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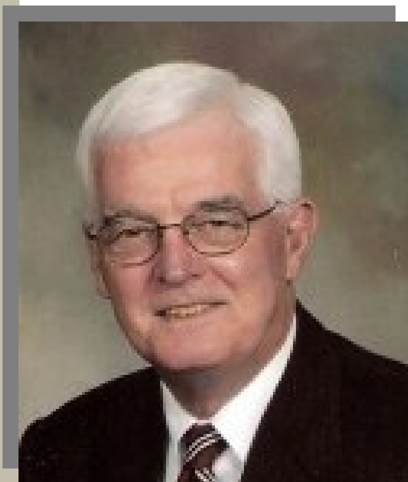
Joseph P. Hester

[N]o checklist is required to remind us that leadership is fundamentally a moral, relationship-dependent activity. The complexities of the information society require that doctors and nurses, teachers and principals, and CEOs and their management teams work together, each with their specialty and all contributing to the purposes of the organization. The ideal of servant leadership reminds us that teamwork is the new leadership model in the information age. It is within our workaday environment that we are able to discover our moral purposes and act on them.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The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership

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Introduction

This article examines values, morals, and civility in a quest for building a foundation for ethical leadership in a diverse and changing business/organization environment. Within this paper, a moral leadership culture is defined as "as an organizational moral ecology." The authors maintain that a narrow provincialism prevents different cultures and organizations from seeking shared moral meanings because of their refusal to first, objectively examine their own values and second, their refusal to seek among their personal values and moralities those principles and beliefs they share with others. The authors propose "dialogic civility," which is a conversation among people and organizations that respects their ethos and integrity as a means of achieving this goal. This article is based on the authors' upcoming book Values, Morals, and Civility, Seeking Community in a Divided World.

Searching for a New Metaphor for Ethical Leadership

Perhaps a new metaphor is needed for grasping the importance of ethical leadership in a world beset with values-diversity. Because of the organic nature of human spiritual and physical life, we have chosen the idea of *a moral human ecology* to explicate the varieties of human relationships and the values we share with others. “Ecology” is normally used in the environmental sciences to refer to an ecosystem or the natural balance in nature. Here we use “ecology” in reference to the development of a moral balance within human organizations — families, churches, businesses, governments, schools, etc. Our metaphor is complex and rich as are human relationships and, as we will shall show, entails, among other things, dialogic civility, which is an active dialogue with others about the values we share. We believe that dialogic civility provides a foundation from which purposeful ethical leadership is able to be strengthened. Edward Shils (1997) held that any society, any organization, is more than a collection of singular actions and economic trades. We learn from Shils that members of a society, as well an organization, depend in large part on a shared image and a commitment to each other. He called this the “collective consciousness” defined by autonomous (open and free) communication — a dialogic civility.

The fact of our natural pluralism gives rise to overlapping and inconsistent values that often cause conflict; thus, an open society necessitates sharing and assessing the moral standards by which we live. To the degree that societies are “open” is the degree to which its members are willing to talk and negotiate what it means to be a morally-based culture. Thus, as Shils has observed, “civility is a phenomenon of collective self-consciousness, is a mode of attachment of the individual or the sub-collectivity to the society as a whole…” Civility is above all else an attitude and a pattern of conduct, one that is able to define ethical leadership in any environment. Dialogic civility encourages all members of an organization to pursue their own image of the common good but only with an overriding respect for the good of the whole under which all others labor.

Recently, John Ragozzine (2008) wrote,

> “As our nation emerges from several decades of determinedly values-neutral education; efforts to weave ethics and integrity into the fabric of education still meet skepticism. The arguments against it are as varied as they are trite. Aren’t we already doing this? Isn’t all ethics relative anyway? Are you saying my child is unethical? Are you trying to impose your values on my family? Whose values are you trying to teach, anyway?”

