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A Leader's Dilemma: Ethics versus Expediency?

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QUESTION

A colleague and I have been debating: do worthy ends ever justify questionable means? We are debating this issue in the context of being leaders who are very committed to pursuing certain goals for our community.

ANSWER

Your debate on whether the ends can justify the means is understandable. Philosophers have debated this question throughout the ages.[1] This humble column is not in a position to resolve that debate. What follows, however, is a practical analysis based on the situations leaders might face that might cause them to ponder this question.

Defining Terms

Wanting to make good things happen within one's organization and community is indeed a worthy end. The question is whether everyone in the community is in agreement on whether a particular result is a worthy end or alternatively, the most worthy goal to be pursuing at this time. In a democracy, there are various processes (for example, elections) that allow the community to weigh in on this question.

Typically, "questionable" means are means that conflict with one's core values. Core values typically include such values as trustworthiness,

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fairness, respect, and responsibility.[2] Examples of questionable means are those that are dishonest, unfair, or at odds with one's responsibility to pursue the public's interests.

Challenges along the Path to Leadership

Often making a difference (the worthy end) requires being in a position of influence. For elected officials, this means getting elected. For staff, it means getting hired or rising through the ranks.

There can be many temptations along the path to getting into positions of influence. For example, it can be tempting to misrepresent one's own qualifications or accomplishments. Such misrepresentations would be inconsistent with the fundamental values of honesty and trustworthiness. So would misrepresenting the qualifications of one's rivals. To be sure, such misrepresentations are expedient—they help one pursue a goal of achieving a certain position—but they aren't ethical.

A more difficult dilemma can occur when one is asked to make certain commitments to those who are in a position to help one achieve a certain position. If these commitments jibe with one's own sense of what's best, no problem. But what if they don't? What if the commitment involves compromising one's beliefs?

It can be tempting to compromise (sometimes telling oneself "it's just this once") in order to get to the position where one can make those good things happen. One can tell oneself that this worthy end justifies the compromise.

A Case Story about Steadfast Adherence to Values

The hazards of such a rationalization are illustrated by a true story involving a man and his ambitions. In the early 1970s, a young man found himself vying for the position of chief executive of an important organization—a position he very much wanted to occupy.

This young man was asked by a politically powerful faction within the organization to make a certain commitment. The commitment wasn't to do anything improper or unethical, but it nonetheless conflicted with the young man's sense of what would be best for the organization (in fact, he worried that if he agreed to the group's demand, it would divide and damage the organization's effectiveness).

The faction threatened to block his appointment if he refused to go along. He declined to do so. He still got the position.

This story illustrates a number of dynamics. First, what would have happened if that young man had yielded to the group's demand? First, he would have compromised his values—his responsibility to do what he felt would be best for the organization. Responsibility is a core ethical value.

Second, he would have created a situation in which he was potentially working in an organization that was not aligned with his values. More practically, he may have bought into a situation that he believed would have made his job much harder. Finally, he would have signaled to the group (and others) that getting (and keeping) the position was more important than his values. From that point on, the group and others would know that the threat of losing the position would be a key leverage point that they could exploit. They would have the ultimate power and he would not. If one wants to be a leader, it's very hard to lead under these circumstances

Leadership and Commitment to Values

The time to be concerned is when one knows that one is being unfaithful to one's core values. Identifying a worthwhile end usually is part of a rationalization to justify the compromise. The conversation in one's mind usually goes something like "If I don't do X (something inconsistent with one's values), I won't be able to do Y (a worthy end)."

Coalition Building and Commitment to Values

Of course in political contexts, getting and keeping a position frequently involves building and maintaining coalitions. As civic maven John Gardner noted in his book *On Leadership*, reconciling diverse perspectives and purposes is a key task of a leader.[3] He notes that leaders and governmental processes, when functioning at their best, involve a knitting together of diverse perspectives that achieve shared purposes and values.[4] Compromise, particularly on positions, can be a part of that process.

The key to the success of those coalitions is for them to be based on shared values (which then are likely to result in shared positions, but not always). A strength of these coalitions is that people who have a strong allegiance to core values respect others who operate according to their values, even when there's a disagreement about how those values should apply in a given situation.

