# Leadership Responsibility

## Ethical and Organizational Considerations

Simon Robinson

# Foreword

A key message of this book is that we cannot begin to understand the ethics of leadership without understanding leadership. It soon becomes apparent that leadership is not that easy to define. There are many pseudo-scientific theories that seek to achieve this, but these concepts remain contentious. Even more interestingly, it is increasingly apparent that the debate about leadership theory now includes questions of ethics and value, which in themselves lead to questions about well-being in any organization and beyond. The very idea of the leader involves ethical debate.

This book is a major contribution to that debate, critically examining the theories that claim to be value-centred and developing a view that leadership should be based in an ethics of responsibility. This is not a grand, one-size-fits-all theory, but rather a view of leadership ethics that demands dispersed and shared leadership that is responsible for the critical review of ethical meaning and practice.

This book will be of interest to any who exercise or who are responsible in any way for leadership. The conceptual clarity it sustains throughout is a fine example of how this important debate needs to be continued.

Through the use of high profile cases, many of the ethical issues explored will already be familiar to most readers. A glossary of technical terms is helpfully given.

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# Glossary

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| *a priori* | Refers to knowledge that does not require empirical confirmation. Strawson refers to an *a priori* argument as one that you can see is true, 'just lying on your couch'. |
| *agape* | Unconditional love. This is distinct from *eros*, a love that is based in conditions such as the attraction of the other. |
| deontological ethics | A theory that founds ethics on universal principles. |
| ethical relativism | The view that there is no universally accepted ethics. All ethics is dependent on different cultures. |
| exceptionalism | The view that leaders do not always have to follow ethical rules. |
| great man theory | A theory that locates leadership in superior individuals. |
| GRLI | Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative. |
| ontology | The study of reality or being. Hence, someone who is viewed as ontologically different is viewed as different in their very nature, not just in their attributes of functions. |
| teleology | The study of end or purpose (*telos*). |
| trait theory | A theory of leadership that characterises leaders according to their traits. |
| utilitarian ethics | A theory that suggests ethics is about maximising the good for the greatest number. |
| virtue ethics | A theory that suggests ethics is founded in the meaning and practice of virtues. |

# Contents

# Introduction

Leadership studies has become something of an academic sub-discipline. It is also central to corporate practice. Business and the professions want people who can lead. From this explosion of interest, leadership ethics has slowly emerged. As a part of applied ethics, it is not quite certain where it is going, but it certainly crosses many discipline boundaries and applies to all professional practice.

All leadership involves making use of power in enabling meaningful practice to happen. How that power is exercised then becomes a matter for value judgment. Is leadership a function of expertise or greater knowledge, with the leader taking the group in the right direction? If so, who determines what the right direction is? What is the basis of the leader's authority? Some argue that charismatic leaders are essential in enabling groups to work through necessary change. Others see leadership as a function of the group and look to involve different stakeholders. Others argue for the importance of a formal democratic process, with leadership enabling a consensus.

Other ethical questions and themes that will weave through this book include the following:

- Should leadership be informed by the best interest of the group or the autonomy of the group and its members?
- Is leadership concerned with the good of the group or the common good?
- Can leaders be exempt from moral rules in the pursuit of organizational purpose?
- Can leaders impose change, development and transformation?
- What are the virtues of leadership?
- How does care relate to leadership?
- How does leadership relate to responsibility?

– What are the world-views that underlie leadership ethics, from ideas of service and servanthood, to stewardship, to universal responsibility?

At first sight, this seems like straightforward applied ethics. However, the answers to most of those questions are contentious and rest on what we mean by a 'leader'. Hence, a good deal of work has been done in developing views of leadership that are based on a view of the good. This suggests that the very idea of leadership is based not in some scientifically determined leadership role, but rather in ethical value. In this light, it is the core ethical purpose that provides the guide to any ethical problems.

