

The Role of Personal Ethical Checking in Courageous School Leadership

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When school leaders make calculated decisions to deviate from hierarchical or cultural directives and norms, they may be viewed as mavericks or brigands. This paper details a process of ethical checking to help differentiate ethical decisions from more arbitrary or self-serving decisions. The paper examines conflicts inherent in many professional codes. We use our model of artistic insubordination (Buskey & Pitts, 2009) as a departure point and examine the relationship between language and steps from Dr. Martin Luther King's direct action model with concepts already found in educational leadership. We use both to develop a process of ethical checking. The process should help school leaders attempting to balance the demands of being administrative leaders, democratic citizens, and human beings (Starratt, 2004).

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

-Martin Luther King, Letter from Birmingham City Jail, 1963

Introduction

Many would argue that today's dark depths in education are reflected in the pressures of test-based accountability, decreased building level autonomy, and a consistent erosion of resources. We assert that it is only through the consistent efforts of *gadflies* that students can remain at the center of schools' actions. However, being a gadfly is more than being a squeaky wheel; it requires a careful and thoughtful application of ethical principles and decision-making. Previously, we suggested that principal licensure programs needed to prepare leaders to do good, and that this inherently meant preparing them to work from positions where their power was either hierarchically insubordinate to principals and

superintendents (in the case of grade level leaders, lead teachers and assistant principals, for example), or powerfully insubordinate to elements such as school tradition, politics, and culture (Buskey & Pitts, 2009). Citing the need to creatively work around such power in order to either prevent harm or do good (Starratt, 2004), we referred to the idea of Artistic Insubordination.

While we were able to offer a concrete model based on King's (1963) four steps of non-violent protest, the article was written largely as a proposition and offered little in the way of specifics. We concluded with three important questions, the first of which this article attempts to address in some functional detail. In suggesting that leaders need to become more independent in making decisions our first question is of paramount importance: "What is the difference between a maverick and a brigand?" (Buskey & Pitts, 2009, p. 60).

Mavericks and Brigands

The existence of professional and organizational codes of ethics is intended to provide ethical guidance, yet such codes rarely address conflicts between the organization and the organization's values. For instance, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) lists conflicting charges in its ethical standards. The code emphasizes that principals must make, "the well-being of students the fundamental value in all decision making and actions." However, principals are also charged with obeying laws and carrying out, "the governing board of education's policies and administrative rules and regulations" (NASSP, 2001, p. 1). Similarly, the American Association of School Administrators' code of ethics call for education leaders to put the well being of students first, but to also enact "local, state, and national laws" (AASA, 2007). Additionally, educational leaders are also expected to accept "responsibility and accountability for one's own actions and behaviors." Neither document provides guidance on how to respond to possible conflicts of duty. What guidance do leaders have for resolving such conflicts?

A few instances exist in which professional bodies or agencies acknowledge ethical conflicts within an organization and in such cases they resort to promoting personalized decision making similar to what is proposed in this paper. The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 2000) noted in its code of ethics that, "psychologists will be faced with ethical dilemmas that are difficult to resolve" (p. 2). The preamble acknowledges the resolution of these conflicts is "a matter of personal conscience," but adds that there must be "a decision-making process that is based on a reasonably coherent set of ethical principles and that can bear public scrutiny" (p. 2). The preamble describes a multi-step process grouped into four phases:

1. Identifying the problem.
2. Considering personal biases and alternative actions.
3. Strategizing and taking action.
4. Evaluating and assuming responsibility for actions by reengaging in the decision making process and, if necessary, considering preventative measures for similar future occurrences.

The Netherlands Tax and Custom Administration (NTCA) recognized values as a fundamental aspect of job performance. Van Blisjswijk, van Breukelen, Franklin,

Raadschelders, and Slump (2004) describe how the agency felt, "it was essential that each employee was given a semiautonomous moral space in which to act" (p. 721). The NTCA developed a model for solving dilemmas with three main stages:

1. Identification of the core problem, and those who are involved and who are responsible.
2. Determining what information is needed, and which arguments exist.
3. Forming a conclusion, and checking the conclusion against personal feelings.

In the absence of acculturated or codified means of reconciling conflicts between competing responsibilities in organizations, school leaders are left to their own devices. A number of authors have alluded to, described, and named methods or patterns of non-compliant behavior in schools (Anfara et al., 2008; Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980; Haynes & Licata, 1995; Licata & Willower, 1975; Lipsky, 1980; MacBeath, 2007; McPherson & Crowson, 1994; Morris, Crowson, Porter-Gehrie, & Hurwitz, 1984; Travers, 2003). More generally, Vadera, Pratt, and Mishra (2013) proposed a model for understanding pro-social constructive deviance in organizations. The described behaviors helped maintain the integrity of the individual leaders and missions of their schools. However, what keeps the conscientious maverick from becoming a despotic brigand?

