

Leadership

The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Ethical Leadership

Joaquín Gómez Blanes

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JOAQUÍN GÓMEZ BLANES

How To Be a Consistent Point of Reference

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Preface

Some years ago, Stephen Covey's book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* happened to fall into my hands. I must say it stirred up great enthusiasm in me. It just so happened that in the same moment I managed to see a film that I had heard so much about, though had never taken the time to see—*Twelve Angry Men* (1957). I don't really know why, but it spontaneously came to me to observe the various scenes of the film from the perspective of Covey's book, which I had just finished reading. Perhaps it was influenced by the advice of the author who suggested that reader put each rule or habit elaborated upon in the book into practice.

A third coincidence that sprung up within a few days of all this led me to the idea of structuring a course using the material I already had in hand. I was chatting with a few friends casually after dinner and telling them about some of the movie scenes, explaining how it seemed to me indicative of the seven habits and actually explained them quite well. Some days later, one of those present that evening told me he received a call asking him to find a substitute professor for a Master's course on the social doctrine of the Church. This was something I knew very well, having read and studied many books on the topic. He said that he thought it would perhaps be a good idea to explain, in a more detailed manner, exactly the things I had been talking about just a few days earlier. I had just five days to prepare! I don't know what I was thinking, but I accepted. I ended up speaking for three hours and the audience was still interested—I realized this by the number of questions that were asked at the end of talk. The following two years I was invited to repeat the course.

And so the idea was born to structure it even better and to add more material. I managed to assemble twelve hours and began teaching a course in the School of Church Communications at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and then later to several groups of entrepreneurs and business managers, arranging it according to the ways that would satisfy their respective needs. Later I began to give this course to groups of university students and different conferences and film clubs.

Yet there remained one more desire: the intention to write these lessons down and make them available to all those who want to go further into the material. Some years ago, I began writing the first part, though on account of one thing or another the project was always temporarily shelved. Of late it has seemed that the time was right and the moment of continuing the work I started more than ten years ago had finally arrived.

I have always wanted this to be a concise text, something useful to those interested in the argument but who have little free time. So, it had to be easy to read and capable of providing some points of reflection that went a little beyond what I present in each lesson of my course. Behold the result! Of course, I do not claim that this text might be used in the place of Covey's book, for his is fundamental and something I encourage everyone to read.

Lastly, and before leaving you to the text, I would like to thank Paolo Cecilia, whose advice and suggestions have helped make this dream a reality.

Author

March 30, 2013

Chapter One: Toward a Concept of Leadership

The first chapter is the cornerstone of this entire book. I encourage the reader to go through it first as an introduction, as well as again at the end as a kind of epilogue. Some of the claims made here could be, and perhaps will be, the object of a separate book. The decision to “skim through” the various themes (as opposed to unwrap all the details) was motivated both by the largely practical nature of this text, as well as the desire to jump-start the reader’s interest in going further into certain anthropological questions that perhaps up to now, for lack of time or ignorance as to their importance, have not been taken into consideration. These pages make no other claim than to be a thought-out popular work for he or she who has little time at hand but who wants to *really* improve his or her personal leadership.

In the following chapters I frequently return to certain basic concepts that I have tried to synthesize to help the reader, knowing of course that, unfortunately, this might leave one without the fullness of each concept.

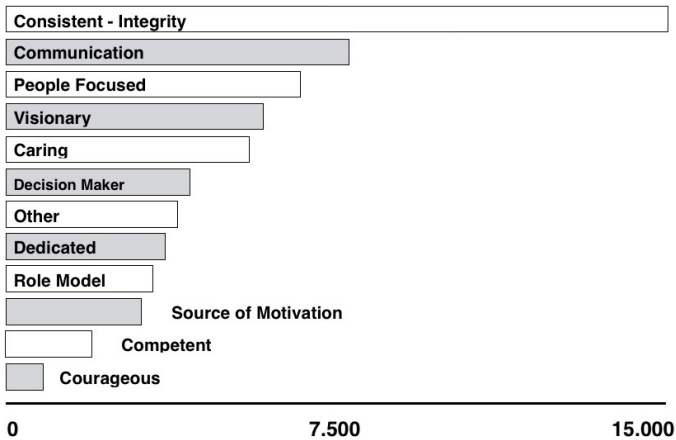
Before presenting a concept of leadership, it will be helpful to make a brief introduction of some terms that will allow us to better understand the significance of leadership. Let us begin with one meaning that perhaps is neither the most common nor the one to which most people subscribe.

