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## Ethical Leadership in the Digital Era: Requirements for Developing Ethical Leaderships in Vietnam

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### **Abstract:**

*Ethical leadership ideas were widely mentioned in the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century, in many areas, such as biomedical ethics, business ethics and moral leadership, etc. These studies emphasize that the leadership contains universal ethical values such as respect, service, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and community. Recently, the strong development of digital technology and artificial intelligence set higher demands for leaders in applying standards and moral values in accordance with the requirements of a digital era. These demands aim to increase the transparency, accountability, and frequent connections between leaders and subordinates as well as between leaders and the people to express the spirit of the service leadership. This article clarifies the concept of ethical leadership in a digital era and raise some issues for building and training ethical leadership in Vietnam in the digital era.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, leadership, ethical leaderships, digital era

### **1. Introduction**

The first conceptions of ethical leadership emerged from ancient times, stemming from Plato's ideas (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). These are considered as one of the most important theoretical contributions for the forming of current leadership theories (Northouse, 2007, p. 342). The authors of ethical leadership studies offer different concepts. Ethical leadership is actually a theoretical study of right and wrong (Kunhiyop, 2008). Sendjaya (2005) argues that ethic is an important component of leadership. The absence of ethic can turn leadership into a disastrous outcome.

For decades, researchers on leadership have tried to identify ethical leadership through understanding leadership effectiveness, specifically the components of effective leaders. Leadership effectiveness is a result achieved when individuals in leadership positions can influence a group of people to carry out a leadership role to gain positive outcomes (Dhar, Mishra, 2001). Madanchian (2017) said that leaders that have influence on their subordinates and organizations in different ways to produce positive results, which are recognized and supported, can be called an effective leader.

The affirmation of leadership effectiveness as an ethical leadership is compelling. In fact, ethical leadership is often associated with moral categories and views, while leadership effectiveness emphasizes the results of leadership. Nevertheless, there is a strong relationship between ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness. Researchers on leaders' behaviors argue that leadership behaviors contribute to explain the effectiveness of a leader by linking the leaders' effectiveness to ethical leadership behaviors (Marshall, 2012). Similarly, some authors propose ethical leadership theory that is consistent with moral aspects and explain the relationship between ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness (Brown, Trevino, Harrison, 2005). Some authors also claim that ethical leadership is positively related to leadership effectiveness (Hazlina, 2012). From these views, it is possible to affirm the heterogeneity in the ethical leadership and effective leadership. They are relatively independent but still have positive relationship and interaction. In the late twentieth century, there have been studies of many aspects of ethical leadership, such as business ethics (Beauchamp, Bowie, 1988), biomedical ethics (Beauchamp, Childress, 1994), and educational leadership (Komives, Lucas, McMahon, 1998). These studies show a common view for the development of universal ethical leadership including respect, service, fairness, honesty and community. Ethical leaders do not use administrative measures but employees still voluntarily commit to follow them to lead the organizations toward the development and achieve the established objectives.

The reality has showed that ethical leadership contains universal social moral values such as humanity, values of altruism, service spirit, fairness, and accountability... Therefore, there are more and more studies on ethical leadership (Trevino, Brown, 2005). According to Li (2013), ethical leadership has gradually become the focus of most current leadership studies. Ethical leadership pays more attention to the moral basics of leaders.

In Malaysia, the government guarantees to promote ethical activities that are implemented through vision until 2020. One of the main pushes is to create an ethical society (Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin, Taherdoost, 2017). Currently, the strong development of science and technology, especially the digital technology, makes the connection between

leaders and people closer and more frequent. Therefore, studies on ethical leadership call for more attention in the digital era. This article will focus on clarifying ethical leadership and some issues raised for moral leadership in Vietnam in the digital era.

