

Community Leadership and Ethics

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Recent events in religion, business, and politics have placed ethics and governance firmly on the community agenda. Institutions and individuals that previously enjoyed widespread trust are now commencing to be subject to much closer scrutiny. Are their actions transparent and accountable? Do their decisions recognise that we are all interdependent on each other and need to consider the effect on others in the decision making process? Are they moral? Are they sustainable?

It is as a result of this type of questioning that ethics and leadership have emerged as pertinent issues across communities.

If we accept that community leadership carries a heavy responsibility to act ethically, inter alia, because of the use of public funds and the involvement of volunteers, then community leaders should be at the forefront of this movement ... ideally before they are forced to incorporate ethical decision making into all aspects of their operations by legislation.

Volunteering Qld has addressed the subject of community leadership in depth and it is not proposed to recover that ground here ... rather we will quickly consider two associated aspects of leadership ... leadership at all levels, known in some circles as empowerment, and moral courage.

It is now recognised in many quarters that decisions made in isolation and without the involvement of stakeholders, may be received with little enthusiasm and commitment. Therefore they might not be sustainable. This possibility is particularly true in the case of volunteers and honorary office holders who are giving their time, and in some cases their money, to the organisation.

Taking ethics into account has been shown to improve the quality of decision making and forward planning. Leaders making ethical decisions will often have to submerge their own egos and beliefs, submitting to the wills of others instead. They will then need to work to ensure the decision is properly implemented and given every opportunity to succeed. These actions take real moral courage and, as such, it is a rare, but highly desirable, quality if the leader is to guide the organisation to be both vital and sustainable.

This approach recognises the leader as a student, the student as a citizen, the citizen as a servant of the community, and the servant as a leader. It also precludes the emergence of a culture of paternalism.

Ethical decision making helps advance involvement and commitment, responsibility and accountability, social justice and equity and equality of opportunity. It is now recognised overseas as a vital, and fundamentally essential, component of risk management in any organisation.

A starting point for ethical decision-making is often the generation, publication and implementation of a code of conduct and/or a code of ethics. Codes of conduct are generally punitive ... thou shall not or else ... whilst codes of ethics are aspirational ... we will strive at all times

As the introduction of an ethical culture can, and often does, involve the incorporation of many aspects of change management, total commitment to the process must be demonstrated, and be seen to be demonstrated, by community leaders at all times. Paying lip service to the concept of ethics will be counterproductive.



Within the organisation areas such as free and open two-way communication, hiring procedures, decision making processes, reporting systems, dispute resolution, employee evaluation systems and safety procedures are just some of the areas that require the application of ethics.

Yet high ethical standards must be seen to apply not only throughout the organisation, but also in relation to all external stakeholders as well. Clients, suppliers, neighbours, employees' families, the local community and government at all levels must be incorporated in the ethical process also.

The foregoing considerations will place the organisation on the path to triple bottom line reporting and action. The organisation's social performance and environmental influence as well as its finances come under formal examination and evaluation. Yet how can this outcome be achieved?

Organisations moving to incorporate ethical decision making processes will often commence with an ethical audit. This audit is usually followed by a restatement of the organisation's purpose (its justification for its existence) and the commencement of an implementation program that incorporates a codes of conduct and/or code of ethics.

Many organisations actually set up an independent ethical procedures office that has direct access to the board, and normally includes a director who has expertise in professional ethics. Any employee or volunteer can refer ethical questions and doubts to this ethics office knowing that it cannot be influenced or over-ruled by anyone.

This discussion introduces a common sense approach to "doing the right thing".

As a starting point, it is worth considering the Rotary 4-way test in

relation to decisions and relationships. This test has been around for a long time but is still a valid series of questions:

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Ethics makes good sense, or in the words of Albert Einstein ...

"The most important human endeavour is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in actions give beauty and dignity to life."

