

A cross-cultural leadership challenge: University-sponsored observatory on sacred Apache site

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, the University of Minnesota received a grant to buy a share in a telescope to be installed on the site of Mount Graham International Observatory. Located in an area known for some of the clearest skies of the world, the mountain is also one of the four holiest sites of the Western Apache, and construction of the observatory was opposed by numerous Native American groups arguing that the ground is desecrated by the research facilities. Leadership of a University known for its commitment to intercultural dialogue was faced with a choice between two sets of values rooted in dissimilar cultures. On the one hand were the resources available to win a significant research advantage for university scientists. On the other, an indigenous community claimed the location as a sacred site. This paper examines the leadership challenge faced by the leaders of the University, analyzes the cultural dimensions underlying the conflict of values, and critiques the ultimate response of University leadership as a violation of the principles of ethical leadership in service to the greater good.

Keywords: leadership, ethical leadership, cross-cultural issues, values

Introduction

Rising 3267 meters above sea level, Mount Graham has the highest elevation in a county in Southeastern Arizona known for some of the clearest skies in the world. In the 1980s, the mountain was selected as the site of an international observatory. Low levels of light pollution and access via a paved road in Coronado National Park made it the top choice for astronomers among over 250 potential sites. Congress waived U.S. environmental laws to make the opening of Mount Graham International Observatory open to researchers from around the world.

The mountain is also one of the four holiest sites of the Western Apache; a destination for pilgrimages, prayers, and traditional ceremonies for the native people of North America. At the time when the research facility opened in the early 1990s, the tribe living in closest proximity to Mt. Graham, the San Carlos Apaches, voted to remain neutral regarding the observatory. Yet

other Apache and Native American groups opposed the construction, arguing that the ground is desecrated by the research facilities, construction threatens endangered species, and the process of public consultation was not sufficient.

In the early 2000s, the University of Minnesota received a grant to buy a share in a telescope to be installed on the site. University leadership was faced with a conflict of values rooted in dissimilar cultures. On the one hand were the resources available to win a significant research advantage for university scientists. On the other, an indigenous community claimed the location as a sacred site. This paper analyzes the leadership challenge faced by the leaders of the University of Minnesota in determining the right course of action in joining or refusing to join the Mount Graham International Observatory (MGIO), and critiques the ultimate response as a violation of the principles of ethical leadership in service to the greater good.

Opposing Values

To astronomers at the University of Minnesota, Mt. Graham is a geographical site that has the objective advantage of a potential for furthering scientific knowledge. Their estimation of the site is expressed in hard numbers – altitude, light pollution levels, distance from the nearest airport, miles of paved road, etc. In contrast, the San Carlos Apache Tribe values the site based on the transcendent values of tradition, history, and religious symbol. To the Apache people, the mountain Dzil Nchaa Si An is a sacred site, “a central source and means of sacred spiritual guidance and a traditional cultural property of the Apache people, and a unique place on Earth through which Apache people’s prayers travel to the Creator” (Davis, 1999). The Apache do not embrace a definition of science and progress according to which the possibility of new discoveries is more valuable than the preservation of an ancient site and its endangered species.

The differences lend themselves to conceptualization through the lens of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) seminal work on value orientation systems. The differences between the

two stakeholder groups appear as corollaries of diverse answers that these groups develop in response to common human dilemmas. The first of these dilemmas involved in this case is the problem of man’s self-expression in activity. The dominant orientation for U.S. Americans is what Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck call *Doing* – “a demand for the kind of activity which results in accomplishments that are measurable by standards conceived to be external to the acting individual” (p. 17). The native people of North America tend towards the orientation of *Being* – “the kind of activity which is a spontaneous expression of what is conceived to be ‘given’ in the human personality” (p. 16). In the controversy over the Mt. Graham observatory, it is striking that those representing the interests of MGIO repeatedly stressed that they sought the input of the Apache people, but after receiving no response to letters, they interpreted the lack of active response from the tribal leadership as an absence of opposition. While this might have been a correct interpretation with those of their own culture, a different value orientation towards activity results in different patterns of governance and modes of communication. In light of the Apache culture, it becomes much more clear why opposition was only voiced after the observatory became a reality with negative consequences for their community.