Hence, the first four chapters of this book will focus on the underlying theories and values of leadership. Chapter 1 examines the classical view of leadership as the individual leader, often referred to as the *great man theory*. It argues that this model harbours ethical problems, such as the lack of attention to the autonomy of 'followers' and to the place and role of stakeholders. Chapter 2 looks at the very different theories of leadership that focus on the group rather than the leader. In some, this involves the leader in developing moral thinking in the group, in others the focus is on leadership as service. These too, I shall argue, have problems, not least around ethical theory and the dynamics of transformation. This leads to a stress on leadership as dispersed and shared, developing through interaction and mutual engagement. In turn this moves the ethical focus to the development of culture, community and related virtues. The third chapter then examines the virtues of leadership. It argues that virtue ethics theory, which seeks to base ethical practice on virtues lived in a community of practice, is not sufficient to act as the foundation of leadership ethics, but nonetheless that the cultivation of virtues, as distinct from skills or traits, is central to leadership. The fourth chapter focuses on responsibility as a way of developing virtue ethics thinking. It suggests that taking responsibility, in context, may well be a definition of leadership itself, as it involves taking responsibility for meaning and purpose and accountability and shared responsibility for the social and physical environment.

Chapters 5 to 8 then explore these themes and particular ethical issues through four case studies. The first case will include leadership and ethics

in the armed forces and politics, focusing on Abu Ghraib prison. It will argue that leadership has to work with ethical complexity in tension with different values, including a concern for the common good alongside the well-being of the organization. Central to this will be an analysis of the *dirty hands* argument: that no politician can lead without breaking some moral rule. Chapter 6 then examines the abuse of leadership in the context of a voluntary community, in this case the Roman Catholic Church clergy sex scandal. This argues that the defence of a narrowly focused moral community leads to abuse of power and the breakdown of responsibility. Chapter 7 then examines leadership in business, focusing initially on the ethics of leadership remuneration. It critically examines the arguments for big bonuses, arguing that remuneration is better seen as part of the community reflection on ethical meaning, not least on justice. It further argues that ethical leadership in business demands concern for the common good. The final chapter examines leadership in a public institution, focusing on higher education. This chapter stresses the importance of bringing together ethical content and process, and thus the role of the leader as enabling ethical reflection. I conclude that ethical leadership demands the practice of multiple responsibility, and with that, leadership of both the organization and the wider society.

# Follow the Leader?

In this chapter, I shall begin to explore leadership. I shall introduce this through the case of David Sharp, showing how different approaches to leadership came together in response to his death on Everest. I shall then offer a working description of leadership and begin to develop the ethical content underlying that. A critical examination of theories and arguments about leader-centred views of leadership will follow. In particular, I shall critically examine views of the charismatic leader, the leader based in contract and the leader as controller.

## Everest ethics

In 2006, David Sharp returned to Everest, determined to conquer it. In 2003 and 2004 he had been part of unsuccessful attempts. The extent of Sharp's determination can be gauged by the fact that he lost several toes in his first attempt. The story of what happened to him in 2006 involves some speculation. It is believed that he did reach the top climbing by himself and with a limited supply of oxygen. During the descent he ran out of oxygen and eventually died from exhaustion and cold whilst sheltering beneath a small outcrop on the crest of the northeast ridge. Sharp had collapsed while he was still clipped on to a fixed line that was used by climbers on that route, and he was found just three feet from it. Before he died, as many as forty people passed by him. Most of these were members of two climbing teams run by Himex, a company specialising in mountain ascents and headed up by Russell Brice, and a following Turkish team. Some of these

did stop to ascertain his condition, and to attempt either to comfort or help him in some way. Reports suggest that the first ones to do this stopped on their descent. Some claim in their ascent not have seen him in the dark. With the encumbrances of climbing gear and goggles, even things close by might be missed. Others claim to have mistaken Sharp for the corpse of an Indian climber who had died there in 1996, a well-known 'feature' of the climb. It would, however, have been difficult for every climber not to realise that Sharp was there. The climbers on the way up would have had to unclip themselves and re-clip to get past him.

