

The unfortunate high-profile miscues by individuals in both the public and private sectors (Foley, Ebbers, Lay, etc.), as well as a plethora of everyday miscues at lower levels, all involved a deficiency in ethical leadership. Over the course of time, individuals have tried to complicate the elements of ethical leadership but the elements are as simple as the ABCs. Colonel (Retired) Tony Hardin makes this point clearly in his book “Hardin’s ABCs of Avoiding Unethical Behavior: Simple but Critical Advice for Leaders in Any Profession.”

Chapter 1

Introduction (Excerpt)

“Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth—to see it as it is, and tell it like it is—to find the truth, to speak the truth, and to live the truth.”

What leader spoke these profound words? Abraham Lincoln? Mother Theresa? General Eisenhower? The answer is none of the above. Surprisingly, Richard M. Nixon spoke these words when he accepted the 1968 Republican nomination for president of the United States. Powerful, powerful words!

I discovered President Nixon’s acceptance speech as a senior Air Force ROTC cadet while attending Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. The words captivated me in every way. As an emerging new leader, I wanted to know what had gone so very wrong for President Nixon. Why did his actions stray so far from his words?

Like most conscientious leaders, President Nixon had ethics at the forefront of his vision and values. He had at least the makings of an ethical framework. An ethical framework is simply a collection of things you believe in and consistently abide by in your life. The things you allow to shape you. However, in spite of Nixon’s great intellect, he had not built a solid ethical framework as a leader and he allowed himself to get sidetracked. He allowed himself to use expediency and rationalization as excuses for his misconduct. Somehow, he forgot ethical behavior is the nucleus of leadership.

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This senior year experience in college piqued my interest in ethics and how ethical frameworks are built. Over the course of my Air Force career, I became a curious observer of leaders at all levels. I had some great assignments, including two years in direct support of the President of the United States as Director of Resources at the White House Communications Agency. I honed my ethical leadership beliefs during assignments as a Commander, an instructor at the Department of Defense’s premier military institutions, and other challenging senior-level positions. Early in my Air Force career, I got the opportunity to share my personal ethical framework as an Air Force ROTC instructor.

So, why write a book? I sat in a staff meeting at the Pentagon one morning and I listened to two senior level Air Force officials explain the downfall of the Air Force’s top lawyer, a two-star general. The top lawyer, allegedly, had affairs with 13 officers, enlisted members, and civilians during the latter part of

his career.¹ The very person charged with upholding justice within the Air Force had fallen far from his ethical framework or had never established one.

Because this occurred on the heels of other well known ethical lapses within and outside of the Air Force, it had a serious negative impact on the morale of Air Force members. The negative impact to morale heightened when the general receive a punishment widely perceived as “light” (reduction in retirement rank), particularly when lower ranking individuals who committed lesser offenses in the past received harsher punishments (to include jail time).

As the two senior officers discussed the demise of their colleague and friend, they discussed the perils of e-mail and how e-mails provided the smoking gun in assuring the downfall of the top lawyer. I sat there stunned. As a Colonel in the Air Force, I had had a difficult time explaining and defending the top lawyer’s crimes and punishment to junior Air Force members. Now two senior officers are talking about the contents of e-mail as the primary lesson learned from the situation? It didn’t compute.

After a period of uncomfortable silence in the staff meeting, I finally spoke by stating the issue isn’t e-mail protocol; it’s ethics and integrity. I went on to explain the danger of their message and how it could do further damage to the morale of our troops. They agreed and went on to explain what they really meant. However, I walked away thinking they really didn’t get it.

The senior officers had blown a golden mentoring opportunity. I had wrongly assumed the senior officers experienced the same degree of disappointment about the situation as many of us had. Instead, they dwelled on how the top lawyer was caught instead of what he had done.

Based on my experiences during my Air Force career, to include the experience at this staff meeting, I felt I could assist in helping leaders define their ethical framework. I’ve chosen to do so by sharing my own ethical framework, which I call the “ABCs of Avoiding Unethical Behavior.”

