

## Leading and Ethics

Lewis F. Collins, Jr.

*It is a grand mistake to think of being great without goodness; and I pronounce it as certain that there was never yet a truly great man that was not at the same time truly virtuous.*

*-Benjamin Franklin*

Ethics have been defined as a system of moral principles. Ethics are the rules of conduct recognized by a specific class of human actions amongst a particular group or culture. As defined, leading and ethics are two sides of the same coin. To use Forrest Gump's analysis, ethics and leading go together like peas and carrots.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*, came to the United States as a French diplomat from his native France in 1831 to examine this infant democracy and provide social commentary. Upon spending many months examining the American system of governance and leaders, he remarked:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers – and it was not there . . . in her fertile fields and boundless forests – and it was not there . . . in her rich minds and her vast world commerce – and it was not there . . . in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution – and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

I believe that putting this template on leadership means that leadership and ethics are inextricably linked. Great leaders rose to prominence not because of their sheer will, determination or hard work, but because people could find something within a leader that would inspire them to be greater than they were. Leaders possess the perfect mixture of strength of moral character, commitment to cause, inspirational oratory, and vision for a better future. Without an ethical overlay, however, their words ring hollow.

As I am writing this, I am witnessing, with great sadness, the 2016 U.S. Presidential race. It appears to me that we are deciding on a leader for our great country based on the *standard* of the “lesser of two evils”. It is a sad state of affairs that voters are being asked to pick a leader who does not possess the moral framework that ethical behavior requires. Ethics and politics have seemed to decouple in this election cycle. Moral and ethical behavior is not the standard by which we judge these candidates. What a particular aspirant for office can “do for me” appears to be the unfortunate litmus test. Leaders are not judged by ethical principles – because, it seems, they lack such qualities. But that has not been so throughout our history. Two of America's greatest presidents, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, are viewed as pillars of ethical behavior, and are perhaps the two greatest leaders to ever inhabit the office of President of the United States.

Abraham Lincoln is my personal guiding star for ethical leadership. As a country circuit lawyer and later as president, he lived his life unabashedly by an internal, personal code of ethics. Foremost among these credos was the “golden rule”. He often was quoted as saying that he treated all others in a way that he wanted to be treated. By living his life this way, people naturally gravitated to him and wanted to follow where he led. Lincoln believed that if everyone led their lives by just the first two Commandments, there would be no need for “ethical” leaders. Perhaps that is why he was given the nickname of Honest Abe. He described the importance of honesty by telling all who would listen that a good name is to be coveted more than riches. I think that this was a lesson he learned from Solomon – perhaps the wisest person ever to have lived<sup>1</sup>. “*Lincoln's greatness must be sought for in the constit-*

1 Lincoln's personal code of ethics and his view of business ethics, based on an excerpt from the one-man play “Lincoln Live” by Gene Griessman. [www.lincolnlive.com](http://www.lincolnlive.com)

uents of his moral nature,” wrote John Bigelow, a New York journalist who became the American consul in Paris during the Civil War. These guiding tenants of honesty and treating others as you would want to be treated became his moral nature. They influenced Lincoln’s heart in a way that caused him to free the slaves and set the country on a path to equality for all. It took a great deal of moral courage to urge the abolishment of slavery in the face of a divided country that promised to be torn apart if his plans succeeded. “Abraham Lincoln is the greatest of all interpreters of America’s moral meaning,” wrote Lincoln scholar William Lee Miller.

Lincoln was a particularly worthy interpreter of America’s moral meaning, in the first place, because he stated it with a rare eloquence. Secondly, he was the primary voice giving the American idea received from the founders its necessary reinterpretation and fresh critical application because he dramatized the centrality of equality – specifically racial quality – as part of the nation’s essence. And in doing those things, he was able, to an unusual degree, to avoid the bane, scourge, curse, and disease that threaten all human statements of moral claims and national ideals – self-righteousness, invidiousness, moral pride and condescension<sup>2</sup>.

He paid a hefty price for his ethical leadership – the intolerable strains of a Civil War and death at the hands of an assassin.

