Herb Kelleher: My Favorite Ethical Leader

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Leaders are the foundation of an organization. They are the ones to formulate an ethical practice early on in an organization’s existence; allowing the ethical practice to manifest itself with time. The actions and ethical conduct of subordinates transpire through the values, virtues, and ethics of their leader. According to the text, *Ethical Leadership*, “leadership is critical to an organization’s culture because senior leaders create these systems and structures, and everyone looks to their behavior for guidance about how to behave with regards to ethics” (p.23). When looking at leadership for guidance on ethics, who better to look up to than Herb Kelleher, founder and CEO of Southwest Airlines?

Herb Kelleher exemplifies leadership in such a way that is transformational. He has developed an organization that values its people more than its money; which ironically resulted in an extremely profitable business. Kelleher built Southwest Airlines while placing a huge emphasis on the following values: “customer service, hard work, equality, cost consciousness, dedication, fun, and, most frequently of all, family” (HBP, p.13). These values are the core of the Southwest Spirit. They are what drive the organizations conduct and decisions on a daily basis. By encompassing these values, Southwest employees are able to identify what is important when faced with an ethical dilemma.

A leader’s position on ethics can have a drastic effect on the culture of an organization. A leader is a role model; they must be able to live and breathe the role in which they wish their subordinates to acquire. If a leader possesses strong work ethic and good moral values, then they are exemplifying those characteristics for the organization. On the other hand, the more a leader lacks ethical conduct, the greater chance that the organization will lack ethical conduct as well. This can result in an organizational demise.

Luckily for the employees at Southwest Airlines, Herb Kelleher’s ethics has had an immensely positive effect on the organization’s culture. In fact, Southwest has even developed its own “culture committee” which is designated for maintaining a positive and thriving environment. The culture of Southwest begins with valuing its employees, who are also known as family. Southwest has an extremely definitive hiring process which ensures that only the right people are brought into the organization. The right
people must have the right attitude and share the same values, beliefs, and ethical conduct as Southwest. Kelleher emphasizes that “attitudes are what count...’We draft great attitudes. If you don’t have a good attitude, we don't want you, no matter how skilled you are. We can change skill levels through training. We can’t change attitude’” (HBP, p.10).

Kelleher built Southwest from the ground up with intentions to build a community. According to the Aristotelean approach to ethics, “we are all individuals, to be sure, but we find our identities and our meanings only within communities” (Donaldson & Werhane, p.70). Kelleher’s establishment of community is one of the major driving forces behind his employees work satisfaction. To this day, Southwest fosters community through the production of annual appreciation events, team gatherings, and many other team development functions. Needless to say, Herb liked to have fun. Kelleher was known by his employees as a man who always liked to have a good time and who would easily get caught up in conversations with customers and subordinates. It was this positive, team and customer oriented attitude that was infectious throughout Southwest Airlines, enabling them to become as successful as they are today.

Southwest Airlines has won multiple awards throughout its years for being one of the most consistent and profitable airlines around. Southwest Airlines would never have won these awards if it wasn’t for their customers. In order to maintain a high volume of customers, it is imperative that Southwest makes ethical decisions when considering them as well. Herb Kelleher recognized the value in keeping costs low for his customers. He did not want to rob customers of an affordable flight by creating a first -class section, or by providing meals on planes. Instead, Kelleher kept it simple and focused on what the customer needed. Kelleher also made sure that Southwest did not waste its money on new plane types, or overly excessive salaries for employees. By being aware and cautious of the business expenses and budget, Herb Kelleher was able to continue providing low airfare rates to it’s happy customers.

According to Ethical Leadership, “vision and values set a general direction and tone, but in today's complex and competitive business environment, people need concrete evidence that their leader is a person of integrity who cares about ethics at least
as much as bottom-line performance” (p.29). Herb Kelleher gave his subordinates that needed evidence of integrity and ethics. One of his employees talks highly of Kelleher and states that “he is the sort of manager who will stay out with a mechanic in some bar until four o’clock in the morning to find out what is going on. And then he will fix whatever is wrong” (HBP,p.6). It is this sort of integrity that instills a sense of faith in subordinates. When people admire someone, they tend to try and become more like that person. As a result of Herb Kelleher’s constant integrity and genuine ethical conduct, employees mirrored his actions. Herb Kelleher was a significant role model for the employees at Southwest Airlines. It was his attitude, values, beliefs, and ethical conduct that is responsible for the amazing culture that continues on today.

Herb Kelleher is my favorite ethical leader for many reasons. For starters, the man likes to have fun. When challenged with a task to pick my top ten values in a deck of cards and in a matter of 45 seconds, fun made my list of top values. I believe that having fun promotes optimism and unity within a group. When people are optimistic and care for one another, they become more supportive of each other. Ethical dilemmas within an organization are less likely to occur if everyone is supportive and shares the same values.

Kelleher also values people and teamwork. I am extremely relationship oriented rather than task oriented. I believe that if people are happy, than the organization will be effective. Kelleher clearly demonstrates this to be accurate. People within an organization are a team and they are what make the organization function. It only makes sense if those people share profit within the company, help run the company, and helps decide who will join the company. Herb Kelleher makes his employees feel valued in many different ways. From parties, to training, to selective recruiting, and to allowing customers and employees to go above and beyond expectations for one another, Kelleher promotes an environment where everyone takes care of each other. If for some reason an employee does not share in the same values and ethical decisions as Kelleher and the team, they face consequences of being cut from the team.

Overall, I think that Herb Kelleher is a great person. From the way he is described by his employees, Kelleher could be considered to be a Level 5 leader. Level 5 leadership is a transformational type of leadership that requires leaders to take time and discover
what intrinsically motivates people, just as much as what extrinsically motivates them. Level 5 leaders are humble, determined, ethical, and will always make personal sacrifices for the good of the organization. Kelleher exemplifies Level 5 leaderships by making decisions based on what he thinks it right and justice. Kelleher seems to be very unselfish and extremely considerate of other peoples perspectives. Herb Kelleher has made such a huge impact on the organizations operations because of his attitude and belief system.

Herb Kelleher was a legendary role model for business ethics. He always put people first and never seemed to make a decision without considering the effect that it would have on others. Taking into consideration the Kantian perspective on the purity of motive, “truly moral actions cannot be contaminated by motives of self-interest” (Donaldson & Werhane,p.65). I truly believe that Kelleher’s motives for establishing such a collaborative organization were not contaminated by self-interest. I believe that he wanted what was best for his employees as well as his customers. Herb Kellher is definitely a hero in the organizational world Herb Kelleher is my favorite ethical leader.
References

