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Self-Leadership and Ethical Duty - The Leader's Role

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In the quest for personal fulfillment, the universal human need is to identify a meaningful purpose for living coupled with the capacity to govern oneself in the pursuit of achieving one's highest potential [1]. This inner drive includes the desire to involve others in the pursuit of shared objectives and, often, to take a leadership role in accomplishing desired results [2]. In his insightful book, **Man's Search for Meaning**, Viktor Frankl explained that accomplishing a valued outcome, pursuing a worthy purpose, and effectively managing one's responses amidst challenges are driving forces that reflect personal maturity and sustainability in the face of life's inevitable difficulties [3].

In writing about the significance of managing oneself in the search for excellence, Princeton University's Alan Gewirth offered the following summary [4].

Because of its concern for what is deepest or best in oneself, self-fulfillment is a maximizing conception; it consists in superlatives of desire and achievement; it subsumes all other values of human life and is the ultimate goal of human striving. So, to seek for a good human life is to seek for self-fulfillment.

Knowing oneself, controlling oneself, and then giving of oneself in the pursuit of worthy ideals are the essence of self-fulfillment and go beyond the ideal of self-actualization to encompass the highest in self-discovery and personal achievement [5].

The purpose of this paper is to address the nature of self-leadership as a process by which individuals strive for self-fulfillment as they seek to refine their lives and fulfill their identities. The focus on self-leadership encompassed herein emphasizes the personal responsibility of those who lead to understand and discipline themselves in the process of serving others [6]. This paper includes a framework for understanding the ethical duties that are inherent in the obligations of those who strive to achieve the highest and best in themselves in honoring the covenantal responsibilities of self-leadership.

The paper begins by defining self-leadership as a complex personal responsibility inherent in leading organizations and serving others. Following this explanation of self-leadership, the paper identifies five levels of ethical obligations of self-leadership and explains their associated responsibilities. The paper concludes by encouraging readers to seek the self-fulfillment that comes by honoring self-leadership and the leader's obligations to self and to others.

Self-Leadership and the Leader's Role

Self-leadership is a multipart self-influence process by which people strive to accomplish meaningful outcomes as they refine their ability to improve themselves and the world [7]. As a practice of intentionally influencing, one's ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with others in the pursuit of meaningful goals, self-leadership is a practical attempt by those who seek to lead to expand their personal capabilities so that they can have a greater impact [8].

Within each person is the capacity to expand the extent of the contributions which they make to the world, and self-leadership is the process for individuals to develop and refine their abilities. Providing individuals with self-direction and the motivation to achieve significant results, self-leadership is an effort by individuals to optimize their potential to benefit other individuals, organizations, and the world [9]. Incorporating principles of Social Cognitive Theory, self-leadership explains that behaviors, cognition, and the external environment interact in the quest for practitioners of self-leadership to make a meaningful contribution [10].

As a process which enhances the effectiveness of virtually all leaders, self-leadership incorporates seven fundamental elements which are briefly explained.

Incorporate Self-Reflection

Self-awareness of who we are is vitally as important as who and what we want to be [11]. Recognizing one's capabilities and

understanding how to best utilize them is the essence of self-reflection and is a fundamental element of self-leadership [12]. Leading others requires a high degree of personal self-awareness centered on a sense of one's overriding purpose in life and the desire to make a meaningful contribution to others [3].

This capacity to examine and understand their own strengths and limitations enables leaders to develop the most effective approach to interacting with others [13]. Self-reflection incorporates the thoughtful identification of one's abilities, traits, aspirations, and tendencies in an effort to understand how to best apply them [14].

Focus on Analysis

Analytical capacity and critical thinking are among the most important requirements of self-leadership and are essential qualities in personal improvement and serving others [15]. As each person assesses the world around them, the analytical processing of their external environment generates a desire to improve this context in which they interact with others [9].

The ability to examine, interpret, and understand a situation is critical to determining how best to respond to that situation [16]. Self-leadership's ability to apply principles of Emotional Intelligence in understanding context, identifying the most effective response, and regulating their own actions to fit a situational need reflects the leader's observation and analytical skills [17].

Affirm Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or the confident self-regard in one's ability to achieve results, enables individuals to willingly undertake challenges which others who lack this high degree of personal self-regard may be reluctant to confront [18]. This realization of one's capacity to accomplish a significant outcome strengthens a leader's willingness to act and also increases others' commitment [19].

Self-leadership incorporates the confident belief in oneself and acknowledges the leader's responsibility to pursue what is potentially possible [20]. The belief in oneself inherent in self-leadership sustains the leader and increases the ability to endure and persist, despite the presence of barriers, temporary failures, and disappointment which may overwhelm and discourage others [21].

