

Justice, the Outward-Looking Virtue

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About the Author

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If a ruler is just, he or she seems to profit nothing by it. . . . The ruler seems to labor for another's benefit; this is why justice is said to be another person's good.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5

People sometimes tell me that they know or work for a leader who does not resemble the one Rob and I describe in our book *The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders*. Examples abound of leaders who are motivated by self-interest, whose aim is personal profit or the benefit of a few at the expense of many, or who, for other reasons, show little concern for those they lead. Such leaders are found in every kind of human community, including nations, corporations, higher education institutions, and faith-based organizations.

Not all leadership is virtuous leadership.

Of the nine that Rob and I address in our book, justice is the defining virtue of virtuous leadership. Why? Because unlike the other virtues, justice is outward looking. Whereas a person can be courageous with respect to himself or herself, justice has meaning only with respect to others. Justice is about how one relates to others. The reader of *The 9 Virtues* will recall that virtues are habits necessary to achieve well-being or a good life. The virtuous leader exhibits justice through his or her concern for the well-being of others.

Except for the virtue of charity (love), probably more has been written about justice than any other virtue. Not surprisingly, Rob and I found circumscribing the subject a challenge. A common interpretation of justice is obeying the law. The just citizen is equated with the law-abiding citizen. The just leader is the leader who upholds the law. While this definition is a helpful way of understanding justice, two other concepts are important to understanding the practice of justice in leadership.

Justice and Transactional Leadership

Justice is treating equals equally and unequals unequally.

If two people have the same relative position in an organization and the same level of responsibility, then justice is treating them the same in terms of resources, expectations, rewards, and other factors necessary for them to succeed. However, if one person has significantly different responsibilities than another—that is, they are unequal—then the just leader must treat them as unequals. A manager who oversees a division, a large staff and employees, and a multimillion dollar budget is treated differently with respect to his or her job than the entry-level employee.

This type of justice is concerned with fairness. Consider fairness in the context of what James MacGregor Burns called *transactional leadership*. Transactional leadership occurs at the leader-follower nexus of goals, motivations, wants, and needs. The leader and follower exchange

(transact) valued things—for example, money for work, time for establishing a business relationship, philanthropy for recognition.

Transactional leadership is bargaining, and virtuous leaders bargain fairly. Fairness is exceedingly difficult because the leader must often make decisions for the collective good of others, but what is good for others varies widely. For example, what is good for stockholders and what is good for employees are sometimes at odds. Knowing what is fair is often difficult precisely because fairness does not require treating everyone the same. It requires treating equals equally and unequals unequally.

Dialogue between leaders, followers, and other stakeholders is critical for understanding what is fair. Clear expectations, job descriptions, performance agreements, and policies help to define what is fair. As Rob and I state in *The 9 Virtues*, fairness, as a transaction, is also a two-way street: People in the organization have a right to expect fair treatment from their leaders, and leaders have a right to expect fairness in the behaviors from those who comprise the organization. Knowing what constitutes fairness requires yet another virtue, wisdom.

That a leader considers the question of fairness is a step in the direction of virtuous leadership. Transactional leadership, even when fairness is attained, is limited to an exchange between leader and follower: “a day’s work for a day’s pay.” There is nothing that binds the leader and the follower to a purpose greater than the exchange. In summary, transactional leadership is a legitimate form of leadership, and virtuous leaders aim for fairness.

As a leader, how do you aim for fairness?

Justice and Transformational Leadership

Justice is giving each person his or her due. From this perspective, *justice* is defined by the leader’s responsibility to give each follower what rightfully belongs to him or her, whether that right is determined by nature or by contract. For example, the Declaration of Independence assumes that humans are endowed with unalienable natural rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Governments are formed to secure these rights, rights due to each human being by their very nature. In human communities (businesses, schools, institutions, and other organizations), what is due extends beyond natural rights and is usually defined in writing, in policies and contracts. Whether natural or contractual rights, the just leader endeavors to ensure everyone receives what is due to him or her.

If we believe that humans have a right to achieve their potential, then *justice* supports the notion that an environment and culture that support human achievement are due. Concerned for others, the virtuous leader will create an environment and culture in which followers can thrive. How?

First, the leader creates opportunities for followers to grow and achieve as they contribute to the organization's goals. While not even a virtuous leader can guarantee that followers will thrive, experience happiness, or even be satisfied with their jobs, he or she can establish and support the conditions in which followers can have fulfilling jobs and succeed. In his research on what motivates us at work, Daniel Pink found that monetary compensation (transactional leadership) is important, but only to a point. Once people are paid enough to take money off the table, what really matters to motivation is (1) autonomy (having the freedom to create and contribute); (2) mastery (getting better at what one does); and (3) purpose (knowing that what one does matters). Leaders should consider what they do to create environments and cultures that tap into these motivations.

Leadership that assumes the follower has a right as a human to a fulfilling and meaningful job, to develop and achieve one's potential, is *transformational leadership*. In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership engages people in a higher purpose, vision, values, and commitments that are shared. There are many recognizable examples of transformational leaders: Elizabeth I, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Bill and Melinda Gates, to name a few. Less-known transformational leaders are found in businesses, schools, churches, and other organizations in our communities and around the globe.

Virtuous leaders are *just* leaders. They transform others by helping others achieve their human potential while engaging them in the vision, mission, values, and goals of the communities and organizations they lead. What have you seen virtuous leaders do to transform others?

