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# Zin Wah Kyu's Principles of Ethical Leadership As Manifested within Her Position As Chief Engineer of the Myanmar Radio-Television Headquarters

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## Abstract

This article will describe the principles of ethical leadership evidenced in the leadership of Zin Wah Kyu, chief engineer of the Myanmar Radio and Television Headquarters that is housed within the Myanmar Ministry of Information. Her advancement within this organizational system exemplifies how a woman practicing clear ethical principles has been able to rise to the senior levels of a male-dominated domain. The ethical dimensions of her leadership are interpreted using four categories of ethical leadership: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership, and virtuous ethical leadership. As such, an international understanding of ethical leadership is enhanced via focus on a Myanmar leader using Myanmar perspectives on ethical leadership as basis of interpretation.

James A. Schnell, PhD (Ohio University) is a two time Fulbright Scholar (Cambodia & Myanmar) who recently completed his Fulbright Scholar assignment at the Myanmar Radio and Television Headquarters in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. He has held teaching/research appointments at Ohio State University, University of Cincinnati, Beijing Jiaotong University (China), Fudan University (Shanghai), Duy Tan University (Vietnam), Royal University of Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Ohio University, Miami University, Ohio Dominican University, and Kutztown State University. He retired from the US Air Force at the rank of Colonel, with his final fourteen years serving as an Air Force Attaché at the US Embassy in Beijing, China, for which he was awarded the Legion of Merit Medal.

The career of Zin Wah Kyu offers an illustration of how relevant ethical practices can serve as a foundation for meaningful leadership that can transform the individual and the organization. As such, the reader can see how the circumstances an individual works in provides context that can be understood as impediment or opportunity, or both. This report will describe the Myanmar cultural landscape within which the Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) organization operates and the ethical dynamics that have impacted the rise of Zin Wah Kyu within that organizational framework.

Brown, Trevino, and Harrison define the concept of ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (2005, 118). The following four categories of ethical leadership will be used to interpret the ethical leadership qualities of Zin Wah Kyu: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership, and virtuous ethical leadership. First, it is helpful to consider the mass media context in Myanmar. According to Neto and Wellenius, “Communication and information services in the developing world have experienced explosive growth. Between 1980 and 2005 the number of phones (fixed and mobile) multiplied 30-fold” (2008, 3). Each region of the world has been impacted by this growth in unique ways, and Myanmar is no exception: “Within the last five years, Myanmar’s media landscape has undergone significant changes. Prior to 2013, prepublication censorship and the existence of very few independent media made access to reliable information difficult and for the main part people had to rely on state propaganda” (Lehman-Jacobsen 2018, 5). These changes have been part of Myanmar’s path to universal service, which is “a policy to ensure that all people have access and are able to use telecommunications services . . . in particular for people living in rural and remote parts of the country and poorer households” (Swe 2018, 37).

Today approximately thirty-four percent of the Myanmar population has access to the Internet (up from twenty-six percent in 2017) and are active social media users (Kemp 2018). Facebook figures prominently in this equation. According to Lehmann-Jacobsen, “Facebook is by far the most popular social media [in Myanmar]—and for many Facebook is the Internet” (2018). Such features are echoed in other areas within Myanmar:

In the midst of rapid socio-political transition, Myanmar is building its telecommunications infrastructure by opening its market

to international mobile companies and engaging in national regulatory reform. With one of the lowest Internet and mobile subscriber rates in the world, Myanmar faces multiple challenges in building connectivity from both an infrastructural and a policy perspective (Calderaro 2015, 1).

The larger political spectrum within Myanmar provides a framework for this technological evolution:

Since the 2015 election of the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate whose international reputation has suffered irreparable damage over her failure to speak out over the military's ethnic cleansing of the beleaguered Rohingya minority, the international press remains under attack. A Reuters investigation into a Rohingya mass grave led to the jailing of two of their local reporters in late 2017 (Long 2018, 11).

The global spotlight continues to shine on the Rohingya plight in Rakhine. "The conflict in Rakhine has further highlighted the lack of knowledge of people's media habits and their ability to critically reflect on digital content, with large amounts of disinformation and hate speech dominating Facebook feeds and spilling into the mainstream media's narratives" (Gowen and Bearak 2017, 6).

Technological innovation matters bleed into other issues of Myanmar life. For instance, the Myanmar Broadcasting Law states that "Myanmar is one of the few states worldwide that has not yet signed the major human rights treaties, but is still obligated under international customary law to follow such standards" (2015, 3). Thus, the relevance of human rights cannot be assumed in Myanmar. "Democracy requires an independent media to enable the free flow of information and ideas to the public so that individuals can make better decisions that affect their own lives, and the authorities can be held to account" (Myanmar Broadcasting Law 2015, 2).