Members of a twelve-person Turkish team came upon Sharp approximately twenty-four hours after he had set out and described him as sitting up, conscious, and responding 'in a restrained way', while others who saw him around the same time claim he was unconscious, in a hypothermic coma, and irrecoverable. Eight hours later, after daybreak on the final day, climbers from one of the Himex teams found Sharp shivering, near death, but able to speak his name. Climbers describe how his hands and arms were deformed by frostbite, how, when he was hauled to his feet, he was unable to stand, and how he was finally left to die alone.

Communication was clearly a problem. Some climbers claimed that Brice had been told about Sharp earlier, and that there was no response. He claimed that he did not know until the teams' descent. Given the quality of Brice's outfit, it is difficult to imagine that his guides and sherpas failed to communicate Sharp's situation to Brice. If Brice didn't hear of Sharp until the descent, then it appears his top climbing guides made the decision to keep climbing and not to initiate a rescue.

At its heart, this case was the lonely death of a man in the most exposed place imaginable. It echoes the Parable of the Sadhu, used by Bernard McCoy in business ethics courses. McCoy, an investment banker at Morgan Stanley, was part of a trek through the Himalayas in the 1980s.[1] It was during his preparation for the final ascent of a mountain that he encountered a sadhu, or holy man, suffering from hypothermia. His dilemma was, should

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1    B.H. McCoy, 'The Parable of the Sadhu', *Harvard Business Review* 61/5 (1983), XXX.

he treat the holy man, or should he leave him and look to achieve the final summit. In the end, both Sharp and the sadhu were left to die and McCoy argues that this is an example of ambitions or goals that block our moral vision. The overriding purpose is conquering the mountain, a moment of ultimate self-assertion and self-actualisation. This obscures moral awareness and critical ethical reflection so that, for instance, at one point even in the midst of the Sharp crisis, a guide who thought he might have a chance to reach the summit by himself was encouraged to go ahead by the head of the Himex group.

But ambition, and all the glory and mystery attached to that, also seemed to obscure even simply the perception of the situation in the Sharp case. Hence, some of the climbers did not 'see' what was only feet from them. Whatever was there was not seen to be of value, in the sense that it would interfere with the primary goal. Here, perception is as much about frameworks of value[2] as about an efficient optic nerve. In the light of that, some of the climbers objected to the charge that Sharp had been 'left alone to die'. He was, they asserted, already as good as dead. In other words, they perceived him as dead. Others involved noted that on their descent several people were standing on or almost falling over Sharp. Their interpretation was that he was, like many other climbers, simply taking a rest. Here the dominant values not only affect perception, they seem to take away any responsibility for testing perceptions. Yet other testimony suggests that when he was first reported, he seemed to be in a trance, with several physical symptoms. Yet when later reported, he was able to speak his name and was trembling, a possible sign of temporary recovery from hypothermia. Subsequently, an Australian climber, Lincoln Hall, did survive after being left for dead. He too was found trembling after being exposed to the elements. The situations were different, in that the conditions where Hall was found were not so severe, and he was able to walk. It still took fifteen people to get him down. Questions remain however, about just what condition Sharp was in, and whether sufficient time had been taken over medical assessment.

2    Simon Robinson, *Spirituality Ethics and Care* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2008).

There is some question about whether operating at that altitude actually affects critical ethical thinking, leading to inconsistent behaviour. This is a very specific issue of agency and responsibility. The dangerous cold, the accompanying disasters, difficulties in communication, and visceral hypoxic misery may have affected their capacity to think through the problem.

It is not, however, clear that this can mitigate the actions of those in formal leadership positions. Central to this were the two Himex teams, each with a leader, and the overall leader Brice. The two leaders of the teams were very experienced climbers and well able to function effectively at that altitude, and Brice was overseeing the whole project from base camp at 23,000 feet.

