Ethical Leadership Communications

RITA LINJUAN MEN, PH.D.

MISSISSIPPI
ALLIANCE
of NONPROFITS
AND PHILANTHROPY

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

Rita Linjuan Men, Ph.D.

Does ethical leadership communication engage employees?

The simple answer is—**YES**! But how? Leadership is a nested influence in an organization that affects organizational culture, structures, communication climates, systems, and the attitudes and behaviors of employees. Many effective leadership behaviors and styles have ethical elements; for instance, *authentic* leadership involves a positive moral perspective that guides decision-making, like honesty, altruism, kindness, fair treatment, accountability, and optimism. *Transformational* leadership is inspiring, stimulating, visionary, and empowering, which also has an ethical indication. However, ethical leadership does not involve just these elements.

According to leadership and applied psychology researchers, the definition of ethical leadership has seven distinct dimensions: fair treatment, power sharing, role clarification, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability (Kalshoven, Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2011). In *fair treatment*, ethical leaders act with integrity and treat others fairly without favoritism. They also do not avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Ethical leaders who practice *power sharing* give followers a role in decision-making and listen to their opinions and concerns. Ethical leaders who practice *role clarification* are transparent and communicate openly to make responsibilities, expectations, and performance roles clear. Leaders who practice *people orientation* genuinely show care, respect, and support to followers. They also meet their needs. *Integrity* is demonstrated by leaders who fulfill their promises and behave consistently. *Ethical guidance* refers to how leaders communicate ethics, explain ethical rules, and promote and reward ethical conduct among employees. Finally, *concern for sustainability* covers environmental orientation. It looks at how leaders pay attention to sustainability issues, consider the effect of their actions beyond their self-interests and the scope of their own workgroup, and care for the welfare of society. So ethical leadership does not just refer to leaders who behave ethically, but rather, it's reflected in the way leaders treat their employees.

Then *does ethical leadership really matter? Does it influence only ethics-related behaviors or more outcomes? How does ethical leadership communication affect employee engagement, especially?* To answer these questions, I surveyed 545 employees who work for various medium-sized and large corporations in the U.S. in my recent study, which was supported by

the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. Below are some of the major findings:

1) **Ethical leaders are considered to be credible by employees.** Leaders who treat employees with integrity and fairness are considered trustworthy. Also, leaders who are clear about roles, expectations, responsibilities, and goals show that they are knowledgeable, which makes them credible as leaders. In addition, ethical leaders who are environmentally aware and act on a social conscience are interested in issues beyond their own, making them trustworthy.

2) **Ethical leadership works with a two-way, balanced system of symmetrical communication.** Some ethical leadership elements, like employee-centeredness, caring, and empowering behavior, describe J. Grunig's idea of symmetrical communication, which focuses on the balance of power and interests, collaboration, relationships, and non-manipulation. In addition, ethical leaders fulfill their promises, take on responsibilities, and are altruistic. They act as moral role models and promote an ethical and positive work environment in an organization by rewarding ethical behavior and by setting ethical guidelines. This kind of leadership nurtures the inherently ethical symmetrical communication system in a safe context.

3) **Ethical leadership communication encourages employee engagement.** Engaged employees make a huge difference in an organization. Employees generally feel trusted, cared for, and experience genuine concern when they are managed by ethical leaders. Thus, they tend to respond by focusing on their work, being proud of and optimistic about the organization, and by being willing to go beyond their duties. Also, employees who are managed by leaders that reward ethical behavior, clarify ethical guidelines, and show concern for sustainability issues often feel positive toward the organization. The halo effect makes employees engaged too.

What can organizations learn from these findings? In a recent article published in the Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations, Dr. Bruce Berger pointed out the disconnect between what leaders know and what they do. Doing the right things definitely does not come without problems, but the returns are worth the efforts. As a summary, here is a checklist of what ethical leaders should do based on my research.

1. **Be fair.** Treat employees fairly, do not practice favoritism, and do not hold employees accountable for things they should not be responsible for.

2. **Empower employees.** Give opportunities for employees to join in organizational decision-making and to express their opinions, concerns, and feelings.

3. **Clarify roles**. Be crystal clear about what you expect from employees, including their performance levels, responsibilities, and boundaries.

4. **Genuinely care**. Show respect, support, care, understanding, and compassion. Make employees feel included and appreciated.

5. **Be accountable.** Always deliver on what you promise, be consistent in what you say and do, and be accountable for your words and actions.

6. **Give ethical guidance**. Lead by example, explain ethical standards clearly, and promote and reward ethical conduct among employees.

7. **Be environmental-friendly.** Pay attention to sustainability issues, consider the effect of your actions beyond yourself or the interests of the organization, and care for the welfare of the society.

Rita Linjuan Men, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of public relations at Southern Methodist University and the Research Editor for the Institute for Public Relations' Organizational Communication Research Center.