

Leadership and Virtues—Justice

By Joe Whitefield

We began this series on virtues with the premise that they have fallen out of favor with many people and their use is in decline. Perhaps they are a little too old fashioned, or maybe too rigid for our modern, fluid society. Values seem like a better fit. They are less rigid and more customizable for each situation.

It is my observation that the products of this virtues-to-values shift include lower behavioral standards, less integrity, less civility, more regulation, and more confusion. Because of this change, I have attempted to make the case that virtuous leadership, however unpopular, has never been more in need. Thus far we have discussed prudence, courage, and patience; now we will now consider justice.

Justice should be the easy one. Everyone has a basic sense of fairness that is a foundation for his or her view of justice. We all want level playing fields with everyone playing by the same rules. Of all of the


virtues, it is still the one most openly talked about today. More accurately, current events perceived as injustices dominate the news cycle and our discussions of it. Often these events are overly politicized to the point where very little conversation takes place about what the real issues are. This article seeks to take a more fundamental look at justice and its relevance in organizational leadership.

THE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

The inherent problem with justice is that most of us only want it when we have been wronged by someone else—not so much when *we* are perceived to be in the wrong. When we violate some standard, we often lean much more in the direction of justification: There are always reasons why we acted the way we did. So it is justice for you with all of the appropriate consequences, and justification for me with all of the appropriate exemptions. Like I said, easy.

However, such “good-for-thee-but-not-for-me” attitudes defy justice, contributing to a culture defined by double standards. There is a story that Jimmy Johnson, when coaching the Dallas Cowboys, once cut a player struggling to make the team for falling asleep in a team meeting. Following up on this seemingly harsh punishment, someone asked Coach Johnson what he would have done if his star quarterback Troy Aikman had fallen asleep. Coach Johnson said he would have walked over to Troy and simply asked him to wake up and pay attention. What do you think: double standard or justifiable difference? Either way, double standards and inconsistent behaviors (real or perceived) undermine the faith people place in their organizations and their leaders. Fueled with distrust, some people resort to willful violations of policies, standards, or acceptable behavior. They act on a feeling of justification as they rationalize their increasingly poor or disruptive behavior. Left unaddressed, this unhealthy environment is potentially dangerous.

All of this is to say that leaders have the difficult task of maintaining level playing fields when there are vast differences in employees and in their



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individual paradigms of fairness. So here is a thought for the leader wanting to be more just: Enhance efforts at equality with approaches that are equitable.

Very few situations and no two people are exactly alike. As such, equality, if singularly defined as identical, is rarely attainable. However, an equitable approach goes beyond basic equality by accounting for differences and providing individualized responses that are of *equal value*. For instance, my two children chose to attend different colleges. One was a state school three hours from home, and the other was a private school closer to home. Both situations involved a different combination of financial contributions and various commitments from both parents and children in order to accomplish their educational goals. These college paths and everyone's contributions were not identical (equal), but they were equitable. Both children were given the opportunity to pursue the education of their choice at the school of their choice. By placing an appropriate value on the ability to choose, greater equity was achieved than could be seen on a financial statement or report card.

In an organizational setting, equity should be sought where possible. This means attributing value to opportunities and accounting for inevitable differences equitably. Doing so will have a leveling effect on the playing fields within organizations by reducing the appearance of double standards. Keep in mind, level playing fields do not necessarily produce equal outcomes. However, differences in outcomes can be more easily identified and evaluated if the standards are equal and the expectations are equitable.

THE ORDER OF THINGS

When describing elected governmental leaders in his book *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*, Eric Metaxas says that they are "inevitably representatives of the larger order of things." And that a lack of virtue on the part of these leaders plays a decisive role in undermining the entire enterprise of democracy. I believe the same is basically true for organizations. Thus, one of the main goals of any leader should be to help

people maintain faith in the organizational system and its leadership so that the enterprise is successful. To accomplish this, a leader should be virtuous. And a virtuous leader should certainly be just. §

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