The more these debates have raged, the more they have raised questions about leadership, at personal, corporate and wider levels. Sharp's personal leadership has been questioned. Was he not directly to blame for his plight? He did not have sufficient oxygen for the whole trip and he had chosen not to employ a sherpa, even though he could have afforded one. Hence, Sharp had to take responsibility for his own failure of leadership. In any case, wasn't Sharp also buying into a climbing ethic that in essence was individualistic? Here, the dominant purpose becomes the dominant ethic. When a person makes a decision to head for the peak, they are responsible for whatever befalls them. All climbers understand this, so the argument goes, and none would want to get in the way of others getting to the top. Hence, it was morally right simply to leave Sharp. The ethics of ambition, whatever the cost or problems, was summed up by the example of Mark Inglis, a remarkable New Zealand climber with two artificial legs. Inglis had himself suffered in climbing accidents and seems to have been driven in his desire to overcome his handicap, and to demonstrate his resilience. He was one of the ones who went past Sharp. Leadership in this area involves driving oneself or driving another, through support and coaching, to achieve the end that he or she wants to achieve. Hence, Inglis kept going despite experiencing frostbite on the descent. The end is about conquering the challenge and going beyond one's boundaries, seen as good in itself. It is a heady mixture of the transcendent beauty of the experience, the massive physical challenges, the associated risks and the incredible desire

to achieve.[3] Closely connected to this also is something about the need to demonstrate these qualities to the world, and it is perhaps not surprising that Inglis was accompanied by a camera team from the Discovery Channel. Inevitably there is with this value base a series of myths about the heroic individual standing up against the greatest challenge. The body of the Indian climber close to Sharp seemed like a memorial to this kind of heroic sacrifice. A body becomes a significant land mark and thus becomes part of the heroic folklore.

Others, some members of the Himex teams, and of the Turkish team, tried to exert a very different personal moral leadership. They argued against the team leaders and stayed with Sharp as long as they could. They felt the full brunt of the dilemma. Later they were to question key parts of the story.

Much of the controversy around the case, however, was focused not on personal leadership but on the leadership of Russell Brice as head of Himex, and on the leaders of the two Himex teams. At first sight, there is an indication that all were primarily concerned about health and safety and the need to weigh the fate of Sharp against the safety of the climbers on the slopes. Brice calculated that although he had the resources to bring Sharp down, to do so at that point would have jeopardised the climbers. There was some debate later about how difficult such an exercise might have been. It would have been difficult even in the best conditions, involving getting a non-ambulatory man down a sheer 800-foot face, and requiring a team of up to fifteen. In any case, at that point the two Himex teams had had their own problems with at least two members climbing so slowly that they had to go down before reaching the summit. Both the teams were strung out along the ridge, and thus vulnerable. There were also problems being experienced by the Turkish team.

Brice had an exemplary record of health and safety with his firm. In 32 years of guiding in the Himalayas, Brice had mounted 23 commercial expeditions, led 270 climbers to the tops of 8,000-metre peaks, and had never lost a client. His sherpas and guides organized the trail each spring,

3    Jakob Arnoldi, *Risk* (London: Polity, 2009).

fixed ropes on the mountain, and on many occasions they had come to the aid of climbers. Brice had overseen some fifteen rescues at high altitude on Everest.

There was also some suggestion from the Himex team guides that the primary moral concern was not for safety *per se*, but for the safety of the clients in particular. One guide was quoted as saying that he would have rescued Sharp had he been a client: '... as a guide I'm primarily responsible for the people on my expedition. So if he was part of our expedition, yeah, definitely. However, a member of our expedition wouldn't have ended up in that situation because he wouldn't have been left unaccompanied.'[4] Another guide said, 'You make a note to yourself that it's pretty late in the day to be going up, and it was blowy and snowy and quite, quite cold ... Russ [Brice] watches us as we're climbing, through a spotting scope from Camp 1 at the North Col, and I remember we commented back and forth on the radio about that, seeing [Sharp] moving really, really slowly. I didn't see him again. I was focusing more on getting myself and our clients down.'[5]

Brice himself had to make decisions about his responsibility as a leader. He and up to thirty clients and colleagues were on the slopes that day. He had certain outcomes that focused his decisions: that he should fulfill the contract with his clients and that he should ensure the safety of his clients and colleagues. The concern was shared by his colleagues. One noted, 'We had a traffic jam coming up behind us ... It was bloody cold so we were keen to just keep moving. It was fairly evident that not a lot could be done, so we carried on.'[6]

Brice is quoted as saying later, 'That's a hard decision. Not many people have the balls to do that. Seriously, I've got to get people who have paid me up and down the mountain safely. One of the main things in a rescue situation is that you do not put your rescuers at further risk ... I can only go on a limited radio conversation with Max, who's saying the man seems

4    Nick Heil, with additional reporting by Kevin Fedarko, Catharine Livingston, Andrew Olesnycky, Abraham Streep, Matt Thompson & Brad Wieners, *Men's Journal* (August 2006), re-published with permission at Mountain Zone.com. 3/2/2010.