Model Values

Self-leadership is value driven and acknowledges the importance of leaders aligning their conduct with the values that they espouse [22]. Serious leaders understand that their personal example generates the trust of others and view self-leadership as necessary to earn followers' commitment [23].

Leaders model the way by their actions and behaviors and define a path for others to follow to accomplish outcomes that drive organization success and serve society [24,25]. Modeling self-leadership encourages others to also follow the leader's example [26].

Demonstrate Caring

Self-leadership recognizes the leader's obligation to care personally about the needs of others, to be committed to their personal welfare, and to honor duties owed to them. Stephen R. Covey defined leadership as treating people so well that others are able to both recognize their potential greatness and are motivated to achieve it.

Consistent with the leader's responsibility to care about others, self-leadership incorporates both the pursuit of a higher state of existence and a more meaningful and satisfying outcome for those who are involved [7]. In his early writing about self-leadership, Charles Manz (1992) emphasized the importance of engaging and empowering others as a leadership responsibility and called self-leadership "the heart of empowerment [27]."

Seek Self-Mastery

Self-leadership is founded on the belief that before a leader can influence others, personal self-discipline and self-mastery are required [28]. Driven by a commitment to excellence, individuals who pursue self-leadership strive for the self-mastery of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors [13].

Self-leadership incorporates self-correcting behaviors to improve oneself with methods ranging from self-talk and goal setting to establishing self-rewards and punishments in the striving for self-improvement and acquiring personal self-control [10]. The discipline required of self-mastery and self-control is a fundamental quality of self-leadership [28].

Honor Obligations

Honoring obligations is at the heart of self-leadership. Self-leaders recognize their ethical obligation to improve the human condition, to identify better ways to accomplish priorities, and to manage the resources necessary to translate potential into reality [7].

Implicit in leadership is the moral responsibility to pursue a worthy purpose, to honor correct values and principles, and to assist others with whom leaders interact to follow their example [29]. Steinbauer and colleagues emphasized that self-leadership not only establishes standards of ethical conduct for those who lead but for others in their organizations as well [30].

These seven qualities of self-leadership drive individuals in the pursuit of not only their own self-improvement but in establishing standards of excellence for the organizations in which they work and for the colleagues with whom they labor [7]. The foundation for leadership conduct is on understanding the underlying responsibilities that leaders owe to others and to themselves [30].

Levels of Ethical Duty

For each person there are five levels of ethical principles and responsibility, and these duties and obligations apply to self-leadership in the same manner that they apply to all other individuals [31]. Diagram One, provided here, is a visual representation of the five levels of ethical duty.

Diagram One - Five Levels of Ethical Duty

Each of these five levels includes a broad set of ethical and moral responsibilities which have an important application to self-leadership. The significance of each of these levels is described in the following paragraphs.
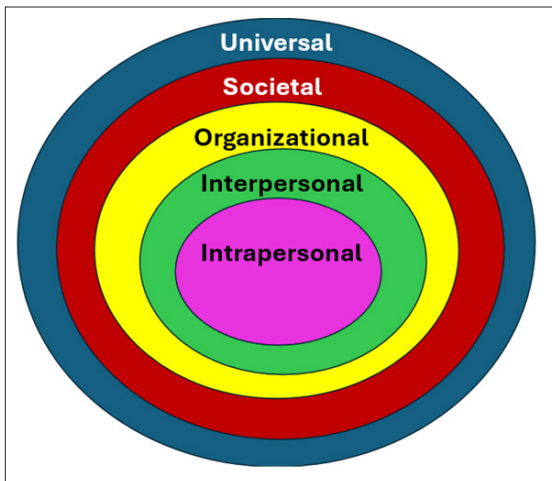
Intrapersonal Duty

Intrapersonal duties are obligations and responsibilities that individuals owe to themselves, although these duties are rarely fully articulated and typically are understood only at the subconscious and unconscious levels [32]. In subtle ways, rationalization and self-justification enable individuals to minimize and even deny these duties. In equating our ethical responsibilities to the nature of our individual identities, Peter Burke and Jan Stets have explained that each person possesses a subconscious Identity Standard or Comparator which they use in monitoring their behaviors [33]. The Burke and Stets identity framework is shown here as Diagram Two.

Diagram Two: Burke and Stets Identity Framework

As indicated by this framework for the identity, each person has a subconscious set of criteria which (s)he has established for actual behavior, based upon that person's complex set of beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad, and evil and virtuous conduct. Those criteria are translated into expectations about personal performance or standards of behavior that individuals establish for themselves. Those standards become the moral and ethical guidelines for personal action, but the reality is that actions and behaviors can vary from personal guidelines as each person is confronted with decisions, choices, opportunities, and circumstances [33].

