



The Essence of Ethics - Bigger than The Beatles

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SPRING, 2026

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More than 60 years ago, President John F Kennedy said, to a joint session of Congress on conflicts of interest: “the basis of effective government is public confidence, and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or [even] appear to falter.” In other words, even smoke (without fire) shakes the foundation and makes people nervous.

Knowing that ethical behavior comes from carefully balancing character, sentiment of the community, moral duty, and obligation – every day, we must deliberately practice and live so that, no matter how righteous the ethical plank, we think first before acting - and regardless of one’s upbringing, opinion, or position - find a way to care and feel.

Remember, no one and few things are too big to fail. There’s always someone bigger than us. Our ethical foundation is bigger than governance, bigger than partisanship, and even bigger than simply doing things right. In fact, as much as it pains me to say it, it’s even bigger than The Beatles.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this presentation participants should be better able to:

1. Differentiate doing things right and doing the right thing.
2. Recall and articulate at least three of the ten points of “leading to ethics.”
3. Decipher the meaning and moral of the “frog and the scorpion” and “two people in a rubber raft”.

First, a review of definitions and origins:

Webster's Colligate II: "relating to what is good or bad, and having to do with moral duty and obligation."

Derived from the Greek "*ethos*," which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition.

What is ethics?

At its simplest, ethics is a system of moral principles. They affect how people make decisions and lead their lives.

Ethics is concerned with what is good for individuals and society [sentiment of the community] and is also described as moral philosophy.

Ethics covers moral dilemmas such as:

- How to live a good life.
- Our rights and responsibilities (duties and obligations vs. rights and entitlements).
- The language of right and wrong.
- Moral decisions - what is good and bad?

The Frog and the Scorpion- a cautionary tale

- The story of "The Frog and the Scorpion" is a fable about a scorpion who asks a frog to carry it across a river. The frog is hesitant, but the scorpion promises not to sting, explaining that doing so would also cause it to drown.
- Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway. When the dying frog questions why, the scorpion replies that it was in its nature to sting, and it could not help itself.
- The moral: The fable is often interpreted as a lesson about how people cannot change their fundamental nature, and it advises caution when trusting those who are known to be dangerous.

The Scorpion and the Frog is an animal fable that seems to have originated in Russia in the early 20th century. The fable teaches that vicious people cannot resist hurting others even when it is not in their own interests and therefore should never be trusted.

Synopsis -A scorpion wants to cross a river but cannot swim, so it asks a frog to carry it across. The frog hesitates, afraid that the scorpion might sting it, but the scorpion promises not to, pointing out that it would drown if it killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers this argument sensible and agrees to transport the scorpion. Midway across the river, the scorpion stings the frog anyway, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing the consequence, to which the scorpion replies: "I am sorry, but I couldn't help myself. It's my character." Source - [The Scorpion and the Frog - Wikipedia](#)

How good do **you** feel about being in a situation when the only way through is to work together and trust one another?

Here's a great ethics dilemma: The following are two concepts that we don't discuss enough. What are *governance* and *partisanship*? How do each work and what's the difference? And finally, in a democracy, which works best for the majority? It's long been said that, ethically speaking, the true question should always be **what's** right, not **who's** right.

Governance

Governance refers to the broad system of processes and rules used to manage a group or organization, while partisanship is a strong, biased allegiance to a specific political party. Partisanship can influence or even undermine the principles of effective governance, particularly in a political context. Governance is the framework that an organization uses to make and implement decisions to achieve its goals. It is a system of guidance, processes, and rules that applies to many different contexts, including a government, a corporation, or a nonprofit.

Key characteristics of good governance include:

- **Accountability:** Officials and institutions are responsible for their actions and decisions.
- **Transparency:** Decisions are made openly, and information is accessible to those affected.
- **Rule of Law:** The system operates under a fair and impartially enforced legal framework.
- **Participation:** People have the opportunity to express their views and be involved in decision-making.
- **Effectiveness and Efficiency:** Institutions produce results that meet societal needs while making the best use of resources.

Written by Mark Bevir

Fact-checked by the Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica

Article History

The study of governance generally approaches power as distinct from or exceeding the centralized authority of the modern state.

