Administrative Breakdowns in Ethical Leadership: An Institutional Case Study

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Abstract

Given the inherent risks involved in managing large organizations, universities must maintain ethical leadership—the relational process that affirms integrity, equality, and justice in all decisions and actions—at the institutional level to avoid the quagmires of self-sabotage. The problems and challenges resulting from deficiencies in ethical leadership severely degrade organizational reputations, morale, and effectiveness. Accordingly, a strong ethical foundation is crucial for coping with such a potentially perilous environment. Indeed, ethical values must permeate all aspects of institutional operation such that principles of service, integrity, communication, compassion, and collective growth guide the institution. This research examines administrative operations within an agency that demonstrated unethical practices at a small liberal arts university, serving as a case study to explore breakdowns in ethical leadership. The results of this case study indicate that even minor breakdowns present major repercussions for the institution, that seemingly isolated problems are often systemic in nature, and that breakdowns in ethical leadership must be addressed in a prompt and forthright manner.

Keywords: ethical leadership, ethical decision-making, servant leadership, case study

1. Introduction

Despite increased attention to ethical issues in the corporate and political worlds and the emergence of the field of leadership studies in academia over the past quarter century, serious scrutiny of ethical leadership—the natural intersection between the two disciplines—is somewhat lacking, both in the practical and theoretical settings. Ethical leadership as a construct is dependent upon the criteria of the individual’s values, conscious intentions, uses of ethical behaviors and decisions, types of influence, and environmental factors, as well as the values of the evaluating party. Thus, evaluating the ethicality of ethical leaders requires an holistic approach that considers the means, ends, and consequences of the decision-making process.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, ethical leadership is defined as the relational process that affirms and ensures integrity, equality, and justice in all decisions and actions. Characterized by servitude akin to servant leadership (in fact, Greenleaf and others all but equate the two leadership forms) and the “Ignatian vision” of progress, growth, service, and compassion, ethical leadership also pursues paths of finding solutions that are universally ethical, and thus incorporates all stakeholders, creating communities centered on virtue, compassion, and the needs of the individual and of groups.

While ethical leadership usually creates fiscal success and longevity for organizations, problems and challenges resulting from deficiencies in ethical leadership severely degrade organizational reputations, morale, and effectiveness. Accordingly, a strong ethical foundation is crucial for coping with such a potentially perilous environment. Indeed, ethical values must permeate all aspects of institutional operation so as to ensure public trust, high morale of stakeholders, organizational stability, and effective risk management.

A compiling of commonalities among ethical leadership models relevant to this case study yields the following
five common guiding principles for ethical leadership: service, integrity, communication, compassion, and collective growth. First, service to all followers and to the organization/group itself builds upon a communitarian vision constructed around the follower’s input, needs, values, and ideas\textsuperscript{14,15,16}. Being truly a servant under Greenleaf’s conception, the ethical leader leads by example and is willing to take personal risks to accomplish the stated mission or manifest the vision\textsuperscript{15,17}. Second, ethical leaders must also act with integrity—that is, with honesty, respect, and in accordance with espoused values\textsuperscript{15,18,19}, establishing “touchstones of trust” with followers\textsuperscript{17}. Third, effective, open communication maintains a healthy problem-solving environment that avoids negative organizational culture\textsuperscript{20}. Forthright disclosure of relevant information to followers about events, problems, and actions allows the ethical leader to help define and diagnose issues with them, paving the way for swift resolutions\textsuperscript{21,22}. Next, compassion takes on a relational emphasis, specifically the care of the individual within the group\textsuperscript{23}, because “[d]espite the primacy of the common good, the need to care for the individual person should never be lost”\textsuperscript{24}. By placing emphasis on relationships and the well-being of people, ethical leaders serve individuals, as well as achieve impersonal goals. Finally, the ethical leader must facilitate collective growth through servitude to and mentoring of the followers, fostering leadership and development at all levels\textsuperscript{20,21}. The leader encourages critical evaluation in solving problems and balances and integrates the diverse interests of stakeholders\textsuperscript{25}