1. Consistency and Leadership As Service

Imagine that one day on your way to work a person walks up to you. This person is smiling and asks you to answer a simple question: “What do you look for in a leader? What are the characteristics that, in your opinion, must never be missing in a person who directs an institution? What do you think are the main elements of leadership, what to expect from a leader?” To help you answer, this person begins to make a list: courageous, competent,

has vision, dedicated, role model, decision-maker, focuses on people, communicator, consistent...

A medieval warrior might have answered “courageous” without the slightest hesitation. Today this quality would occupy the last place among those persons interviewed by Covey.¹ Out of 54,000 answers, the winners were *leader-communicator* (nearly 9,000 replies) and *leader-consistent*, which garnered a consensus of 15,000 responses.



Behind this answer there are many things that are at least worth acknowledging. In the first place, one can affirm that to be consistent invites us to begin our discussion of leadership with *character*. Consistency – integrity² is not something one can take up today because it is in his or her interest to do so, and then tomorrow put it back on the shelf. No! To be consistent implies a way of life, beginning with a conscious *choice* (I want this lifestyle), and going forward with daily effort to truly be consistent. It is a daily exercise, an effort that must be maintained over time through all its successes and failures. To speak of forming one’s character might seem old-fashioned today, yet it is the basis of all lasting things in our lives. What is the formation that everyone receives

¹ STEPHEN R. COVEY. *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. (FreePress Book, 2013), 147.

² One is consistent only with regard to values or principles. When I add integrity to consistency I am referring to the consistency that has to do with principles. Later on we will speak about the difference between values and principles, and this distinction will become more clear.

from childhood but a daily forging of character? I would even go further and say that to not form one's character "in time" can be a determinant obstacle to one's leadership, as well as one's familial and professional life. And so it is, for changes come on slowly and take time and require consistency until they consolidate into habits. By definition, to be consistent means that over time consistency is chosen as a lifestyle, a choice that requires a continual effort to make it *habitual*, part of my *character*. I agree with those who say, "Ninety percent of all leadership failures are character failures."³

Consistency yields trust, which beyond being the key to relationships, as we shall see later, "is the fruit of the trustworthiness of both people and organizations (...) You give me trust and I return it (...) it's something shared and reciprocated between people."⁴ Other authors,⁵ speak of the *leader-servant* who judges his or her success not only according to the achievement of the result, but also on the basis of the effects of that result in those who materially collaborated to that end. That is, action produces two types of results: *objective* and *subjective*. The objective result might be considered the quantifiable benefit of an excellent publicity campaign, where on account of the measures taken one succeeds in increasing sales by twenty-five percent. Beyond this direct, objective and quantifiable effect, there is also the *subjective* effect: the people who carried out the project have changed. They have acquired new experience, and become better at what they do because they have had to tackle a new situation, in all the of the minor successes and upsets, before obtaining the final result. The next time they have to study up on how to increase the commercial quota of a certain product they will not be starting from zero, as perhaps was the case before. Now, one can count on this acquired experience. The results, then, cannot be quantifiable merely as a twenty-five percent increase.

It is the task of the leader to make those persons responsible for the sales increase better, to expand their capacity to make themselves

³ Ibid., 146.

⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁵ For example, D. ZIGARMI, K. BLANCHARD, M. O'CONNOR, and C. EDEBURN. *Essere Leader: L'importanza di conoscere se stessi per guidare gli altri*. (Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 2006). English translation under the title *The Leader Within* (2005).

useful in the future. I agree that the leader had the intuition to act in a certain way, understood what he or she would have had to do when no one else, perhaps, believed it possible. I agree that he or she succeeded in moving his or her collaborators toward a certain *vision*. But it is equally true that in order to manage this one needs to believe in his or her collaborators, trust in them, and encourage them during those periods where upsets are more visible than the desired success. A true leader must concern himself or herself with the others, be altruistic, believe in people, serve others and give of himself or herself for others. By definition, it is about being a *leader-servant*.

2. Habit and Action

The preceding idea allows us to take up another important aspect. What if the result had instead been less than expected, or even a great failure? Can I say that it was *truly, absolutely and totally unsuccessful*? Before answering this question, I would like to give an example. If you have ever competed in a sporting event, even in elementary school, you remember how victories were never attained without appropriate preparation in the days or months leading up to it. If, for example, through your training your objective was to improve your time in the 800 meter dash, before arriving at the finish line you experience small successes and failures until, day by day, the stopwatch begins to show a better time. Unfortunately, you even experience periods where, unexpectedly and for no apparent reason, without having done anything wrong, your time is just terrible. And this doesn't just happen once, but many times. What a disaster! What happened? Who has not had a moment of uncertainty before a particularly difficult undertaking? It is a part of everyone's life to have difficult moments—passing a university exam after first having failed terribly, for instance. How many times has it happened to us that we experience a series of “no's”, even for extended periods of time, before finally hearing a “yes”? Who has not experienced a “brilliant” idea only to hopefully present it to his or her boss and see it canned right away? All those hours of work that we have dedicated and then having to lay all that hope to rest... Quite often, those endured let-downs and difficulty in the moment seem to be genuine drama, but in time we learn to laugh at them: when, for example, we realize our error in thinking that

dropping over three minutes in the 800 meter dash was a question of diet, or when we simply push ourselves past our limits, or that in reality our biggest and most annoying challenge in preparing for an exam has actually proved to be essential to our jobs, or that that the job search in many areas has made us more aware and helped us understand a problem of contemporary society first hand (such as the unemployment among the youth), or has led us to get to know our boss better and so we then understand the *right way* to make proposals and advance those projects that interest us.

These examples help us understand that the upsets we live through, whether professional or in our personal lives, are never *total* successes. There is always something that helps us improve. We can always draw from these positive life lessons. We at least know what to avoid next time around if we want to have a better athletic performance, better prepare for an exam or business meeting, to convince the director to pursue a certain course of action, and so forth.

In the third part of this book we will see how optimism is fundamental both to *leadership* as well as to *management*. But in this moment the accent is placed not so much on a positive attitude as much as on the fact that it is not just the result that counts, even though this is indeed very important. Actually, insofar as I am interested in obtaining the best result, I consider the initial upsets as simply partial, as further occasions to in a real way lead me to the finish line. In addition, reaching the end in a sudden manner can very likely condition future development. Think of, for example, an unexpected election—I won, but seeing as I am not well prepared to govern, public opinion criticizes my mode of operating.

Now, let's take another step forward. I would argue that it would help us understand how the result is not the only parameter within which to keep leadership if we make the distinction between acting and doing, or the *praxis* and the *poiesis*.

1. *Acting*—means “to exercise an act”, and is focused on the *subject* who acts. It is not generic, but adds some personal act. It is “to conduct oneself, to produce an effect”.⁶ It

⁶ MERRIAM-WEBSTER Online Dictionary, “Act”. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/act>. Accessed 20 June 2013.

corresponds to the Greek term *prassi*, which is an action that bears immanent effects in the subject. Here, the emphasis is not so much on the action as it is on the one who acts, the subject. The subject is in a certain sense transformed by the action that he or she carries out. After “acting”, one becomes more capable, more efficient, more competent, more prepared, more entrepreneurial, or (unfortunately it does not always go in a positive direction) more egotistical and less trustworthy. This happens because actions follow each other, one after the other, creating a habit, a tendency to operate or act in a certain way. This is so much the reality that I habitually say of a person that he or she is capable, efficient, competent, prepared etc., for this person habitually realizes actions that qualify him or her in this sense.

