

# Are You an Ethical Leader?

By Michael A. Jacoby, Ed.D.



**A**s children, many of us read the Dr. Seuss classics *Horton Hatches the Egg* and *Horton Hears a Who*. Both books are entertaining and still widely used to teach children to read and also to emphasize the value of moral virtue.

*Horton Hatches the Egg* is the story of an irresponsible bird named Maysie who asks Horton the elephant to sit on her egg for just a few minutes while she takes a break. The break lasts for months and Horton remains faithful to his promise, staying with the egg as his friends laugh at him, as he is captured by hunters, is exposed to the elements, endures a dangerous voyage across the sea, and is finally placed in a circus.

He doesn't waver from his commitment, and when the egg finally hatches, the baby is a cross between Horton

and Maysie. All is well and they return happily to the jungle.

So, what is the point? The point is illustrated in the phrase that Horton utters repeatedly throughout the story: "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent." What a perfect place to start when talking about ethical leadership for school business professionals.

## **Are You an Ethical Leader?**

I venture to guess that when asked that question, each of you would say "yes." My concern is that many of you would respond without first reflecting on what ethics really are. Nor would you spend much time delving into a personal audit of your thinking and behavior.

To “have” ethics is to hold to a set of beliefs about what is right and wrong or what is good and bad. One could argue that an individual will exhibit true ethics only when that individual has an internal motivation for his or her behavior. In essence, the “character” of ethics has everything to do with one’s beliefs.

## We live in a culture that embraces moral ambiguity.

What beliefs or value systems govern your daily behavior at home and at work? Do you just make it up as you go along or do you know what you believe and live by it? Can you say along with Horton, “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant,” or are you like most people who don’t take the time to establish in their own minds the standards by which they will act and live?

I have argued over the years that we live in a culture that embraces moral ambiguity. It is not politically correct to say that anything is absolute. Consequently, the mores of our society are left somewhat undefined. However, that does not mean that people don’t judge the behavior of others. They just do it from their own perspective.

Now, combine that moral ambiguity with the fact that some leaders take little time to set personal standards or define personal beliefs, and it is no surprise that we see headlines about ethical failure at every level and area of leadership.

It is hard to say, “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant” when nothing was ever said!

Take some time to do your own personal ethics audit. Then, answer the question, “Are you an ethical leader?” Don’t just give it lip service; make a Horton-like commitment by defining what you are and what you will be as an ethical leader.

Below is a list of virtues that I have shared with school business professionals during the past 15 years. Under each virtue, I have listed a few questions to consider as you examine your leadership as a school business professional.

### Virtues of Ethical Leaders

#### Peaceable

- Am I inclined to make peace when a conflict begins rather than to welcome a fight?
- Do people look to me to calm a situation or articulate a thoughtful approach to resolution?
- Do I have a cooperative spirit when working with others?
- Do I strive to create harmony and unity?

#### Prudent

- Am I wise in all my dealings so that I look at life from an ethical point of view?

- Am I aware of the ethical principles that I violate when I encounter problems in my life?

#### Experienced

- Have I faced a sufficient number of tests that demonstrate my steadfastness as a leader?
- Can I handle a compliment without embarrassment and a rebuke without depression?

#### Open-Minded

- Am I flexible when dealing with people and ideas?
- Do I give the other person a fair and unbiased hearing in hopes of learning from him or her?
- Am I able to submit to the wishes and counsel of others, especially those who are older or my superior?

#### Positive

- Do I long for and appreciate goodness and kindness while discarding and avoiding those things that influence me negatively?
- Am I so completely oriented toward the positive that I am known for it?

#### Just

- Am I considered a fair-minded person?
- Do I always hear both sides of a story before making judgments?
- Do people come to me for counsel, trusting that I will help them reach a fair point of view?

#### Reputable

- Do people trust me with confidential information?
- Is my life a worthy example for others to follow?
- Do people respect me as having high moral standards and impeccable ethics?
- Do I honor my promises even when they are not in writing?
- Do I show respect to others?
- Do I stay on a schedule?

### Can You Answer the Call?

So, how would you answer the question, “Am I an ethical leader?” Can you, like Horton, say, “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. [A school business leader’s] faithful, one hundred percent”?

## An introspective evaluation of your own ethics is both confirmation and conviction.

In the first course of the Illinois ASBO/Northern Illinois University master’s program in school business management, I pose this question as one of the most important considerations for those students who want to enter the field of school business management. The assignment is to develop a personal code of ethics.

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It seems quite simple to the students at first, but in the end, they often tell me that it was one of the most difficult assignments of the semester. Why? It requires some introspection and some commitment of personal values. (Also, students know that when they become school business managers in Illinois, I will ultimately hear about the quality of their leadership.)

Remember that an introspective evaluation of your own ethics is both confirmation and conviction. By pondering the questions presented here, you have identified those areas where you are strong. Now, you must accept that there are areas you need to work on.

In all my workshops, I stress one important conclusion: growing as an ethical leader is about “direction, not perfection.” When you identify a virtue you need to acquire, you are already pointed in the direction of change. Celebrate that and don’t worry about not being perfect. Nobody is! But be the leader who doesn’t stop growing. Your profession will thank you, your family will thank you, and your community will be proud of the quality of your leadership.

High stakes and high reward—are you up to the challenge?

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