

## ethikos Volume 34, Number 1. January 01, 2020

### Moral credibility: The lynchpin of authentic leadership

---

By Frank C. Bucaro, CSP, CPAE

Frank C. Bucaro ([frank@frankbucaro.com](mailto:frank@frankbucaro.com)) is Owner, Frank C. Bucaro, LLC in Williams Bay, WI. Frank is a thought leader/speaker/trainer on Values-Based Leadership Development.

We seem to be in an era for the quest for more ethical, moral and values-based business practices and leadership development. It behooves us to take a closer look at the moral aspect of leadership as the hub rather than the spoke of the leadership “wheel” of roles and positions. For me, it all begins with moral credibility.

### Components of moral behavior

James Rest, an American psychologist specializing in moral psychology and development, has described four components of moral behavior, which for me, are the cornerstones of building one’s moral credibility.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### 1. Moral sensitivity

This means that the leader must have insight into the issue before taking action. One must first be able to spot moral issues when they present themselves. Being morally aware inherently means to be able to discern sensitive issues and take action as part of one’s decision-making to carry the process to the resolution.

#### 2. Moral judgment

Once one has recognized an ethical/moral problem, then one needs to make a thoughtful, reflective, and informed decision based on being able to give good reasons for its resolution. Possible consequences need to be part of the decision-making process as well as gauging reaction to the decision. Go slow and choose well!

#### 3. Moral motivation

Once one has recognized that an ethics issue exists, one must think through well enough the possible options. Those options need to reflect the values, behavior, and situation involved in this process. To make a good decision, two questions will still remain:

- Why do the right thing?
- How do you get yourself to do it?

#### 4. Moral character and action

One must implement the decision and put it into action; however, the basis of that decision must revolve around its purpose. The purpose needs to focus on this: *Knowing* the right thing to do and *doing* the right thing are not necessarily the same. Now what?

### Moral credibility

---

How then does one develop moral credibility? How is it manifested on the job? Moral credibility needs to embody the qualities of character, trust, empowerment, positive self-esteem, and being values-based and principle-driven. Moral credibility is modeling and instilling a balanced approach to the discerning process. This balanced approach is not emotion-based, but rather an honest approach that is values-based on a truly authentic concern for all involved.

Moral credibility is essential for the development of one's personal moral compass. It also needs to be authoritative in nature, consistently modeled, observed, and communicated in word and deed. Otherwise, you get moral hypocrisy. "Moral hypocrisy is when one's evaluations of their own moral transgressions differ substantially from their evaluations of the same transgressions committed by others."<sup>[2]</sup>

It's the old, "Don't do as I do, just do as I say" statement that destroys any credibility whatsoever.

Part of this moral hypocrisy concept is in the attitude of ethical blindness, which is the temporary inability of a decision-maker to see the ethical/moral dimension of a decision at stake. Is that "temporary inability" a choice? What perception of the leader does it send to those one leads? Keep in mind that perceptions are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves; they just are. The reality is that perceptions can determine one's attitude, and one's attitude can determine one's behavior.

## **Building credibility**

I'm reminded of the quote from Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker that states: "The culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate."<sup>[3]</sup>

This means that this type of leader has no moral credibility at all. To help in reinforcing the need for the moral credibility of leaders, here are four of what I refer to as moral obligations that leaders need to embody in order to build credibility.

### **1. Always put people first in your decision-making.**

Sounds easy but....

It has been said over and over again that, "our people are our most important asset." Do you know how they perceive their leaders? What message does the behavior of leaders send? Remember that people listen with their eyes, not their ears.

### **2. Respect individual human dignity.**

You have a right as a leader to disagree with one's behavior, but you do not have the right to challenge one's self-esteem. If you "go after" one's self-worth and self-esteem, you've just made an adversary! Always separate personhood from behavior. Disagree with behavior, but affirm self-worth!

### **3. Treat everybody fairly.**

Moral credibility applies from the top down. No exceptions. All must adhere to the same "rules." This is the purpose of mission statements and values statements. They stand for what we believe in, how we treat others, how we do our business, what the benefits to all will be, and why *all* employees are expected to model those values.

### **4. Be honest.**

If you have a short memory, always tell the truth! If honesty is what one expects of one's employees, then be honest with them. If you're not, you've damaged your credibility with your people. Now what?

## Embrace the moral spiral

The moral spiral is the reality that no decision is made in isolation and without affecting others. One thing leads to another, then another, and then another, and hence the spiral effect. As the spiral spins and one thing leads to another, there are consequences. I call these the "prices to pay" or the PTP factor. When is the best time to think about the effects of one's decision-making—before or after one makes it? Consequences, either good or bad, can go on for a long time, so choose well.

Logic tends to be that it is better to deal with a moral issue when it's first discovered and "pay the price" needed at the time. Isn't it better to treat a disease when one finds it early? Isn't being proactive to resolve it better than waiting until it develops into something that is so costly in so many ways and for so long? Which option is the most credible: Dealing with it as it happens, or procrastinating to deal with the issue and so much more than you may have counted on?

Think beyond the immediate, most accessible answer and beyond yourself. Think about who or what else could be affected by your decision. Think about the decision and its cause and effect before taking any action.

Moral leaders need:

- More confidence in values than in personalities.
- To take into consideration what others have thought and done before us.
- To understand that values don't change and need to be a constant foundation for developing credibility.
- To have the ability to face difficulty, uncertainty, or pain without being overcome by fear or intimidated by the possible consequences.
- To be able to deal with the consequences, based on the foundation of your values.

## So what's the moral of these moral credibility insights?

- Think beyond the immediate, most accessible answer and beyond yourself to think about who or what could be affected by your decision.
- Think the decision through reflectively, keeping in mind that no matter what your decision, there is always a "price to pay," (positive or negative). The choice is yours. If you can't pay, then walk away, review, re-think, and re-commit.

**1** James Rest, *Development in Judging Moral Issues* (University of Minnesota Press, 1979)

**2** Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What To Do about It* (Princeton University Press, 2012)

**3** Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker, *School Culture Rewired*, ch. 3 (ASCD, 2015)

This publication is only available to subscribers. To view all documents, please log in or purchase access.

[Purchase Login](#)