LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Engaging Leadership

Administrative Ethics

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There are some who would immediately say that the title of this column is an oxymoron. Their sense is that demonstrating ethics in decision-making and being an administrator in a titled leadership role are incompatible and that administrators seldom act in an ethical manner. This column counters that position by proposing that ethics are an important part of being a good leader but that one may have to look at things differently when one is a leader and the definition of ethical conduct shifts.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is Lord Acton's widely recognized warning which is frequently applied to any in a leadership position. The truth is that there ARE some bad, even toxic leaders who become managers more for the power and status and create situations where this statement is sadly quite accurate. In a recent ALA conference program, the speaker, Karol M. Wasylyshyn, spoke on toxic leaders and the show of hands on the number of attendees who had experienced true toxic leadership was saddening. However, there are many leaders, managers, and administrators who are working hard to be good leaders and struggle to do "the right thing" when faced with making decisions in challenging issues in an ethical manner. However, an understanding and appreciation for what is the best decision to make may be different for a manager than it is for a front line staff member. This is how ethical disconnects occur, when leaders and individuals disagree on what is "the right thing" to have done.

Inevitably, a manager or administrator must consider what actions to take when ethical clashes are unavoidable. Ethics are often embedded in an individual's personal value system. As discussed in prior columns about leadership decision making, many decisions will not have a simple right or wrong answer. This is particularly the case when the issue has embedded ethical components which may be nuanced by a multitude of factors. The higher a leader goes within an organization, the more exposure one gets to these complexities and systemic impact factors. As a result of this, there are going to be occasions where front line employees and administrators disagree about a decision with the front line employee or even the middle manager questioning or even challenging the ethics behind the administrative decision. Unfortunately, allegations of ethical violations or deficiencies can easily trigger a highly emotional, defensive, and personalized response from an administrator. When this personalized response is combined with a leader who tends to default to an authoritarian administrative style, it is a formula for escalating conflict. Even those administrators who tend to support organizational and process transparency can be tripped up and stumble when their ethics are challenged. Consequently, as ethical conduct is a component of one's personal value system, getting to the point of agreeing to disagree or compromise while still maintaining a

level of mutual respect can be very difficult. How an administrator responds to this challenge through engagement will significantly impact the culture and climate of the organization.

BIG PICTURE DECISION MAKING

Attributed to a variety of ancient as well as popular culture references, such as *Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*, the concept of the needs of the larger group outweighing the needs of the individual is a key part of defining leadership and yet often contributes to the core conflicts between leaders and operational staff. When one is on the front lines, one is usually focused on short-term individual accomplishments and success within a specific area of responsibility. For senior staff or middle managers, this may include acting as an advocate for your needs, areas of responsibility, and the needs of the specific users you serve most closely. There is not a librarian or middle manager who has not at one time or another, said in frustration "well if I ran things, of course I would have supported [fill-in-the-blank] or done it differently." Similarly, with the emphasis on teamwork, one may also have formed close relationships with peers and have difficulty looking past the collegiality or camaraderie of working with peers to impartially view their contributions to the organizational whole.

However, in taking on formal leadership roles, particularly at administrative levels, one's perspective must broaden to focus more on strategic goals and objectives than current operational details. One may have to deliberately and intentionally abandon one's role as an advocate for a particular group and adopt a neutral position where one has to balance the onslaught of advocacy from a multitude of individuals or organizational needs. This may also require one to establish new boundaries in personal relationships to avoid allegations of bias. In many environments and cultures, there can even be a "who you know" expectation that decisions will favor the past relationship. Sadly, left undiscussed, this shift in personal dynamic to establish distance for the purpose of equity is often interpreted with an emotional filter and assigned the "gone over to the dark side" context.

