



# IT IS THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AND ETHICS STILL MATTER

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the ages, the practice of ethical behavior and decisions are critical for every leader within every organization. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is even more crucial that leaders' study and practice ethics in their organization. Failing to do so, could in a matter of minutes, turn the wrath of the masses through social media into a firestorm of judgement that could prove disastrous for both the leader and their organizations. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture has the tools to both elevate and commend leaders in their organizations for practicing good ethics and at the same time render what was once successful organizations powerless. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and ethics still matter and must be practiced above all else.

*Keywords:* Leaders, Social Media, Ethical Behavior, Culture

## INTRODUCTION

In the 2018 film, *The Commuter*, actor Liam Neeson plays a former police officer who now commutes routinely on the Hudson line from his home to Grand Central Terminal to his job as an insurance salesman. He was just a regular face in the crowd when he is approached by a woman that he has never seen before who proposes a “hypothetical situation.” She asks him to do one “little thing” that he “is uniquely skilled for, the results of which would have consequences that he would know nothing about, but would affect one of the passengers on the train.” All he had to do was identify a passenger who did not belong on that train. His reward would be \$100,000 and he could walk away. Being a former police officer, he rightly suspects that if he identifies this passenger that something bad will happen to them; however, \$100,000 is a lot of money. He has a choice to make and it is an ethical one.

Every day we are faced with ethical dilemmas, maybe not as dramatic as this one, but one’s with consequences, good or bad, nonetheless. The culture of the 21st Century impacts each of us and the organizations where we belong. This culture along with our own experiences and beliefs helps define our ethics, morals and values that will determine our behavior in a variety of situations. In the modern, fast paced, changing, information rich, and anonymous world of the 21st Century, ethics still plays a prominent role shaping us, as leaders, and guides our organizations.

## CULTURAL IMPACT ON LEADERS

The culture of the 21st Century is driving leaders to become conformed, anonymous, and even robotic in their leadership approach. Social media has leveled the playing field of ideas and beliefs to the point that it is hard for leaders to truly ascertain what is real and what is not. Credible sources of information are hard to find. Media outlets and government spokespersons have proven to be unreliable and filled with hidden agendas. The recent 2016 Presidential election introduced all of us, regardless of political beliefs, to the idea that “fake news” is real and, unfortunately, here to stay. In today’s culture, anyone can say anything and “must be believed” even if they are proven wrong. What is up to some is down to others. What feels right,

must be right, and cannot be challenged. Everyone has a voice and if they tweet it or post it, they must be heard and listened to. After all, all of us are created equal and each of us is right as it relates to our own beliefs and moral compass – right?

Our culture empowers individuals to determine their own right and wrong and ethical positions based on how they define themselves. In many ways, we become our own standard bearer. We are allowed to not only determine our own ethics and beliefs, but also to practice them as we see fit. The 21st Century still has laws on the books throughout the world, but those laws are fast eroding as it is now acceptable for each of us to determine our own right and wrong.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *What the Dog Saw*, discusses the usefulness of profiling to help catch criminals. Despite the ability of everyone to become anyone or anonymous in the 21st Century, if they desire, there are still characteristics that define us as unique individuals. These unique characteristics give us away. Our ethics plays a major role, even today, in broadcasting to the world what we believe and how we view right and wrong. Our ethical broadcasts are viewed by our friends, family, colleagues in the workplace, and everyone who is searching for us.

Leaders are defined by their ethics just a criminal is defined by their profile. Every leader has an ethical position. Ethics is commonly defined as the knowledge of right and wrong or good and bad. Someone known to be an ethical leader is a person who makes their decisions from a consistent set of values and morals. In the 21st Century, finding ethical leaders is a challenge.

Joanne Ciulla in her book, *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, states “it’s difficult to have heroes in a world where every wart and wrinkle of a person’s life is public.” People will stumble and fail throughout their life. Being an “ethical” leader implies a person who aspires to do the right thing even if it causes pain or misfortune for themselves. People living in the 21st Century are not much different than people living in other eras, it is just it is easier to keep track of the ethical failures of leaders today. When leaders fail, we know it, often in minutes. Our culture loves to call balls and strikes and judge everyone on every decision they make. This creates an

environment for leaders where they are challenged to be ethically perfect or face the wrath of the masses.

The culture of the 21st Century would be incomplete without recognizing the pace of change being experienced by leaders and organizations. It is simply unprecedented. This creates stress and confusion for those who are chasing who they are and what defines them. Without having a strong ethical grounding, then those meaning to do the right thing may unintentionally do the wrong thing.

A lesson from the 20th Century can be applied to the 21st Century. In the 1970s, when desegregation of public schools was occurring, children began to be bused across town to culturally seek a blend of different races and to give everyone an equal opportunity for an education. On its face, this was the right and ethical thing to do. However, an unintended consequence was that it led to communities that became disconnected and separated from their local school because their children now were going across town. Over time, desegregation of public schools has proven to be ethically the right thing to do, but it was not without its fault and negative impacts. If this change occurred today, the 21st Century social media outlets would have been abuzz with tweets and posts of all the problems that were being created. On the flip side, this cultural change may have spread faster and been accomplished in less time as the ethical issues involved would have been highlighted quickly and then allowed the community to address them without the filter of main stream media. Leaders responding to change and especially those implementing change need to be resolute and ethically grounded to be able to withstand the onslaught of the culture of the 21st Century.

