

MAY 2002

Ethics, Politics and Morality: Essential Leadership

By James Burgett

Mahatma Gandhi once said that the things that will destroy us are: politics without principle, pleasure without conscience, wealth without work, knowledge without character, business without morality, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice. If everyone would adhere to Gandhi's idea there would be no need for this article. But that isn't reality. And because it isn't reality we need to list, discuss, check off, measure, and manage what should be the overriding parameters of not only our educational responsibilities but also of our lives. Because ethical behavior, moral leadership, and political savvy are not inherited traits, we need to outline them and learn them. Because we know the Golden Rule, but fail to put it into place at all times, we need to set standards and work toward realizing them.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to talk about ethics, politics, and morality in school leadership. Maybe the most important topics of all - because without them we can't be effective educational leaders. With them, we will

be respected, remembered, and admired for not only what we accomplish, but more important, who we are.

an act but a habit." The guy's name was Aristotle. (When you write as many neat things as he did, you don't need

Ethics, politics, morality...It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that these are essential components to school leadership, and that everyone expects us to master these topics if we are to be successful.

Recently, I read a shopping list of the characteristics of leadership. There are, in fact, lots of these lists. Do you know what you always find? Honesty and integrity. And also - finding the good in others. And usually - praising improvement and encouraging coworkers to do what is right. Almost every list you read is a list of ethical behaviors and moral attitudes. It seems a no-brainer that these essential characteristics are the foundation of *successful* educational leadership.

Someone a lot smarter than me (which eliminates very few) once said, "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not

two names.) What he said seems to boil down to this - when we do what is right, we attain virtue and excellence.

I think I could end this article right here with what has already been said. Ethics and morality boil down to four words....do what is right. It IS that simple. And yet, in reality, it isn't. That brings in the third component - politics. Politics seem to compromise our attitudes and behaviors. Right and wrong become less black and white and more a shade of gray, or better yet, mud. It's not easy doing what is right when there are two or three or seven opinions of what is right. That is where the term leadership comes to play. A leader can convince, convert, compromise, explain, or justify decisions. A good leader can do the same and still end up doing what is right.

JAMES BURGETT is a the superintendent of Highland Community Schools Unit #5 and popular speaker and writer for IPA and other administrators' associations.

For purpose of our discussion, let's agree on some common definitions. Ethics can be defined as philosophy, beliefs, values, code of conduct, principles, and morals. Morality is virtue, goodness, purity, and righteousness. Politics is best characterized by a shrewdness in managing, contriving, or dealing. It is good when you need it, and it stinks when you don't.

Even the words used to describe the terms seems to set the stage for understanding the difficulty in being an ethical administrator when politics are involved.

In my opinion, however, the best news is that you can balance all three and do it well. You can reach a successful political solution while remaining moral and ethical. It takes skill. It takes practice. It takes work.

Ethics, Politics, and Morality - and the Illinois Standards

The Illinois Professional Teaching Standards refer to moral and ethical behavior, professional conduct, high professional standards, ethical issues, and the like throughout the various general and specialized listings. Standard Five of the Illinois Content Area - Standards for Principals is simply stated as

tom line - you won't find a listing of standards anywhere in the United States or in Illinois that don't tell the administrator - you must be ethical, moral, and deal with politics.

I think the standards thing is best summed up in the Preamble to the Illinois Professional School Leader Standards where it states, "We believe that we have a responsibility to bring the highest ethical principles to the process of administrative decision-making..." Later it states, "We believe in the importance of political and legal systems: that there exists a variety of viewpoints, cultures, and ideas...." Standard Five of the Illinois Professional School Leader Standards is "Acting with Integrity, Fairness, and in an Ethical Manner." Standard Six is "The Political, Social, Economic, Legal, and Cultural Context."

What' next?

OK, it is obvious that the standards are full of EPM (ethics, politics, morality). It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that these are essential components to school leadership, and that everyone (and anyone) expects us to master these topics if we are to be successful. So, how do we do it?

to help anyone determine if their behavior is indeed ethical.