Present day Myanmar is observed to lack encouragement for free expression. BBC Media Action noted that "Quantitative studies on media habits in Myanmar produce inconclusive results due to participants being unwilling or hesitant to provide opinions" (2016). The accepted role of journalists is a factor in this situation.

If people living in Myanmar—including those affected by conflict—do not understand the role of independent media and

are afraid to speak to journalists, their voices and stories will not be heard and they will not be empowered to participate in the peace process. Journalists must work to break down these barriers (McElhone 2017, 15–16).

Zin Wah Kyu is the Chief Engineer at the Myanmar Radio and Television Headquarters, located about an hour drive outside of Nay Pyi Taw. It sits in a desolate rural area. As such the expansive MRTV Headquarters complex stands prominent. There are roughly three thousand people employed at MRTV and they all live in government housing that is adjacent to the MRTV Headquarters complex.

MRTV is situated as a sub-unit within the Ministry of Information. The objectives of the Ministry of Information are to inform, educate, and entertain the people. As such, the emphasis breakdown is conveyed as thirty-five percent information, twenty percent education and forty-five percent entertainment. The Ministry of Information is comprised of the following departments: MRTV (Myanmar Radio and Television); Information and Public Relations; Printing and Publishing; News and Periodical Enterprise; and the Film Corporation. MRTV is guided by a Director General, who is supported by two Deputy Generals (one for content/programming and one for finance/administration). The MRTV is broken down into seven supporting units: television, radio, music, international concerns, engineering, administration and finance.

Zin Wah Kyu has worked as an engineer within MRTV for the past thirty-five years. Her ascent within the engineering ranks at MRTV began in 1984 after she completed an undergraduate degree that stressed the fundamentals of electrical engineering. It should be noted that this was long before Myanmar's modernization developments, which means that her training was very limited by today's standards. Prior to 1984 she had been raised in a family where her father was an engineer. She received her high school degree in 1979.

Her initial employment at MRTV was as an assistant technician. Then she advanced through the ranks of technician, assistant engineer, engineer, senior engineer, deputy engineer, and finally the chief engineer for both radio and television. She describes how her advancement through each rank involved many years of dedicated effort, focusing on fundamental ethical principles in her own career and leadership style.

Zin Wah Kyu lives by a unique philosophy that embraces a fundamental emphasis on ethical considerations. She explains that her professional

development has been grounded in recognition of ethically sound meanings for making the MRTV engineering situational dynamics come together in a way that reinforces organizational efficiency.

It is important to mention how fundamentally basic electrical engineering had been in Myanmar during her years as an engineer at MRTV. She explains that her undergraduate training in electrical engineering only provided a general orientation to the field of electrical engineering and that there was no opportunity to pursue meaningful advanced training in electrical engineering in Myanmar. Instead, she shares that she and her contemporaries learned by doing. Trial, error, and experimentation were a significant part of their learning curve, as well as considerable practical hands-on learning that built upon itself. There were limited training periods offered via international linkages, but otherwise much of what they learned came by reading professional journals and seeking guidance from Internet sources.

It is remarkable to observe what these engineers have been able to achieve by continually building upon basic foundations. Zin Wah Kyu stresses that her attention to ethical variables was key as she sought to build her levels of expertise and worked to guide others along that path. This, in turn offered structure for her growth.

She credits MRTV's organizational culture's emphasis on informal and formal ethical values as being helpful with her job functions. Regarding the latter, one can see concrete emphasis on ethical standards in the Broadcasting Law manual for MRTV. The Code of Conduct section clearly delineates expectations having to do with moral and ethical values; impartiality; protection of children; acceptable boundaries for taste; and treatment of religion, ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged groups.

The MRTV "Broadcasting Law" manual is supplemented by a "Broadcasting Code of Conduct" directive that covers all areas of the broadcasting process within MRTV, including the engineering area in which Zin Wah Kyu works. This directive defines standards for accuracy, politics, religion, discrimination, children, privacy, legal matters, elections, advertising, and rectification. It goes through each of these areas in a comprehensive manner.

