Book Review of Price's *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*

The book reviewed for the purposes of this paper was Terry Price's *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*. In his book, Mr. Price reviews the reasons that leaders make unethical or immoral decisions, and proposes ways in which these ethical shortcomings can be avoided. He hypothesizes a number of different reasons that leaders might act immorally, and by exploring these, the public health official (PHO) is able to focus on his own decisions and ensure he is not acting in a similarly unethical manner.

The text clearly gives advice that would help a PHO lead to better moral choices. For instance, Price recommends that public officials make use of checks, audits and ombudsmen to ensure accountability, as a high risk of being caught performing unethical actions will make the behaviour less likely (Price, 2006, p. 17). This can be considered to be traditional accountability, described as "formal, impersonal, uni-directional, standardized and blame-oriented" (Warah, 2004, p. 3), and can help put in place checks and balances that stop the PHO from ever being tempted to make unethical decisions. While checks and audits work well to protect ethical behaviour in an organizational setting, Price also gives advice from a personal-ethics perspective: "leaders can appeal to personal characteristics, to features of the situation, or to norms of special relationships in order to differentiate their behaviour from that of others" (Price, 2006, p. 63). While this statement implies that a leader might have different ethical requirements than a staff member, or "non-leader", Price clarifies that "ethical challenges are part of the very nature of effective leadership" (Price, 2006, p. 74). Hopefully, when leaders appeal to those personal characteristics to which Mr. Price refers, they will find themselves in a position to make better moral choices.

The text also speaks to the downfall of making incorrect, or immoral choices, stating: "deception and manipulation by leaders can erode the trust of others, making it difficult to maximize utility in the long run" (Price, 2006, p. 95). As the public relies on PHOs to make decisions that are in their best interest, the entire concept of a public

health system relies on the trust of the public being placed into the educated hands of the regulators. Should this trust be lost, the public demand for protecting their health will disappear, and the entire program could collapse. The PHO, by noting how poorly things can go if they make unethical decisions in their work, is well served by this part of the text.

In the moment of critical choice, when a leader must make a decision about whether to act morally or immorally, it is important to have some helpful advice. It is often difficult for a leader to rely simply on existing legislation to make decisions; as Denis Beauchamp (1997) says, "Because it is legal does not necessarily make it ethical" (p.72). It is also important to note that public officials, who may *not* have been acting in the greatest good of society at the time, wrote existing legislation. At the moment of critical choice, a PHO must remember that his decisions need to reflect the greater good of the population as a whole, and he has to consider what effect that decision will have on the people he serves. While the text speaks specifically to political leaders when referring to public officials, the comment that they can "hardly afford to be indifferent in their identification of the primary beneficiaries of goods such as happiness and well-being" (Price, 2006, p. 111) reflects equally strongly on the work done by public health officials. Every day PHOs are faced with decisions that must balance considerations for legislation, morality and ensuring that the most underserved people in our society have the same opportunities for happiness and well being as everybody else. As public officials, we must ensure that we "adopt a principle of inclusiveness at the margins of moral community" (Price, 2006, p. 200). The text helps the public official consider all of these aspects when faced with a moment of critical decision.

Price makes the point that public leaders are often called upon to act immorally for the greater good of society, and are justified in these immoral actions, "when the benefits to followers are great, or the costs of adhering to generally applicable moral requirements are very high" (Price, 2006, p. 115). This is excellent advice to assist the PHO at his moment of critical choice: rather than being handcuffed by his own personal moral beliefs, he can instead focus on what action would bring the greatest amount of

good to the people he serves. A PHO must "balance his responsibility for the organization's long-term survival with his need to care and provide for his staff … plus respond to the concerns of the community at large" (Sinclair, 2009, p. 4); while this might be impossible within his normal realm of ethical reasoning, by considering that his actions might benefit both the community at large, as well as his organization, it makes the choice to act easier. This is not to suggest that just because the PHO is a public leader that he should be exempted from making better moral choices. Rather, it helps the PHO at his time of critical choice, to consider aspects beyond just his personal ethical beliefs. The PHO "must differentiate between those requirements that apply to <him> and those with respect to which a deviation would be justified" (Price, 2006, p. 25).

Though the text manages to give advice leading to better moral choices, and assist in the moment of critical choice, it also has some downfalls. Often, Price refers to broad, classical philosophical theorists when making his points (including such thinkers as Machiavelli and Immanuel Kant), which takes away from the book as a guide for public leaders. It is difficult to glean much useful information from a book when the reader is mired in long, philosophical explorations. The text also is overly wordy in its literary analyses. Rather than simply getting to a point and continuing on, Price expands, sometimes for pages, about single topics. Often the reader finds himself missing the hypothesis of the section, because the author has gone on tangentially for too long. Lastly, the text often relies on philosophical and moral theories that are no longer relevant in our modern times. More than once, Price quotes from the Bible to make points about ethical decision-making (e.g. expounding on God's treatment of David, p. 27), or refers to Machiavelli's theories on ethical political leadership (p. 74, p.113). Though some of the broader moral ideologies of the past may still apply, it is difficult for the reader to apply theories from up to 2000 years ago to the moral decisions of our complex present. Further, applying teachings of the Bible makes the text limited in its broad appeal. In James P. Owen's book "Cowboy Values" he asserts: "our country is as divided by religion as anything else" (Owen, 2008, p. 16). In a multi-cultural, multi-religious nation such as ours, the moral teachings of the Bible may not be applicable to all readers, and be out outside of their personal scope of ethics.

Though the book is somewhat wordy at times, and relies on classical philosophy to make points about modern leaders, it still brings up excellent points about why leaders make unethical and immoral decisions. This allows the reader to avoid making their own immoral choices, by avoiding the mistakes of others. *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership* is very much a text that should be recommended to my peers to further their study of ethical leadership. It deals specifically with leadership characteristics in the public sector, as well as focusing on the challenges that leaders in the public sector face when having to make decisions that might fall outside their normal realm of ethical behaviour. Many text books deal with ethical failings from a personal perspective, or from the perspective of private corporation leaders (e.g. the ethical failings on Wall Street); but a textbook that recognizes that public leaders face unique challenges when trying to balance ethical decision making in the realm of fixed legislation, personal moral beliefs, and service to the public is very helpful in our position.

Perhaps unknowingly, *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership* gives advice that speaks directly to the PHO, which can be used daily. Price states that "… morality ultimately requires that leaders do more" (p.182), and that "at the very least, future generations can reasonably expect that our leaders respond by including individuals at the margins of moral community" (p.200). Every decision the PHO makes can be guided by these concepts: doing more, and including the most vulnerable members of the public. By following this advice, as well as avoiding the entrapments of the common ethical failures in leadership, the PHO can become a truly great public official.

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