The second area of difference in value orientation between the two cultural groups with implications for leadership has to do with their assumptions regarding the relationship between man and nature (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s, 1961). The dominant orientation of most U.S. Americans is *Mastery-over-Nature* – the belief that “natural forces of all kinds are to be overcome and put to the use of human beings” (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961, p. 13). The native people of North America do not separate man and nature to the same degree – their orientation is closer to the category of *Harmony-with-Nature*. Both groups developed their orientations in the course of interaction with their environments as a reflection of what passed the test of time in their respective communities. As Bhawuk et al. (2008) contend, “the space

or geography defines the people and their behavior because people have to interact with the environment for sustenance and survival” (p. 12). For the Apache people, who exist in greater unity with their environment than most U.S. Americans, the destruction of their habitat is tantamount to the destruction of their culture in ways difficult to imagine for those accustomed to a culture which values mastery over nature.

The significance of cultural value differences in this case is further illuminated in the research conducted by Schwartz and colleagues’ (Schwartz & Zanna, 1992; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995) discussion of culture-specifics in the content and structure of values. They classify values according to their motivational content and postulate that cultures organize values based on their mutual compatibility (Schwartz & Zanna, 1992). In the case at hand, the values of the Apache people appear to be clustered within the main category of conservation, while the values driving those advocating for the MGIO center around the primary value of achievement. Given these dissimilar motivational axes, and the consequent differences in systems of thought, a solution satisfying both parties appears difficult if not impossible to devise. While each side can legitimately argue the strength of their case based on the epistemological grounds distinctive of their own cultural framework, it is the manner of interaction between these frameworks that will ultimately tip the scales in the favor of the side that recognizes the value differences and honors the rules adopted by the other side. That the Apache people took that step is evident from their more vocal opposition and coalition building that led to the case becoming publicized in U.S. media. It is worth noting that the case was made known to a wider audience only when members of the dominant culture became engaged in the Mt. Graham Coalition. It is not evident whether the stakeholders advocating for the MGIO have made a similar attempt to accommodate to the Apache culture at any level beyond a quest for an appearance of public consultation.

The leadership implication for the University of Minnesota in the decision to join or

reject the MGIO consortium involves determining its course of action in consideration of the cultural factors in place as well as the unequal power dynamic between the two cultures. Otherwise, the University runs the risk of violating principles of social justice and public good that had to this point set the University apart on a national scene. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) suggest that in order to break the spell of ethnocentrism, one engaging with an unfamiliar culture must first observe, describe, interpret, and suspend judgment. The challenge in the MGIO situation consisted in admitting that the viability of the Apache perspective threatened the interests of those who already made enormous investments in the MGIO, and raised significant ethical issues for the leadership of the University of Minnesota.

The Response

The leadership response from the University of Minnesota provides an instructive case study for leadership in the context of unequal power dynamics. The Faculty Senate’s Social Concerns Committee (FSSCC) advised for the University to divest itself of its interests in the MGIO. In its recommendation, the FSSCC concluded: “it is critical to recognize that Apache government is not Anglo government. There is no tradition of unified, univocal representation for these native people, so that they have not ‘spoken as a whole’ cannot be taken as either confusion or tacit approval” (2002). Advocates of the MGIO repeatedly stressed that the entire process leading to its establishment was perfectly legal, but the presence of two differing constructs of governance and politics involved in the case brought the FSSCC to question whose laws and whose customs were being taken into consideration. Despite the recommendation of the committee, the university administration decided to take the grant and join the project.

Ethical critique

Research conducted by House et al. (2004) suggests that across the world, people want

their leaders to be trustworthy, just, honest, and dependable. Few leadership attributes appear universally desirable across cultures, but the top characteristics of a preferred leader are ethical in nature. Likewise, the leadership dilemmas involved in this case were ultimately ethical, having to do with what it means to act with integrity towards the Apache people, the scientists, and the local constituency. The university leadership failed the leadership challenge on three accounts outlined by Northouse (2007) as the pillars of ethical leadership.