The accuracy standard stresses balance, impartiality, and avoidance of deception. The politics standard conveys concern about broadcasting information that might needlessly depress the nation or might sacrifice safety. The guidelines concerning religion address caution with regard to the treatment of religion, especially having to do with nationalities, while the discrimination standard covers nondiscrimination policy with minorities, gender, age,

race, and physical handicap. The code also focuses on children in terms of classification of programs and possible subliminal images, and stresses parental rights concerning what their children are exposed to. Privacy variables are inherent within many of these “Broadcasting Code of Conduct” domains.

Myanmar has representative values and boundaries that are unique to their circumstances. As such, one will see commensurate constraints on the portrayal of sexual conduct, violence, antisocial behavior, and the use of abusive language. The guidelines for reporting on legal developments are to not interfere with trial proceedings and should acknowledge that a suspect is innocent until proven guilty. Elections coverage should be fair, with all candidates covered in a balanced manner with due respect for electoral regulations.

General ethical provisions are described as having to do with all areas of broadcasting. These include that archives are to be kept for at least three months. There will not be plagiarism or any reporting that promotes immorality or obscenity, vulgar expressions, falsely defamatory statements, or indecency. Broadcast rectification is stipulated in all areas in that any significant factual mistakes are to be corrected within twenty-four hours.

These areas of concern cover a wide range of broadcast functions and provide a spirit of intent for the overall organizational functioning with regard to ethics. It is that overall spirit of intent that Zin Wah Kyu recognizes as helpful in guiding her work both in detail and comprehensive intention.

The following four categories of ethical leadership can be used to interpret the ethical leadership qualities of Zin Wah Kyu: charismatic ethical leadership, contingent reward ethical leadership, regulatory focus ethical leadership, and virtuous ethical leadership. Illustrations for each category will be offered from perspectives she has conveyed. Use of the aforementioned four categories is stressed within a Myanmar cultural understanding. Hence, depiction of Myanmar leadership ethics is enhanced via interpretation using a Myanmar theoretical frame of reference.

#### Charismatic Ethical Leadership

According to Brown and Trevino (2005, 956) charismatic ethical leadership is defined as “inspirational leaders who convey ethical values, are other-centered rather than self-centered, and who role model ethical conduct.” During my time working within MRTV, I recognized an organizational culture that embraces a spirit of compromise that is consistently reaffirmed by Zin Wah Kyu as she seeks to guide the varied aspects of her work as they come together to effectively meet organizational objectives. This manifestation is found to be both explicit and implicit.

### Contingent Reward Ethical Leadership

The concept of contingent reward ethical leadership is defined as “an exchange of rewards between leaders and followers in which effort is rewarded by providing rewards for good performance or threats and disciplines for poor performance” (Muenjohn 2008, 6). As the only chief engineer, Zin Wah Kyu has considerable authority over decision making within MRTV. She can reward desirable behaviors and penalize undesirable behaviors as a method to guide her area of responsibility in desirable directions.

She explains how she consistently seeks to be creative with her application of influence within the organization, realizing that desired or unintended effects could be a result. As such, she needs to be sensitive to overall meanings and expectations that are created in relation to her actions. She feels that consistency, fairness, and no appearances to the contrary are key for her leadership to have the desired impact.

### Regulatory Focus Ethical Leadership

Regulatory Focus Ethical Leadership “has two components, which are ethical promotion focus and ethical prevention focus” (Shao 2010, 79). That is, in some instances we can promote ethical objectives while, in other instances, we can better realize ethical objectives via prevention of some behaviors. She recognizes this area of leadership to emphasize leader responsibility for creating a supportive climate whereby organizational members are valued for their contributions and feel valued for their contributions. This can be a delicate balancing act that requires continual focus on organizational needs and outcomes.

### Virtuous Ethical Leadership

The concept of virtuous ethical leadership is defined as leading with “behaviors beneficial to others that reflect moral ideals and involve personal costs or risks. Virtuous ethical behaviors are praiseworthy if performed and not blameworthy if not performed” (Trevino, Brown, and Hartman 2003, 10). Zin Wah Kyu sees this domain as being key insofar as she seeks to lead by example. She shares that she continually needs to reflect on who she is as a leader and what her goals are within the organizational context, paying heed to the image that is conveyed to others. She seeks to be genuine with her behavior with the hope that virtuous intent will be evident, rather than seeking to simply be virtuous. The observations of this author are that she has been successful with that intent.



The present and future of Myanmar are strongly impacted by its quality of leaders who guide Myanmar along the path toward effective functioning and modernization. Ethical concerns will be relevant to effective progression along that path. There will be setbacks along the way but, using the past as a guide, progress will be realized and ethical leaders such as Zin Wah Kyu will be part of that evolution.

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