The first President of the United States, by selection, became the standard by which all future leaders of this country would be judged. Washington, however, was not a politician. He would have been happiest on his farm, leading a quiet life of working the soil. During his life as a “gentleman farmer,” he memorized 110 rules of comportment and conduct that he devoted his life to follow<sup>3</sup>. By memorizing these rules, Washington forced his mind to focus on each rule and principle. He lived his life with civility and respect for others. Malcolm Gladwell in his book “Blink” talks about how being forced to think about doing the right thing in any situation (a/k/a doing the right thing when no one is looking) increases a person’s respect for others. Aristotle put it this way: Prudence is a “*pattern or habit that should become ingrained*” in the character, which prepares the morally virtuous person to make sound judgments. Washington by memorization of his 110 rules became a moral leader who made decisions by applying ethical judgments. By leading his life in this way, people were drawn to him. Although neither a polished writer nor spellbinding speaker, the “genius” of George Washington was his character – a character founded in ethical behavior and principled living. Washington was a reluctant leader. Nevertheless leadership was a mantle he accepted. “*His character helped sustain his troops throughout the travails of the Revolutionary War, convince delegates to the Constitutional Convention to assign significant powers to the presidency, secure the ratification of the Constitution, and enable the new republic to survive in a hostile world.*”<sup>4</sup> He was the person to whom this new democracy looked as it began the process of forming the American character that de Tocqueville would come to admire some 55 years later. By his strength of character, he gave this new nation an identity forged in his character mold. Following his presidency this honorable man (yet humble farmer) wrote to his trusted confidant Alexander Hamilton, “*I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of an honest man.*” This, I believe, should be the desire of any person – the ultimate statement of the crowning achievement of their lives.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi provide two additional examples of ethical leadership, with a slightly different point of view. They possessed the essential characteristics of an ethical leader: dignity, respectfulness, servanthood, justice, community building, and honesty. These traits are the hallmarks of effective and ethical leaders.<sup>5</sup> I would add to these traits a large helping of humility and forgiveness. King and Gandhi inspired their nations through a leadership style that embraced these elements. Despite violent reactions to their quest

[achievementdigest.com](http://achievementdigest.com)

2 William Lee Miller, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Winter 2001, pp. 1-2.

3 In 2003, Richard Brookhiser published a book about Washington’s rules and how they formed his character and influenced his career. *George Washington on Leadership*

4 The Character of George Washington, Gary Smith march 10, 2010. The Center for Vision & Values, Grove City College

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for equality and freedom, they led with a respect (if not love) for their tormentors - all the while not losing sight of the justice they sought for those denied that precious right. King and Gandhi built a community of followers without sacrificing honesty and fair dealing. Gandhi, a lawyer, first employed nonviolent civil disobedience as an expatriate barrister in South Africa, fighting for the resident Indian community's struggle for civil rights. He spent 21 years there, developing his political views, ethics and political leadership skills. This is where Gandhi was first faced with the discrimination directed at all "coloured" people (as they were classified). King drew great inspiration from Gandhi and adopted his non-violent and ethical response to discrimination. He embraced Gandhi's "truth-force" concept of leadership. King said this of his mentor: "*Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale*"<sup>6</sup>.

Like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela was a lawyer who represented people who faced discrimination based on the color of their skin. Mandela, through his non-violent legal counsel, ended up in prison for his political views and later became the first President of a free and undivided South Africa. As his country's leader, he was able to heal the wounds that apartheid had indelibly etched upon his country through a series of "Truth and Reconciliation" hearings held following his election. The goal of these hearings was to restore the divisions in South Africa by giving dignity to the victims of apartheid and uniting the country as a nation of many colors. Mandela lived the principles of an ethical leader by the example of his life. When he was released from the prison that held him captive for 27 years, he said, "*As I walked out the door toward my freedom, I knew that if I did not leave all the anger, hatred and bitterness behind that I would still be in prison.*" Those words became foundational to his leadership style. Mandela lived a life that gave forgiveness in exchange for imprisonment. He said that forgiveness "liberated the soul" and became a "very powerful weapon". Forgiveness a "*weapon*"? This is a telling turn of a phrase. By exhibiting a leadership style forged by forgiveness he also liberated his country in a way that the abolishment of apartheid only began. This powerful weapon of forgiveness (instead of bitterness or retaliation) was used to fuse ethics and leadership together. It was a *weapon* he used to defeat the prejudice and hatred that gripped his country for so many years. A *weapon* he used to put his country on the path to true freedom. As Mark Twain once said, "*Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.*"

Ethical leadership, therefore, is woven together by five powerful principles which form the foundation of truly motivational and inspirational leader. These five pillars are (1) respect for others, (2) service to others, (3) justice and forgiveness, (4) manifest honesty, and (5) building a community that embraces an ethical leadership model. These guiding tenets hold both the leader and the organization accountable for the ethical DNA that must be tapped into for every decision. In order for a leader to motivate and inspire others, he or she must communicate this ethical model throughout all levels of the organization. Once communicated and understood, it becomes an integral part of every aspect of the organization. It forms the framework by which all decisions are made. These decisions can concern the direction of the organization, the actions of the prospective members who are asked to join the organization, and the structure of the organization, including its bylaws and rules. Ethical leadership must be anchored at the very core of everything.

In order for an ethical leadership philosophy to emanate from the people who are chosen to lead, it must permeate throughout the organizational structure. It must exist through the committee structure and into the membership at large. It must be taught, coached and reinforced. Without such communication and integration, an organization becomes lost. It is, therefore, the job of a leader to inculcate into the community ethical values as discussed above.

The ethical leader (Washington, Lincoln, King, Gandhi, Mandela) becomes a charismatic presence that binds the country, organization or group together. This presence then allows and encourages ethical conduct to spring forth in every aspect of the organization. And it all starts with living a life of moral principles and ethical behavior that, by example and deed, compels others to follow and the organization to adopt and engraft into its

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6 The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.

core values.

**No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,  
Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,  
The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,  
Become them with one half as good a grace  
As mercy does.**

- William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

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