## 2. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is the expression of the behaviors and actions of the leaders through building interpersonal relationships, inspiring and promoting those behaviors among employees through two-way positive interaction, reinforcing decision-making to achieve leadership goals (Brown, Trevino, Harrison, 2005: 120). According to Ather (2014), ethical leadership means eliminating coercion and providing good goals, lofty objectives and methods of implementation to make individual's values multiplied. Ethical leadership is also expressed in the spirit of service and altruism, whose serving those who advocate is the priority responsibility in leadership strategies. Leadership can act as an advisor, who can empower and build a strong unique group (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996). Carol Dalglisch, who is an Australian management researcher and Alex Josey, a British scholar, said that an individual need to have a high moral standard for people to follow to be a great leader. Both authors illustrate the Singapore's success with a huge role of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, who has a very high moral standard and places the social interests above personal's (Son Ha, 2016). Some think that those who have goals which are set up autonomously always take the organization's goals as a mission. They have orientation to strive, make and practice leadership decisions based on the respect. They never consider leadership as a means to achieve personal goals (Beauchamp, Bowie, 1988: 37). Hoogh and Hartog (2008) argue that ethical leadership composes three components, which are fair values, power sharing, and the role of leaders. Yukl (2010) claims that ethical leadership always shows a strong, clear, stable and consistent self-identity (p. 424).

Leaders who respect subordinates and colleagues also show a respect for themselves. They always know how to create influence and make others aware that personal values and differences must always be respected (Kitchener, 1984). The respect is expressed in sharing and convincing others to believe in what leaders believe, lead and direct the subordinates to voluntarily support to achieve the common goals. In addition, the leaders help the subordinates to formulate their own needs, values, and goals, thereby supporting subordinates to realize them in accordance with those of the leaders (Burns, 1978). Moreover, ethical leadership requires a clear sense of a civic virtue (Rost, 1991).

The respect for employees and subordinates is considered as the standard of moral values and shows the respect as a close relationship. The respect is expressed through thorough listening even with opposing views. It also means dealing with subordinates in a way that they feel their beliefs, attitudes and values truly. The subordinates have authority over the assigned works, be respected and treated with full humanity and moral values so that they can work hard. According to Tracy, there are four ways to show the respect, which are appreciation; approval; admiration; and attention. In addition, Tracy also says that ethical leadership must be able to create motivation, must have courage, perseverance, open communication, a sense of responsibility and accountability. They have to be always a good example, make commitments, never complain or blame others, be lenient, accurate in behaviors and conducts, avoid giving orders whenever possible, keep promises, be honest, integrity, fair, and always on the right side (Tracy, 2016).

Ethical leadership with such featured ethical qualities is universal values, which demonstrate the integrity, respect, service, objectivity, fairness, always standing to the right, open, having responsibility and commitment, always being an example and bring the group benefits above personal interests. These affirm that ethical values are of high standards, and that subordinates voluntarily follow the common values that leaders aim without any enforcement or administrative orders. Such leaders demonstrate moral values by caring others (Gilligan, 1982), not forcing or ignoring the opinions of others (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). The principle of service leadership is also found in the studies of Block (1993), Covey (1990), De Pree (1989), Gilligan (1982), Greenleaf (1977) and Kouzes and Posner (1995). All studies show a common in universal moral values to lead and guide others on a voluntary basis.

Given the above arguments, the ethical leadership can be understood as an application of standards, ethical values that are universal in the leadership process, in order to create influence and lead others to voluntarily follow to achieve the leader's established goals. Thus, ethical leadership clearly shows the role of the leader, the process of applying values and moral standards in orienting and guiding the subordinates according to the common values that the organization needs to achieve.

## 3. The Digital Era

Scholar Jill Shepherd of Strathclyde University, UK in his book "Economic and social transformation in a digital era" has confirmed: The digital era is characterized by technology that increases the speed and breadth of knowledge revenue in the economy and society (Georgios, Nikolaos & Nancy, 2003), based on digital technology and integrating all smart technologies to optimize processes and production methods. Therefore, the digital era is the high crystallization of human intellect to create a rapid change in technology, which makes all aspects of the social life have strong and profound changes, and fundamentally change the way of leadership. Major areas of digital technology include: 1) Big Data; 2) Smart cities (; 3) blockchain/bitcoin; 4) Artificial intelligence; 5) E-commerce; 6) Robotics; 7) 3D printing; 8) Virtual/augmented reality connection; 9) Shared economies; 10) Internet of Things (Nguyen Ngoc Thuong, 2017).