The term *governance* can be used specifically to describe changes in the nature and role of the state following the public-sector reforms of the 1980s and '90s. Typically, these reforms are said to have led to a shift from a hierarchic bureaucracy toward a greater use of markets, quasi-markets, and networks, especially in the delivery of public services. The effects of the reforms were intensified by global changes, including an increase in transnational economic activity and

the rise of regional institutions such as the European Union (EU). So understood, *governance* expresses a widespread belief that the state increasingly depends on other organizations to secure its intentions, deliver its policies, and establish a pattern of rule. By analogy, *governance* also can be used to describe any pattern of rule that arises either when the state is dependent upon others or when the state plays little or no role. For example, the term international governance often refers to the pattern of rule found at the global level where the United Nations (UN) is too weak to resemble the kind of state that can impose its will on its territory. Likewise, the term corporate governance refers to patterns of rule within businesses—that is, to the systems, institutions, and norms by which corporations are directed and controlled. So understood, *governance* expresses a growing awareness of the ways in which diffuse forms of power and authority can secure order even in the absence of state activity. More generally still, *governance* can be used to refer to all patterns of rule, including the kind of hierarchic state that is often thought to have existed before the public-sector reforms of the 1980s and '90s. This general use of *governance* enables theorists to explore abstract analyses of the construction of social orders, social coordination, or social practices irrespective of their specific content. They can divorce such abstract analyses from specific questions about, say, the state, the international system, or the corporation. However, this general usage creates the need for a more specific term, such as new governance, to refer to the changes in the state since the 1980s. Whether one focuses on the new governance, weak states, or patterns of rule in general, the concept of governance raises issues about public policy and democracy. The increased role of non-state actors in the delivery of public services has led to a concern to improve the ability of the state to oversee these other actors. The state has become more interested in various strategies for creating and managing networks and partnerships. It has set up all kinds of arrangements for auditing and regulating other organizations. In the eyes of many observers, there has been an audit explosion. In addition, the increased role of nonelected actors in policy making suggests a need to think about the extent of their democratic accountability and about the mechanisms by which it is enforced. Similarly, accounts of growing transnational and international constraints on states suggest that a need to rethink the nature of social inclusion and social justice. Political institutions from the World Bank to the EU now use terms such as *good governance* to convey their aspirations for a better world.

Source - Governance | Definition, Types, Structure, & Facts | Britannica

Partisanship

Partisanship is the strong, often emotional, loyalty to a political party, ideology, or cause. While some degree of party loyalty is natural in a political system, extreme or negative partisanship can be detrimental.

Key characteristics of partisanship include:

- **Uncritical allegiance:** Adherence to a party's values and views without careful consideration.
- **Hostility toward opponents:** A negative view or distrust of opposing parties.
- **Unwillingness to compromise:** An unwillingness to cooperate with political opponents, which can lead to gridlock.
- **Focus on winning:** Prioritizing the defeat of a rival party over implementing effective policies.



Written by Brian Duignan

Fact-checked by the Editors Encyclopedia Britannica

Article History

Partisanship, in democratic politics and government, a strong adherence, dedication, or loyalty to a political party—or to an ideology or agenda associated with a political party—usually accompanied by a negative view of an opposing party. Extreme partisanship is generally regarded as detrimental to the functioning of democratic governments, in part because of its typical basis in motivated reasoning and misperceptions of political reality. Among political leaders and officeholders, such “hyperpartisanship” is usually manifested in an unwillingness to cooperate or compromise on important matters with leaders and officeholders of another party. It may also be seen in “institutional warfare,” or the misuse of institutional authority for the purpose of undermining popular support for another party or preventing another party from governing effectively, even at the cost of harming the national interest. The attempted politicization of traditionally independent and apolitical government institutions is another signal of extreme partisanship. In the United States, partisan electoral strategies have included legal and illegal techniques of voter suppression and vote dilution—designed, respectively, to make voting difficult for adherents of another party and to ensure that another party is underrepresented in a legislature relative to its share of the total votes cast in a given election (*see also gerrymandering*). Partisanship among political leaders naturally encourages, and is encouraged by, partisanship among ordinary citizens, which is characterized in part by hostility and prejudicial attitudes toward members of another party. In cases of extreme partisanship, significant numbers of ordinary citizens as well as political leaders may believe that no government headed by another party can be legitimate or even that violence against governments headed by another party is justified. Extreme and long-lasting partisanship in a two-party system, known as political polarization, results in the division of a country's entire population into two diametrically opposed political camps. Polarization of this sort can damage a country's long-term interests, in part because the resulting dysfunction and gridlock make it difficult for any government to

adequately address national problems. It can also pose a serious threat to democracy because it undermines the public's trust in electoral institutions and weakens its commitment to democratic values and the rule of law.

Source - [Partisanship | Definition, Examples, History, & Facts | Britannica](#)

An ethical dilemma – what's the difference...

Between doing things right, and doing the right thing?

