

AUTHOR'S NOTE

WHO AM I TO TELL others what ethical leadership is? Anyone claiming to write a book about ethical leadership can come across as presumptuous, even sanctimonious. All the more so if that author happens to be someone who was quite memorably and publicly fired from his last job.

I understand the impulse to think that any book written about one's life experience can be an exercise in vanity, which is why I long resisted the idea of writing a book of my own. But I changed my mind for an important reason. We are experiencing a dangerous time in our country, with a political environment where basic facts are disputed, fundamental truth is questioned, lying is normalized, and unethical behavior is ignored, excused, or rewarded. This is not just happening in our nation's capital, and not just in the United States. It is a troubling trend that has touched institutions across America and around the world—boardrooms of major companies, newsrooms, university campuses, the entertainment industry, and professional and Olympic sports. For some of the crooks, liars, and abusers, there has been a reckoning. For others, there remain excuses, justifications, and a stubborn

willingness by those around them to look the other way or even enable the bad behavior.

So if there ever was a time when an examination of ethical leadership would be useful, it is now. Although I am no expert, I have studied, read, and thought about ethical leadership since I was a college student and struggled for decades with how to practice it. No perfect leader is available to offer those lessons, so it falls to the rest of us who care about such things to drive the conversation and challenge ourselves and our leaders to do better.

Ethical leaders do not run from criticism, especially self-criticism, and they don't hide from uncomfortable questions. They welcome them. All people have flaws and I have many. Some of mine, as you'll discover in this book, are that I can be stubborn, prideful, overconfident, and driven by ego. I've struggled with those my whole life. There are plenty of moments I look back on and wish I had done things differently, and a few that I am downright embarrassed by. Most of us have those moments. The important thing is that we learn from them and hopefully do better.

I don't love criticism, but I know I can be wrong, even when I am certain I am right. Listening to others who disagree with me and are willing to criticize me is essential to piercing the seduction of certainty. Doubt, I've learned, is wisdom. And the older I get, the less I know for certain. Those leaders who never think they are wrong, who never question their judgments or perspectives, are a danger to the organizations and people they lead. In some cases, they are a danger to the nation and the world.

I have learned that ethical leaders lead by seeing beyond the short-term, beyond the urgent, and take every action with a view toward lasting values. They might find their values in a religious tradition or a moral worldview or even an appreciation of history. But those values—like truth, integrity, and respect for others, to name just a few—serve

as external reference points for ethical leaders to make decisions, especially hard decisions in which there is no easy or good option. Those values are more important than what may pass for prevailing wisdom or the groupthink of a tribe. Those values are more important than the impulses of the bosses above them and the passions of the employees below them. They are more important than the organization's profitability and bottom line. Ethical leaders choose a higher loyalty to those core values over their own personal gain.

Ethical leadership is also about understanding the truth about humans and our need for meaning. It is about building workplaces where standards are high and fear is low. Those are the kinds of cultures where people will feel comfortable speaking the truth to others as they seek excellence in themselves and the people around them.

Without a fundamental commitment to the truth—especially in our public institutions and those who lead them—we are lost. As a legal principle, if people don't tell the truth, our justice system cannot function and a society based on the rule of law begins to dissolve. As a leadership principle, if leaders don't tell the truth, or won't hear the truth from others, they cannot make good decisions, they cannot themselves improve, and they cannot inspire trust among those who follow them.

The good news is that integrity and truth-telling can be modeled in powerful ways, shaping cultures of honesty, openness, and transparency. Ethical leaders can mold a culture by their words and, more important, by their actions, because they are always being watched. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true. Dishonest leaders have the same ability to shape a culture, by showing their people dishonesty, corruption, and deception. A commitment to integrity and a higher loyalty to truth are what separate the ethical leader from those who just happen to occupy leadership roles. We cannot ignore the difference.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the title of this book. In one sense, it came out of a bizarre dinner meeting at the White House,

where a new president of the United States demanded my loyalty—to him, personally—over my duties as FBI director to the American people. But in another, deeper sense, the title is the culmination of four decades in law, as a federal prosecutor, business lawyer, and working closely with three U.S. presidents. In all those jobs, I learned from those around me and tried to pass on to those I worked with that there is a higher loyalty in all of our lives—not to a person, not to a party, not to a group. The higher loyalty is to lasting values, most important the truth. I hope this book is useful in stimulating all of us to think about the values that sustain us, and to search for leadership that embodies those values.