Ragozzine concludes,

> “Ours is an age of inordinate moral confusion. Every day’s headlines report big-picture dilemmas with no clear solution: international terrorism, regional warfare, global warming, energy shortages, corporate scandals, nuclear proliferation, and endemic corruption. At a more granular level, this bewilderment appears in a litany of national and local ethical lapses, where values are subverted, integrity is abandoned, and moral courage is given short shrift.”

Accordingly, a purpose of our conversation about ethical leadership is to assist with an understanding of personal and organizational values, and then suggest how these might be extended into a wider context of community and organizational civility. This, we maintain, is a neglected part of public school and college education, especially business and leadership education and perhaps the education of community leaders and educators. We have conveniently left moral education out of the curriculum and others have tried to bring some of it back under the guise of "character education." Moral values are learned early in life and direct our purposes, beliefs, and values as we mature. Thus, we emphasize the home, church, and early childhood education as a starting place of value growth and ethical leadership.

This conversation challenges us to understand, as John Rawls (2001) has reminded us, that our choices and aspirations are to be understood against a broad background of incommensurable yet valuable alternatives and it begins where we are, not in the abstractions of analysis and proposed steps to leadership effectiveness. This is not to belittle those who propose this avenue, only to recognize that the 21st century has been a time of a proliferation of information and knowledge, so much so that the most intelligent minds are unable to assimilate and remember it all. Thus, keeping a personal checklist of leadership principles may not be a bad idea. Of course, no checklist is required to remind us that leadership is fundamentally a moral, relationship-dependent activity. The complexities of the information society require that doctors and nurses, teachers and principals, and CEOs and their management teams work together, each with their specialty and all contributing to the purposes of the organization. The ideal of servant leadership reminds us that teamwork is the new leadership model in the information age. It is within our workaday environment that we are able to discover our moral purposes and act on them.

Our vision of a moral human ecology applied to leadership potential recommends dialogic civility as a guiding interpersonal metaphor in a time of moral disagreement. Ronald C. Arnett (2006) frames a pragmatic case for dialogic civility as a means for negotiating differences in the public domain of postmodern communicative interaction. He says, "We live in a time in which ethical standpoints that traditionally have undergirded discourse are in contrast, dispute, and disruption. Dialogic civility is grounded in the public domain and in a pragmatic commitment to keeping the conversation going in a time of narrative confusion and virtue fragmentation." It is especially important that leaders in education, government, and business are committed to this principle, that their leadership potential is grounded in a shared moral purpose. To emphasize the dialogic is to stress the importance of opened lines of communication throughout the organization. Mistakes will be made, but by communicating vertically and horizontally, coupled with respect for one's colleagues, problem solving and the dissemination of vital information will be greatly enhanced.

Moral Appraisal in a Leadership Culture

Leadership is about relationships and relationships are sustained by shared moral values; therefore, leadership is value based. Understanding this idea is a prerequisite to becoming aware of the basic moral principles that comprise the foundations of effective leadership behavior. Awareness precedes thinking about our beliefs and values. Only when we become aware of them can we bring our beliefs, values, and purposes to the forefront of internal and external assessment.

David Brooks notes that we are shaped by our relationships inside and outside our immediate environs. (2007) Yet, we cannot put the community or the organization above the individual — both are significant as they shape and reshape each other. Brooks makes the following significant observations: (1) that success is not something we achieve through our own genius and willpower only; (2) that one's true self is not found inside only, but is a social phenomenon and is found in relationships; and (3) that we are embedded creatures who find meaning and purpose in the context of living and working with others.

Also, Austin Dacey (2008) points out that when we apply our values within the organizational culture, we release them to the assessment of others. Assessing personal values that are shared openly should not be construed as a personal attack on a person or their freedom of choice. Rather, leaders should move the conversation to a clarification of the substance and application of values. When we identify the beliefs and values that comprise our leadership potential, the behaviors they recommend require the scrutiny of both our inside customer (workers) and those who seek our services. These behaviors are the scaffolding upon which objectivity and impartiality are built.