Application: From Fairness to Thriving

Justice is a complex concept. Even the application of justice to the workplace is difficult to circumscribe, because the concept is so broad.

Fairness

From one perspective, laws define justice. During the industrial revolution, labor unions emerged to define justice by protecting the rights of workers. Institutions and companies develop policies and procedures to define what justice means in their organizations. In these examples, justice is generally described as fairness. Below are four basic ways of thinking about justice as fairness, whether in organizations or governments:

- *Procedural justice* is about the fairness and openness of processes by which decisions are made.
- *Distributive justice* addresses fairness in the allocation of resources and goods.
- *Interactional justice* is about the fairness of interpersonal treatment by those in power and colleagues.
- *Retributive justice* concerns the response to a wrong act—for example, punishment in retribution for doing something considered wrong.

While we cannot here define all the ways that the leader ensures fairness, below is a basic checklist, in no order, for leaders to consider:

Fairness Checklist

- Are employees paid fairly for the work that they do in comparison to others with similar responsibilities and in relation to organizational resources?
- Do employees understand organizational policies, procedures, and measures that affect their successful job performance? Do they understand the consequences of not performing to established standards? (Understanding is more than just being told.)
- Are employees invited to engage in meaningful conversations with leadership?
- Are the necessary resources—human, financial, and other—provided for the employee to achieve the outcomes expected of him or her?
- Does the organization discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age, disability, or genetic information?
- Do employees have a means of addressing conflicts or disagreements with organizational leadership and with colleagues?
- Can employees advance to greater levels of responsibility and contribution based on performance? If not, can the employee leave the organization for new opportunities without repercussions?

Use this checklist to consider and to assess fairness in your company or institution. If there are problems ensuring fairness, what specifically can you do to address them?

Thriving

Justice as fairness is a minimum standard. While leaders sometimes claim to be “more than fair,” anything less than fair is unjust. I would like to go beyond the minimum and look at justice in the way that I defined it in the context of transformational leadership. This type of justice is more proactive than fairness. The leader’s motive becomes a primary consideration, because he or she is genuinely motivated by a concern for others, even while clearly focusing on the organization’s mission and goals.

A principle taught at the Disney Institute is that the extent to which the leader genuinely cares for his or her employees is the same extent to which they will care for clients, students, customers, and one another. Based on his research, Stanford University business professor Jeffery Pfeffer found that work environments impact employees’ health, medical costs, and even life span. He argues that, “The greatest leaders are the ones who run places that care for their employees ... and those who run organizations whose mission and purpose entails caring for people’s health and well-being.” Pfeffer then gives examples—people like James Goodnight, co-founder and CEO of software company SAS Institute, a company with a designated Chief Health Officer, and Amir Dan Rubin, CEO of Stanford Healthcare, who led in the adoption of the

mission, “healing humanity through science and compassion, one person at a time.” As I said in the section Justice and Transformational Leadership, if we believe that humans have a right to achieve their potential, then justice supports that an environment and culture that support human achievement are due; thus, the virtuous leader will create an environment and culture in which followers can thrive.

To conclude, I would like to propose a second checklist. Like the first, it is incomplete, but the focus of this list goes beyond fairness to *thriving*, to *justice as transformative leadership*:

Thriving Checklist

- ❑ Do employees receive training and development to help them improve job performance, work competencies, and themselves?
- ❑ Do the leaders of the organization inspire through a compelling vision and mission? Is the organization purpose driven, and do employees buy in to the purpose?
- ❑ Are the values of the organization clear? Does leadership model those values?
- ❑ Are employees encouraged to take vacations and time away from work to reflect and recharge? *Away* means without being tethered by technology.
- ❑ Does the organization have a wellness program?
- ❑ Within appropriate limits, are employees encouraged to try new ideas and, when not successful, learn from failures?
- ❑ Is there a reward system that goes beyond monetary compensation (e.g., recognition, time off, and other nonmonetary rewards)?
- ❑ Are employees encouraged to contribute to causes outside of the organization through volunteer activities and other involvement—on the organization’s time?
- ❑ Does the organization promote mentoring of less-experienced employees by more-experienced, successful employees?

One of my objectives in writing about justice is to give the reader deeper insight into a complex idea, the “outward-looking virtue.” But, as with the other virtues, the aim is not knowledge but practice. To that end, I hope the reader finds these checklists worthy of consideration, exploration, discussion, and, where needed, action. Virtuous leaders practice justice.

Recommended Reading

Adler, M.J. *Six Great Ideas*. New York: Touchstone, 1997. Adler’s book contains a section on liberty, equality, and justice for those who would like a deeper analysis of these related concepts.

Burns, J.M. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978. This text is the classic book on transactional and transformational leadership.

Haden, N.K. and Jenkins, R. *The 9 Virtues of Exceptional Leaders, Unlocking Your Leadership Potential*. Atlanta: Deeds, 2015. To download a copy of Chapter 13, Justice, go to http://www.aalgroup.org/uploads/files/Chapter13_Justice.pdf.

Pink, D. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead, 2009. Pink's research is summarized nicely in an 11-minute YouTube video.

Sashkin M. and Sashkin M.G. *Leadership That Matters*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003. A more recent book on transformational leadership, Sashkin and Sashkin provide a readable and practical guide.

References

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Lynch, S. Why your workplace might be killing you. *Insights by Stanford Business*, February 23, 2015, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/why-your-workplace-might-be-killing-you>.

Pfeffer, J. Who are the world's best leaders? *Fortune*, May 26, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/03/26/best-leaders-employee-well-being/>.