In an ideal world, libraries would have sufficient financial resources to buy anything users might need and plenty of staff to support extensive detailed cataloging, finding aids, circulation services, and digitization for immediate access. However we do not live in an ideal world, resources are limited and part of an administrator's role is to assign those limited resources in an ethical way that balances between maintaining currently-needed, valuable services and keeping the library positioned for future relevancy and value to the user community. Because individuals are looking for support for their specific areas and may be passionately committed to a particular position, when a leader has to make the decision in favor of one view over another, someone will not be happy. Making the decision based on a transparent process that allows for open dialogue can help diffuse the emotions of the situation but a certain amount of win/lose dynamic is unavoidable. In the most difficult scenarios, a leader has to make a choice between equally valid options that all have some aspects to recommend them. Depending on how deeply individuals have personalized getting support for their particular recommendation, strong emotional responses may be triggered with a context of anger or betrayal and disappointment or loss of confidence in the decision maker. In this scenario, effective leaders may have to go the extra mile to head off future questioning of their ethics.

There is a seductive trap in having made the best possible decision that one could, given the information one had to work from and external constraints of limited resources. Sometimes the factors that define a "best" decision may be very subtle or fall into the intuitive category and it is difficult to explain the obviously right choice. Additionally, there may be confidential information which cannot be shared but that one has incorporated into the decision. While one can acknowledge that there may have been other viable options, one has to present the actual decision with a level of confidence as uncertainty from the outset will almost always undermine the success of the initiative as other will not commit to it. That said, it is important not to go overboard in cheerleading the decision as it will exacerbate the win/loss emotions and one can even admit to it having been a challenging decision. But effective leaders need to take care not to shift into a defensive posture or be dismissive of an individual's disappointment over things not having gone their way. The manner in which one addresses the other views and follows up with individual perspectives plays a significant factor in the perception of administrative ethics.

Some administrators resent having their decision questioned, particularly if it was a difficult one, and ascribe to the model of never explaining or justifying a decision because they feel this is seen as an indication of weakness or loss of positional power. Others just do not know what to say or how much to share and end up saying nothing. However, there are several benefits to explaining one's decision making process, even if one cannot share every detail. Acknowledging that a decision was difficult and complex and speaking to the various factors that had to be weighed in the decision creates an opportunity to develop future leaders. It also helps diffuse some of the personalized resentment of the decision and demonstrates that the decision was not about the individual but incorporated the data and strategic context. Finally, it makes the administrator seem more human and engaged with employees rather than seeming distant, on a pedestal, or only engaged with institutional administrators or selected individuals. This all helps validate that one acted ethically and took multiple issues into consideration and helps maintain the relationship for future engagement on other matters.

LEADING WITH VISION

A mistake that is frequently encountered in political leadership and sometimes in organizational leadership is where someone will seek a leadership role to passionately right a particular perceived wrong or to move forward their commitment or viewpoint on a single issue. The problem is that while these individuals may succeed in pushing forward their one issue, they have not actually immersed in the full responsibilities of the role and subsequently prove to be less effective in leading other aspects of organizational culture and operational changes. Additionally, even if they have been successful in putting their agenda forward, the cost in organizational respect and personal equity may have put them in a precarious place, in terms of future ethical decision making and trust. A similar situation can develop when leaders have a strong commitment to a particular vision or focus but are unable or unwilling to explain or substantiate their views in a way that builds support and buy-in from all levels of the organization.

Toxic leaders tend to take their vision of the organizational need to the extreme and let their vision of it become the all-consuming one where the individuals who struggle with this vision are

seen as flawed and expendable. True leaders will be equally committed to their vision but also recognize that others may play a valuable role in helping to refine and even improve the vision and making it a reality. Additionally, enlightened leaders will seek to find a way to move the vision forward where the needs of most individuals can still be met for more win/win engagement and less win/lose dynamics. Sometimes, these needs will be time to better explore and understand the vision and make cultural adaptations to it. In some cases, employees may not have the skills needed to fulfill the vision and time accompanied by educational opportunities is required. These delays for a vision to be incorporated into the organizational culture can be frustrating to enthusiastic leaders. However, the manner in which one addresses the delays is a direct reflection of one's administrative ethics as an ethical leader seeks to build up and engage individuals rather than run them down.