The backbone of ethical leadership is ethical decision-making, a multi-dimensional process that includes and considers the individual decision-maker, the relational and organizational context, the ethical issues involved, and the consequences of alternative decisions for all involved parties\textsuperscript{26,27,28}. Because individual ethics vary according to the experiences, values, and general paradigms of the individual, one remains one’s own distinct variable in each evaluation of ethical decision-making. However, research indicates that organizational structures and systems\textsuperscript{29}, the actions of peers\textsuperscript{27}, and general organizational culture affect individuals’ responses to ethical dilemmas more than personal beliefs\textsuperscript{27,30}. The issue or dilemma under consideration also functions as its own variable, though it is dynamic in that the nature and specific subject matter also influences the ethical decision-making process, making it “issue-contingent”\textsuperscript{31,32}. The final step in evaluating ethical decision-making involves an historical reflection upon the diverse consequences of the leader’s decisions and actions on all parties involved\textsuperscript{33}. Thus, since multiple factors affect ethical decision-making, there is a profound need for strong, guiding ethical leadership as a stabilizing force.

Moreover, the need for effective ethical leadership proves paramount because organizational culture functions as a mirror of leadership behavior\textsuperscript{33,34,35}. Mid-level managers tend to adopt the ethical values and behaviors of their superiors\textsuperscript{36} through social learning processes and structural pressures of the organization\textsuperscript{37}. While top executives and administrators typically dictate ethical tone in organizations, middle managers are the ones who have frequent, daily contact with the employees, and thus have great power and responsibility in determining the ethical state of the organization\textsuperscript{38}. Given the inherent risks involved in managing large organizations, universities—which are subject to the same dilemmas as any entity in the corporate world\textsuperscript{39}—must maintain ethical leadership not only among their ranking officials but, moreover, at the institutional level in order to create values-based organizations and avoid the quagmires of self-sabotage\textsuperscript{39}.

This case study seeks to explore the dynamics among ethical decision-making, administrative responsibility, and bureaucratic protocol within the context of ethical leadership models by examining the operation of an institution in light of its commitment to ethical leadership and the consequences of deviating from ethical leadership practices.

2. Methodology

Examining the circumstances of interaction between an agency and one of its employees within a small, liberal arts university, this case study was conducted through five central means: primary observation, primary interviews, secondary narration, public documents, and private documents.

Primary observation of the parties, circumstances, and events by the present authors accounted for the primary basis of this case study, as well as added an element of verifiability to information gathered through other means; this method was employed throughout the entirety of the case study. Primary interviews were defined by direct, dynamic questioning of the participant; interviews were informal and unstructured so as to allow for unrestricted monitoring of the developing events throughout the entirety of the case study. Secondary narration by affiliated parties unique from either the agency or the employee was used to indirectly gather information from parties uncooperative to primary interviews—with the understanding that the further removed the information, the less reliable its content. Public documents researched include the campus newspaper, personal accounts and/or statements of affiliated individuals in public access fora, and archives. Private documents include the personnel file of the employee, internal administrative memoranda from the agency and its supervisors included in the employee’s dossier, and personal electronic communications from primary parties, all provided by the research subjects. These means, taken together and yielding information spanning approximately eighteen months, provide a detailed case
study of institutional ethical leadership. Comparison of the evidence attained from these sources to both the ethical standards for university administration in the scholarly literature and the university’s own proclaimed values leads to the conclusions, shown in the Discussion, that the agency had acted unethically.

3. Presentation of Case Study

This case study examines breakdowns in the ethical leadership of an agency by chronicling the actions of a residential affairs office (the agency) toward a resident assistant (the employee), as well as the bureaucratic administration of the situation by officials higher in the bureaucracy of the university (the institution).

The employee was hired for one academic year and retained for a second, but was fired early in the second year. Prior to termination, a number of complaints had been received about the employee from resident students over the employee’s tenure (though the employee’s performance was never in question). Early in the first year, anonymous parties informally lodged complaints accusing the employee of inappropriate physical contact. Internally, the agency noted the insubstantial nature of the situation given that none of the complaints had been officially filed, and that it could not hold the employee accountable to anonymous reports.