Ethics Checklist

1. Is it legal?

Does it comply with the "standards", or with school policies, or State laws, or recommended procedures, or past practices, or "company policy"?

2. Is it Balanced?

- Is it fair to all concerned in the short term as well as in the long term?
- Does it promote a win-win relationship?
- Is it rational?

3. How will it make me feel about myself?

- Will it make me proud?
- Would I want my decision published in the paper?
- Would I want those I love to know about it?

Steps to Action...

Here are ten easy, practical steps to becoming a better administrator while dealing with the EPM issues....

1. Think before you act.
2. Communicate with tact and honesty.
3. Research before you decide.
4. Always consider the student's best interest.
5. Remember - You are never alone!
6. Do what is right.
7. Know your priorities.
8. Be persistent.
9. Walk the Talk.
10. Love it or leave it.

#1. Think before you Act.

Some things require immediate action. Don't do research when the building is on fire. Don't get the policy manual down when two kids are kick-

No one said that being a school administrator was an easy job. It isn't. And balancing political dilemmas is just one facet of the job...

"Acting with Integrity, Fairness, and in an Ethical Manner." Standard Six is "the Political, Social, Economic, Legal, and Cultural Context." And all of the administrative standards are aligned with the national standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), and the Illinois Special Education Administrator Standards. Bot-

J.C. Watts once said, "Character is doing what is right when nobody is looking." And, once again, that is the key. Doing what is right. And deciding if it is right is not that hard. Ken Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale wrote a wonderful book that I highly recommend, **The Power of Ethical Management**. It shares a great deal of information on balancing good management skills with politics and ethics. The following list, although slightly altered, is one tool that they share in their book

ing the daylight out of the UPS man. These are extremes. However -

When a teacher sends a kid to your office, don't issue a punishment until you hear all sides. When a parent calls you for some type of action - always listen, take notes, restate the conversation,

There is nothing wrong with saying the following...."I don't know, but I will try to find out." "I'm not sure and I'll get back to you as soon as I can." "I feel I need to gather some more information before I am comfortable with this issue."

Because we know the Golden Rule, but fail to put it into place at all times, we need to set standards and work toward realizing them.

and promise a response. Then make sure you follow-up.

When the police arrive at your school to arrest someone - take your time to before saying yes. When the boss calls and issues a decree - don't hesitate to ask questions, do your homework, or ask for time to consider the issue if you need it.

Remember, however, to always follow-up on all promises by the deadline stated, and if you can't, call and tell the parties involved why.

#2. Communicate with Tact and Honesty.

Two things you can't afford to do - lie and gossip. Never, never, never lie. Also, never, never, never gossip. These are instant credibility losers.

Several things you must learn to do regularly and effectively - listen, consider, evaluate, research, ponder, ask others (sometimes a third party), and then act. If you have questions - ask them. Be tactful. Consider your questions and never hurt anyone's feelings intentionally. Here is a practical suggestion for asking a question that might offend someone: "I'm trying to be thoughtful of your feelings, but I need to ask you a question to better understand the situation..."

If you think there might be a hidden agenda - look for it. If you feel you need more information - try to find it. If you wonder if there is history that you don't know - search for it.

#3. Research Before you Decide.

Here are some questions to consider when making any decision that might test your ethics, morality, judgment, or might involve a political situation.

1. Have I looked at all sides of the issue?
2. Should I seek advice from a higher up?
3. Should I ask about legal counsel?
4. Is there precedent for this situation?
5. Do I know who is involved?
6. Is this battle worth the fight?
7. Can I resolve this another way?
8. Am I comfortable with the information I have?
9. Is there a hidden agenda?
10. Is this my issue to resolve?

#4. Always Consider the Student's Best Interest

A few simple questions, often lost in the confusion of daily stress, are: Why are we here? What is our purpose? Who wins and loses here? Is that a parental issue? Is this a teacher issue? Is this a power issue? *What is in the best interest of the student???* Just asking the questions to yourself, or using a short checklist, may help you de-

termine that the issue is not yours to begin with or that you have lost focus of the student in all the hoopla.

