

Ethical Leadership

Conversations with Three Vermont Nonprofit Directors

Ethics are the principles, values and beliefs that define what is right and what is wrong behavior. Ethical challenges arise at all levels of leadership and in all types of organizations – for-profit, nonprofit, government – and involve a complex relationship between individual character and cultural influences. This paper will explore what this means, and how the relationship individual character and cultural influences plays out practically in organizations.

For Karen Tronsgard-Scot, the Executive Director of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence the challenges of ethical leadership are very nuanced. She said,

“I think it is almost easy to be an ethical leader at those critical points and moments when the choice between good and bad is really obvious. It is more challenging to be an ethical leader on a day-to-day basis where those decisions come down to “should I wash my coffee cup now or can I get away with leaving it in the sink for a couple of hours?” So as an ethical leader I think you have to always ask yourself, “are my decisions around ethics, are they fair, are they moral, and are they proper?” You are certainly establishing an ethical leadership pattern and pathway and examples every day in the smallest most incremental ways...”

Leaders set the moral tone for the entire organization; thus, the job of an ethical leader is to set the cultural tone and uphold shared organizational values. What we know about organizations is that a strong culture that supports high ethical standards will have a tremendous influence - not only on employee behavior but in the external community as well. Tiffany Bluemle, the Executive Director of Vermont Works for Women put it this way:

“Well it goes back to what I learned very early on which is you don’t treat people in a way in which you don’t want to be treated. Create a workplace in which you want to work....I can’t stand indirectness, so I think I have been very conscious about creating a workplace where people can talk very openly and say what they need to say...”

Phelan Fretz, Executive Director of the ECHO Center Lake Aquarium and Science Center described the process the board and staff engaged in to describe their workplace values. The values impact not only staff behavior but also their relationship to museum visitors. He said,

“...the staff went through a process with board support and defined a series of workplace values and these workplace values are really how we ethically work with each other. They are accountability, collaboration, communication and the most interesting one that came out of the process was humor. So at the end of the day we ask ourselves all the time, are you being accountable with each other? Are we really collaborating on this? Are we really being clear in our communication and then, are we having some fun with this because otherwise it is not who we want to be and I think it colors our relationship to our guests, we want them to be having fun. I think those core values have enabled us in many ways to cement what is considered ethical behavior...It has given us the framework to operate as a team.”

Each director interviewed agreed that one way to create an ethical culture in an organization is to be a visible role model. Tiffany Bluemle said,

“I don’t think much about the example I set save for wanting to be consistent and fair and thoughtful and listen well, but those are the things that all of us should do, not just the leader. But what I have the responsibility to do is to step back and make sure I create space for things that won’t naturally occur and to reflect on the big picture and how well, how consistent we are being with the values we have set. This is a piece of my job, and it is not necessarily something a program coordinator has time to do.”

Strong leaders communicate ethical expectations and institutionalize an ethical culture.

Phelan Fretz continued to discuss ECHO’s work place values,

“... when we bring in someone new, and they ask who we are it is very straightforward. These are our 4 core values of how we relate to each other and people get it right away and we can ask how they think they will relate to those core values so everyone knows what we are walking into. The difference in ECHO since we added the workplace values in addition to the institutional values...the comradely in the workplace – the change is palpable.”

Regardless of the type of organization, the size of the organization or the personal style of leadership, an ethical culture can be created. The leaders quoted in this paper have thought not only about their values and ethics, but also about means and ends. How you build an ethical organizational culture is an important as where you end up.

Karen Trongard Scot reinforced this,

“that process (of developing ethical communication standards with staff) resulted in us having opportunities to communicate outside of this worn pathway of difficult communication so we found this new way of positive reinforcement and in the end the means were the ends and that is the final ethical communication guidelines that we came up with that the means are the ends”

Tiffany Bluemle added:

“When I think about taking the long view which another organizational value we don’t judge our own success based on one program or one participant’s success, or failure. We take the long view and accept that there will be ups and downs and that success happens in a spiral not in a straight line trajectory.”

And Phelan Fretz wrapped up the discussion with the following statement,

“Anyone who is the leader of an organization you never put it away until you go away for a couple of weeks on the beach, so you are really living it all the time and that’s your role because you have got to be thinking all the time about what’s the next step, what’s the next process, and how do I stay out of the process a bit, up on my gallery and watch the process emerge and guide it. Not trying to overwhelm but guide it and it ultimately is about the mission of the organization and what my perceptions are about and where that has to grow. Now that is informed by a huge group of guests, the community, the staff and the board.”