The agency did not disclose to the employee the complainant’s identities, the specific incidents, or the forms of physical contact alleged (e.g., shoulder tap, hug, sexual advance, etc.), nor did the agency delineate for the employee appropriate and inappropriate physical contact (e.g., what level of conversational physical contact was appropriate). In lieu of a direct approach, the agency issued the employee an ultimatum: attend three counseling sessions with the campus counseling center or resign from the agency. The employee attended the counseling sessions, but because the agency did not identify and elucidate the perceived problem, the employee and the counseling center were mutually unclear about what to address and how. In this first episode, the agency did not ask the employee for the employee’s perspective of events or work with the employee and complainants to achieve a mutually supportive resolution. Internal agency documents indicate that the administrators were operating from a risk assessment model.

Over the next several months, the agency received no more complaints about the employee. Near the end of the first academic year of employment, one day following the agency’s decision to retain the employee for the next year, an incident report was filed against the employee for talking loudly in a common area. The agency did not investigate the report or question the employee, instead retracting its decision of the previous day to retain the employee. After several weeks of silent consideration, the agency again rehired the employee for the next year.

Shortly before the beginning of the second academic year of employment, the agency vacillated in its dormitory assignment for the employee, in part due to petition from the employee’s former romantic partner. Despite repeated requests to know the nature of the employee’s own residential situation, the agency kept the employee uninformed up to, and even several weeks after, the beginning of the school year. Early in the same year, the agency received an informal complaint about the employee from a parent stating that his/her student had felt uncomfortable with the employee’s hands having been placed on the student’s shoulders and with some of the compliments the employee had made about the student’s attractiveness. Additionally, the parent expressed concern for his/her student and general concern that the employee was a resident assistant at all (although the employee’s jurisdiction did not include the student’s hall). All reports from the complainant, however, indicated that every time the student had made a request of the employee to alter behavior, the employee immediately did so.

Over the weeks, a small, informal committee of agency and university administrators discussed how to handle the complaints they were receiving about the employee. As a precaution, the agency revoked the employee’s dormitory master key, limiting the employee’s capabilities and responsibilities as a resident assistant without due explanation as to why the key was revoked or when it would be returned. Nevertheless, based on reasonable reliance of continued employment with the agency, the employee carried out the duties of the job even in the midst of administrative uncertainty.

Based upon the employee’s case history, possible risks to the agency and students, and the “gut reaction” of an agency official, the committee leaned toward the decision to remove the employee from the position of resident assistant. However, because there had still been no official or substantiated complaints against the employee, the committee discussed a plan to offer the employee a clerical position that would retain at least a portion of the former pay but would not bear the power and privilege of the resident assistant position. With this plan, the committee hoped to appease all parties involved.

Several days later, another resident student presented a complaint that the employee had given the student a back massage, during which time the student began to feel uncomfortable. When the student asked the employee to stop, the employee did so. Within an hour of receiving the complaint, the committee decided to terminate the employee and the agency met with and fired the employee. Despite the employee’s multiple requests for disclosure, agency officials refused to disclose the basis for the decision, providing instead a misleading pretext for the decision to
avoid discussing the real reasons. The agency did not offer the clerical position, nor did it conduct an exit interview.

Up to this point, negative publicity regarding the agency and employee came primarily from parents and individuals. However, the subject began to enter public scrutiny following an agency meeting the following day between officials and the remaining resident assistants. The agency declared that it lamented the unfortunate loss of one of their own; it offered no explanation, however, nor did it reveal that it had refused to address any issue directly with the employee. This omission created an atmosphere of distrust, for many of the resident assistants were aware of the employee’s situation. Some of these individuals described their experiences of the agency at this point as “two-faced” and “hypocritical,” losing respect for their own employing agency.

Three days after being fired, the employee submitted a formal letter of inquiry for the rationale of termination after repeated informal requests failed to induce any form of disclosure. An upper-level university administrator evaded the formal request with a two-sentence reply that did not address even a single question in the original letter.