In a digital era, booking airline tickets, taxi calls, hotel reservations, etc. can all be supported on modern technology platforms such as internet of things, self-driving cars, 3D printing technology, Nano technology, ... Taxi companies such as Uber and Grap, or Airbnb –the world's largest hotel specialization company, in fact do not have any taxis or hotels. The strong development of artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and big data create the new generation robots, 3D printers and autonomous cars. These are the first signs of the digital context. The drastic change of the digital context helps people advance in a short time.

Digital data nowadays is one of properties of organizations or businesses. They are the key to digital transformation and innovation, which leads to success. The latest International Data Corporation (IDC) study shows that the digital transformation process contributes about 1.16 trillion dollars to Asia's GDP, with an annual growth rate of 0.8%. In 2017, about 6% of Asia's GDP comes from digital products and services. IDC forecasts that the transition will help Asia's GDP increase to 60% by 2021 (Nguyen Thanh, 2018). This illustrates the huge benefits of digital transformation to the development of economies.

In addition to the great achievements that the digital context brings to the society, the digital context also creates many challenges. The unregulated and false forecasted digital will break the labor market when the rising automation gradually replaces manual labor. Robots replace people in many areas such as customer care, financial advice, law, self-driving cars ... The digital development makes people interact less, uncontrolled information posted on internet can cause negative impacts on the whole world such as the self-filming of terrorist attacks on social networks, many young people abuse and overly depend their personal lives on technology. All of these lead to a deviant life. It can be affirmed that the digital era is developing strongly, but it also brings many aspects of life out of the control and makes our lives riskier. Understanding and effectively applying the rules of social life into the leadership process helps building a stable, orderly and better society.

#### 4. Ethical Leadership in the Digital Era

Ethical leadership in the digital era means creating a better society, bringing freedom, equality for all, taking the spirit of service and altruism. Honesty is necessary to become a good leader. Dishonesty can distract employees. They will see leaders unreliable and their respect for leaders will be diminished. According to Dalla Costa (1998), the leader should not promise what they cannot be do, should not misrepresent, not avoid the responsibility, respect the dignity and humanity of others. The digital era opens the door for citizens and governments to participate in the process of creating the future. The relationship between the government and the people is built on mutual trust, dedication and intimate links. The emergence of e-government in many countries confirms the power sharing, the participation of people as social participants becomes more and more clear. Some leaders who see themselves unable to lead can even cede the position to others capable of steering the organization or the country to overcome challenges. It is necessary to change the concept of government to become a spearhead of the new economy to, because we are living in an era where there is no room for hesitation. Social, economic and political consequences can arise if leaders ignore ethical issues (Maktoum, 2016). The equality between the state and the people must be constitutional. Thus, ethical leadership not only manifests itself in the ability to dare to do, but also in the proactive, willingness to accept responsibility, the service, getting rid of personal self-respect and making it become the general self-esteem. The leader has a key role and the leading position in the organization. Therefore, their moral qualities will have a great influence on the organization (Tran Long Van, 2016). Ethical leadership always contains moral standards, humility and leniency. The leader who builds trust in the subordinates on the journey to success creates synergies, commitment from the team, not by coercion. A humble leader always puts himself in the collective, using human power, exemplary actions and noble moral qualities to create influence for others, which is the way for others to acknowledge and respect him (Tran Long Van, 2018: 104).

