

Ethics Beyond the Law – The Ethical Leader

“The most ethical way to deal with an unethical situation would be to simply say, “We did something wrong.” - Patti Davis

Sounds like the most logical thing in the world. When we are wrong, admit that we are wrong.

Yet how often do we and others find ourselves tempted to do exactly the opposite, to insist that we were right? And how often do we give in to that temptation?

In addition to the fear of the consequences of ethical failure made public, there often is a lingering uncertainty about our conduct. Yes, there are public officials who clearly know what they are doing is wrong, and do it anyway, for as long as they can get away with it. But most municipal elected officials with whom I’ve worked don’t approach their public service that way. It’s the gray stuff that gets us in trouble.

You thought I meant ‘gray’ as in ‘not black, not white’? No, that’s not what I mean.

I mean the gray stuff inside our skulls.

As vitally important as ethical thinking is to public service (and to leadership more generally), it is not something we teach as much as we should. Yes, we have ‘ethics training,’ but typically, the ethics we teach is about ethics *law*, not ethics.

Most ethics laws are inspired by ethical principles that are widely accepted. Sometimes ethics laws go too far, constraining perfectly reasonable and otherwise ethical behavior in the name of ethics reform. The law is, after all, a blunt instrument, more of a meat cleaver than a surgeon’s scalpel.

Whatever the state of our ethics laws, they are an imperfect guide to ethical conduct. They only codify as illegal what our council or commission or the state legislature has chosen to codify. They don’t cover every ethical consideration, and they aren’t always truly ethical in their impact or enforcement.

Of course, we should obey the ethics laws that apply to us. But being an ethical leader involves a much higher standard than simply not breaking the law.

The Ethical Leader: Rules and Tools focuses on ethics beyond the law. We will develop a practical understanding of how one can make ethical decisions when what is ethical is unclear. And I believe participants will discover that this most practical of the fields of philosophy offers us much more in the way of good counsel and challenging inspiration than the ethics code any government has (or can) adopt.