Meanwhile, several of the resident assistants with whom the employee had worked spoke with officials or wrote letters to inquire about actions that appeared to them to be unwarranted and duplicitous. These letters called for disclosure of information to the employee, citing the importance of learning opportunities for personal development and connecting the ideals to the liberal arts mission. The letters also related the psychological and emotional stresses from which the employee was suffering and proffered the compromise of allowing the employee to know the reasons for termination while still retaining confidentiality for parties wishing to remain anonymous. Furthermore, the letters also describe the agency’s history of withholding information (even in situations where confidentiality was not a consideration), unwillingness to involve residents in the learning process, unwillingness to directly engage student concerns, and hypocrisy between policies and actions. Almost all of these letters were tactfully evaded in a manner akin to that of the employee’s formal letter of inquiry—with short replies that ignored the main points of the letters; frustrated, most of these individuals ceased their inquiries.

The employee was harassed by several of the complainants shortly thereafter via an electronic messaging system. The employee reported this harassment to his former supervisor and followed the official route of the student conduct system, but the employee’s concerns were hastily dismissed. The employee was told to ignore the barrage of threatening obscenities, in contradiction to the agency’s willingness to address complaints against the employee.

Meanwhile, the residents of the hall formerly assigned to the employee did not receive notification of the employee’s removal until eighteen days after the termination—leaving these residents without a resident assistant or general awareness of their situation. Interviews revealed frustration with the agency’s perceived mismanagement on the part of residents and that hall’s new resident assistant.

Two and a half weeks after the employee’s termination, a campus newspaper published an article covering the employee’s case and the agency’s refusal to discuss the matter in a forthright manner with anyone involved. The article generated negative publicity that, according to internal documentation, troubled the university administration. The next day, the employee met with a university administrator, who acknowledged the employee’s emotional strife, difficulty focusing on academics, and social repercussions as rumors and speculation concerning the reasons for the termination were spread by the complainants and their friends.

In the following weeks, many students who had read the campus newspaper article responded critically to the situation, questioning their esteem for the agency and greater aspects of the university as a whole. Some community members wrote to the administration, offering their dismay with the unethical manner in which the agency had handled the employee’s seemingly unwarranted termination, citing the lack of due process given to the employee, highlighting the importance of sharing information and insight for personal development, and even raising the likelihood that the agency had breached its own employment contract due to the manner of termination. Though some of the tension has waned, the issue has still not been fully resolved as of the date of publication.

4. Discussion

In discussing this case study, it will be important to note that—for the purposes of this research—the focus of ethical leadership is the administrative agency, not the employee. The liberal arts institution under study abides by guiding philosophies, goals, and codes typical of ethical leaders. As an institution, the bureaucracy of administration provides an intentional, standardized framework for ethical decision-making via protocol. For its students, this institution also operates a developmental conduct system. Thus, its codified policies and procedures imply that the institution’s decisions should be made for the benefit of all stakeholders and for the community at large, that such decisions should—when possible—cause positive developmental progress for individuals and institutions, and that such decisions should uphold the integrity and ethical standards of the institution. The specific agency under study within this institution also advocates Aristotelian ethical virtue. It is possible to infer from the resident assistant training and support documentation that the agency desires to instill its own sense of ethical decision-making within
its student staff. From this documentation, the agency seeks to provide a supportive atmosphere in which individuals may explore the leadership role, learning and growing from their mistakes. Honesty, integrity, courtesy, respect, and conflict resolution are principal among the qualities the agency seeks to impart to both student employees and resident students. This case study, however, demonstrates a departure from the guiding principles of ethical leadership: service, integrity, communication, compassion, and collective growth.

The first principle of ethical leadership, service, which is a dynamic process that allows the community’s needs to shape and redefine the group’s vision, was not maintained by the residential affairs agency. As a service-learning employer, the agency provides its student staff with the opportunity to grow as leaders while also serving the resident student population. It is therefore important for the agency to ensure the well-being of both its own institution and its clients. Clearly, the agency attempted to handle each circumstance in such a way as to appease the complainants; however, the agency dis-served the employee and the other resident students in the process. The attempts of the agency to minimize risk and avoid “sticky situations” were part of the breakdown in the service principle of ethical leadership, which requires a willingness to take risks. A paradigm of self-protection in which individuals or an agency avoid fully addressing problems is antithetical to the service principle, and this agency (and the institution at large) refused to dialogue with the employee instead of capitalizing on the teachable moment and being of service to both the employee and the community. Service also means leading by example—leading with vision. The agency’s example demonstrates that a powerful entity may win out over weaker entities through nondisclosure and uncooperative behavior, an example that does not follow from the agency’s espoused values.

