

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

August 1, 2013

The “Moral” Dimension of Leadership

by Dr. Mike Armour

When we were youngsters, adults commonly read us stories which had a moral to them. The moral gave us some insight into life and how we should pursue it.

In adulthood we continue to learn in a similar fashion. Think of how many stories are told by motivational speakers. And most of these stories, including the jokes, have some implied or explicit practical application, some moral for us to reflect on.

In a sense, motivational speakers are continuing to ask the same question that parents and teachers posed to us so often in childhood: what's the moral of this story?

The Lost Moral Consensus

If we grew up in a religious family or community, we also learned about an additional aspect of morals. We were given a set of proscriptions to respect. It was not moral to lie, to cheat, to murder, to be inhumane, or to violate sexual mores.

At one time there was much broader agreement on the tenets of this proscriptive moral code than is true today. Relativism and pragmatism have collaborated to undercut the moral consensus that once flourished.

And this breakdown of consensus makes leadership all the more challenging. Leadership is not merely about uniting people around a shared vision. It is also about uniting them around shared values in the pursuit of that vision. Shared values, in turn, presuppose an underlying consensus on moral principles.

Two generations ago leaders did not need to go to great lengths to define shared values. They didn't have to. Workers came out of the formative experiences of childhood and education with a common moral perspective. Even when their personal conduct violated this code, people still acknowledged the tenets of the code as the proper way to live.

But that day has long since passed.

Why Morals Have Fallen Out of Fashion

Interestingly, today we talk more about “values” than about “morals.” Perhaps this stems from the proscriptive tone of classic moral codes which parents, churches, synagogues, and schools once taught with a single voice. In contemporary society, proscriptions (with

the possible exception of core prohibitions in criminal law) are increasingly viewed as quaint and antiquated.

Values, on the other hand, sound much more individualistic, more relativistic, and thus more in tune with the temper of the times. No one expects two people to value the same things. One values options. Another values structure. One values vanilla ice cream, the other chocolate.

Morals, by contrast, are normative. They set a standard for one and all.

As a result, to the contemporary ear "morals" is not a warm and fuzzy term. Ours is a world that celebrates freedom to choose our own way, to be our own person. In that context, "morals" suffers from carrying too much sense of external standards imposed upon us.

In addition, the word "morals" has atrophied in meaning. There was a time, not that long ago, when being a "moral person" was defined broadly. It embraced everything that had to do with acting honorably, responsibly, equitably, and in a manner that was above reproach. The word "morals" was so inclusive, indeed, that excessive drinking or gambling were considered moral issues.

Today things are different. In popular discourse "morals" have been reduced to the province of sexual conduct and little else. When someone is accused of being "immoral," our minds immediately picture some type of sexual impropriety.

But that's a far cry from what our parents meant when they talked about the moral of a story. The "moral of a story" is quite close to the meaning of *moralitas*, the Latin root of from which "moral" is derived.

In Latin *moralitas* referred to a "pattern of behavior" or a "proper course of action." It eventually gave us English terms like "morale," "mores," and of course, "morality."

Of these terms, "morale" has departed the farthest from the original meaning of *moralitas*. We don't think of morale as a set of guidelines for conduct, but rather as a spirit that prevails within an organization.

When we say that a group is demoralized, we are not implying that they are lacking in morals.

Yet nothing can be more demoralizing within a group than a lack of moral consensus. When we are not agreed on what is wrong and what is right, what is proper and what is not, we are unlikely to find agreement on a host of other vital matters.

Is It Time to Restore "Morals" to the Conversation?

Perhaps we have shied away from the word "morals" too long. The reason that societies and families have historically taught "moral lessons" to children is that these principles have proven their worth for generations.

Any organization is made stronger when its people are consistently moral in their conduct. And this conduct must start at the top and be modeled from the top. In a word, leaders must exemplify the moral conduct that they desire their people to practice.

I would even go so far as to say that leaders need to be "moralists" in the most non-judgmental sense of the word. I say this, knowing that I could be easily misunderstood. Some might hear me encouraging leaders to be "moralizers," preaching right and wrong on every turn.

But that's not my intent. That's why I purposefully chose the word "moralist" rather than "moralizer."

I'm using the word "moralist" as an appeal for leaders to return to the Latin concept of *moralitas* in framing their leadership role. That is, they must be known for maintaining a personal pattern of behavior that is circumspect, exemplary, and above reproach.

In addition, as a moralist, leaders should consistently and effectively spell out their convictions about proper conduct within the team. This includes not only moral behavior such as honesty and telling the truth, but other concepts embraced in the original notion of *moralitas*, such things as acting responsibly, accepting accountability, and maintaining an atmosphere of respect.

It is no longer safe to assume that people come into your organization dedicated to the standards that you consider appropriate.

As leaders we must therefore see ourselves as first-line advocates for the moral values which we want to prevail within the organization. If we ignore this duty, the group, of its own accord, will arrive at some moral consensus. And in all likelihood that consensus will not be one to our liking.

In a word, then, we are the "moral leaders" of our team, whether we recognize it or not. Our people will take some "moral" from what they see in us. We determine the moral that they learn by the way that we choose to conduct ourselves on a daily basis, by the example that we set as leaders, and through the moral values that we consistently espouse and reinforce.

© 2013, Dr. Mike Armour

This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to www.leaderperfect.com. You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.