In promoting dialogic civility where individuals and organizations recognize their shared values, we are challenged to acknowledge the core values of others. This will be difficult. Our conversations with others will be meaningful to the extent they are infused with dignity and mutual respect. When they (whoever they are) join the conversation with the same attitudes, we are optimistic that a shared moral foundation can be found. Without apologizing, our purpose is to avoid the extreme view that is built on coercion and seeks to impose unscrutinized values on the organizational culture through intimidation and authority. What we believe is needed is a sensible pluralism that recognizes the reasonable moral values we indeed share. Kai Nielsen says, "What we can live with here is what counts as reasonable" (1996). This may be a tenuous line to follow, but a successful organizational culture will keep this conversation going.

[M]orality is inclusive, emphasizing human rights and dignity, respectful of diversity, and consequence-sensitive.

This gets at the heart of what we call "a moral human ecology." From this view, morality is inclusive, emphasizing human rights and dignity, respectful of diversity, and consequence-sensitive. This does not mean that morality is simply about ends. Those who have followed a pragmatic philosophy say that if it works to their preconceived goals, then it is to be valued—that the ends always justify the means. A moral human ecology recognizes the organic nature of leadership, which suggests that both means and ends have moral significance, that they are always and constantly related. The goal of ethical leadership is to protect and enhance the well-being of all persons. The means for accomplishing this goal are complex and require much reflection and reconsideration. Our personal and organizational values will constitute the ground floor of this dialogue.

When speaking about our moral compass, Brian Orchard (2001) comments that we all have moral capacity, but that this capacity is tempered by time, place, and circumstance; thus, morality and moral values may be relative with no hope of finding any common ground. We recognize that there is some truth to relativism, for indeed we are in various ways culturally

defined as human beings; but this, in our opinion, is a transient characterization that ignores the deeper moral connections of our shared humanity. Thus, leaders, to be effective, must be open, flexible, and diligent when entering into conversations about the moral quality of the organizational culture. This requires self-assessment at every level and organizational assessment as an ongoing activity.

While defining the beliefs, values, and purposes that undergird our leadership capacity, we acknowledge the difficulties in reaching consensus on any issue involving moral behavior. This will be a challenge and we share the belief that understanding implies thinking: the use of reflective consideration in making choices, in behaving in a civil manner, and in acknowledging a common moral foundation for organizational civility. For some, our thesis is idealistic, but we believe it remains a normative necessity in an otherwise morally confused and disjointed world. We agree with John Rawls (1975) who expresses hope for an overlapping consensus of all major political and religious ideologies for a reasonable moral pluralism supported by public reason. Rawls defines "reason" as that which people with different ideas and beliefs could agree upon and that we would be able to endorse by asking whether this (whatever action is being debated) is something that we can live with given the difficulties of judgment, past pluralities of society, and their resulting political culture.

Rawls also noted that we should be willing to evaluate our beliefs against those of others. Thus, we broaden the field of relevant moral and non-moral beliefs to include an account of the conditions under which it would be fair for reasonable people to choose among competing principles, as well as evidence that the resulting principles constitute a feasible or stable conception of the moral organization. Rawls emphasizes "fairness" as a communicative moral quality characterizing ethical organizations. The more narrow view of the leader-as-intimidator, seeks no conversation about the shared values of his or her co-workers and, as a matter of course, places blame on others when organizational success fails to materialize. This limits morality to personal views only and tends to exclude those who are different or disagree. The wider view is one we believe forms the foundation of ethical leadership.

The Leadership Culture as a Place for Dialogic Civility

What is significant to dialogic civility is to "imagine" how our values fit with others and to be familiar with and work toward building moral harmony within diverse organizations. This starts with human purpose and meaning and an acceptance of innate human value. T. S. Elliot explains in *Notes toward a Definition of Culture* (1968), that our reasonable goals ought to determine our means. He views culture as an extension and expression of a society's ultimate values and believes that if such values which buttress community are ultimately compromised, the possibility of developing a genuine moral culture may be critically weakened.

