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Ethical leadership: Student perspectives and future actions identified in reflective writing

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ABSTRACT

The connection between ethics and leadership has been intensely scrutinized in the last several decades because of the proven positive results that can be achieved through the practice of ethical leadership. The purpose of this study, conducted in an online course on leadership in healthcare, was to examine students' perceptions of leadership after experiencing a specific instructional and reflective practice based on real events. Questions based on historical artifacts (videos, photos, articles, propaganda, etc.) are explored in light of ethical leadership concepts. Evidence-based journal questions allow students to specifically investigate: 1) climate and culture; 2) roles of leaders and followers; 3) words and actions of ethical leadership known as moral efficacy; and 4) conscientiousness of actions. The purpose of the educational activity was for students to identify ethical leadership through a reflective writing process in order to be better equipped and prepared to influence ethical leadership in the future. Results from this study show that when placed in unethical situations, the majority of students would either speak out or act out in a way to rectify the situation. In developing a culture of inclusivity, students would act in various ways that would provide a welcoming environment for others.

Keywords: ethical leadership, reflective practices, student journal

INTRODUCTION

The study of ethical leadership incorporates the morality of a leader's action, and the impact on followers and those affected. Ethical leadership includes situations in history that can have a significant impact on society. Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005) describe ethical leaders as "engaging in ongoing behaviors that are evaluated by followers as normatively appropriate, and that suggest altruistic (rather than selfish) motivation" (p. 120). In contrast, Bass and Riggio (2006) describe the pseudotransformational leader as a leader with focused personal gains rather than morality for followers.

Ethical leadership incorporates the focus on the values and morals of the leaders. This moral efficacy is what defines individuals as a "moral agent" within their organizations (Brown & Mitchell, 2010, Schaubroeck, et al, 2012, Mayer et al, 2012). It is a health provider's ethical practice of integrity, truth, respect, confidentiality, consent, and informed decision making (Barr and Dowding, 2012). The role of follower in ethical leadership is just as important as a leader's role in regard to ethical leadership. Actions of the leaders must be confirmed to be moral within the organization (Fehr, Yam & Dant, 2015). The relationship between the follower and the leader with ethical leadership identifies that followers are conscientious and not as likely to participate in unethical or immoral actions (Taylor and Pattie, 2014).

In studying ethical leadership four components from the research literature were included in the research for further exploration: 1) climate and culture; 2) roles of leaders and followers; 3) words and actions of ethical leadership known as moral efficacy; and 4) conscientiousness of actions. These components were not intended as a definition of ethical leadership; rather they were used to identify ways to help others connect and reflect on their role in ethical and unethical situations. Understanding the definition and effects of ethical leadership can have "significant influence on employee behavior and commitment" (Neubert, Wu, Roberts, 2013, p. 289).

OBJECTIVES

The objective of the research was to explore the concepts of ethical leadership from a student perspective. The exposure to ethical leadership, as well as reflection for their actions, provide a level of awareness and the ability for students to evaluate and assess their own behavior. Specifically, students were asked what they would do differently upon reflection of unethical situations they had experienced themselves. Students were also asked how they would create inclusive ethical environments in the future. This reflective journal was assigned after students review of the ethical leadership course materials which consisted of textbook, course content, historical video footage and a reflective journal.

The historical context of ethical leaders and followers was achieved through a video provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) within the Levine Institute for Education. By incorporating content from USHMM, students were able to better understand ethical leadership within social situations. The emphasis on these materials was not on the Nazi activities, but on stories shared in the five-minute film "Some Were Neighbors" about how the actions of local people affected survivors. The mission of the Museum "is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy" (www.ushmm.org). These materials aligned with the course in the ethical leadership module.