2. *To Do*—means in its most universal definition “to construct, produce”. In this case, the emphasis is more on “what a person does” rather than on the person “who does” it. That is, the emphasis is on the result of his or her action. Here I am not interested in whether or not you have become more capable or better after having executed an excellent marketing strategy that has facilitated a sales increase, but that sales have indeed increased by a quarter. This is equivalent to the Greek word *poiesi*—an action that has a repercussion that is exclusively external to the subject, or the result. In this case I am not interested in the habit. I value only the action, or the obtained result.

This diagram is a schematic presentation of what has thus far been discussed.

Habit	Action
To Act: “exercise an action” Focuses on the <i>subject</i> who acts	To Do: “construct, produce” Looks at the <i>result</i> external to the subject
<i>Prassi</i> Action with immanent effects in the subject who acts	<i>Poiesi</i> Action with repercussion external to the subject

I am of the opinion that in leadership both are important and complementary. In reality, this division as seen in the diagram is purely theoretical. All we have done is divide one single action into two parts, and for pedagogical reasons. It is comparable to a doctor who speaks of a headache and increase in temperature then loss of appetite in order to explain the symptoms of the flu. It is true that normally there is great discomfort, but this is never the only symptom. Together with that pain there is also a general indisposition. To properly identify the illness, one has to isolate the various symptoms that in reality almost always occur together. If the object of study is, rather, inflation, to really grasp this concept it helps to isolate its possible causes: increase in demand, decrease in supply, or a large increase in production materials like petrol and other raw materials. It is probable that these factors might occur, and therefore influence, simultaneously or individually, the increase in inflation. After coming to know the process well, one is then interested in studying each individual cause, with the difference between acting and doing, *prassi* and *poiesi*, or habit and action in mind. These are not two different things. On the one hand there is the person, and on the other the result. Achieving the result is also transformative to one's person, as we saw before.

3. Ethics and the Process of Human Acting

Ethics is knowledge concerning the moral life as lived, and reflects on the actions of the moral life. Ethics, then, in the first place has as its point of departure personal experience, and only secondarily a reflection of practical knowledge which becomes normative for me. Let us look at a simple example. Experience tells me that I should not look for food in the trash can, rather at the supermarket. This custom then becomes normal for me and I never look for food items in the dumpster. I thereby learn what I should do: I begin with experience and this becomes a norm.

Ethics⁷ (this term comes from the Greek εθος, or “conduct”, “character”, “custom”) is the part of philosophy that studies the

⁷ This definition of ethics is taken from *Wikipedia* with some small personal modifications.

objective and rational foundations that allow us to distinguish human behavior as good, right, or morally licit with respect to behavior held to be bad, morally inappropriate, or downright illicit. One can even define ethics as the search for one or more criteria that allow the individual to adequately manage his or her own freedom.

It is often also called *moral philosophy* insofar as its object is moral values that determine human behavior.

It is custom that makes the distinction between the term “ethics” and “morality”. Even though these are often used interchangeably, one normally uses the term “morality” to mean the whole of values, norms, and customs of an individual or a certain human group. The word “ethics” is reserved for the reference to the rational intention (that is, philosophical) of founding a morality recognized as a discipline.

Ethics can be *descriptive* if it describes human behavior, or it is *normative* (or *prescriptive*) if it provides indications.

It can also be *subjective* when it deals with the subject who acts, independently from actions or intentions, and *objective* where the action is related or compared to common values and institutions.