Indeed, literature, religion, sociology, and even philosophy remind us that "community" is more than an indiscriminate crowd. Rather, community is the building of shared values, beliefs, and purposes knotted together by behaviors we normally call "civil." The literary critic Cleanth Brooks (1995) insightfully observes that community is "a group of people held together by common likes and dislikes, loves and hates held in common, shared values." Brooks says,

> ***"Where there is a loss of shared values, communities may break down into mere societies or even be reduced to mobs. The loss is ominous, for when men cease to love the same things, the culture itself is disintegrating…Change has come—and of course is still coming—but the questioning of old attitudes and values is a powerful stimulant to observation, memory, and cogitation. If the loss of the old provokes in some no more than the irritation at being disturbed, it sends others back to an examination of their first principles. If the new constitutes a challenge to the old ways, in the philosopher and the poet the old may offer a counter challenge to the new."***

As we continue to examine the idea of "leadership as a moral activity," we too look back to the "old ways" for ideas that support our view of a moral world. Since the Enlightenment, social scientists have begun to analyze community scientifically. The 19th century saw the emergence of psychology and the social sciences that adopted the methods of scientific investigation. This was a century of ideological conflict — Marxism, Social Darwinism, philosophical pragmatism, Lenin's interpretation of Marx, and in literature, Transcendentalism, whose purpose it was to recapture the "inner man," which had been relegated to the "subjective" sphere and set aside for more objective, scientific, and mathematical reasoning. During the second half of the 20th century, both "servant leadership" and the concept of "leadership culture" emerged as ways of redefining "ethical leadership," emphasizing both the "inner" values we hold and their application within the organizational culture.

The struggle continues today, and certainly affects how we view leadership, as post-modernists have decried any foundation for morals, knowledge, or truth except tradition and personal preference. The financial debacle of 2009 confirms that many in leadership positions feel that this is a "me-first" world and are apt to live by principles of greed rather than the moral principles they have sworn to uphold. Edgar S. Brightman observed that in 1951 a conflict of ideals was raging in the world and this conflict, he surmised, was not only between East and West, and neither was it political or economic. Rather, it was, as he remarked, "a conflict in the minds of men about ultimate values." Indeed, the struggle continues today.

We learn then that we can never grasp the totality of our leadership environment, that we are never disengaged from it, and that there will be paradigm shifts along the way. There are people working against the ethical grain and their efforts will sooner or later emerge as destructive and disparaging. On the other hand, leaders are not passive reflectors of history and tradition only; rather, they are actors creating and recreating history and the milieu of human associations. They also acknowledge their biases, but understand that personal values are only a starting point, their mooring to what has been discovered and what has worked in the past. This is where leadership begins, not ends.

A Call to Service: Leadership as Relationship Permeated

When we speak of "the leadership culture" and "the leadership community," we are acknowledging that leadership is relationship oriented, and, according to Kevin Cashman, "Relationships are the bridges that connect authentic self-expression to creating value." (1998) Thus, the leadership community is the human contextualization of value, meaning, and purpose. It also defines who we are as persons of value and specifies the arrangements for human

achievement: assessments and placing people in positions where they can best achieve their goals and the goals of the organization. Poet Robert Pinsky's (2002) insights into culture and community remind us that it is within community, and ourselves, that we recognize and come to terms with the "stirring of meaning" whose power is social as well as psychological. He believes that meaning is a communal phenomenon embodied within various cultural forms that have significance to us and to the organization. Rationally and emotionally, dialogic civility requires that we seek within this network of value and meaning those values we share in common. It will be our commonalities, not our differences that define the culture in which we labor.

