

BEYOND BENEFIT AND OUT OF ITSELF: WHY ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IS NOT AN END IN ITSELF

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It is not uncommon when weighing a decision to wonder what benefit you may gain from choosing one way or the other.

When organizations contemplate a transformation, the obvious question is why and what for? Or, when clients seek advice from business coaches, they frequently ask the question what benefits a change in behavior will bring about. And, not surprisingly, when corporations invest a considerable amount of money into leadership development, the likely questions circle around what strategic goals are being supported by the investment and, again, what benefit is substantiated.

The premise behind these questions is legitimate and makes perfect sense. In ethics, such questions are called *teleological*, as they are concerned with the direction, cause, and purpose of an activity or process. However, such reasoning has its limitations and is not far-reaching. Here is why.

Being ethical has a metaphysical dimension as well.

This line of questioning, certainly in business cultures, can be boiled down to *materialist reasoning*. An action bears its merit when it stabilizes market share, drives innovation, retains talent, resolves some sort of business conundrum, or some additional way that boosts the business's bottom line. Most leadership approaches are obsessively concerned with the pragmatic—some sort of toolbox or specific framework that can be transferred into palpable action. This becomes evident when reading articles on leadership; the commentaries most often end with an enumeration of bullets that are concise, easy to grasp, and benefit-oriented.

Mind you, though, that such approaches have their limitations. Leading with an ethical approach to decision-making, contrary to concentrating on bottom line benefit, takes a viewpoint that extends beyond this type of reasoning. For example, doing the right thing, running a meaningful organization, and speaking up when it matters most are not ends in themselves. Rather, they follow principles of morality and fairness.

Being ethical has a metaphysical dimension as well. It is this aspect that guards those who pursue ethical leadership against becoming a morality clown or a values-ridden nuisance. Being ethical frequently entails showing moral courage, speaking truth to power, swimming against the tide, and making decisions that do not necessarily increase benefit, but are an *ethical necessity*. And because of the moral courage shown, these leaders are able to create a more positive business environment—and as such, receive a *return on ethics*.

Drawing from some historic and more recent instances, note these examples of decisions made from an ethical stance rather than for material or personal benefit.

ENDEAVOURING TO ELIMINATE EVIL

While it may be extreme, the example of Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg's attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler shows just what is meant to act out of ethical necessity. The colonel's actions certainly didn't bring about any personal benefit or serve some materialist reason—quite the opposite, as he and his three co-conspirators were assassinated. However, Stauffenberg's cause was by no means merely a pragmatic one.

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MENDING A SOCIETAL RUPTURE

Another example drawn from world leaders involves former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand's sincere apology to the Muslim community following the massacre of 51 believers in Christchurch in 2019. Wearing a hijab to pay her profound respect, her genuine gesture of sorrow and respect was heartfelt and certainly no end in itself.

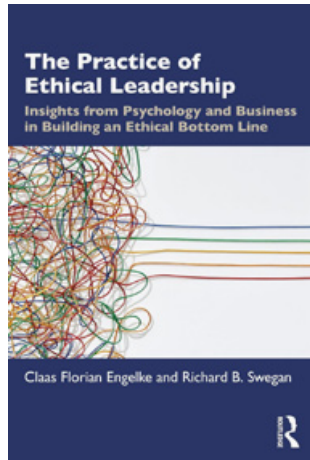
EXPOSING DECEPTION AND FRAUD

When medical research professor John Ioannidis, professor of clinical biochemistry Eleftherios Diamandis, along with investigative journalist John Carreyrou of *The Wall Street Journal* challenged the validity of medtech startup Theranos's blood testing technology in 2015, their confrontation subsequently led to the downfall of this exceedingly fraudulent organization. Its founder, Elizabeth Holmes, was handed a 135-month prison sentence for defrauding investors out of hundreds of millions of dollars. Their motivation came primarily from their inner ethical compass that transcends any personal or professional benefit—no end in itself and certainly not just pragmatism.

As leaders consider moving toward adopting more ethics-based practices for their organizations, such as sustainable energy generation and DE&I policies, they will find themselves moving in the direction of ethical decision-making. Instead of asking what will be the material benefit of each decision, they will begin to embrace the reason behind the reason—a way to steer their organization beyond the solely pragmatic and instead toward ensuring that what they do is foremost responsible and ethical. **A solid bottom line will follow. It should, however, not be the primary goal, and, essentially, just another end in itself.** 📌



Info



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