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The Urgency of Ethical Leadership in Politics

President Vicente Fox

We live in an era of fast-moving societies; everything is changing at the speed of light. China was the poorest country in the world sixty years ago, and now it has the world's second-largest economy.

“The world has become a global village,” said Marshall McLuhan. He meant everything is interconnected. Fifty years ago, what happened in a faraway country did not matter to us; today is different. What happens in China, North Korea, Africa, or South America affects us all.

With so many things changing all over the world, who is managing the effects of the changes, and who is deploying those changes? And the question number one: Are these changes good or not?

Importance of Ethics in all Human Activities

Ethics is a must in all human activities, in family, at work, in social relationships, and so on. If a leader is not an ethical person, things will go wrong. One of the most important human activities is politics, since politicians manage whole countries. This is the field where leaders can do their best for their societies and the human race or they can do the greatest harm, as leaders like Hitler did harm to his country and to the whole world.

Political leaders have a tremendous task in a wide spectrum because of social, economic, legal, public health, security challenges—in short, solving all the problems of coexistence is part of their job. When we are talking of coexistence, it includes everyone sharing the very same existence, the same community, the same planet; that is why ethics is the most important issue here. I strongly believe the bright future of the human race rests on ethics, and anything lacking ethics can be a curse. Take scientific progress for example: in the hands of greedy or evil persons it will hurt humanity. However, the very same knowledge employed by ethical people will do much good.

Five Principles of Ethical Leadership in Politics

Being the leader of a country involves a broad range of political tasks. One person does not have all the knowledge required to manage a nation.

Nobody is a great economist and a great doctor, lawyer, negotiator, specialist in international relations, a super genius in military matters, and so on. Nobody has all the qualities and knowledge required to run a country by himself or herself.

It took thousands of years, from the beginning with Egyptian pharaohs to the eighteenth-century French Encyclopédistes, to realize that political governance should be done by three different and independent powers—executive, legislative, and judicial— not by a king by himself.

With the complications of modern times, the executives of the world deal with many of the hardest administrative problems. They need a flight chart and a moral compass. The flight chart is the government's plan for the time they are in office and beyond. The *moral compass*—or ethical GPS, to reference a more modern tool—is the principles and qualities required to be an ethical leader.

There can be a great number of principles required for this matter, and everyone will have different opinions, which is fine. I chose these five principles when I was president of Mexico from December 1, 2000 to November 30, 2006:

1. Respect for Human Dignity

Every human being has dignity and is worthy of respect from others, regardless of economic, social, racial, or religious matters.

If I made a drawing and threw it away, it would not be worth a penny. But if Picasso made a drawing, and you picked it up from the floor, it would be worth millions of dollars. Why is this so?

Its value comes from its creator: Picasso, in this example. In the case of any person, the creator is God, which is why every human being has a priceless dignity and is worthy of the highest respect.

2. Invariably Pursue the Common Benefit

Forget about having favorites and preferred ones. A president, a governor, or a mayor should work for all, not only for friends, voters, party members, the rich, or whatever you suggest. If a leader pursues the common benefit, the friends, voters, the rich, and so on are going to profit from such decisions, too.

However, what to do if a decision is good for many but negatively affects others? This problem is very common in political leadership, may it be the case of building an airport or a reservoir, or sending an army to another country. When there is a conflict of interests, the three following principles help to see things more clearly.

3. Justice

Justice goes together with ethics; there is no unjust ethics.

The principle of justice deals with philosophy, and is the hardest one to explain as I am talking about justice as a whole and not a specialty therein, like legal justice, justice according to religion, commutative justice, distributive justice, etc. Justice as a whole is the justice I mean. It will help us to understand the term justice, if we analyze what justice is for, what is its purpose, and the aim of justice is to ensure a peaceful and orderly society. The classical definition of justice also helps: "Giving to everyone his or her due."¹

Going to the basics, I would recommend the following to make just decisions:

If it is legal problems you are dealing with, never break the legal and technical issues of the law. As the Romans said: "If you hesitate, avoid..."

If what you are dealing with is another kind of justice, seek counsel from an expert.

Trying to reach just decisions is a commendable job, but it is impossible for humans to be one-hundred percent just all the time. However, the higher your aim, the better your accomplishments.

The following two principles will help you.

4. Be Cautious and Wise

Do not make decisions before you have weighed the pros and cons, studied the problem and implications, and consulted experts, if necessary. Forget improvising. Impromptu performance: NO! NEVER!

However, be aware your time is limited, and never postpone an ethical decision when the time is right, and you did your best to investigate the implications of the decision. Do not lose valuable time in getting very deep in the matter when it is not necessary, and you can delegate work on research.

5. Proportionality

This means to find the equilibrium between excess and shortage. Giving too much can be as bad as not giving enough.

Proportionality is always in the virtuous range, if you fall into excess or shortage you lose effectiveness and justice and, once again, without justice, there is no ethics.

Conclusion

In addition to the principles, the ethical leader must know how to get good use of the qualities he or she possesses, and all of us have, at least some. Good qualities like working hard, generosity, humility, honesty, and effectiveness are some of the qualities most appreciated in an ethical leader, especially in politics. Because the world has an urgent need for ethical leaders, organizations that promote ethics are so important and are doing a great job.

Notes

1. UNESDOC, UNESCO Digital Library, unesdoc.unesco.org.