The concept of "moral community" significantly enriches and extends the idea of the ethical leadership culture and renews the importance of servant leadership. Servant leadership reflects our commitment to moral principles and to the emerging leaders within our organizations. Servant leadership is moral because it is a commitment to give others what they require to grow personally as leaders and, eventually, to grow the organization itself. This investment in others doesn't devalue the leader, but "re-gifts" leadership as the moral leadership vision permeates the soil and soul of the organization. As the leader gives, s/he gets a surplus in return. This is a case of leading from the inside out.

Joe Jaworski (1998) says that "civility is the call to service, giving our life over to something larger than us, the call to become what we were meant to become — the call to achieve our vital design." When we acknowledge this meaning, we recognize that civility is an indication of a life imbedded with moral principles. It is our moral purpose, that home within us, that place where our values and spirit reside, which is enlarged because of caring for others. It is transformational. We cannot shirk this responsibility for the moral goal that we seek and the methods of achieving this goal must be judged ethically.

Civility will add value to others and us as it enlarges our moral surplus, and when we align our work and commitments with this greater purpose, we will discover energies and potentialities within us that we did not know we possessed. The reality of civility is that it is a form of self-expression that creates value for those around us. And let's not neglect the passion that effective leaders must exhibit. Those within the leadership community, and others, will sense the leader's commitment and strong feelings, their work ethic, and determination. Passionate leadership is contagious leadership. Passion in this sense is neither rage nor anger; rather, it is an excitement and enthusiasm that comes from leading with vision, integrity, and respect for others. When such passion is coupled with moral purpose, the idea of serving others, and with building and sustaining relationships, the organization will grow one person at a time and from the inside to those who seek our services. Yet it seems that many people have lost or maybe never possessed a moral compass to direct their lives – that theirs has been a horizon-less mind of pragmatic and radical self-interest. Understandably, this starts within us, but it cannot remain there. Civility is the capacity to enjoy the infinitely varied experiences that life has to offer and promotes human flourishing for others as well.

Dialogic civility provides a workable structure for our discussion of both the leadership community and interpersonal communication. It is a duel metaphor involving communication and ethics and their joint application to the global community. It seeks, among other things, inside and outside spheres of moral interaction where diversity is honored and shared moral perspectives are sought. It is deeply grounded in the conviction that genuine meeting makes change and alteration possible. Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson (1999) rightly perceive that,

> "Dialogic civility is situated in a constructivist *hermeneutic*, calling us to public respect as we work to co-constitutively discover the minimal communication background assumptions necessary to permit persons of difference to shape together the communicative terrain of the 21st century." They believe that if enough people begin to communicate honestly and civilly, then "the story of communication in the twenty-first century would be one that guided difference, diversity, and discourse under the arm of respect and caring for the other."

Arnett and Arneson also explain that the blurring of public and private life has been pushed too far. Instead of offering a sense of humanity to the workplace, emotive exhaustion and self-centered conviction have too frequently been invited into daily discourse. Their goal for public interpersonal communication is not intimacy, but civility that offers a commitment to open and active communication between people in an age of diversity, change and difference. Thus, dialogic civility has its roots in the reality of daily living and the belief that authentic interaction makes change and modification possible. The analysis of Jurgen Habermas (2006) tells us that dialogic civility is situated in a constructivist hermeneutic — in an interpretation of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication as well as prior value-issues that impact communication. It calls us to public respect as we work within the boundaries of our own organizations to discover the minimal communication background assumptions necessary to permit persons of difference to shape together the communicative terrain of the organizational culture. It is leadership guided by difference, diversity, and discourse under the arm of respect and caring for others.