In a similar way, with all the changes that librarianship has gone through in the past 20 years, there may be significant disconnects between the views of the titled leaders and professional librarians in an organization. The easy route is falling back on administrative or titled authority in the parental model of "because I'm in charge and I said so." But this is not effective leadership of professionals in that it forces the dissenting viewpoint into a powerless, "child" mode and actually triggers a stronger anger or despair based, tantrum style response. Instead, an ethical leader will acknowledge employees as adults and work to keep the engagement at a professional level. In the course of the dialogue, one may find some points of agreement that make the points of disagreement more tolerable. Alternately, one may find that the disagreement is not one of philosophy but of implementation. It may also be that the perception of the initial 'sound-bite version' created an inaccurate understanding. This actually happens more often than leaders realize because grand statements are worded in such a way to be catchy and aspirational to challenge the status quo and usually do not appear to have room for negotiation or situational exceptions. Dialogue can help resolve some of these disconnects in understanding and also reinforce that one is trying to act in an ethical manner. Ultimately, it may be necessary to establish that you are not going to be able to reach agreement or consensus and that the administrative decision-making authority dictates the outcome, but having gone through the efforts to engage dissenters it becomes a thoughtful administrative decision rather than an abandonment of ethics.

ETHICS ARE A JUDGMENT CALL

Though many individuals want to see them as the same thing, there is a difference between following rules and demonstrating ethical conduct and leadership. Some rules are very precise, however many rules are more vaguely written and have significant room for interpretation. For example, take a document on shared governance in an academic setting. It will probably say something to the effect of "administrators should engage with faculty when setting standards/expectations on…" In this example, "…should engage with faculty…" leaves a very broad ground for ethical interpretation. It could mean anything in a wide range of options that includes a general call for input, a straw poll of faculty opinion, an advisory committee or task force with appointed and/or elected faculty representatives, or a formal presentation to the faculty with secret ballot voting. What demonstrates a high level of administrative ethics is the transparency of the process. A task force of individuals hand-chosen by the administrator could

be perceived as a rubber stamp group. Whereas, a task force made up of a mix of appointed members and volunteers from an open call will have more of a perception of transparency. Calling for feedback on an issue and then pointing out where the feedback was incorporated, and which feedback was not used and why also provides transparency that supports a positive perception of ethical conduct.

However, the more individuals that are brought into the idea development or decision-making process the longer it may take to reach a result with more opportunity for it to take an unexpected direction or get sidetracked. Where time is a critical factor, a leader may have to trade expediency for transparency and will not have the time to engage with a large constituency. In that case, one should still seek advice from a smaller core advisory group and recognize that one is missing out on input that might make the solution better. One technique for this type of issue is to establish the framework for an idea by the deadline but leave enough details in the "To Be Determined" category that will allow for engaged participation during the implementation phase. Similarly, the more one seeks input from other or shares transparency in decision making, the more difficult it is to maintain a level of confidentiality. Some decisions in large organizations, particularly as they involve budget or personnel planning may require a level of confidentiality until decisions are finalized. In these situations, the ethical context is going to have to be provided after the decisions have been made and may require even more openness and patience on the part of the administrator.

Another aspect of judgment calls associated with being a titled leader that may contribute to questioning of ethics is the role of politics. Written under the cloud of a recent federal government shutdown, it is tempting to label all "politics" as destructive. But as featured in the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute and explained in *Reframing Organizations* by Bolman and Deal,[1] working in the political framework is just another aspect of leadership. We cannot escape it. Even a library director or university president or city manager has someone who set expectations and evaluate performance success. No one is an island unto themselves so institutional level parameters and personalities may play into decision making in a way that can be impossible to explain to the uninitiated. Understanding where one can make a difference and where one needs to step back from the fight and using one's equity effectively is an important part of being an ethical administrator. Yet it is an area that most non-administrators in an organization may not understand. For individuals who tend to an activist or advocacy style of engagement, the act of choosing deliberately and carefully when to engage or take a stand on an issue goes against their personal ethics. They will often not understand the role of emotional equity, but part of leadership development is helping individuals to realize that the Don Quixote approach of constantly tilting at windmills has a price and can undermine future success.