Integrity, the second guiding principle of ethical leadership, calls leaders to uphold honesty and to act consistently with their professed values. In serving the community, the residential affairs agency acted consistently to ensure that its community members’ voices were heard; however, the employee (a member of the agency) was barred from offering any alternative perspectives. This double-standard is a breakdown in the integrity of the agency. During the resident assistant training program, the agency vowed to support and care for its student staff when difficulties arose, yet the employee was denied the opportunity to even know the claims presented, let alone challenge their accuracy or origins. Breakdowns in integrity also manifested when, the day following the employee’s termination—after providing no support or dialogue to the employee—the agency presented itself sympathetically and virtually to the remaining resident assistant staff. In instances such as this, the agency lost credibility with some of its other employees, who then shared their dissatisfaction with the greater community.

Third, open communication is a guiding principle of ethical leadership, and is considered a keystone in leadership as a whole, as it contributes to important leadership concepts of community, partnership, and service. Poor communication was perhaps the greatest breakdown in ethical leadership demonstrated in this case study. Though perfectly within the agency’s legal rights to terminate the employee without explanation under state law, ethical standards demand greater consideration and sensitivity. The employee remained at all times uninformed of the situation as perceived by the agency despite repeated requests for disclosure, both formal and informal. The agency also failed to communicate with its residents for eighteen days after terminating the employee and designating a new resident assistant to the hall. In addition to withholding information, the agency avoided inquiries from diverse parties by using techniques such as vague generalizations, inquiry reversal, and shifting the focus of inquiry.

Ethical leaders are also guided by the principle of compassion. In some respects, the agency and other administrators showed concern for the employee after visible signs of stress appeared after the termination, but a lack of compassion throughout the employment tenure contributed to this very deterioration. Compassion could have also taken the form of direct, open, collaborative efforts to understand and remedy any problems at their onset. In deviating from this principle, the breakdown in ethical leadership led to personal prices for the employee and the employee’s family and friends (and, one could argue, for the complainants that may never have had cause to complain if compassionate intervention and behavior modification had occurred early in the employee’s tenure).

Despite many opportunities for collective growth, the fifth guiding principle of ethical leadership, the agency circumvented the necessary actions to achieve such growth. For the employee, the residents, and the agency to grow, critical evaluation to find better means of solving problems is a necessary process. However, the agency precluded this process—solutions were devised solely by administrators, outside input was rejected, and the collective was removed from the process. Each party suffered as a result: the employee was deprived of opportunities for personal growth, the community was deprived of an effective resident assistant, and the agency received negative feedback from parties on all sides. Palestini indicates that deficiencies with followers are only reflective of deficiencies with leadership, so the inhibition of the employee, community, and agency can be attributed to problems of ethical leadership practices.

The product of the agency’s actions was an assortment of seemingly small breakdowns in ethical leadership—deviating from those five guiding principles—at different times throughout the relationship between the agency and the employee. Though this case study points most strongly to an overarching breakdown in communication, taken
situation, the values and protocol may be redefined based upon experience and institutional goals. It is also
that they are still obligated to remain consistent with the present value system and protocol. Then, after resolving the
organization to be representative of the present state. Thus, even if the agency disliked the results of this situation,
individuals, institutions cannot change values rapidly. Values must be renegotiated among the members of the
employee’s resultant confusion and frustration. To maintain an ethical perspective, the agency must be consistent in its paradigmatic expression. Unlike
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dissonant with the employee’s indoctrinated ethical and developmental paradigm when the agency temporarily
reversion to the dominant social paradigm a more attractive short-term solution. The agency’s decisions are thus
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experiences—a conflict in paradigms among the various parties. Adding to the conflict is the presence of the
principles of collective growth or communication, for instance, would be wholly unsatisfactory to the complainant
concerns arise for these individuals, and they expect the agency to address their concerns in the
justice paradigm of general society—punishment and reward. Thus, a response rooted in ethical leadership
principles of ethical leadership, which could then spawn subtle paradigms that support averting the complexities of ethical action.