One's values and beliefs are one's compass; in fact they represent the "true north" on that compass. Once one starts compromising those values and beliefs, even to achieve a worthy end, one loses that true north. One becomes a follower as opposed to a leader. As such, the ability to achieve those worthy ends could be severely compromised.

What would have happened if the young man had *not* gotten the job? For someone who wanted to lead the organization according to his own compass, it would have been for the best. If getting a position requires you to compromise your values, a reasonable question is whether the position is the right one for you. If the people who control whether you

get or keep the position have values that are out of synch with your own, then you are consigning yourself to an ongoing conflict that realistically you are not likely to win.

What was the dynamic that allowed the young man to get the job? He explained to the group that, should he get the job, his key goal was to unite the organization behind a common goal that they all agreed was a worthwhile aspiration. That's what leaders do. He found a common goal and value that everyone could agree to, at least to enough of an extent that the group didn't block his appointment. He didn't have to compromise his values in order to achieve his goals. He went on to successfully lead the organization for decades.

A Leadership Strategy

Gardner notes that leaders put heavy emphasis on vision, values and motivation.[5] That's what the young man in the story did: he encouraged the group to think beyond their *position* that something should happen to think in terms of a shared vision of the organization's effectiveness and appealing to a shared sense of responsibility for that effectiveness. This avoided the need for him to compromise on his own sense of what would be best for the organization.

Thinking in terms of core values—those with which most agree—can be an effective leadership strategy that reduces pressures to engage in end-justify-the-means thinking.

To be sure, this is hard work. And it is important to be realistic that leaders will not always be successful in the effort to encourage competing factions to find common ground. In the end, a leader/decision-maker will have to make a decision on what's best for the community and be prepared for powerful interests to perhaps disagree. This of course, is the essence of leadership

Other Applications of the Principle

This column has analyzed other applications of the principle that potentially worthy ends don't justify questionable means. For example:

- A public official cannot vote on a matter—even one that would accomplish great things for a community—if the official has either financial or other interests that might cause the public to question what motivates the official's decision. (www.ca-ilg.org/abstentions, www.ca-ilg.org/owningproperty, www.ca-ilg.org/bias)

- Even though a ballot measure may greatly help or hurt a community, it's not okay to use public resources to advocate for or against ballot measures (www.ca-ilg.org/vargas).

- There are legal and ethical restrictions on the degree to which one can use one's position as a public official to help nonprofits with which one is involved. This is the case even though nonprofits pursue worthy ends. (www.ca-ilg.org/nonprofits).

- Vote-trading is a crime because even though one gets a vote for a worthy objective, one has to do so by possibly not voting one's best judgment on another measure (www.ca-ilg.org/votetrading).

These contexts illustrate another dynamic. Sometimes the "end" that is important isn't a specific governmental decision or result. Instead the worthy end is for the public to have confidence that public officials are making decisions the right way.

Conclusion

In short, leaders have a choice between two philosophies.

1. One philosophy holds that the means one uses to pursue one's goals matters. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that leaders need to use means as pure as the ends sought. They also believed that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends.

2. By contrast, a central theory of Niccolo Machiavelli's book *The Prince*[6] is that the ends justify the means in political life. That theory leads him to the conclusion that leaders must be willing to use even what might be considered evil means to maintain their authority and power.[7]

Fundamentally, the question is what kind of leader one wants to be *and* what kind of leader people in the community are willing to entrust with power and authority. Is it just about getting good things done or does *how* things get done matter?

This piece originally ran in *Western City* Magazine and is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) Ethics Project, which offers resources on public service ethics for local officials. For more information, visit www.ca-ilg.org/trust.

Endnotes:

[1] *See, for example*, the contrast between deontological ethics and consequentialist ethics analyzed in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/.

[2] Rushworth Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices* (Fireside 1995).

[3] John Gardner, *On Leadership* (Free Press 1990) at 97.

[4] *Id.* at 102.

[5] *Id.* at 4.

[6] Published first in 1532 and available at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm.

[7] *See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Niccolò Machiavelli, first published Tue Sep 13, 2005; substantive revision Tue Sep 8, 2009, available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/machiavelli/.