

# On ethical leadership and education

*A thoughtpiece by Ulf-Daniel Ehlers*

A thoughtpiece is an opportunity for a writer who is used to write scientific articles. It carries in it the opportunity to convey what's on one's mind without being tight to the rigid structure and rules of scientific writing. In this sense I would like to ask my readers to be mild with the following text, when they perhaps feel that it is becoming too opinionated at times. Take it as a thoughtpiece.

- 1) **It is clear that there is no leadership without ethics.** This does not mean that leaders are always leading in an ethical way. No! We all know many examples where we can judge leadership actions as unethical. However, what is meant is that: There is no leadership without considerations what is right or wrong to do, for example for an entire organization, but also for a state (policy leadership) or also in civil society contexts, private initiatives, the family or one's own lives. In this way ethics cannot be separated from leadership. Still, it is important to notice that ethics – of course - is not just a concept for leaders. Ethics is a concept which is important for societies, groups, or individuals in general. They are the context and environment leaders act in, e.g. the organization they are situated in. The very general (ethical) question what serves the public good is important for everyone who is leading, be it in policy, in other position in societies, or in organizations. In essence, leadership cannot be separated from the context it is happening in. And the context is connected – like an ecosystem – with a larger context, e.g. a society. When we ask the question which values should drive our action, we will sooner or later arrive at the point to notice that society is one main reference point for the answer. That is why in the question how leaders should act ethically, we need always to take into account the larger context, e.g. the prosperity of the organization or the development of the society. This is one main reference point to come to an answer.
- 2) **Ethics needs pragmatics.** To illustrate this we can look at justice: One concept for leaders on a national level is for example the concept of equality, striving for social and just societies in which every member of the society has the same rights and the same opportunities. Justice, however, is a very broad concept with no easy and clear answer to what it is. Therefore it needs a concept which helps to operationalize it into pragmatic every judgements and actions. A translation into action. A tool to provide pragmatic help for leaders in such

situations can be concepts and approaches on justice. For example theories of justice which deal with the question which are the guidelines and criteria for just behavior or a just society. One example is the theory of justice from the Harvard Professor John Rawls. Or the works and writings of US political Philosopher Michael Sandel. The concepts help to arrive to pragmatic judgements, conclusions and actions from ethical considerations. They form the concrete reference frameworks which lead to pragmatic recommendations. In that way ethics can only serve as a guideline for action if it is accompanied by pragmatics, helping to operationalize leadership situations.

- 3) **Ethics is constantly on.** In every action of leaders there is a trait of ethical consideration. Ethics in that sense is never absent, silent or sleeping. And be it as leaders or not, as humans we are always entangled into situations and contexts which are the results of persons acting on their values and considerations, implementing their conclusions to the question what is the right thing to do? In exactly that way we are entangled into situations which we positively like to support, and at the same time also in situations which from an ethical point of view pose challenges to us. An example given by Jean Ziegler, the famous UN activist for peace and better distribution of nutrition: In this very moment hunger is ruling many parts of the world. Every five seconds (!) a child is dying of hunger while at the same time the Food and Agriculture Organization (the UN organization dealing with food and nutrition monitoring) is convinced that humanity could feed about 12 billion people. On our planet we are 9 billion people today and it is highly questionable, how humanity could arrive to a situation in which every five seconds one child dies from hunger. The only conclusion to that is that there is some kind of behavior and action taken which prevents a distribution of the available nutrition in a way that is not available to everybody in need. Everybody knows that this is not right. And still, most of us are convinced that we all are responsible for this. Take another field of global problems – the climate change. Those who are least resilient and can least deal with the challenges from climate change and the changes in the environment are those who are hit the hardest from it. Take migration and other fields which are of a nature in which those who are causing the challenges are not those who have to deal with the consequences. In a global connected world nobody can turn away from these problems. And for most of the problems mentioned there are no models existing today to deal with these problems, to heal them. Whatever we do starts with ethical considerations. And, to be frank - whatever we do, we need to orient our actions on solidarity and sustainability.