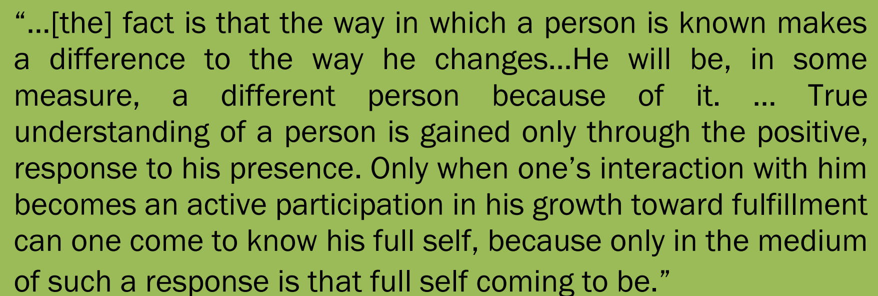
Conclusion

Thus, communicative life begins with a commitment to a background of dialogue that embraces patience, persistence, and cultural discourse rooted in respect for one another. This is a pragmatic necessity within an ever shrinking world of diversity, especially a world in which value and truth have been devalued. This is a world which is losing its connections to its past—the stories of courage and commitment by parents and grandparents, and by national founders who forged respect for tradition and history. Being disrespectful is likely to drive others from the discourse.

To be successful we must recast this conversation from one of clashing values only and issues of cultural relativism to one of "constructive challenges." Civility has in the past been on the sidelines of ethical discussions, and we can agree that its role has been neglected. As we have incorporated strands of insights from moral theorists and sociologists, we agreed that civility — this unfocused value — can no longer be ignored. We can't speak about ethics and moral behaviors without talking about community, issues of morality exposed by human need, and the moral role that civility plays in the leadership culture.

The moral future we envision and the various moral strands we have pulled together have recognizable parallels, cultural furrows tilled by those who understand the moral needs of humanity and the moral dimensions of our common experience. Without this constant and continuing practice of moral correlation all criteria of moral meaning go out the window. We have been enlightened and now is the moment that moral behaviors should become the

substance of our dialogic conversation with others, of our leadership culture. E. A. Burtt (1965) explains,



Burtt's ideas can become a model for ethical leadership. Can we teach this? Can we model this? The fact is we must do both. Leaving civility unfocused as an inclusive moral principle keeps morality chained to a pre-reflective, pre-conceptual, and pre-ethical past that limits both its meaning and applications. Anyone who has experienced even one moment of uncivil behavior from another understands the dehumanizing and depressing feelings that result. Negative emotions of fear, hate, suspicion, and indifference block avenues to understanding others. Thus, important to the leadership community is that we become accountable to human need. And we believe that this article substantially supports the belief that we hold that what will get us there is a human moral ecology based on a commitment to dialogic civility.

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Author Biographies

Joseph P. Hester earned the Bachelor of Arts Degree in the Social Sciences and History from Lenoir-Rhyne College (University) in 1961. He is a 1964 and 1967 graduate of Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest, NC where he earned both the Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees. His master's thesis was an analysis of the theology of the 19th century Anglican minister and theologian Frederick W. Robertson. He earned the Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Georgia in 1973 completing his dissertation in analytical ethics. Working in the area of pre-college philosophy, he became a certified public school teacher and supervisor, earning doctoral certification as a Curriculum Specialist III. Hester is the author of many professional articles and books in philosophy, religion, and education. In the area of ethical leadership he authored *Ethical Leadership for Public School Administrators and Teachers* and, with H. Darrel Young, *Leadership Under Construction.*

Don R. Killian earned the Bachelor of Arts Degree in History and Sociology from Davidson College in 1961. He received his Masters of Arts Degree in Sociology from Appalachian State University in 1965. In 1968 he was awarded a National Science Foundation Scholarship to study anthropology at the University of Colorado. Additional graduate study at the University of Georgia in sociology and anthropology from 1969-1971 and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in small group sociology completed his graduate school studies. He participated in the Basic Instructional Skills Program as an instructor for the North Carolina Department of Community Colleges from 1982-1987. He just completed his forty-fifth year teaching sociology at Gaston College, Dallas, NC. He is co-author of the two volume *Cartoons for Thinking* published by Royal Fireworks Press.