I’m not an expert and don’t claim to have all the answers. I don’t even claim to have a superior ethical framework. My ABCs of avoiding unethical behavior represent my personal framework. This book is not based on academic research, polls, or surveys. I wanted to write a book on ethical behavior that the average person could relate to. The vast majority of the book represents my views, opinions, and a few light-hearted stories. I’ve attempted to take a serious, yet entertaining, approach in making my points about the importance of ethics. Some readers will find my framework as overly simplistic – great! Some readers will get in a defensive crouch – great too! You won’t always agree.

The purpose of the book is not to get your agreement. Instead, the purpose is to get you to think about and develop your own personal framework of ethical leadership – steps critical to becoming a respected leader. I believe a critical starting point is to build this framework and strengthen it with each leadership experience.

Lastly, I’m going to give you a 100% guarantee. I’m 100% sure this book will not give you everything you need to build your ethical framework. Most of what you need will come from within. However, regardless of your profession, I do guarantee this book will be most helpful in helping you build your ethical framework. Let’s get started.

Chapter 22

Understand Yourself in Order to Better Understand Others (Excerpt)

The Johari Window is a great tool for helping you gain a better understanding of yourself. In short, the theory says you have four areas: (1) Public Area – things you know about yourself that others also know – example, you’re little overweight; (2) Unknown Area – things you don’t know about yourself and others don’t know either – example, how you might react during a fire; (3) Private Area – things you know about yourself but others don’t know – example, you have a fear of heights; and, (4) Blindspot Area – things others know about you but you don’t know about yourself – example, you talk too much. The key to the Johari Window is to learn as much about yourself as possible and to ultimately reduce the Blindspot Area.²³ As you seek to become a leader known for his ethical standards and one who avoids unethical situations, honestly ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you display enthusiasm? Your folks will reflect your degree of enthusiasm. If you don’t show enthusiasm about your work and institution, you can’t expect them to. In addition, never whine – it will spread like the common cold.
2. Do you take time to be alone? Self-reflection is critical for keeping the proper balance between family, spirituality, and work. Self-reflection also allows you to keep focus on your professional and personal goals.
3. Do you prize self-discipline? If you prize self-discipline, you will have self-discipline. Self-discipline, in this “do your own thing world”, is not always particularly prized.
4. Are you interesting? This question directly relates to number 1. If you show enthusiasm, you normally don’t come off as boring. Also, do you have fresh ideas, fresh approaches, think outside the box? Use your creative juices, coupled with an enthusiastic attitude, to ward off boredom (yours and others).
5. Are you humble? General Hugh Shelton, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, once said “The further up the flagpole you go, the more of your rear-end you show.”
Keep your humility.
6. Do you worry about being good or looking good? Don’t consume yourself with how things will “look” for you. Do the very best you can and always seek improvement and the right perceptions will fall into place.
7. Do you keep a team focus? Keep the team tightly woven – good planning, value-added contributions, and positive attitudes are necessary pieces for each member on a strong team. Also, if someone decides to leave the team and the team is better off, then that’s a clear win.

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8. Do you take yourself or your job seriously? Don't take yourself too seriously. If something happened to you today a replacement could be available tomorrow. However, you have an ethical responsibility to do your best on your job. Take your job seriously but not to the extreme (i.e., job becomes your whole life).
9. Do you work smart and hard or just hard? Don't just work hard, work hard and smart (tap into your creative juices). Some say people are "lucky" when good things happen. No, it's because the harder and smarter they worked the luckier they got.
10. Do people value your ethical standards? If no, you've got work to do. If yes, people will try to adopt your standards and their respect for you will show.

Understand yourself. Once you understand yourself, you are better able to understand others. Most importantly, a good self-understanding allows you to build a very strong ethical framework.

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¹ Josh White, "General is Sanctioned for Unprofessional Affairs", *Washington Post*, January 11, 2005, A13.

²³ Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, "Johari Window Concept", 1950's presentations, cc.yasu.edu/~jaconser/images/JohariWindowForChapt4.PDF.