Examples:

- Waterboarding?
- Tasing Grandma?
- The “Holy fool” (*yurodivy*), Kramer or whistleblowers?



In his book “***Talking To Strangers***” (2019), Malcolm Gladwell describes the concept of the holy fool or *yurodivy* in Eastern Orthodox asceticism. This individual is found in many religious stories in that region.

Often the holy fool takes the appearance of a crazy person or fool but displays an incredible clairvoyance at points. This character is usually able to see things in the world that are hidden in plain sight because he is not part of the everyday world.

Gladwell compares this character to one the West is more familiar with. Hans Christian Andersen's story “***The Emperor's New Clothes***” parallels the idea of a holy fool in action.


In Anderson's story, weavers offer an emperor a set of clothing they say will be invisible to the unworthy. The weavers actually give the emperor nothing, basically scamming him. However, the attendants and citizens dare not tell the emperor.

If they report that the leader is wearing nothing, they'll show they're incompetent or stupid. The emperor decides to have a parade to show off his new clothing. The viewers watch blankly and say nothing.

However, a child in the crowd shouts that the king is wearing nothing, breaking the charade. The child has no social status and doesn't care if he looks like a fool. In this case, he's the holy fool that points out something missed by the masses.

The holy fool shows you the power that is gained by not caring about your status and being willing to take the appearance of a fool. By being the negative center of attention or a fool in your pursuit of growth, you'll tread down a path towards wisdom.

Source: <https://medium.com/the-ascent/you-should-aspire-to-be-a-fool-g09dccc63d3e>



GREAT LEADERS KNOW
ABOUT DOING THINGS
RIGHT – *AND* DOING
THE RIGHT THING.
WHAT'S THE
DIFFERENCE? THEY...

Lead to Ethics

This is of course not to say that managers are unethical, and leaders are not, rather, it's another example of short-term versus long-term thinking. Management is always concerned with efficiency – doing things right to conserve resources. But leadership focuses on effectiveness – doing the right thing. For example, the military must manage its resources well to maximize its efficiency. But, in waging war, the military's critical responsibility is to be effective and win the war – regardless of the resources required.

So, here's the key question on ethics: **what's the difference between doing things right, and doing the right thing?**

In their book, *Leading to Ethics*, authors Eric Harvey, Andy Smith and Paul Sims reiterate the importance of leading by example: "You have no choice about being a role model. You are one. It comes with the job. The only choice you have is *which role you'll model*. The modeling of ethical behavior by organizational leaders, supervisors and co-workers is positively related to ethics outcomes such as employees being more satisfied with their organizations and feeling less pressure to commit misconduct." (Harvey, Smith and Sims, 2003)

In short, *your employees rightfully assume that it's okay to do whatever **you** do...*

Leading to Ethics, Top Ten

1. **Encourage initiative** - Great leaders motivate employees to step up and take the ethical lead instead of complaining, pointing fingers or waiting for others to take the first step.
2. **Hire and promote ethical people.** -Leaders use the organization's mission, vision and values as criteria for hiring and promoting decisions. And they **ONLY** select those individuals who believe in these principles and who behave with integrity.
3. **Focus on steady, incremental change.** Leaders understand that ethics and values – alignment are “sum total” outcomes, and therefore place emphasis on lots of improvements (10% at a time, over time) in lots of areas.
4. **Pay (close) attention to perceptions.** Leaders pay close attention to the feelings, opinions and reactions of their colleagues, their employees, the customers they serve, and everyone in their circle of influence. They realize that perceptions **ARE** reality when it comes to ethics and integrity.



Leading to Ethics, pt. 2

5. **Ensure in-sync policies and practices.** Leaders make sure that rules and standards support the organization's values and ethics at every level. And, should an ethical dilemma occur, they welcome the opportunity to resolve the issue quickly and without fear of reprisal.
6. **Hold people accountable.** Leaders hold themselves and others accountable for ethical behavior. And, they have zero-tolerance for values violations because they know that “one bad apple can spoil the bunch.”
7. **Provide values and ethics education.** Leaders take the time – and devote the resources – to help employees acquire the confidence and skills necessary to translate good beliefs into good behaviors.

Leading to Ethics, pt. 3

8. Use values to drive decisions. Leaders apply the organization's values and guiding principles when making decisions – whether big or strategic, or small and seemingly insignificant. They realize that ethics are displayed in everything we do, and everything we do counts, or nothing counts.
9. Build values and ethics awareness. Leaders regularly communicate and discuss the organization's shared values operating principles, and ethical standards – making sure they are understood, supported and accepted at all levels.
10. Lead by example. Finally, leaders recognize that they earn the right to expect others to perform with integrity when they, themselves, “walk the talk.”

