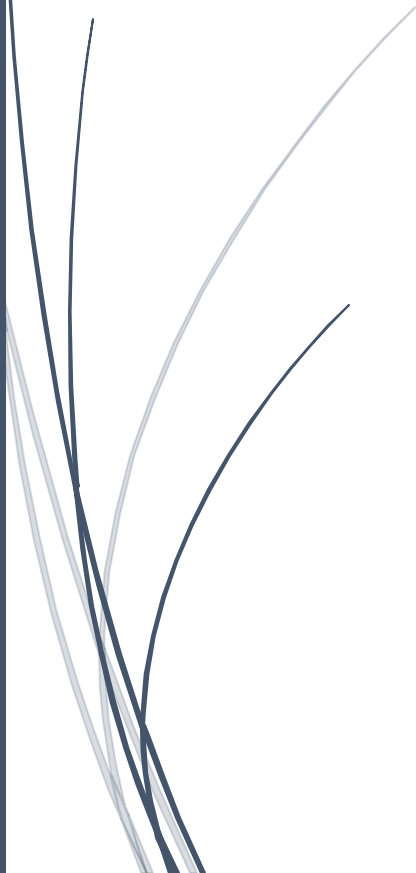




# There Are No Ethical Leaders

An Argument for Ethical Individuals



*“A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world.” – Albert Camus*

## **Ethical Leadership**

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Ethical leaders become increasingly valuable – both to society and to individual organizations – the more they are discussed and studied. As this happens, the importance of understanding just what constitutes an ethical leader and how we can create more of them grows.

Thus far, much of the literature on ethical leaders has focused on the dual sides of ethical leadership, or what Trevino et al. call the **moral person** and the **moral manager** aspects. The latter deals with an individual’s efforts to promote ethics and influence the actions of others, while the former are those behaviours, intentions, and characteristics which make up the ethical individual (Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2000). Combined, these two aspects form the basis of the modern ethical leader synthesis.

Some, however, have called into question the usefulness of this model in dealing with particular situations. More specifically, they have highlighted the complexity of moral decision making and how individuals do or do not extend their ethical beliefs to leadership positions (Trevino & Brown, 2004). The focus of this paper will therefore be to examine the shortcomings of this model, and briefly propose an alternative.

## **Moving Towards an Alternative Model**

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Given what we know about ethics and leadership separately, I believe that the concept of ethical leadership as a whole is counterproductive to its promotion. In particular, ethical leadership **a)** creates a false dichotomy between the leader and the individual, **b)** compels us to prioritize one aspect over the other, and **c)** fails to distinguish between action and intention.

I furthermore propose that a more individualistic model of ethical leadership be considered. Under this model, ethical characteristics would be considered at the individual level first; if met, only then would they be considered from a leadership perspective. My hope is that this approach will mitigate the problems identified previously and lead to more and better trained ethical leaders.

## **Dueling Identities**

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One of the primary problems with the ethical leader model is the over-differentiation between the moral person and moral manager aspects. When we treat ethical leadership as a separate concept, we run the risk of creating dual identities; effectively separating ourselves into the **“leader”** and the **“individual.”** Presented with two unique identities,

individuals will seek refuge within the other, justifying their unethical actions by appealing to these distinctions.

A manager who displays unethical leadership at work, for instance, might reason that their actions at the “individual” level remain ethical, and thus they remain an ethical leader. This in turn increases the likelihood of further unethical action, since the manager has isolated themselves from criticism for their actions, so as long as they are committed in the context of business.

Had they taken the alternative approach, they would not have been able to justify their actions by appealing to a separate identity as a leader. Only ethical individuals exist, of which leaders are merely a subset.

### **It Creates Potential Conflict**

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Leadership is influencing people to achieve communal goals; ethical leadership is achieving those goals in a way that is fair and just to your employees, your customers, your suppliers, your communities, your shareholders, and yourselves. (Rowe & Guerrero, 2013)

What is more important, acting ethically or being a leader? Theoretically, there is nothing which prevents both from occurring simultaneously. Yet practically, examples of conflict between the two abound. Imagine for instance an executive who faces the dilemma of either acting unethically or going bankrupt. In this situation, will the manager be able to meet communal goals and retain their integrity?

Sadly, this is what (too) often occurs in business. Faced with business obstacles, managers will often cut corners to meet objectives. Not only is this what happens, it is what is expected. In a survey conducted by EY, **59%** of employees expected managers to cut corners when times were tough. (EY, 2011). Under these conditions, leadership of the organization – narrowly defined as meeting financial objectives – is prioritized ahead of acting ethically.

Where there is conflict then, how are we to proceed, either as ethical leaders or their followers? This is where the distinction between ethical individuals who are also leaders versus “ethical leaders” becomes important. If we are ethical individuals, all of our actions take place within the moral and ethical framework we create for ourselves. Ethical leaders in this sense do not experience conflict between their responsibilities; rather they are empowered by their ethical self before they ever make a choice or take action as a leader.

### **Separating Action from Intention**

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The study of ethics has largely been separated into two distinct schools; one focusing on conduct and the other on character (Rowe & Guerrero, 2013). The study of conduct, furthermore, can be subdivided into those theories concerned with outcomes on the one hand, and intentions on the other.

Within the ethical leader framework however, the distinction between action and intention is often blurred. Leadership is judged on outcomes while ethics is judged on intentions. How then do we judge a leader whose actions are made with ethical intentions but produce unethical outcomes? Under the ethical leadership model the task is difficult, not least because there is no proper definition of what is ethical in business. A manager might have loyalties to numerous stakeholders, often with conflicting ethical beliefs.

If we consider ethical leaders as individuals first and leaders second however, the task becomes much easier. Under these conditions, an action is only considered ethical if both the intentions of the individual and the outcomes are ethical. Moreover, the latter is dependent on and antecedent to the former.

### **Conclusion**

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**Ethical leaders may not exist, but ethical individuals do.** Ethical individuals who fail to distinguish themselves from their responsibilities as leaders run the risk of making the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons. Where they do distinguish, ethical leaders are empowered to make decisions as leaders, free from the temptation of multiple identities, justifications, and the confusion of actions with intentions.

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