This teaching activity intended for students to review materials with the intent of providing thoughtful response to being placed in unethical situations in the future, and how they could find their voice as leaders. The purpose of the activity was to prepare students for the ethical implications that can occur within healthcare and proactively consider their own actions as leaders. More specifically, the activities were designed to identify what students would or would not do differently in unethical situations. Dewey (1933) described reflection as "… active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge…." Therefore the intent of careful consideration in questioning for future situations was incorporated in the questions. The focus on ethical leadership allowed students to revisit stories of Holocaust survivors and relate them to issues in healthcare and to their lives. The purpose was to provide an experience for students to explore real world situations, reflect upon their own personal experiences, and proactively prepare if and when they are placed in unethical situations in the future (Cicero 2006, Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002).

METHODS

Students completed a journal upon review of course materials during week five of a seven-week undergraduate and graduate accelerated online leadership in healthcare course. Students participating in the course were from pharmacy, pre-medical, health sciences, social work, and other health related fields. Throughout the course, four periodic journals were assigned, each connecting leadership content covered in class to what students experienced thus far in their education and in organizations. During this module, this journal assignment was designed to connect one theory – ethical leadership – to the students' past experiences and future possibilities.

Within the course module, students were provided a variety of materials on ethical leadership. These included a textbook Barr, J., & Dowding, L. (2012), online overview of ethics, and access to the five-minute video "Some Were Neighbors." While the textbook and online content provided descriptions of ethical leadership, the video was intended for students to get a first hand account of a real historical event (the Holocaust) with compelling ethical perspectives provided by survivors. The purpose of providing this context was to include a concentrated focus on one theory of leadership – ethical leadership – that could be related to the healthcare field. The research focused on students' personal experiences of unethical leadership as well as their perspectives on actions they will or will not take in the future if presented again. The journal questions were designed based on four components from the literature review: 1) climate and culture; 2) roles of leaders and followers; 3) words and actions of ethical leadership known as moral efficacy; and 4) conscientiousness of actions.

Figure 1.0. Ethical Leadership Journal Questions

1) Think of a time when you witnessed unethical leadership. How did you react in this situation? If placed in the same situation again, what are some ways that you could demonstrate a more ethical leadership-focused perspective and potentially change the outcome?

2) Select an organization, community, or business with which you are affiliated today. Regardless of your role, what are some ways that you can contribute to creating a culture of ethical leadership? How would the organization be improved with these changes?

3) Who is someone that you know or have learned about who demonstrates ethical leadership within healthcare? What are the characteristics they portray? What are some ways that you can display your own ethical leadership model?

Upon submission of the journal, students were provided individual feedback from the instructor in writing. The responses for each of the journals were de-identified, and analyzed using NVivo 10 software. Specific questions were selected for analysis and students' responses were coded.

RESULTS

Ethical leadership reflective journals were analyzed for 38 undergraduate and graduate students. Three specific reflective journal questions were descriptively coded to capture the main thought(s) of each student's response. Codes were then grouped into broader ideas (themes) by question in order to identify major concepts. Across each of the three questions, the themes of speaking out, acting out, and organizational strategies emerged.

The first question analyzed was, "If placed in the same situation again, what are some ways that you could demonstrate a more ethical leadership-focused perspective and potentially change the outcome?" Nearly 90 percent of students responded to this question (34/38). Of the students who responded, a majority of students, more than three-quarters, would speak out in some way about the unethical actions of others (Table 1). Of these, most students indicated they would confront the individual directly in an attempt to curb the behavior. However, if that didn't work, some would take it the next level. For example, one student wrote, "I would explain that many people were getting frustrated because of her actions and that she could make some small changes that would have a big impact with the staff. If this had not worked, I could take my concerns to her supervisor and explain the negative impact her behavior was having on our team." Another theme that emerged, on which a little less than one-quarter of students commented, was to act out in some way. These students seemed to be especially appalled at the situation they were in, and believed they should have taken a harder stance. For instance, one student commented, "If I was placed in this situation again, I would react in a completely different manner. First off, I would not quit doing something that I love." Interestingly, three students quite honestly indicated that if placed in the same situation again, would not change their behavior and not risk getting fired.