1) Failure of respect

According to Northouse (2007), ethical leaders respect others, allow them to be themselves, and treat individuals as ends, not a means to an end. The questions that arise in this situation were: Has every party felt equally respected? Whom may we be tempted to judge or use for our own ends? How would we wish to be treated if we were in the shoes of the various stakeholders? The leadership challenge was to find a way to serve the constituency and all the stakeholders involved. Meanwhile, some argued that the responsibility of the University of Minnesota leadership is exclusively to its own constituency, and all decisions should reflect its best interests. Transformational leadership theory does not conflict with such views, but it does claim that the best interest of any constituency is a raised moral functioning. This theory fits particularly well in an institution like the university, whose appeal is closely tied up with the ideals that it represents. In an organization of this type, achieving a short-term goal in morally questionable ways may win the leaders a battle, but it poses the threat of losing the long-term commitment of university staff and the broader constituency. Such was the case with the MGIO, which raised significant criticism from the university constituency.

2) Failure of justice

A key quality of ethical leaders as proposed by Northouse is that they are just – they treat people in an equitable manner. As the dilemma around the MGIO clearly illustrates, fairness is

made problematic by the “real and perceived scarcity of resources” (Northouse, p. 353). What does it mean to treat all parties justly when their demands are in clear contradiction with each other? In an ethical approach to leadership, a key consideration in answering this question is whether any of the stakeholders’ demands are likely to perpetuate inequality and social injustice. Greenleaf’s (1970) theory of leadership suggests that “the servant leader has a social responsibility to be concerned with the have-nots and to recognize them as equal stakeholders in the life of the organization” (Northouse, p. 349).

3) Failure of honesty

Della Costa (1998) suggests that to be an honest leader, “do not promise what you can’t deliver, do not misrepresent, do not hide behind spin-doctored evasions, do not suppress obligations, do not evade accountability, do not accept that the ‘survival of the fittest’ pressures (...) release any of us from the responsibility to respect another’s dignity and humanity” (p. 164). Yet the reality of the situation surrounding the MGIO was so complex and muddled that it became tempting to construct a much simpler narrative that only included one set of voices and ignores those who attempt to tell a different story. Leaders often take that route based on the conviction that their followers are unable to handle complexity and dissonance, so it is the leader’s task to eliminate it.

4) Failure in seeking common good

The final characteristic of ethical leaders is that they build community by moving people toward a mutually beneficial, common good. Achieving this goal involves attentiveness to the interests of various groups, but also to “the interests of the community and the culture” (Northouse, 2007, p.356). By virtue of their influence, leaders of the University of Minnesota had a special responsibility to act in such a way that their behavior could become the standard across the institution and in the wider community. Behavior modeled at the top will be reproduced at lower levels of the university regardless of its ethical content. In light of its mission, the University of Minnesota

set an example undesirable for all to follow.

Conclusions

The analysis presented above leaves little doubt that the proposal by the Social Concerns Committee of the Faculty Senate that the University of Minnesota divest itself of its interests in the MGIO had significant arguments speaking in its favor. Because of poorly understood cultural differences between the advocates of the observatory and the Apache people, the former have in the past not managed to include the voice of the latter in deciding the fate of a site with obvious symbolic and religious significance in Apache culture. Now that their voices had become heard, it was the ethical responsibility of those representing the dominant culture, including the leadership of the university, to take them into account on their own terms. It is not consistent of the University of Minnesota leadership to express commitment to intercultural dialogue and social justice, to pursue a prominent agenda of increased internationalization and intercultural competence on its campus, without attending to some of the same issues in its dealings with other cultures outside the campus. Since the matter involved a strong voice of a group that had historically been disenfranchised and oppressed, it was the ethical duty of university leadership to listen to that voice and to live up to professed values. In their position report concerning the divestment, the Social Concerns Committee (2002) recognized that the MGIO has become a symbol of an ugly history of oppression that would threaten to tarnish the University's reputation by virtue of association. The result of the ultimate decision was a loss of opportunity to lead the entire university community towards higher standards of moral responsibility. Honoring the values and wishes of a disenfranchised group at the expense of the university's own short-term interests would have been good not only for that group, but primarily for the university's own long-term benefit.

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