The degree to which individuals practicing self-leadership consciously reflect on their conduct and hold themselves accountable to their Identity Standard reflects the integrity of those persons and their commitment to personal honesty [7]. Individual leaders committed to being authentic and honorable self-leaders examine their behaviors and thoughtfully address the guidelines that they have set for their lives - particularly when they recognize that failing to follow the standards is self-defeating and involves a potential cost that is ultimately self-destructive [34].

For others who deny the consequences of failing to follow obligations owed to themselves, they are likely to become victims of personal self-deception and rationalization [35]. At the sub-conscious and unconscious levels those who practice self-deception view themselves as hypocritical and dishonest individuals [33.36].

Writing about the dangers inherent in compromising personal standards, Harvard University's Clayton M. Christensen explained that this self-justification and failure to honor one's

highest standards almost always leads to more bad choices, a growing sense of guilt, a decrease in feelings of personal self-worth, eventual disappointment, and a failure to achieve one's highest potential [37]. The cost of the failure to be true to oneself at this intrapersonal level also has a devastating impact on other levels of ethical responsibility [38].

Interpersonal Duty

The express and implied duties associated with dyadic interpersonal relationships create obligations between two parties that affirm their commitment to each other, that reflect the strength of their relationship, and that clarify their perceptions about the nature of those duties [39]. Interpersonal trust is a mutually interactive and ethically-based relationship that is based upon the words, actions, and behaviors of the parties [40].

Trust between two individuals is established based upon perceptions about the psychological contract that exists in the one-on-one association of the parties [41]. Interpersonal dyadic relationships are fraught with mutual expectations and leaders of all types have the responsibility to clearly communicate the obligations and responsibilities that they owe to others, to confirm that the commitments that they are making are precisely understood, and that they then honor duties owed [42].

The breach of a perceived commitment in one-on-one relationships is viewed as both an ethical breach and the destruction of trust between the parties. Unfortunately, for many years the research about psychological contracts has confirmed that the parties involved in a dyadic relationship often have much different perceptions about the promises made and the nature of the duties owed to the other party [43,44].

Because trust is the glue that binds interpersonal relationships, effective self-leadership requires that leaders pay close attention to all the commitments and perceived promises that they make to others [18]. Failing to understand the expectations of the other party, even when an actual commitment has not been made, can result in the deterioration of the leader-follower relationship and generate the belief within the other party that the leader is unethical and not worthy of being trusted [42].

Organizational Duty

At the organizational level, leaders assume a multitude of ethical obligations and responsibilities [45]. As self-leaders adopt an ethical stewardship role, they recognize that they have a responsibility to seek to optimize long-term value creation to best serve all their stakeholders [46]. It is by recognizing the importance of optimizing that value that leaders demonstrate that they understand the impact of that duty and its benefits for all [47].

Self-leadership includes a recognition of the leader's obligation to empower employees to achieve their highest potential in addition to seeking to enable their organization to thrive and be sustainable long-term [27]. The responsibility to achieve both organizational and interpersonal obligations requires a transformational leadership approach that is closely aligned with the characteristics of self-leadership [48].

Self-leadership imposes on leaders the obligation to understand not only the current needs and goals of their customers but to

recognize and anticipate their evolving future requirements [49]. By becoming experts about their customers' businesses, the most effective leaders demonstrate their ability to help their customers create a sustainable competitive advantage that serves both the customers and the organization itself [50].
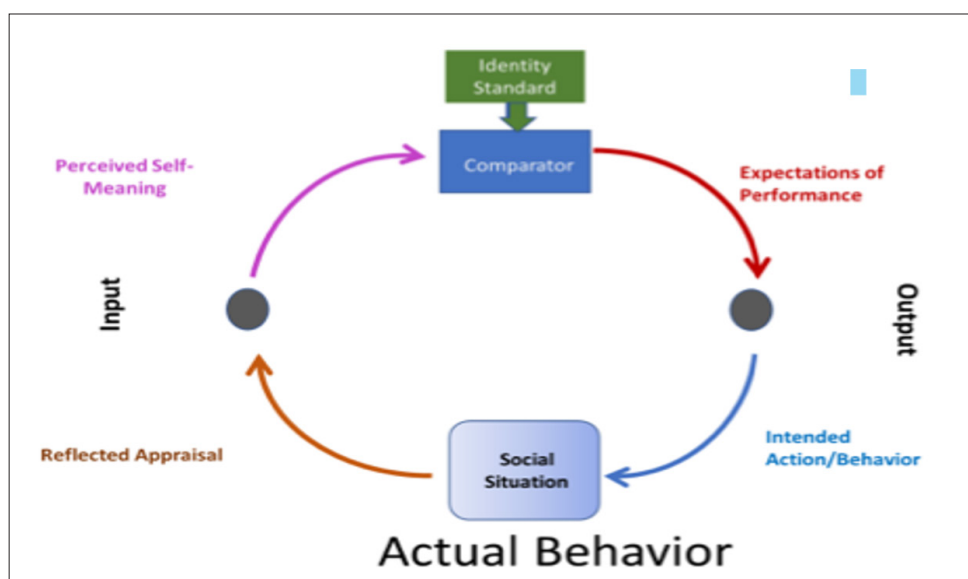
Societal Duty