5    ibid.

6    ibid.

to be unconscious, he's got a frozen nose, his arms are wooden, he's not on oxygen, and so on. And there's no way you can carry him off. This is what people don't understand.'[7] Brice's decision was something about the limits of responsibility, risk and his role as a leader. At the very least, he argued that this meant that he could not respond in a simplistic, altruistic way. He had to take account of his core relationships and the issue of safety for the majority, and thus move into a utilitarian calculus. The use of that calculus was later to be criticised in the light of the Lincoln Hall case.

Part of Brice's leadership stance was also based in the utility of the business. This was a highly successful business focused on the north face of Everest. The Chinese government charges less for permits than Nepal does on the south side, and this influences cheaper charging from outfitters. The north face is also more accessible, enabling guide ropes to be in place for most of the journey. This makes it less of a pure climb and thus open to a much wider market for those wanting adventure and risk. It becomes critical that this operation is not seen to fail. Hence, Brice was quick to say that the one client that he did lose, snow-boarding down the slopes, was only in contract with him to get to the top.

Ranged against Brice's leadership was that of Sir Edmund Hillary, the famous mountaineer who in 1953 became the first to scale to the world's highest mountain. Hillary was not a formal leader. However, in many senses his distinguished climbing career cast him as a respected leader of the wider climbing community. In that role he focused on principle and attitude. Perhaps above all he, through that leadership in the climbing world, had to look beyond the boundaries of the corporation and to the care of the wider community.

'The whole attitude toward climbing Mount Everest has become rather horrifying,' he told the press. 'A human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain.'[8] Hillary was in effect arguing for an ethos that should be shared by all on the mountain. Underlying it was the opposite of the heroic climber myth: a principle of unconditional care for

7    ibid.
8    ibid.

all the community whatever the context, based in need. Despite the call from Hillary, there is no evidence of any climbing associations setting out such values, and certainly no evidence of the Chinese authorities taking responsibility for mountain rescue. However, Hillary argued that there was an unwritten code of mutal support for all in trouble on the mountain, and that this was being taken over by one of commercial gain and individual ambition, with these two motivations reinforcing each other. Hillary was asserting leadership of a quite different kind, focusing on a broader set of values around the wider community of climbing and even beyond, to basic obligations owed to humanity. In this light, leadership finds value beyond narrow group concerns and in transcendent value. Part of that leadership seemed to be the development of a sustained ethos. Ethos can be summed up as the distinctive character, spirit and attitudes of a group or community. For the climbers, the ethos was one that was worked out around an environment of risk shared by all. At its centre was the belief that however good any climber might be, he or she might at any time depend upon other climbers to survive. Emerging from that awareness of physical vulnerability was the core principle that one always helped another climber in need. Ethicists as different as MacIntyre[9] and Levinas[10] both agree on this point, that concern for the other arises from an awareness of vulnerability. Hence, for Levinas ethics begins with the face of the other, that which sums up the limitations, and ultimately the mortality of the other.

This view of leadership looks to develop the capacity to take responsibility for all in the community. Hence, by implication, it sees the Sharp case as an example of the so-called 'bystander effect'. One the major examples of this was the infamous death of Kitty Genovese on 13 March 1964.[11] Genovese was murdered in the street outside her New York apartment. Some thirty-eight neighbours watched and did nothing. Some reported the incident not realizing what was going on, others simply ignored it.

9    Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999).
10   Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
11   Abe Rosenthal, *Thirty-Eight Witnesses: The Kitty Genovese Case* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964).