One element missing from earlier calls for increased leadership autonomy is a process of personal ethical checking. This process must take place within a larger context of ethical leadership. It must have clarity and contain safeguards that help leaders navigate competing interests while keeping student wellbeing as the highest priority and should also aid in preserving job security without sacrificing ethical beliefs.

Personal Ethical Checking

One of the challenges for us in fully developing the process of ethical checking has been trying to reconcile two ethical, yet distinctly different traditions. Our initial work was inspired primarily by the non-violent social movements symbolized by Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. However, we are thankful to our colleague Jerry Starratt for reminding us how our own ethical traditions in educational administration already call upon us to make responsible decisions on behalf of our students, teachers, and communities, while at the same time balancing requirements of governing bodies (personal communication, January 19, 2010). In examining our own traditions more closely, we have found parallels to Dr. King's tactics of non-violent action. However, within the framework of ethical school leadership, the components have not been brought together in a way that encourages the kind of independent decision making that King referred to earlier. What follows is a unified and sequential process for personal ethical checking.

Stefkovich and Begley (2007) called for educational leaders to focus on an ethos of working for students' best interests. The authors asserted that, "We need the capacity to discriminate actual intentions within ourselves and among others" (p. 211). The process of ethical checking cultivates both the capacity and habit for such discrimination.

King (1963) described four steps in non-violent protest in his Letter from Birmingham City Jail: "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct-action" (p. 540). We consider the first three steps to make up the

process of ethical checking, but feel that the language of social action is misleading for the kind of “direct-action” employed by highly skilled and educated school leaders who are hired, in large part, because of their ability to make decisions.

In the context of school leadership, the first step consists of an examination of the situation using multiple ethical perspectives. The second step attempts to reconcile three aspects of leadership responsibility. The final step is self-improvement. We elaborate on each of these themes below.

Examination Using Multiple Ethical Perspectives

An event looks different depending on the perspective one takes and the responsibilities one has. Researchers and theorists have continued to offer multiple ethical paradigms, including justice (Kohlberg, 1958), caring (Gilligan, 1977), community (Furman, 2004), profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011), and critique (Giroux, 1988) for consideration by school leaders. We have chosen to draw on Starratt’s work to combine the three ethics of justice, care and critique (1991), as they present a framework with which to “move toward the ‘best’ choice under the circumstances” (p. 187) and relate well to the ideas put forward by King (1963).

Collecting facts in ethical checking goes beyond a simple examination of what, who, and when. It also means an ethical examination of the facts from multiple perspectives. We propose that leaders use Starratt’s (1991) three ethics and work through them in a purposeful order in three subsequent rounds. Starratt described the ethics in a specific order for specific reasons and we adhere to his purpose of moving from critique, to justice, to care.

Recognizing that bureaucratic systems are inherently ineffective and subject to being misdirected from their core function, ethical checking should begin with critique and an examination as to whether the conflict (a) furthers the purpose of the organization, (b) whether that purpose is ethically just and (c) addresses inequalities in the system.

The next examination is from the perspective of the ethic of justice. The ethic of justice is concerned with how we govern ourselves. This governance applies not only to the rules of school, but to how teachers and students participate in school governance. In an age of government mandates and standardization, the ethic of justice may seem to speak to our relationship to external agencies, however it is much more focused on how we treat each other, who has voice, and how we solve our problems (Starratt, 1991). In examining issues from a justice perspective, the leader asks what actions will a) serve the common good, b) respect individuals’ rights, and c) promote an ethical community.

The ethic of care comes last because it is unique in being able to examine instances of conflict with regard to the individual impact on each human being. The ethic of care encourages us to consider how the conflict (a) treats each person “with intrinsic dignity and worth,” (b) is free of motives to dominate or intimidate others, (c) carries the possibility to nurture and develop others, and (d) “maintains trust, honesty, and open communication” (Starratt, 1991, pp. 195-196).

Using these three perspectives, the leader should determine whether the problem is primarily related to the organization’s ethics and equality (critique), how we govern ourselves (justice), or obligations within our relationships (care). An understanding of the problem from multiple ethical perspectives leads to the next step.

Reconciliation through Responsibility

In *Ethical Leadership*, Starratt (2004) described three ways in which the leader is responsible, as a human being, a citizen administrator, and an educational administrator. Each of these ways has a different emphasis and determining how to balance these three ways is at the heart of negotiation. Negotiation takes place first within the leader, and then between the leader and external forces. Typically, school leaders operate from an educational administrator role by default. However, as Scribner, Crow, Lopez, and Murtadha (2011) found, some successful principals “acknowledge...their moral and ethical obligations to the holistic well-being of students and families” (p. 416). Acknowledging multiple responsibilities allows school leaders to rise above the bonds of hierarchical relationships.

