

## Take Me to Your Leader: Towards a Fractal View of Ethical Leadership

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### Abstract

Values, according to a former senior executive, 'were central at Southwest Airlines, but they just happened.' This business leader's preference was clear: 'I think it's better to decide upfront what they'll be' (quoted in Gittell, 2003: 226). For those deciding on a set of values upfront, the quartet of Communication, Respect, Integrity and Excellence might appear a good starting point. According to its 2000 Annual Report, they were Enron's espoused values.

As with values, so with business ethics. Do they 'just happen', or should we decide upfront what they will be? And who should decide? The perspective of this paper is that ethics, and values, do not 'just happen'. Western organisations cling to an outmoded view that may be characterised as Newtonian. If those at the top of organisations mandate sound ethical values, then ethical behaviour will result. Such cause and effect thinking is exemplified in any number of organizational codes of ethics and regulatory regimes.

Insights from complexity theory, from evolutionary biology and psychology, offer new perspectives on the business ethics discourse. We are encouraged to look at organizations as complex adaptive systems. This radically different approach offers both an alternative explanation to the values which are so demonstrable at Southwest Airlines, and the nature of ethical leadership. Far from 'just happening', values and ethical behaviour can be seen as emergent properties, evolving from the relentless consistency of leaders at all levels. While both complexity theory (Griffin, 2002) and evolutionary theory have been applied to ethics (Clayton and Schloss, 2004), this paper seeks to move the subject forward by applying another feature associated with complexity theory: that of fractals.

The concept of fractal leadership has been pioneered by Wineberg, who highlights the importance of consistency throughout an organization (2005: 29). In this paper, we argue that ethical behaviour is encouraged by consistency of approach. How can front line employees expect to behave in one way if they see the supervising board, or individual managers, behaving in another? How can managers promote teamwork if performance management systems encourage individual reward? In other words, we should expect to see repeating patterns at different levels in an organization. This is where the concept of fractals might help us: repeating patterns observed at different levels in nature (Mandelbrot 1982). Popular examples range from ferns to coastlines.

This alternative approach raises a series of questions about organizational ethics. We will examine two. First, where is ethical leadership situated? A fractal view accords with advocates of distributed, or dispersed, leadership (Raelin, 2003). As the contrasting examples of Southwest Airlines and Enron illustrate, ethics and leadership are interwoven. The CEO and first line supervisor should demonstrate consistency: the subject matter of their work might vary, but a repeating pattern in their approach should be observable. Moral authority and responsibility is shared.

Secondly, how is ethical leadership promoted? The pioneering biologists Maturana and Varela observed how 'We can never direct a living system. We can only disturb it.' (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996: 49). Self-organization and emergence challenge direction and control. Ciulla (2008: 58) highlights the difficulties for leaders, whose work is not as well defined as professionals such as medics and lawyers. The best guard against unethical behaviour is not subscription to a code of ethics, nor externally mandated frameworks, but relentless consistency of approach. Yet this cannot be controlled (Streatfield, 2001). An emergent view emphasises the importance of consistency in small interactions, rather than 'set piece' pronouncements.

However, criticisms of this approach can be made from an ethical standpoint. We will address a fundamental challenge: that an emergent approach may result in a consistency which does not constitute a moral good. Confronting a view which states that 'Corporations, of course, are not biological' (Brown, 2005: 4), we will suggest that the need for disturbance in healthy ecosystems offers key insights. In addition, we will highlight the importance of feedback loops in both closed and open systems.

In reaching tentative conclusions, we will suggest areas where the implications of a fractal approach to leadership may prove fruitful, as well as critical questions that still need to be addressed.

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