Table 2 displays the thematic analysis of the question, "Regardless of your role, what are some ways that you can contribute to creating a culture of ethical leadership," of which ninety-five percent (36/38) of students responded. When students were asked what they would do differently if placed in a similar situation again, speaking out in some form was the predominant answer. However, when responding to how to they can contribute to creating a culture of ethical leadership, actions spoke louder than words. Nearly two-thirds of the students indicated they would act out in some way, with concepts of fairness and leading by example being the most prevalent. One student wrote, "As a leader I would want to ensure that no discrimination based on gender, race, religious views, etc, are influencing how the employees are being treated and are not influencing what outcomes are determined by the situations at hand." A little more than one-third of students indicated they would speak out to contribute to a culture of ethical leadership, with nearly 20 percent of students indicating they would both act and speak out to contribute to a culture of ethical leadership. Another way more than one quarter of students mentioned to

promote ethical leadership was to implement an organizational strategy of some kind, with the importance of hearing all voices and open communication being stressed. For example, "I think I would be able to contribute to creating a culture of ethical leadership in this organization by assuring the needs and concerns of each employee are being voiced and being acknowledged by individuals that are higher up in the company."

The third question analyzed was "What are some ways that you can display your own ethical leadership model?" Thirty-three of the 38 students responded to this question (87%), with answers primarily falling into the three main categories of act out, speak out, and organizational strategy (Table 3). One-third of respondents mentioned providing quality patient care as a way to display ethical leadership. One student clearly articulated, "My role may differ slightly depending on what pharmacy setting I find myself in throughout my career, but my goals will still remain the same, to provide the best possible care I can to my patients." Within the theme of speaking out, teaching others about ethical leadership was the most touched on concept, with two students also mentioning the value of calling out unethical and ethical behavior as well. Fifteen percent of students indicated they would display ethical leadership by both speaking and acting out. Properly supporting staff was the most prevalent organizational strategy as a means of displaying ethical leadership, with a little more than one-fifth of students mentioning it. One student summed it up by saying, "Some ways that I can display my own ethical leadership model is to understand what my employees are going through and try to give them proper trainings on the tasks they are given."

The activity was designed to have students prepare their responses in advance of real-life situations, and thus proactively work toward a culture of ethical leadership. Overall the results of the students' journals showed that the majority would consider choices of ethical leadership in future circumstances. When placed in unethical situations, students wrote that they would either speak out or act out in a way to rectify the situation. In developing a culture of inclusivity, students would act in ways that would provide a welcoming environment for others.

Table 1. How would you react differently now?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example	Frequency
Speak out			27 (79.4%)
	Confront unethical individual	"If I were faced with the same ethical leadership situation again, instead of being a bystander, I would speak up."	23 (67.6%)
	Inform individual's supervisor	"If I were placed in the situation again, I would talk to the assistant principle, the principle, or even the superintendent."	7 (20.6%)
	Discuss unethical situation with others	"I would try and speak up about it in front of the whole group because other team members would probably be feeling the same way they just didn't want to bring it up."	6 (17.6%)
	Take legal or professional action	"However know what I know now, I would file a law suit myself or join and help build a case as much as I can."	3 (8.8%)
Act out			8 (23.5%)
	Do what was right instead of what I was told	"I could also continue to do what I know was right from the beginning instead of letting my manager make me do things I knew I wasn't supposed to do at the time."	4 (11.8%)
	Stick up for myself	"If I were to go back to this situation I would have shared more of my ideas with other members of the government to show them that those who were my age were worthy of being heard and respected."	4 (11.8%)
Wouldn't react different – to avoid getting fired			3 (8.8%)
Organizational strategy			2 (5.9%)
	Establish different protocol	"If placed in the same situation I would ensure that we had a protocol set in place for monitoring his actions and ensuring that he was unable to take things for free."	2 (5.9%)
Haven't witnessed unethical leadership			1 (2.9%)
Total # students responding			34

Note: Comments may fit into more than one theme/sub-theme, so the sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages reflect the proportion of the total number students responding with comments related to a particular theme/sub-theme.