Today one⁸ speaks of the “two radically different ways of conceiving of ethical knowledge (and the moral life):

1. The first, precisely of the order that today is called ‘first person ethics’ or even ‘virtue ethics’, holds that ethics is and must be the study of the *universal human good*, or the good of human life taken as a whole. Ethics unfolds, then, as a *discussion of different lifestyles*, of different ways of living (virtue and vice), and not of individual acts (these are secondary, even if still important). The discussion would lead to pointing a finger at that life which is best and should be desired and lived out.
2. The second ordering, called ‘third person ethics’ or ‘normative ethics’, holds that ethics is and must be the study

⁸ A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO. “L’etica come educazione del desiderio” (2004). This article is available to the public through the website www.eticapolitica.net. In a few pages, I think this is a good explanation of the role of freedom in any ethical choice.

and foundation of rules and moral norms to observe, that is, rules and norms concerning individual acts. The problem that must be addressed is not how one must live, but whether or not act x is licit. Here is a situation: 'John Doe has carried out act x —did he act well or badly? One calls this, then, 'third person ethics'. From this perspective it is not possible to investigate the ulterior desire nor lifestyle that would be desirable. The judge of another's actions (third person) judges acts, not desires.'"⁹

From this perspective of leadership and its relation to ethics, I think that a notion of third person ethics can only help us up to a certain point. It might encourage us to do or not do certain acts, not because they are *technically* perfect from the leadership point of view, but because they are licit or illicit—that is, there is a norm that permits or prohibits it. Rather, a conception of first person ethics allows me to freely make the right choice, even from the perspective of leadership, in that I maintain that making a certain choice is the *right thing*. It is in line with my principles, my lifestyle and the model that I have as my point of reference. In other words, I advance closer toward that ethical principle which guides my lifestyle.

To better grasp what has been sad thus far, two things ought to be explained: first, the distinction between the school of *character* leadership and, second, the school of *technical* leadership. The latter, according to the article cited above,¹⁰ is the anthropological process of human freedom when one makes choices.

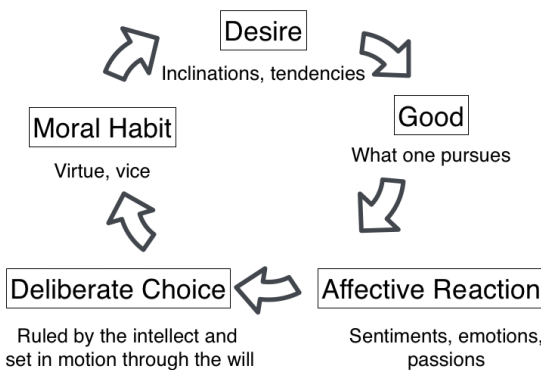
As we said before, ethics also aims to help human beings use their freedom. Morality's fundamental objective is to understand human freedom and precisely the way in which it is expressed through moral acts. The free act represents the culmination of a complex process that possesses a kind of circular quality. At least five fundamental elements can be analytically distinguished in this process.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

1. *Desire*: Here I am not referring to intentional desire, rather to simple inclinations and tendencies.
2. *The Good*: What it is that one pursues, which can be present or absent.
3. *Affective Reaction* “(sentiments, emotions, passions): a person reacts positively or negatively according to meaning (...) If the tendencies are like an impulse that exits the subject and projects itself on the world, ordering one’s pursuit and perception, emotions and sentiments that are the interior resonance of tendencies that follow from perception. The answer that comes from the world in the midst of the interrogation contained within tendency is taken in and evaluated in the emotions, or sentiments.”¹¹
4. *Deliberate Choice*: Governed by the intellect and moved by the will.
5. *Moral Habit*: (virtue or vice) This is what predisposes the subject to accomplish future acts in a sense of being positive or negative. That is, they come back into the process inasmuch as they modify inclinations and tendencies.

Even if one greatly simplifies the internal process that lies behind every human choice, the above-mentioned outline can give us an idea of the importance that education plays in our habits for the future exercise of personal freedom, in general, and leadership in particular. The following diagram is a visual representation of everything we have just discussed.



¹¹ Ibid.



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Some years ago Stephen R. Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, happened to fall into my hands. I must say it stirred up great enthusiasm. It just so happened that in the same moment I managed to see a film that I had heard so much about and yet never had taken time to see—*Twelve Angry Men* (1957). I don't really know why, but it spontaneously came to me to observe the various scenes of the film from the perspective of Covey's book, which I had just finished reading.

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