They are sustainable because of the organization support. Moreover, the digital technology allows the frequent connection between leaders and subordinates, allows the listening and understanding the subordinates' concerns. The subordinates will be more devoted to the assigned work (Lanik, 2019). The digital era creates many breakthroughs, many social processes happen quickly, but moral standards need to adapt quickly. McCall and Hollenbeck show some qualities of global leaders in the 21st century including perseverance, optimism, honesty and integrity (McCall, Hollenbeck, 2002: 35). In the digital era, cloud computing, big data, social networks, data analysis, IoT, artificial intelligence, blockchain ... have created a revolution in processing and exploiting the huge data sources increasing every day. The digital era opens a new era, especially in terms of the access to information. People can easily involve in monitoring the activities of public agencies. However, many concerns also arise. The reliability of data becomes an important issue. The information can easily be copied, modified but not easily verified. The data recovery becomes difficult or almost impossible. Information can be easily stolen. Negative information shared on social networks can spread quickly due to loosen control. Moreover, the smart devices were created not for the purposes of peace, but for profit. The manufacturer is willing to sacrifice the interests of majorities just to protect the interests of minority. In the leadership process, in addition to increasing profits, the leaders need to address harmoniously the relationship between growth and sustainable development, pay attention to the lives of all employees, take equality and social responsibility as a driving force for leadership.

Technology crimes tend to increase. Leaders of technology companies who want to protect and retain customers without cooperating with authorities to prevent criminal acts can enforce the crimes. In the digital era, the criminals can completely hide themselves in one country but can use technology to harms security in another country or to serve unjustified purposes that are difficult to detect and handle. The officials in public agencies and senior leaders against high-tech criminals can even shake hands with technology criminals, let them use the technology system for large-scale scams. This causes serious consequences and reduces people's confidence. Leaders of technology companies promptly recognize and prevent criminals from taking advantage of technology for personal profits. The frankness, sincerity and commitments to the people are standards of morality and civilization. The service leadership must be considered as an important requirement for the leaders in the digital era.

The practice has demonstrated the role of leaders in the development of the digital era. The security of individual, organizational and national security information needs more attention because the digitization brings great benefits but also reveals many weaknesses. Leaders who do not show the spirit of service, do not stand to the right, have no commitments, etc. but have personal and group interests will create great losses for the organization, and even the

country. With the support of communication technology, the leaders can create a false reputation to build their images, influences. After achieving their goals, they can forget the promise, limit the participation of people in leadership decisions, use authoritarian behaviors to maintain the position. In addition, with strategic thinking and vision, the leader must be sensitive to the digital context. For example, the introduction of the taxibooking model through the application of technology brings the traditional taxi companies into crisis. The digital technology is applied in television and electronic newspaper production tends to make printed newspapers face many difficulties and challenges.

On one hand, ethical leadership in the digital era requires the leaders to have knowledges of the digital context, the ability to influence and strong commitments, an example of action, respect for employees, the willingness to take responsibility, never making excuses, blaming others or objective circumstances, because they represent the best (Tracy, 2017). They must respect the others' opinions and listen. Thereby, the organization members will feel more emotionally connected with the united group (Lanik, 2019). Ethical leadership is also reflected in building solidarity, organizational culture and sharing vision. The more strongly supported the leader demonstrates the ability to gather, inspire, and encourage employees to participate in leadership decisions. If the leaders are slow to changes, they will soon lag behind. Not only will the leader be pushed out of the game, the organization's activities will be stalled.

On the other hand, leaders in the digital era must focus on building and coaching the adjacent leaders with sufficient virtue, promote the spirit of service, minimize risks for organizations and society, listen and mobilize the voluntary participation of employees, exploit and share information, thereby building and creating a vision for the organization and for the general development of the society.

It is possible to give a conception: Ethical leadership in a digital era is a creative and flexible application of moral standards that have both universal and typical values of the digital era into the process of social leadership in order to influence and lead others to voluntarily follow to achieve the proposed leadership goals. Some characteristics of ethical leadership in the digital era include information sharing, accountability, transparency, vision creation, service spirit, and respect for human dignity. Therefore, moral leadership in a digital era is always faced with significant challenges from the external environment, so more than ever, the leader must show clearly the moral leadership role and create stability, balance, flexibility to promote organization's development.