The school leader must consider the duties of the educational administrator with the other two responsibilities. The citizen administrator is responsible for ensuring a healthy democracy through preparing students to be active and informed democratic participants. The school leader must also consider the duty of one human being to another, especially as it relates to the nurturing of students into authentic adults.

The process of negotiation is the consideration of the facts in light of the responsibilities of the leader. What possible courses of action exist in which student authenticity can be promoted, democratic foundations can be perpetuated, and obligations to governing bodies can be fulfilled? As the leader develops options, he or she takes them to external forces and attempts to garner support for appropriate alternative actions.

Self-Improvement

Before a leader attempts to change the external, a leader must change the internal. Hess (2013) argued that many school leaders suffer from self-imposed limitations. Quinn & Synder (1999) stressed that we cannot ask others to change before we ourselves have changed. They describe a model of personal transformation developed from studying ethical-spiritual leaders such as Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. We have adapted their model and offer the following steps of self-improvement:

1. Work to become more inclusive in both the sharing of information and in decision making. This implies being open to hearing others' views as well as sharing one's own perspectives.
2. Align actions with personal values and eliminate hypocrisy. While every conflict may not be resolved in the leader's favor, simply acting out of an ethical perspective allows leaders to make forceful arguments and to fulfill their professional responsibilities as opposed to simply feeling like powerless agents of a system.
3. To the greatest degree possible, stand on personal principles, and recognize that a systems set of rewards and sanctions are an elaborate set of controls. The degree to which a leader can divorce dependency on these controls exponentially increases the freedom to act.
4. Discuss ethical decision-making processes with others.
5. Continue to learn by reading and asking questions—there may be good solutions of which the leader is unaware.

At the conclusion of the ethical checking process, the educational leader should have considered the issue from multiple ethical paradigms. Is the issue truly an ethical one? Does the situation invoke the ethic of critique in that it works against those already disadvantaged by the system or conflicts with the stated mission of the school or even public education? Is it an issue of justice, conflicting with the common good or the rights of individuals? Or, is it an issue of care, and our responsibility to each other as human beings? Isolating the source of the conflict helps the leader decide which responsibility should take prominence. Is the issue most related to the leader's responsibility as an administrator? Just as likely, the situation calls for the leader to consider his/her role as a protector of our democracy or as a nurturer of authentic human beings. As a leader situates the issue in a specific ethical paradigm and identifies his/her primary type of responsibility, he/she is able to clarify the situation and to develop courses of action that can potentially resolve the conflict or mitigate the damage. In addition, the deeper understanding of the issue can guide personal development that will facilitate negotiations or improve the effectiveness of resistance and creative action.

Conclusion

Our inspiration for ethical checking came from singularly powerful human beings who led major movements that changed our world. However, the mechanics of the process call from our own educational leadership traditions. Engaging in ethical checking should be as routine for school leaders as coming to work. It is not something reserved for high times or great people; it is (or should be) at the heart of the leadership we aspire to exert each day. Ethical checking allows practicing school leaders to reclaim a measure of professionalism by empowering them to act on their values at the same time they are informed by their knowledge and experience. It also helps leaders to stay grounded in their purposes, and to avoid or at least lessen the emotional scars that result from acting contrary to our values.

While we know that school leaders learn extensively from job embedded experiences, we also know that the time they have to reflect and to learn divergent skills is limited. Further, new administrators have a very short window of time in which to establish their credibility as ethically centered leaders. These factors make it imperative that administrative licensure and school leadership programs provide aspiring school leaders with practical tools that support sophisticated decision-making in ethically conflicted milieus. Schools are cultures, and forms of power are multifaceted. Knowing why we are willing to stand up to power, or to choose one responsibility over another, is a prerequisite for taking purposeful action. We urge professors of educational administration who wish to prepare their P-12 colleagues for the challenges of school leadership to provide both the content and experiential elements required for ethical checking. Prospective administrators can be coached to clarify their values, develop skills for analyzing ethical conflicts, and provided practice in recognizing and negotiating with different powers using ethically driven arguments.

The benefits of ethical checking are multi-faceted and far-reaching. In an era that is dominated by shrinking resources, decreased autonomy, and rigid accountability systems, ethical checking is an invaluable tool for helping school leaders align their actions with their values in proactive and responsible ways. As demonstrated by our own discordant codes and standards, ethical dilemmas and competing responsibilities have become routine challenges to successful school leadership. Hierarchical and non-hierarchical school leaders who routinely practice ethical checking will be better equipped to see the complexities of situations and to

keep student best interest in the forefront of their decisions. In closing, ethical checking allows each of us to, in King's (1963) words, "rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal...to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."

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