



Quick Reference Guide: ELA Virtues of Ethical Leadership

We use models to make sense of complex phenomena; few aspects of human experience are more complex than leadership. This model by Ethical Leaders in Action combines ancient concepts with modern terminology and applications; we invite leaders to use it as a framework for discussion and development.

Aristotle (and others) observed that people flourish by cultivating certain traits, which he called *arête*, translated as “virtues.” These virtues constitute a wide range of qualities, moral and practical, public and private. Virtues also reflect moderation: courage, for example, is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. Excellent human beings, he argued, all exhibit a full range of virtues.

We live in a diverse culture, in an even more diverse world, with many concepts of human flourishing. Rather than attempt to define the full range of human virtues, we pursue a more focused goal: to define the virtues that promote ethical leadership, described as *empowering others to make a positive difference in the world*.

The virtues of ethical leadership include one core commitment and four capabilities. All are inter-related. We develop these virtues to grow stronger as ethical leaders:

- **Service** describes the core commitments of an ethical leader, striving to improve and achieve positive ends, while enabling others to do the same. It encompasses integrity, compassion, and justice.
- **Clarity** describes the capacities for imagination and vision, as well as observation and analysis. It includes the abilities to craft and share vision, as well as to discern and understand reality. It also encompasses moral clarity with respect to our individual and shared values.
- **Creativity** enables us to build, to improve, and to solve problems. It features an ability to synthesize solutions, and a drive to achieve optimal outcomes.
- **Competence** includes context- specific skills, along with practical wisdom and judgment. It also includes more general leadership competencies, such as communication.
- **Courage** is the willingness and ability to do what is right, even in the face of obstacles and challenges.

We develop virtues through practice and reflection, alone and especially in relationships with others. For each of the virtues, you might ask yourself:

1. What are my strengths with respect to this virtue? What examples can I point to that illustrate my strengths as well as any shortcomings?
2. When has this virtue helped me in the past? When, and how, might greater strengths have helped me?
3. Who are my role models with respect to these virtues? What can I learn from them?
4. What are my concrete plans for improvement? How will I chart my progress?

The ELA model rests on a foundation of excellent work by others, from Aristotle (who articulated a potent and enduring virtue set around 300 BCE) to Peter Koestenbaum (whose contemporary Leadership Diamond crystallizes around a commitment to greatness). As important, the model is informed by our experience with today’s leaders in multiple contexts. It will continue to evolve as we continue our work.

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