#5. Remember - You are Never Alone!

Everyone needs help sometimes in solving difficult issues - or when the ethics are not clear. You can find that help by seeking a mentor in a neighboring school - it won't take long to find someone you can trust. Or call a friend. Or establish a relationship with one of your peers.

Of course, you can always rely on your professional organization for help. Often times they have the expertise, experience, and staff to help you immediately.

And never hesitate to get an opinion from someone outside education. Sometimes the "fresh" view really helps spark new ideas.

And don't forget one essential path of help - prayer.

#6. Do What is Right.

Make that your motto. Make that the quote that teachers and students will expect to hear from you. Make that the cornerstone of all your decisions. Then live it.

#7. Know Your Priorities

This is a regular feature of success. Put your life in order. Know what is most important to you and strive to make that the pillar of all you do. If your faith is number one in your life, then model all your behavior to fit your faith. If your family comes before work, then never do anything at work that would compromise your family relationship. If work is the number one thing in your life, then constantly and seriously consider the ramifications of every action you take at work in terms of building a positive relationship and untouchable reputation. Don't risk your principles, your occupation, your dignity for anything or anybody.

Once you know your priorities, let them establish the order of things in your life by keeping your priorities in focus and in perspective.

#8. Be Persistent

I have one of those memo rocks on my desk. It says, "Never, Never Quit." I think about that often and realize it means never quit doing what needs to be done - and doing it right. With persistence also must come the art of patience and the awareness of what is realistic.

#9. Walk the Talk

In terms of ethics you walk the talk by being a living example of a good work ethic and by never doing what you know is wrong. People will soon realize you are a person to be trusted and valued.

Concerning morals, you can never forget that you are THE moral leader, the standard by which everything will be judged. You are, by the very nature of your job, a role model. There is little wiggle room on this one.

And, concerning politics - no one will challenge you if they KNOW you are above reproach and will not compromise your ethical and moral foundations.

#10. Love it or Leave it.

Finally, if administration isn't what you think it should be, if you have given it a fair chance (probably two years), and you are not excited about the opportunities you have to make a huge difference - LEAVE. Leave either the district or the profession.

If you love it (not just like it), then do it the best you can.

In conclusion . . .

No one said that being a school administrator was an easy job. It isn't. And balancing political dilemmas is just one facet of the job that gives most of us gray hair, no hair, or bad hair days. But establishing a solid base of professional, ethical, and moral habits puts us in a position of respect and admiration. The politics seem to fall in place when you know how to handle the rest of the job fairly and appropriately.

I don't remember where I first heard the following story, so I can't give credit where credit is due. But it does fit our study of ethics, morality, and politics.

An elderly carpenter was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife - hopefully to enjoy his family. Yes, he would miss the paycheck, but he needed to retire and he could get by.

The contractor was very sorry to see this faithful and good worker go and asked if he could simply help build one more house before he retired as a personal favor.

The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to unusually shoddy workmanship - and even used some inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career.

When the carpenter finished his work, the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said. "My gift to you."

The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently.

So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock, we realize we have to live in the house we have built. But it is even more complex than that - because we build lives and opportunities for kids each and every day. There is no room for poor workmanship or inferior decisions. Being a school administrator is, in many ways, a do-it-yourself project. Every day you hammer a point, construct an opportunity, build a dream. Every day you motivate and lead by example. Every day you are counted on to work through political barriers and build your school on a moral and ethical foundation. Every day you do all this to make a difference. And every day, if you work hard and try even harder, you build a little better.

Remember, to the world you might be one person - but to one person - you might be the world. And that person probably looks up to you because you do things right.

The Golden Rule

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

We have committed the Golden Rule to memory. Now let us commit it to life.

Edwin Markham

Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for his is the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 7:12

And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

Luke 6:31

One should seek for others the happiness one desires for one's self.