Finally, we are in information overload as leaders within the 21st Century culture. This places each of us on a slippery slope as we may not notice others unethical behavior let alone our own. In the book, *Blind Spots*, Max Bazerman and Ann Tenbrunsel discuss how easy it is for an ethical fail to occur by leaders in a culture overloaded with ethical dilemmas and an overabundance of advice often from the wrong people.

## CULTURAL IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS

Most organizations have a published set of organizational values or ethical positions that seek to tell the world who they are. Google takes the bold position of using the motto “Don’t be evil” as a rallying cry to its employees. It is also an underhanded statement to the world that they know better than you what is good and what is evil. It is ironic then that in the beginning of 2019, within two weeks of launching an ethics board to oversee its artificial intelligence efforts, that it shut it down as reported by Jane Wakefield of the BBC. For the company that uses an ethical stance as a motto, it apparently fears that accountability of their own ethics may be counterproductive to their business practices.

Again, it is the 21st century, and organizational ethics changes occur regularly. Is it ethical for organizations to employ illegal immigrants to work? After all, they need the work (in many cases to feed their family) and the company needs the help. It is against the law, but who is it really hurting? Or how about the organization that needs to pay a bribe to custom agents to even be able to move their product into a country. It is a monetary cost only, right?

Organizations have always struggled to be consistent with their ethical positions. However, in the 21st Century, this struggle has become more acute as decisions and choices become visible like never before. Organizations realize that in a matter of minutes their choices will become known by the world. In many ways, this creates a pressure on organizations to do the right thing. Nike and Apple have widely been criticized for assembling their products within countries that offer cheap, underage, abused and disadvantaged workers. Calling them out on their labor practices through social media has driven them to make changes so that they do not become the social media target of the masses worldwide. The question is whether or not they would have changed their practices on their own without the cultural tools of 21st Century massing against them.

## USING ETHICS TO TRANSFORM LEADERS

Leadership is often about making decisions. Therefore, leaders are judged by how they make a tough decision. Ethics when used as a tool by a leader provides both a grounding and a defense

by which a leader can justify a decision. Obtaining information to make an informed decision is often not the problem of a leader in the 21st Century. Knowing what is “truly” right and wrong is. Leaders cannot bounce inconsistently from decision to decision. Their followers will not only become confused, but also lose faith in them as a leader. They need to be able to show the world their ethics and use it a platform for showcasing who they are as a leader. Their beliefs, values, morality, and history of making ethical decisions are constantly on display. Being known as an “ethical leader” will empower and transform that person into a leader that others will follow. In contrast, failing as an ‘ethical leader” will cause the wrath of the over-connected 21st Century culture to seek to destroy them. Ethics, displayed for all, is a litmus test for every leader today. As a leader, use ethics as a strength.

## USING ETHICS TO TRANSFORM ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are made up of leaders and followers. If a leader is known by their high ethical standards, then followers who excel in an organization under the leadership of these leaders will also learn to practice and make decisions in a consistent ethical manner. Entire organizations are deemed successful in the 21st Century when they earn profits in an ethical manner. However, when people in these organizations have an ethical fail, these organizations are brutalized in our 21st Century culture.

Making a profit is not evil. However, profiting at the extreme expense of others and with zero attention to earning income from an ethical perspective is evil. Drug manufacturers often get a bad rap in the 21st Century because they are viewed as gouging low income individuals with excessive drug costs. Their defense is that it takes a lot of capital and risk to successfully develop a new wonder drug. And it does. However, doing the right thing and practicing from an ethical perspective would mean that the company would set its drug prices in a consistent manner that protects their interests and shareholders along with the customers they serve. Strive to practice good ethical behavior for your shareholders, employees and customers. Our culture demands this.

Another example occurs during times of natural disasters when gas stations notoriously raise prices to profit in the near term over customers in a desperate situation. Laws had to be passed to “force” ethical behavior onto them. In addition, media outlets often broadcast live to call out the evil practices and ethical violations of individual gas station owners. These stories can quickly go “viral” and spread throughout social media shaming an organization to change.

Positive motivation to practice in an ethical manner has always been a common practice for organizations. However, in the 21st Century, fear of extreme repercussions through a social media attack for an ethical failure is transforming organizations to practice a consistent good and ethical manner. Organizations simply cannot afford a public’s wrath that would summarily come about from a discovered ethical failure. Practice solid ethics and your organization can thrive in the 21st Century.

## CONCLUSION

Ethics plays a crucial role for leaders and organizations in the 21st Century culture. It serves to protect and provide a foundation for leaders to build lasting organizations. With leaders and organizations being bombarded with information, change, and challenges, it is even more critical that leaders stay grounded in solid ethical practices so that they and their organizations will be successful. For those that have their failed ethical decisions played out in the social media landscape of the 21st Century, they will find that judgement will be swift and devastating. Commit as a leader to practice from a solid ethical perspective for the success of both you and your organization.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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