyone can be a manager, but not everyone can be a leader. Leadership requires work. Ethical leadership requires hard work and, at times, difficult choices. I encourage you to make the effort, set the example, and reap the rewards. ℗

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