In addressing the social responsibility needs of society, self-leadership scholars have increasingly acknowledged the important contribution of self-leadership and have extended the responsibilities and obligations of leadership beyond the individual and the organization. Malmir and Azizzadeh explained that the modern world increasingly needs the kind of leadership that values the establishment of organizations, facilitates activating human and organizational potential, and is responsive to the demands of rapid change in a world where the advancement of technology, the erosion of world boundaries, and the consequences of political and economic decisions have made governance difficult.

In a world that has become increasingly political, uncertain, and volatile, the obligations of leadership extend far beyond simply managing a business to generate profits for stakeholders [51]. Self-leadership includes the moral responsibility "to take the high road" in honoring duties owed to society that are often overlooked by more traditional leaders [52]. Self-leadership that is committed to honoring ethical duties promotes the commitment and followership of others in an organization to also acknowledge the duties that are owed as socially responsible corporate citizens [30].

Societal duties are obligations that are owed to the greater community which recognize the responsibilities that individuals and organizations must be contributing citizens of the world outside of the narrow scope of their own lives and their organizations [53]. In a troubled world, self-leadership imposes upon individuals this broader responsibility and is a higher standard that extends beyond simply creating value and competing against others for competitive advantage and financial dominance [54].

In summarizing the obligations of those who lead in the modern world, Thomas Maak and Nicol Pless made the following observation.

As the world is getting increasingly connected and interdependent it becomes clear that the world's most pressing public problems such as poverty or global warming call for cross-sector solutions. The paper discusses the idea of business leaders acting as agents of world benefit, taking an active co-responsibility in generating solutions to problems. It argues that we need responsible global leaders who are aware of the pressing problems in the world, care for the needs of others, aspire to make this world a better place, and act in word and deed as global and responsible citizens.

Self-leadership imposes on those who lead the moral responsibility to be not only conscious of these larger problems of society but to play a role in mitigating those problems [55].

Universal Duty

Ethical leadership encompasses compliance with universally correct principles [56]. For leaders and organizations, they ultimately recognize that they cannot break those universal laws but will ultimately break themselves against those laws if they are violated [57]. True principles of all types affirm themselves in every aspect of life and self-leaders come to fully understand their need to adhere to principles of truth [58].

The reality for leaders is that they ultimately engage with people that have broadly diverse ethical backgrounds and standards. By being true to universal truths and correct principles, the most effective leaders find that their actions and conduct are aligned with the many different ethical perspectives of those whom they lead [59]. Self-leadership requires that leaders acknowledge that they must be committed to the highest ethical standards if they are to serve individuals and groups who have differing ethical priorities [8].

Self-leadership enables leaders to look holistically at the tasks that they are striving to accomplish together with the duties they must honor to establish trust with the many different individuals who they serve [60]. Those leaders understand that earning the followership and dedication of others demands that they honor

the principles that they espouse and the ethical relationships and standards that others expect of them [56].

Focused self-leadership allows those who lead to recognize that there are universal truths that must guide them as they govern their lives, and it also confirms that the failure to hold themselves accountable to those truths undermines their integrity [61]. These universal principles apply to all five levels of duty and responsibility and establish the standards for others as well as for self-leadership [62].

Encouragement for Self-Leadership
In writing about the profound nature of human potential, Abraham Maslow reminded the world that within everyone lies the opportunity to glimpse her or his own self-transcendence. The process of personal growth may well be filled with temporary failures, grievous errors, and seemingly unending mistakes [21]. Despite the inevitable challenges that face virtually everyone, the University of Michigan's Robert Quinn, reminded the world that we can also achieve "moments of greatness" that are the fruits of constant commitment, unyielding effort, and adherence to the correct principles that govern right conduct.

Self-fulfillment and the ability to make a profound difference in the world can be achieved as individuals invest in themselves, strive to constantly improve, and honor the ethical obligations that they owe to themselves, to others, to the people that they serve, and to the world [63]. Self-leadership, while often a difficult and challenging road to travel, can also be the source of the personal and professional satisfaction and self-fulfillment that drives the often-suppressed inner soul of men and women [52]. Understanding its elements and being committed to the personal excellence required of self-leadership may often be a difficult journey - but it is one that is ultimately worth the effort that it demands.

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