Table 2. How can you contribute to a culture of ethical leadership?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example	Frequency
Act out			23 (63.9%)
	Be fair	"treating everybody fairly"	7 (19.4%)
	Lead by example	"As a leader I would start by being personally responsible for my actions, and lead by example."	6 (16.7%)
	Help others	"I will help my co workers whenever I can and provide feedback when it is asked of me."	5 (13.9%)
	Follow organizational policies	"I can do so by following our rules and procedures"	5 (13.9%)
	Be ethnically inclusive and sensitive	"…I would like to make sure that people within my lab do not fall into groupthink and that there is a diverse group of people contributing to decision making."	4 (11.1%)
	Show integrity	"to admit it when I've done something wrong instead of trying to hide it or blame it on other people"	3 (8.3%)
	Be kind, positive, or respectful	"act respectfully towards customers and fellow staff"	3 (8.3%)
	Express appreciation	"Expressing my appreciation for others is something that can be seen, and I believe is appreciated by people."	2 (5.6%)
	Do what I say I am going to do	"I will do what I say I am going to do"	1 (2.8%)
Speak out			14 (38.9%)
	Call out unethical behavior	"I can also work on speaking up when I see an ethical situation that is not being handled appropriately."	9 (25.0%)
	Remind others of ethical behavior	"By reminding my coworkers how it is important to respect our residents…"	6 (16.7%)
Organizational strategy			11 (28.9%)
	Make sure all voices are heard	"One way would be to make sure everyone's voices are heard."	4 (11.1%)
	Improve communication	"This year, I have made it clear that I, and the entire board will be open about anything the brigaders want to know and nothing will be ambiguous."	3 (8.3%)
	Properly train staff	"One of them being teaching others how to be effective and positive leaders."	3 (8.3%)
	Establish guidelines for ethical behavior	"I would have the group create a guideline for ethical behavior."	2 (5.6%)
Total # students responding			36

Note: Comments may fit into more than one theme/sub-theme, so the sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages reflect the proportion of the total number students responding with comments related to a particular theme/sub-theme.

Table 3. How can you display ethical leadership?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example	Frequency
Act out			22 (66.7%)
	Provide quality patient care	"…some ways to display my own ethical leadership model include prioritizing the well-being of the patient…"	11 (33.3%)
	Be fair	"In the future as a physician I will be sure to be fair with my staff."	5 (15.2%)
	Be kind or respectful	"I will be honest, but in the kindest way. I will show respect to each and every one of them."	5 (15.2%)
	Show integrity	"…it is essential that I am honest about what I do and do not know so that I can develop the skill set necessary to be an asset to the pharmacist at my worksite."	3 (9.1%)
	Be ethnically inclusive and sensitive	"I believe that the most important part of ethical leadership is increasing inclusion and diversity."	2 (6.1%)
	Follow organizational policies	"I hope to be just as good as an ethical therapist by… following the rules…"	1 (3.0%)
	Be thoughtful	"As a leader I will need to make sure I take the time needed to fully access the situation to come to a decision of what to do next."	1 (3.0%)
Speak out			10 (30.3%)
	Teach others about ethical leadership	"I want to teach others to always consider the ethical implications behind their actions as well."	6 (18.2%)
	Call out unethical behavior	"I will not be afraid to step up and voice my opinion if I feel the patient care in the hospital is not up to par or needs improvement."	2 (6.1%)
	Recognize ethical behavior	"I could even provide praise to team members when I see that they are showing ethical leadership themselves."	2 (6.1%)
Organizational strategy			9 (27.3%)
	Properly support staff	"I would want to be able to recognize ethical dilemmas and train my team members to do so as well and teach them how to deal with such situations.	7 (21.2%)
	Create open environment	"I want to show my organization that they are encouraged to come to me when they have an idea or want to speak their mind."	3 (9.1%)
	Clarify core values	"When my organization knows what the core values are, they will know what to respect and in the right environment, it will be easier to adapt to these values."	1 (3.0%)

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General statement about ethical leadership	3 (9.1%)
Total # students responding	33

Note: Comments may fit into more than one theme/sub-theme, so the sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages reflect the proportion of the total number students responding with comments related to a particular theme/sub-theme.

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