

# The Ethics of Leadership Power

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*In her speech at the Golden Globe Awards on 8 January 2017, Meryl Streep did not mention the US President-elect's name, nor did she mention ethics. But the issue she addressed so effectively was the ethics of power.*



**T**he increased power and authority that comes with a leadership position allows leaders to have a greater influence on others, whether by means of decisions, policies or strategy. The higher visibility that generally accompanies a leadership role enables them, as role models, to have an impact on an even wider audience than their direct followers, influencing employees across the organisation or citizens in the country. This effectively makes leaders a very powerful force as regards ethics, either creating an ethical culture, or condoning or modelling behaviour that undermines an ethical culture.

## **The ethics of power**

It is, therefore, pertinent to clarify what constitutes the ethics of leadership power. The view that "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is not new; in fact, it was first written in April 1887 by Lord Acton, the English historian, politician and writer.

Instances where the abuse of power has led to corruption are extensive, occurring in both the public and private sectors. A local example is contained in the previous Public Protector's State of Capture Report about 'alleged improper and unethical conduct

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by the President and other state functionaries relating to alleged improper relationships and involvement of the Gupta family ...'. Michela Wrong's book, *It's Our Turn to Eat*, provides an account of pervasive government corruption in Kenya, with political power used for the benefit of the leader's family and tribe. In South Korea the president, Park Gun-hye, is part of a growing corruption scandal, accused of being complicit in a scheme to pressure big companies to donate millions of dollars to funds controlled by a close friend.

What these examples illustrate is a crucial factor that defines the ethics of power. For power to be considered ethical, it needs to be exercised for the benefit of all affected parties - not just for the leader in power and a select few favourites.

Ironically, there are many instances when leaders who became guilty of grave abuses of power initially gained power through traits and actions that advanced the interests of others, such as empathy, openness, collaboration, fairness and sharing. Dacher Keltner, author of the October 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, 'Don't Let Power Corrupt You', acknowledges this 'paradox of power' whereby the finer qualities at the start tend to fade once leaders attain positions of power and privilege.

But Lord Acton's statement does not imply that power always corrupts: rather that it *tends* to corrupt. In other words, it's not a given. It can be avoided.

#### The imperative for ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is the perfect antidote to the trap of the abuse of power. Servant leadership<sup>1</sup> reflects an ethical leadership approach that specifically supports the beneficial outcome of leadership for others. The servant leader focuses on sharing power, putting the needs of others first and helping people develop – on using the power of leadership to serve their followers. This contrasts starkly with leadership that is characterised by the pursuit of untrammelled power and self-enrichment.

The importance of ethical leadership has also been given a great boost in King IV™ Report<sup>2</sup>, not least by the definition of corporate governance as being 'about the exercise of ethical and effective leadership by the governing body'.

Effectiveness has always been required of leaders. Business leaders are expected to deliver sound, sustainable results, and political leaders are expected to ensure service delivery to their constituencies. But the combination of ethical and effective is noteworthy as it combines the 'what' and the 'how'. It ensures that the pursuit of effectiveness is guided by ethical principles and conduct.

The imperative for ethical leadership lies not only in its benefits, but also in the consequences of the abuse of power. The results can be far-reaching, especially as bad leaders (and those they benefit) have a vested interest in retaining power - so their demise is often not as quick as would be desirable. Ultimately, the abuse of leadership power can tarnish the reputations of executives or public officials, and undermine their opportunities for influence. But, until that happens and unethical leaders are removed from office, the negative consequences of the abuse of power continue to impact on others - followers, stakeholders or citizens.

The solution lies in promoting and elevating the imperative for ethical leadership in all private and public sector organisations and institutions and, importantly, in placing significantly greater value on ethical leaders who care for their people and affected stakeholders. ■



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<sup>1</sup> The phrase servant leadership was coined by Robert Greenleaf in 'The Servant as Leader', an essay that he first published in 1970.

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