Two people in a rubber raft

The story of one person stabbing the other end of their rubber raft carries a potent symbolic meaning about self-destructive betrayal in a codependent relationship. The act is a perverse form of attack, as both individuals are harmed by the act.

Here is a breakdown of the symbolism:

The rubber raft represents the relationship itself—a shared vessel that both people need to survive. It is a fragile, enclosed world for two people, isolated from the outside. The raft can symbolize a marriage, a business partnership, a friendship, or a family unit.

The water surrounding them symbolizes the external challenges of life—the dangers, pressures, and struggles. The raft is their protection against these challenges, but once compromised, it ceases to protect anyone.

The stabbing of the other end represents an indirect attack. The aggressor is not physically attacking the other person but rather the foundation that supports them both. It is a form of sabotage or betrayal that harms the victim by proxy.

The resulting slow sinking or deflation symbolizes the decline of the relationship. This action ensures that both people will inevitably be harmed. It's a lose-lose situation born of bitterness, misdirected anger, or a desire to hurt the other person at any cost, even their own.

Although it is AI generated, and just a superficial look, former George Mason University economist Doctor Walter Williams' philosophy through a metaphor is a beautiful place to start. His story and example were the first I'd heard of the potential and harm caused by one who is willing to risk and lose everything by preferring to lose by themselves rather than win as part of a team.

Ethically speaking, in conflict or crisis, which are you?

Please read more about Dr. Williams at [Economics | News: Department Tribute for Walter E. Williams](#)

Maurice and Maralyn Bailey in 1974



It's funny how often time and chance intervene. While searching for a good (and hopefully with real-life application) example of the sealed fate of two people in a rubber raft, I stumbled upon this new book, published in 2025, which is well-written, and the author hopes clearly to be turned into a screenplay. It's a real-life example of what two people must do to survive in a rubber raft when survival is what matters most - having something to live for indeed.

In "A Marriage at Sea," the journalist Sophie Elmhirst's elegant and propulsive nonfiction debut about a married couple cast adrift for months on a raft, this tension is on full display. Maurice and Maralyn Bailey took to the seas from 1970s England, selling their suburban home to buy a boat and sail to New Zealand. Nine months into the trip, a sperm whale breached under their boat — called the Auralyn, a combination of their names — and it sank into the Pacific, leaving them stranded on a crude raft with an assortment of salvaged items, luckily including water, canned food, a camera — and a biography of King Richard III. The couple was 117 days adrift before being rescued to tell their story.

[A Marriage at Sea: A True Story of Love, Obsession, and Shipwreck: Elmhirst, Sophie: 9780593854280: Amazon.com: Books](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780593854280)

Conclusion: “The Basis of Effective Government...”

In a special message to Congress on conflicts of interest, April 27, 1961, President John F. Kennedy stated:

"No responsibility of government is more fundamental than the responsibility of maintaining the highest standards of ethical behavior by those who conduct the public business. There can be no dissent from the principle that all officials must act with unwavering integrity, absolute impartiality and complete devotion to the public interest. This principle must be followed not only in reality but in appearance.

For the basis of effective government is public confidence, and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or appear to falter."



The resources and references that greatly influenced this presentation (in addition to those specially noted in the previous pages) include:

1. ***Leading to Ethics*** by Eric Harvey, Andy Smith and Paul Sims, Performance Systems Co. (Originally published by Walk the Talk,(2003) [Amazon.com: Leading To Ethics-10 Leadership Strategies for Building a High-Integrity Organization: 9781885228505: Harvey, Eric, Smith, Andy, Sims, Paul: Books](#)

Presenter information – J. Mark Warren

Is a (mostly) retired Training Consultant and former employee with the Texas Association of Counties in his hometown of Austin, Texas. His presentations convey a message of inspiration, motivation and new direction and revolve around leadership, interpersonal communication and relationship skills, workplace diversity and professionalism, bridging the generations and customer service excellence.

Mark worked with the TAC Leadership Program and served as the coordinator of its Leadership training from 2002 and County Best Practices from 2009 to 2015.

After graduating from St. Edward's University in 1977, Mark spent 23 years with the Texas Department of Public Safety, promoting to Training Officer at the Training Academy in Austin in 1981, and retiring in 2000 as the Academy's Assistant Commander.

From December 2015 through August 2017, Mark presented a series of presentations on verbal de-escalation with the Texas Police Association for the Department of Public Safety and law enforcement and criminal justice professionals across Texas.

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