Buddhist

Editor's Note

The purpose of Building Leadership is to provide information that the reader can use immediately to solve a problem, build a policy or simply to work more effectively as a school leader. Often, issues are written as reactions to what we see as current or emerging problems that principals must deal with. That scenario is the genesis of this issue. In the past year, the number of situations brought by members to Field Directors John Ourth and Fred Singleton, to General Counsel Brian Schwartz and to me that center around a moral or ethical dilemma have increased dramatically. They are serious problems with serious consequences that go beyond "looking the other way" on some minor student discipline matter. They are situations where a principal's action may cost a teacher their job and inaction may cost the principals their own job. They are situations where principals, assistant principals and deans are caught between policy, the law, their own moral code, the mandates of a superior, nasty consequences for the school or an individual and doing the right thing. It is being between the proverbial "rock and a hard place".

When your computer furnishes you evidence that one of your teachers may be doing something illegal, who should you tell and what should you do? A

Code of Ethics

Illinois Principals Association

In keeping with Illinois Standards for Principals which states that,

“A competent administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner,”

the Illinois Principals Association supports the following Code of Ethics for its members.

Each member of the Illinois Principals Association shall:

- Make the well-being of students the basis for all decision making
- Honor the public trust above any personal gain
- Fulfill professional responsibilities with honesty and integrity
- Avoid preferential treatment and conflicts of interest
- Enforce and obey all local, state and national rules and laws in the performance of duties
- Respect and safeguard confidential information
- Not allow professional decisions to be influenced by personal gain, favors or gratuities
- Demonstrate values, beliefs and attitudes that inspire others to higher levels of achievement
- Honor all contracts, agreements and commitments
- Assume responsibility for individual actions
- Treat all people fairly and equitably and with dignity and respect
- Maintain personal and professional standards that enhance the image of the school and the profession

*Adopted by the Executive Board of the Illinois Principals Association
July 1999*

Illinois Principals Association

2940 Baker Drive • Springfield, Illinois 62703 • 217-525-1383

Dedicated to Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education

board member asks you to alter a grade to keep a star athlete eligible. What do you do and who do you tell? Your superintendent asks you to do things to protect a teacher's job and you know they are involved in an affair. What do you do and who do you tell? You get pressure to hire a board member's child who is not the best candidate. Who do you tell and what do you do? Keep in mind that IPA is only a phone call away.

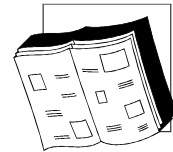
Fred, John, Brian and I have discussed dozens of situations like these where members have been placed in no win situations. We always come to the conclusion that it is best to take the moral high ground and that doing the easy or politically expedient thing often backfires, makes the situation worse over the long haul and leaves the prin-

cipal "holding the bag". It comes down to principals clearly understanding their core values. Knowing what they will fall on their swords for. Being able to see the right path and stick to it even though their job may hang in the balance. To help members make those kinds of hard decisions, IPA developed a workshop led by Jim Burgett dealing with professional ethics and, as a follow-up, asked Jim to author this issue of Building Leadership. We hope it helps you to find your moral compass and provides you some guideposts in dealing with the ever increasingly complex issues you face as a building leader. We hope it fosters conversation with your colleagues and we hope it leads to purposeful analytical thought. We hope you put IPA's Code of Ethics where it

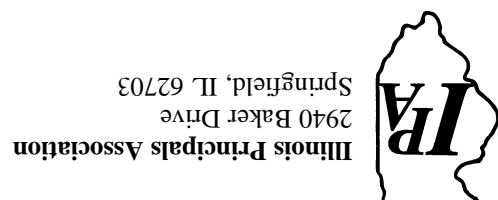
can easily be seen. If you want a frameable copy, let us know and we will send you one.

We believe that principals have a high calling in influencing the lives of young people and that your actions speak louder than your words. Many young eyes and minds are focused on your decisions and their ethical implications. Schools are among the last bastions of civility and moral leadership in our country and principals need to accept that charge. I believe it was Warren Bennis who said, "Managers do things right, but leaders do the right things." You are a leader, and we hope this helps you do the right things.

~ David Turner



Return Service Requested



Presorted
Standard
U.S. Postage
PAID
Springfield, IL
Permit #1054