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Leadership, Identity and Ethics

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This special issue of *Journal of Business Ethics* focuses on the interactions between leadership, ethics and identity. A substantial literature is developing centered on ethics and morality in work organizations. In recent times, critical attention has focused on how identities are best conceived and researched, the discursive resources that are drawn on in processes of identity construction, and how identities are embedded in relations of power. A much larger and longer established management and organization studies literature exists which has theorized and explored empirically aspects of leadership. However, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to how notions of 'leadership', 'ethics' and 'identity' are connected conceptually or in practice. This is an important gap that our special issue seeks to address. In studying how ethics are embedded in leadership and identity issues we hope to gain a better understanding of basic sensemaking practices of organizational actors involved in 'leading' and 'following' and of how identity issues are bound-up with the desire to become a leader, the style that a leader adopts, influence strategies used, and use of power. In this issue we aim equally at scholars whose principal interest is 'ethics and leadership', 'ethics and identity' and 'identity and leadership'.

Leadership, Ethics and Identity

In the face of ongoing revelations about misbehavior in organizations by both workers (Brown 2000, 2005; Greenberg 1990) and leaders (Ashforth 1994; Eubanks, et al., 2010; Mumford et al., 2007, 2008; Tepper 2000), and by corporate actors (Brown 2004; Donaldson 1989) and politicians (Brown & Jones 2000) there is a continuing need to reappraise the agenda for research on ethics and identities. Perhaps surprisingly, relatively little of the huge

volume of extant work on unethical, 'dark side' and mis-behavior in and around organizations has centered on identity issues. Further work is required on how situated actors draw on local discourses regarding ethics in order to construct their selves and their organizations as 'right', 'proper' and 'appropriate' (Kornberger & Brown 2007). In some ways most importantly of all, there is a need for fine grained and nuanced studies of how ethical identities, individual and collective, are constructed within relations, and are effects of, power (Brown 2006; Foucault 1977; Ybema et al. 2009).

Leadership is intrinsically bound up with questions of ethics. Leaders' aspirations, relationships to others, day-to-day practices, decisions and behaviors have all been shown to have a moral component. We know that leaders can commit unethical acts either intentionally or unintentionally (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Mumford, et al., 2007; Mumford, et al., 2008), but outstanding questions remain as to the role of identity in decisions that are made. Exploring these issues may include delving into leaders' early life and early career experiences in the formation of identity (Ligon et al., 2008) or, instead, studying leadership theories and training sessions as attempts to shape, regulate, and control managers' identities as ethical beings (Waples et al., 2008). We may also explore leadership identity from an interactional point of view. Self-identity research indicates that leaders with strong relational identities place a high value on the relationships formed with followers. Exchange quality becomes important to these individuals because their self worth is dependent on successfully meeting the standards set by followers (Andersen & Chen, 2002).

Leaders tend to move away from past identities and invest heavily in future identities (Ybema, 2010), embracing 'postalgic' notions such as 'mission' or 'vision' (implicitly seeing themselves as 'missionaries' or charismatic 'visionaries') or 'planning' and 'forecasting' (seeing themselves as rationally planning actors) (Ybema, 2004). Future research should explore when leaders form their identity as impacted by individual differences and how they

might progress from one identity stage to the next. Additional research is still also necessary as to how individuals form a particular type of identity over another (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Understanding the relationship between identity and leadership can help us to understand individuals' development and future behaviors as a leader. Exploring the contextual variables can help explain how a leader may form an identity type (Karp & Helgo, 2008). Finally, understanding the role of the follower in identity formation of the leader is an important avenue for exploration.

Special Issue Papers

Unal, Warren and Chen (2012) offer an analysis of the normative foundations of unethical supervision in organizations. Their review of current literature suggests that it is deficient in three respects: it is reliant on intuitive assumptions, exhibits confusion between unethical and lack of ethical supervisor behaviors, and is in need of an overall integrative framework that can be used to classify, compare and distinguish different types of unethical behavior. In response, the authors derive ethical standards for analyzing and measuring destructive supervision and work towards providing means of measuring the 'dark side' of supervision. They then proceed to show how a normatively-based framework of unethical supervision may facilitate generative research and practical means of reducing unethical behaviors by supervisors and minimizing its consequences.

An empirical study by Avey, et al., (this issue) used a sample of 845 working adults to answer questions about ethical leadership and positive employee outcomes. The results indicated that ethical leadership was related to psychological well-being and job satisfaction for employees. Further, employee voice mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and psychological well-being. There was an additional mediation relationship found between ethical leadership and job satisfaction. This research provides a first step in demonstrating a relationship between ethical leadership and employee psychological well-being and job

satisfaction levels. This study supports the idea that ethical leadership affects employee well-being by encouraging employees to voice concerns. Finally the mediating role of psychological ownership between ethical leadership and job satisfaction was identified.

Den Hartog and Belschak (this issue) take an integrative approach to answering leadership questions by looking at the role of work engagement and Machiavellianism in the ethical leadership process. This two-study based empirical paper first tests a model that work engagement acts as a mediator between ethical leadership and employee initiative as well as counterproductive behavior. The second study adds Machiavellianism into the model. The results of this study indicate that the effects of ethical leader behavior on engagement are weaker when ethical leaders are high compared to low levels of Machiavellianism. In essence, when employees perceive their leaders to be acting in an ethical manner, employees reported enhanced work engagement. In turn, these more engaged employees demonstrated more personal initiative and less counterproductive behavior. Results also demonstrate that Machiavellians seem to be able to act out ethical leader behaviors if it is perceived to be of benefit to them.

Following in the ethical decision making (EDM) tradition, Thiel et al., (this issue) argue that there is need to pay due regard to how leaders construct ethical issues. Their solution is to adopt a 'sensemaking ' approach that leads to a focus on the fluid and transitional nature of contemporary organizations and their complex environments. The contribution their paper makes is to specify four trainable strategies which can assist leaders to make sense effectively of their environments and to compensate for constraints on their ethical decision making. Organizations, they suggest, should proactively develop leaders' sensemaking skills so that they can better understand and enact ethical decisions. Koning and Waistell (this issue) analyze the narration of identities and ethics through metaphor by business leaders who re-author themselves as moral beings after a religious

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conversion. Koning and Waistell's study does so in an unusual and interesting empirical setting, focusing on ethnic Chinese business leaders in Indonesia who converted to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity. The owner-manager they single out in their case analysis, bifurcates his identity before and after an epiphany, juxtaposing his aspirational, born-again self vis-à-vis his former self in terms of light versus dark, active versus passive, clean versus dirty, and right versus wrong. Through the use of such metaphors as 'the right road', 'in the hands of God', and 'head of the family', their protagonist uses the ethical cleansing or purification for moral inspiration and certification of his business and his identity as a business leader. This paper furthers an understanding of ethical leadership as a time- and context-bound process in which managers aspire to an identity as ethical leaders within a corruptive business context.

Final Thoughts

We hope that the papers in this special issue provide a further understanding of leadership, ethics, and identity. The papers take different approaches in addressing this topic and we feel that is a strength of the special issue. The majority of papers focus on the relationship between leadership and ethics. While these pieces have certainly contributed to the literature, a further exploration of the role of identity and ethics is still warranted. Therefore, we encourage researchers to continue to explore this topic as we attempt to understand what allows leaders to "fall from grace", engage in counterproductive or unethical activities. In the meantime we believe that this collection of papers provides ample food for thought in considering the intersection of leadership, ethics, and identity.

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