Ethical leadership in the digital era promotes the controlling mechanism and balances the power between leaders and people. People can examine and monitor the effectiveness of leadership of all organizations, agencies, and the government better. Therefore, each leader should strongly aware of building relationships with the people. These owners of the country will protect them through difficulties, in order to serve the common goals and happiness of all involved people involved. Ethical leadership in the digital era are not about making compliments about what is right or wrong, but about choosing the right thing to do and doing on a voluntary basis of people's participations.

## 5. Requirements for Building and Practicing Ethical Leadership in Vietnam in the Digital Era

Vietnam is a country that is taking its first steps in the digital era while the world has achieved many important achievements. Thus, it is very likely that leaders are impatient and make personal standards disruptive due to the personal pursue and satisfaction as well as the desire for quick success. Leaders in the digital era should have consistency. If the leaders are false, frank and unrighteous, they will fail (Maxwell, 2016). The leader should not be impatient. They need patience, be consistent with the guidelines and ways of the Party, and raise personal responsibility. Firstly, implement staffing strategy of Communist Party of Viet Nam.

The regulation on the framework of criteria for titles, orientation frameworks for evaluation of leaders and managers at all levels, No. 89-QĐ / TW, dated August 4, 2017 by the Central Executive Committee clearly states that in terms of political thoughts, the leaders must have a passion for patriotism, putting the interests of the Party, nation, people and organization above personal interests; willing to sacrifice for the Party, for the independence and freedom of the Fatherland, for the happiness of the people. In terms of morality, lifestyle, and awareness of discipline, the leaders should have a clear moral quality; honest, modest, sincere and simple lifestyle; be need, economical, integrity and impartial publicity. In terms of competency and creditworthiness, the leader should have the ability to lead and direct; exemplary, gathering and promoting the combined strength of collectives and individuals; be trusted by officials, party members and masses (CCCPV, 2017). Leaders of public agencies must be aware of the responsibility of "publicity" and a "loyal" servant of the people.

The fighting and preventing moral degradation, especially the morality of some senior leaders, has been clearly stated in the Resolution No. 04-NQ/TW of the Fourth XII Conference on strengthening the building and regulation of the Party; preventing and repressing the recession of political ideology, morality, lifestyle, internal "self-evolutions" and "self-transformation" manifestations. The moral and lifestyle degradation of a large number of officials and party members have not been pushed back. The corruption, waste and negative situations are still serious and focused on the number of party members with positions in the state (CCCPV, 2016). Therefore, right from the selection of officials, it is necessary to be righteous and objective to choose the right people. Since 1947, in his work "Modifying the way of working" written in 1947, President Ho Chi Minh (2002) indicated that "every success or failure is due to good or poor official. Staffs are the roots of all work. Thus, training staff is the root of the Party" (p. 240, 269). Therefore, it requires the leader more accountability and strengthening the connection with people. In the increasing popularity of digital media, the dialogue with the people, listening to the people, and commitments to serve the people should become a platform and a sense of self-awareness in ethical leadership.

The resolution No. 26-NQ/TW of the XII Central Committee on building staffs at all levels, especially the strategic level, who are qualified, capable and prestigious for the task shows a number of limitations of the staffs, especially the strategy leaders, in communication skills and ability to work in the international environment. These staffs are not willing

enough, superficial, afraid of difficulties and suffering, degraded in the political ideology, morality and lifestyle, lacked exemplary, be bureaucratic, far away from people and individualistic, entangled in corruption and waste (CCCPV, 2018). This requires that staffs should not be bureaucratic, power abused, arrogant and excused. Instead, they should constantly train and cultivate moral and creative qualities in the work, promote the digital application, strengthen dialogue, contact and listen to people's opinions.

Second, promote the digitalization under the direction of the Vietnam Government and the Prime Minister, strengthen the moral leadership of the leader.