INVISIBLE ETHICS

Where administrative ethics often get a particularly bad reputation are those cases that involve personnel-related decisions, particularly disciplinary actions or lack thereof. By virtue of clearly written rules and the potential for subsequent lawsuits, decisions involving personnel actions cannot be made transparent to everyone in an organization. As has been mentioned in a prior column, few employees are such poor performers that everyone in the organization expects

them to be fired. Even in those cases where an employee's performance problems have been somewhat public in nature, many employees will not have seen the all behaviors and documentation that lead to disciplinary action or termination. To their viewpoint, the employee made some mistakes and was subsequently terminated. The situation becomes particularly problematic if the employee tries to lobby for support and cast himself or herself as a targeted employee by an unethical leader. Referring back to the earlier discussion about responding to challenges about one's ethical conduct, the best way to respond is to maintain one's ethical commitment to the process and treating all employees with respect. This could mean reminding the disciplined employee, and the employee's advocates, of the appropriate appeals or grievance procedures and why one is maintaining confidentiality on the issue. You can also state that due process was followed, without any further elaboration. In time, these issues will resolve themselves and employees will realize the library is not a horrible place with someone constantly being reprimanded or fired on trumped up false allegations.

Ironically, these same employees who will sympathize with an employee undergoing "arbitrary" disciplinary actions frequently tend to be the same employees who also complain about employees who appear to be allowed to perform at a poor or disruptive level without repercussions. Again, transparency of the process and employee rights can substantiate ethical leadership without going into employee performance specifics or the facts that guide the leaders action or perceived inaction. One technique is to educate all individuals, not just supervisors, on basic supervisory skills. Sometimes new supervisors or insecure leaders feel that by giving employees a better understanding of the disciplinary process, they are helping employees to "game" or abuse the system. This is a fear-based mindset akin to a course instructor being afraid to put class notes on Course Reserves for fear students will quit coming to class and lacking a basis in reality. In truth, the disciplinary and promotion processes should not be a mystery. Rather they should be clearly documented and shared for the success of all employees. This helps diffuse peer issues in disciplinary situations as employees can better understand the need for documentation and an awareness that due process does have to be followed before disciplinary action is taken.

Finally, one must be careful in how one engages with individuals because repeated personalized interactions, compromises, or trade-offs can lead to allegations of unethical favoritism. The perceived favoritism can manifest in several different ways. The most common is that a particular individual who happens to be openly supportive of the leader's vision is repeatedly given more opportunities to advance or develop. These opportunities can take the form of repeated support for new initiatives, excessive conference or travel opportunities away from the office, or even advancement into formal leadership roles without due process in considering other employees. That said, treating all individuals fairly does not mean one has to treat everyone exactly the same, but it does mean that at the end of the day, expectation standards are set and all employees are held accountable to them. Development opportunities for talented employees should be accompanied by expectations on how the organization will benefit as a whole. Perceptions of favoritism, whether intentional or not, will undermine confidence in the ethics of the administrator and can also damage the career of the individual on the receiving end. Similarly, while one's administrative advisory team needs to be in alignment with the overarching goal, surrounding oneself with individuals that adopt a passive, worshipful

mode of engagement and do not challenge one's ideas is ethically dangerous. While it might be pleasant in the short term to avoid conflict and dissension with one's advisors, in the long term it will not challenge one to think critically about one's own ideas and lead to inevitably poor decision making from not reaching solutions through a wider, more open minded approach.

REBUILDING AN ETHICAL REPUTATION

Suppose one has made some poor decision that represent ethical mistakes. It actually is not an unrealistic occurrence as great leaders are not born with all the necessary skills in place. Rather excellent leaders are created through a process of tempering, growth, and self-development. As the cliché goes, you cannot make omelets without breaking a few eggs. Similarly, one cannot grow if one never makes a mistake and has the opportunity to learn from it. That said, many individuals who work in libraries have memories like elephants and moving past those growth mistakes can be a rocky process. As referenced earlier when discussing ethical disagreements, the key to success is transparency. This means a leader must being willing to be human and openly admit to having made a mistake with ethical ramifications. It can also be effective to give insight to what one has learned from the mistake, such as next time waiting to see the data rather than anticipate what it will show, or not dismissing dissenting viewpoints, or not getting caught up in a false sense of urgency. Leaders can also admit to having made a mistake in trusting someone that subsequently stabbed them in the back. This engagement will enable one to better move on and face the next ethical dilemma older, wiser, and with a clean slate. However, if titled leaders try to hide the mistake, shift blame, or make excuses to avoid having to apologize, then these compounding errors in effective engagement and ethical leadership will serve to undermine their success so long as they stay at their institution.

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Reference

[1] Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).