Given the pressures and responsibilities incumbent upon the agency and its administrators in this case study, the
explanation for institutional breakdowns in ethical leadership most likely relates to paradigmatic conflicts. The
agency incorporates ethical and developmental foundations of servant leadership and virtue ethics into its guiding
philosophies and protocol, with which the employees are indoctrinated in their training programs and regular
meetings. However, other individuals stepping out of common society—in which the justice paradigm based upon
punishment and reward operates nearly universally—are unaccustomed to many concepts of ethical leadership in a
practical sense. Concerns arise for these individuals, and they expect the agency to address their concerns in the
justice paradigm of general society—punishment and reward. Thus, a response rooted in ethical leadership
principles of collective growth or communication, for instance, would be wholly unsatisfactory to the complainant
and perceived as lax or even negligent. Even if only vaguely and abstractly, the agency likely senses—and
experiences—a conflict in paradigms among the various parties. Adding to the conflict is the presence of the
employee, who, as a member of the institution, expects the ethical leadership model to be upheld. The pressures
from the employee, those being served, and higher officials within the institution to resolve the situation make a
reversion to the dominant social paradigm a more attractive short-term solution. The agency’s decisions are thus
dissonant with the employee’s indoctrinated ethical and developmental paradigm when the agency temporarily
reverts to a justice paradigm to appease complainants. The agency is responsible for that dissonance and the
employee’s resultant confusion and frustration.

To maintain an ethical perspective, the agency must be consistent in its paradigmatic expression. Unlike
individuals, institutions cannot change values rapidly. Values must be renegotiated among the members of the
organization to be representative of the present state. Thus, even if the agency disliked the results of this situation,
they are still obligated to remain consistent with the present value system and protocol. Then, after resolving the
situation, the values and protocol may be redefined based upon experience and institutional goals. It is also
important to note the possibility of a cognitive disconnect among values of individuals within the agency, the ethical
guidelines of the institution, and the actions taken during this case study, which could, in part, explain the
breakdowns in ethical leadership. It is important for organizations, therefore, to engage in frequent self-assessment
at both the institutional and individual levels to improve commitment to and manifestation of ethical practices.

5. Conclusion

Ethical leadership and ethical decision-making models essentially contend that every decision and action, under the
guidance of clearly defined ethical codes, should be able to produce good for every party affected. This case study
examined a situation in which the ideals of ethical decision-making are present within an institution, but, due to
breakdowns in ethical leadership, a non-desirous outcome generates negative consequences for multiple parties.
After all of the internal communication among the administrators, the conversations with parents and students, the
letters and statements of criticism of the agency, the negative coverage in the school newspaper, and the mistrust
engendered in the student staff, it is evident that the breakdowns in ethical leadership within the agency proved
costly. As ethical leadership literature would predict, it was more time, energy, and resource intensive for the
agency to drag these situations out over extended periods of time, hide the truth, punish without proof, and otherwise
deviate from the ethical leadership model rather than directly address the problems with the employee and
complainants. The agency reacted to the situation from a stance of self-protection. When complaints arose, attention was primarily focused on quickly and quietly quenching them, rather than isolating the fundamental causes behind such complaints, uprooting them, and thus preventing future recurrence. Though the agency did exercise thoughtful consideration when deliberating how best to address the situation, it did not do so in accordance with its professed values. However, the agency could have opened dialogue with the employee to convey what was unsatisfactory about the job performance and then have decided to terminate the employee, investigate the accusations, or take action to reform the employee. This direct approach would not only harmonize with the institution’s espoused values but would also address the causal issues in addition to the manifested issues.

This case study demonstrates that when an agency deviates from an ethical leadership model, the institution may suffer resource and reputation costs. Additionally, seemingly isolated problems are often systemic in nature. Breakdowns in ethical leadership must be addressed in a prompt and forthright manner, or the problems may grow and cause decreased morale, loss of trust, and difficulty in returning to ethical approaches. Further research, however, should directly investigate the psychological effects on individuals when agencies switch among leadership models, and should also determine the psychological forces behind deviation from an institutionally established ethical leadership model.

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