- 4) **Every action is rooted in values.** Every action is based on a consideration of what is good, what is making sense, what is helpful or meaningful – be it conscious or unconscious. Every thought, every communication and every action is rooted in such ethical considerations. And here lies an interesting connection to education: Without values there are no competencies. Ethics and competences have in common that they are both relying on the existence of values. A short definition shall be attempted in order to show what we mean with competence: Competencies are understood here as dispositions which enable us to act self-organized and creative. These are the characteristics needed to deal with the problems of a globalised world with challenges like climate change, hunger and migration. Without values there are no competencies. Values serve as a compass for action.
- 5) **Why is that so?** Because values enable a person to act in circumstances of insecurity, where they are unprepared. Everyone can act in situations where action only requires to reproduce or apply exactly what s/he has learnt before. But acting in situations which we do not know, which we have never before lived through or experienced, that is something more challenging. Something we can only master if we have developed competences. When learners, students and employees use an utilize certain concepts and strategies in exactly the same way they were trained before, we can call them qualified. They use what we call qualifications. Qualification as a concept is the application of learnt knowledge in exactly the same context it was learnt in. An example is to learn how to operate the computer program on one computer and then being able to operate it on another computer. But you cannot creatively come up with algorithms for the computer programs. To act successful in circumstances of insecurity, to be able to deal with problems which you have never met in complex unknown future situations needs more than qualifications, it needs competencies. And values are enabling a person to act in circumstances of insecurity. In a way values are the bridge – the bridge between a lack of knowledge and the need to act. When we are in a situation in which we don't know the exact answer but we still want and need to act, values are the compass to start to experiment and reflect on the direction of our action and decision. By doing so, they allow a potential unlimited number and modalities of actions on bases of a limited set of concepts and knowledge pieces. Values function as basis and orientation for individual and social cooperative and communicative human self-organization.
- 6) **Competent leadership needs values which are interiorized.** Only through a process of interiorization - and that means inner adoption - they become meaningful to us. And here we are arriving at the importance of education for ethical behavior. If the objective is to help students or help learners to develop competencies it is important to base the educational

experience on a process of interiorization. Any meaningful education thus should lead to a process of interiorization of values. Only then individuals will gain the ability to act self-organized in uncertain conditions. The process of interiorization requires an experience of labialization, i.e. questioning one's own beliefs. And labialization needs emotional involvement. In that way, any education which frustrates, or which leads to resistance on sites of the learner and to insecurity is a golden path into one of the main components of leadership education. Because it helps leaders to develop value based dispositions of self-organized behavior. And that is what they need. In order to deal with future, unknown and complex problems. It helps them to keep their orientation in uncertain times and be self-organized. Education and learning is an activity which needs values in order to arrive at competent behavior in order to lead in uncertain circumstances. Dealing with values in such an in-depth way is important for leaders because the value-sphere in our societies has changed dramatically.

- 7) **The history of values and ethics has changed dramatically.** Today, as opposed to our society still 200 years ago and older, we have no overarching binding and stabilizing consensus on values any more. Whereas in the old times the value base could be taken from societal traditions and overarching beliefs and could be routed into institutions of society which were clearly structured, like the core family concept for example, it is through technological advancements, globalization and progress in societies that larger risks emerge and uncoupling of normative concepts lead to a diversifying society. In this society still concepts which were before giving orientation are important, but have diversified. For example spirituality is a modern concept in societies but there is no dominant leading idea of religious groups any longer. Living in communities is still an important concept and gives orientation but there is no core family concept any longer. Concepts like love are important and desired in society. But at the same time they cannot just be expressed through marriage but through a variety of forms of living. Habermas states in his important works on revaluing societal values. That the orientation framework for our modern times and modern thinking is not any longer deriving from past decades but that has to find its normativity in itself. In a way it is the shift of our ethical system of values from the past where we derived stability from before into the future. What the future will hold is less and less deductible from the past. And therefore we have no models for action which are guaranteeing stability for the future. It is the big challenge today for companies and organizations to train their employees for a world in which they have to deal with the constantly changing framework of norms and values. In which they have to deal with a world in which values are constantly changing.