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**Ethics Matter!**

**Ethical Leaders: The conduct we love and loathe in our leaders**

As part of their lifelong research on effective leadership, authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner are attempting to answer this question: What do we look for and admire in leaders? Survey results from more than 75,000 individuals from across all sectors in the world were consistent and clear. The number one attribute we demand from our leaders and admire when we see it is honesty. A character trait – not knowledge, skills, or abilities – was the first choice every time.

It trumped being forward thinking, inspiring, competent, fair-minded, and similar qualities. Those other attributes are certainly important but not more than working for someone who is honest. Honest individuals are truthful, credible because they are consistent in their values and conduct, and people of integrity who can be trusted.

And why is this result important? It’s much more than just an esoteric search for enlightenment. The whole point in asking the question to begin with is because success in achieving any goal or mission depends on the ability of leadership to inspire others to join, commit, and move the cause forward. If I don’t trust you because I don’t think you are honest, will I really contribute my best to even the most worthy effort? What happens to my reputation, credibility, and self-respect when I sign on to work for a dishonest leader?

For a real-world perspective on leadership in local government, emerging leaders in the management profession who earlier this year attended ICMA’s Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP) classes on ethics were asked to weigh in on a similar set of queries. These included “Describe the personal trait or conduct of one of your leaders that you so appreciated and admired that you try to emulate it? And on the flip side, cite an example of the leader’s conduct that was so uninspiring that you would never act that way!” Here’s what the respondents had to say:

* When issues get very political and the way forward is unclear, my city manager demonstrates respect for the process and position. He brings honor to the title.
* Lead by example. It’s not what he says he is going to do, it’s what he does. And I contrast that with another who lacked consistency in his actions with regard to rewards and punishments.
* Be a truth seeker. I actually work with someone who wants an honest opinion and, in the process, sometimes can change mine. It took time to get comfortable, but it created a relationship built on respect.
* Respect people, not positions. Working for someone who showed great respect for the “generals” [the elected officials] but was dismissive of the “troops” was demoralizing.
* At all the commission meetings, the manager took responsibility when things didn’t go well or as planned. Having once worked for a manager who was quick to publicly blame the staff, this approach motivates me to perform better.
* How you achieve the ends matters. Being aggressive on the numbers to the point that it defies reason just to make the project attractive is not okay. Staff’s credibility is on the line when the results don’t deliver as promised.
* Pay attention to what keeps you up at night. I had a supervisor involved in a questionable situation who shared with us that her ‘decision point’ about the right thing to do came from a sleepless night.
* Be willing to admit when you are wrong. Honesty is more important than your ego.
* Good leaders believe in the power of delegation. They trust staff members enough to give up control and, in turn, give away the credit. A bad leader needs to have a hand in everything.
* Don’t just wave the government flag. Search for the fair and equitable resolution. Weigh all perspectives. Is it right for the community? Is it right for the other parties?
* Take your fair share of the pain. Get furloughed, decline the bonus, be an equal participant in the cost reduction plans taking place, even if your contract provides otherwise. To opt out at this time or negotiate for even more just seems greedy.

Kouzes and Posner note: “Honesty is strongly tied to values and ethics. We appreciate people who know where they stand on important principles. We resolutely refuse to follow those who lack confidence in their own beliefs. We simply don’t trust people who can’t or won’t disclose a clear set of values, ethics, and standards and live by them.”

Regardless of your career stage, some self-reflection on how honest you are and how well you live out your values is important. How would you answer these questions posed by the researchers that are core to demonstrating ethical leadership?

* Is my behavior predictable or erratic?
* Do I communicate clearly or carelessly?
* Do I treat promises seriously or lightly?
* Am I forthright or dishonest?

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