Leaders in public agencies must be proactive and responsive to promoting the application of digital technology, digitizing documents to practice savings. The decision No. 225/QĐ-TTg approving plan for state administrative reform in the period 2016-2020 by the Prime Minister (2016) requires the modernization of the administration, implementation of e-Government, E-government and promotion of the application of information-communication technology in the process of handling the work of each state administrative agency, between state administrative agencies and in transactions with organizations and individuals, which help create a network environment and share information widely among state agencies. Leaders who do not boldly innovate the thinking, not proactive and actively develop digital technology, will lag behind the world in terms of technology, economics, and other aspects due to the over focus on administrative management, maintaining an outdated administrative system that costs a lot of labor, financial resources, and therefore the accountability and transparency will not be adequately concerned.

The Directive No. 16/CT-TTg on strengthening the capacity to access the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution by the Prime Minister (2017) clearly states that it is necessary to develop a digital transformation strategy, a smart management system and to give priority for the development of the digital technology industry, smart agriculture, smart tourism and smart urban. Leaders need to be bold and proactive in finding the appropriate direction for the country's development strategy, but also need to raise the alertness against the destructive plans based on the loopholes of the digital technology.

In the digital era, many negative manifestations of the society become sophisticated, complex and difficult to control when many jobs are digitized. While most people are not familiar with new technologies, the moral degradation of the leaders, especially those in the field of digital technology, will become dangerous and be a scourge, which reduces people's confidence in the Party. Therefore, we have had many resolutions on staff work, which clearly state the responsibilities of the leader. However, there should be stronger measures. For example, the seniors cannot be irrelevant and irresponsible when their subordinates violate the rules. Mindful and objective leaders create the convergence, build solidarity for each organization to build a sense of work.

Unrecognized security gaps can lead to the unauthorized exploitation of user data, or there may be an underlying compromise to provide information to untrusted parties, which makes the social management become difficult. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of technology companies should not only be for profit but should put their conscience and responsibility to serve the nation, the country first, and be responsible for building a rich and powerful country. It is necessary to promptly detect and prevent all law violations of individuals and organizations taking advantage of technological gaps to gain illicit profits.

Vietnam is in a transition period. Therefore, the awareness of the digital technology development and creative thinking are still limited. In that context, the application of moral values in the leadership process through persuasive, educational and engagement methods are critical to create the trust and commitment of the leader to the people before the leadership decisions. Thus, understanding and properly applying the rules of leadership that are appropriate to the digital age necessary conditions for higher successes. If the difficulty is considered as a teacher, it is an invaluable asset. Resilient leaders will not be dominated by the difficulty, all must follow righteousness, "saying to do, to do must be effective" (Hoa Nhan, 2018). Ethical leadership in a digital era does not reduce the role of leaders, it contributes to promoting and enhancing the accountability and transparency of the modern administration, which is to serve the people, are also among the requirements.

## 6. Conclusion

Leadership is an important factor for the success of every organization. A developed organization demonstrates both the leadership skills and the gathering of individuals in the organization. Obtaining these requires very high moral standards for each leader. Therefore, ethical leadership has a direct and positive effect on leadership effectiveness at all levels. Some studies have shown evidences on the positive relationship between ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness (Madanchian, 2017). Ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness complement each other. This study contributes to the literature on ethical leadership and leadership effectiveness. In the digital era of a developing country like Vietnam, ethical leadership has a positive impact on leadership effectiveness.

Leaders need to aim at a society with a high level of connection between agencies and citizens, enhance the transparency and accountability, strongly promote technological innovations to strengthen the contact between leaders and people, and actively listen to people's opinions. Leaders who use ethical leadership are encouraged to further develop their understanding of ethical leadership and develop skills and knowledge to promote the organization's growth. Ethical values are always important platforms for leaders to attract the commitment of people into leadership goals, to achieve a common vision, with the goal of building a rich, strong, democratic, fair, and civilized country, where people have a prosperous and happy life.

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