

The Non-Negotiable Moral Obligations of Leaders

A. Always put people first in decision making. In a research whitepaper that I recently read, it said that 57% of all companies that have downsized in the last few years still have the same problems, which tells me that it wasn't the people, but the people were the ones made to pay for the problem of the organization. Maybe it was the process, maybe it was the leaders, maybe it was, whatever, but people need to be considered first in decision making, particularly in the long term because no matter where I have traveled in this country, no matter what organization or business that I've spoken to, they all tell me that, "People are our most important assets." Then why aren't they a priority in many areas of decision making?

B. Respect the individual human dignity—you have a right as a leader to disagree with my behavior, you do not have the right to challenge by human dignity or my self esteem. There is a difference between telling someone, "You are the dumbest thing next to the jackass," as opposed to, "Normally you don't make decisions this poorly. I was wondering why this decision was made and how you came to that?" Always, always, always affirm personhood, disagree with behavior.

C. Treat everybody fairly; Do the rules apply for the CEO down to the new hire? The last thing you need as a leader is a chink in that armor that there are different rules for management or leadership than there are for the employees. Everybody must play by the same rules and one of the points that I make in my programs is dealing with codes of ethics. Here's my analogy if this will help you: if you invite me to your house to play a game, shouldn't you explain the rules before we play? And what happens if you change the rules in the middle of the game? What happens to your credibility and the credibility of the game? That's what a code of ethics needs to do. These are the rules by which we play here at this company. They will not change and they apply to all. If you'd like to join us, these are the rules, if not, then maybe you need to find a job someplace else. That's the goal. But within the context of that code of ethics, which reflects mission statement, is the key point that everybody must play by the same rules—everybody.

D. Be honest. If you have a short memory, always tell the truth. Every now and then in an audience someone will come up to me and say, "Well you know, I only told a little white lie." Compared to what? A big chartreuse one? How does this work? If honesty is a moral principle, then don't chip away at it. Be honest. Yet how many of these obligations do we see in today's workplace? These obligations are innate capabilities that leaders need to address, communicate and model in their organizations daily!