EPILOGUE

I AM WRITING IN A time of great anxiety in my country. I understand the anxiety, but also believe America is going to be fine. I choose to see opportunity as well as danger.

Donald Trump's presidency threatens much of what is good in this nation. We all bear responsibility for the deeply flawed choices put before voters during the 2016 election, and our country is paying a high price: this president is unethical, and untethered to truth and institutional values. His leadership is transactional, ego driven, and about personal loyalty. We are fortunate some ethical leaders have chosen to serve and to stay at senior levels of government, but they cannot prevent all of the damage from the forest fire that is the Trump presidency. Their task is to try to contain it.

I see many so-called conservative commentators, including some faith leaders, focusing on favorable policy initiatives or court appointments to justify their acceptance of this damage, while deemphasizing the impact of this president on basic norms and ethics. That strikes me as both hypocritical and morally wrong. The hypocrisy is evident if you simply switch the names and imagine that a President Hillary Clinton had conducted herself in a similar fashion in office. I've said this earlier but it's worth repeating: close your eyes and imagine these same voices if President Hillary Clinton had told the FBI director, "I hope

you will let it go,” about the investigation of a senior aide, or told casual, easily disprovable lies nearly every day and then demanded we believe them. The hypocrisy is so thick as to almost be darkly funny. I say this as someone who has worked in law enforcement for most of my life, and served presidents of both parties. What is happening now is not normal. It is not fake news. It is not okay.

Whatever your politics, it is wrong to dismiss the damage to the norms and traditions that have guided the presidency and our public life for decades or, in many cases, since the republic was founded. It is also wrong to stand idly by, or worse, to stay silent when you know better, while a president brazenly seeks to undermine public confidence in law enforcement institutions that were established to keep our leaders in check. Every organization has its flaws, but the career prosecutors and agents at the Justice Department and the FBI are there for a reason—to rise above partisanship and do what’s right for the country, regardless of their own political views. Without these checks on our leaders, without those institutions vigorously standing against abuses of power, our country cannot sustain itself as a functioning democracy. I know there are men and women of good conscience in the United States Congress on both sides of the aisle who understand this. But not enough of them are speaking out. They must ask themselves to what, or to whom, they hold a higher loyalty: to partisan interests or to the pillars of democracy? Their silence is complicity—it is a choice—and somewhere deep down they must know that.

Policies come and go. Supreme Court justices come and go. But the core of our nation is our commitment to a set of shared values that began with George Washington—to restraint and integrity and balance and transparency and truth. If that slides away from us, only a fool would be consoled by a tax cut or a different immigration policy.

But I choose to be optimistic. Yes, the current president will do significant damage in the short term. Important norms and traditions

will be damaged by the flames. But forest fires, as painful as they can be, bring growth. They spur growth that was impossible before the fire, when old trees crowded out new plants on the forest floor. In the midst of this fire, I already see new life—young people engaged as never before, and the media, the courts, academics, nonprofits, and all other parts of civil society finding reason to bloom.

This fire also offers an opportunity to rebalance power among the three branches of our government, closer to the model the founders intended. There is reason to believe this fire will leave the presidency weaker and Congress and the courts stronger, just as the forest fire of Watergate did. There is a lot of good in that.

Thoughtful people are staring at the vicious partisanship that has grown all around us. Far from creating a new norm where lying is widely accepted, the Trump presidency has ignited a focus on truth and ethics. Parents are talking to their children about truth-telling, about respect for all people, about rejecting prejudice and hate. Schools and religious institutions are talking about values-driven leadership.

The next president, no matter the party, will surely emphasize values—truth, integrity, respect, and tolerance—in ways an American leader hasn't needed to for more than forty years. The fire will make something good grow.

I wrote this book because I hope it will be useful to people living among the flames who are thinking about what comes next. I also hope it will be useful to readers long after the flames are doused, by inspiring them to choose a higher loyalty, to find truth among lies, and to pursue ethical leadership.