

Are

YOU

an Ethical

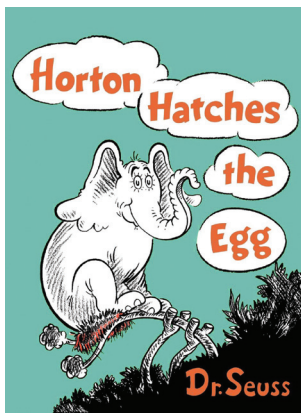
Leader?

by Dr. Jacoby

Since first writing about ethical leadership in ASBO International's *School Business Affairs* in 1995, I have had the privilege to speak on the topic of ethical leadership at many ASBO affiliate conferences and leadership institutes. In many ways, this subject has become a strong passion of mine and perhaps even a foundational element of my own leadership as a school business official, superintendent and now the Executive Director of Illinois ASBO. Recently, however, the question of ethical leadership hit home in an interesting way.

A LESSON FROM HORTON

A few years ago, I was sitting with a three-year-old that my wife and I watch on occasion. The little girl and I were eating our lunch and watching the animated movie *Horton Hears a Who*.



Horton first appeared in an equally familiar tale entitled *Horton Hatches the Egg*. This book depicts an irresponsible bird named Maysie who asks Horton to sit on her egg just for a few minutes while she takes a break. The break lasts for months and Horton remains faithful to his promise staying with the egg even as his friends laugh at him. He is captured by hunters, exposed to the elements, endures a dangerous voyage across the sea and is finally placed in a circus. Yet he doesn't waver from his commitment.

The classic phrase uttered by Horton over and over in the story is, **"I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent."** This is a perfect place to start when talking about ethical leadership for school business professionals.

ARE YOU AN ETHICAL LEADER?

That question deserves an answer from every school business professional. I would guess each of you reading this would say, "yes." My concern is that many of you would respond without first doing any sort of deep personal reflection of what being ethical really means and further, you would not spend much time going deep into a personal audit of your thinking and behavior.

Before you answer, let's start with some definitions. The terms ethics, virtues and morals are often considered synonymous. We may agree that the terms can be used interchangeably, but let's look first at the origins and meanings of the terms.

The Greek word *ethos* refers to a set of customs or beliefs. From that perspective, to "have" ethics is to hold to a set of beliefs about what is right and wrong or what is good and evil, not simply to follow a list of established rules. To expand upon this, one could argue that true ethics will only be exhibited when an individual has an internal motivation for their behavior. In essence the "character" of ethics has everything to do with one's beliefs.

Consider what beliefs or value systems govern your daily behavior at home and at work. Are you just making it up as you go along or do you know what you believe and live by it? Can you say along with Horton "I meant what I said and I said what I meant?" Or are you like most people, who don't take the time to establish in their own minds the standards by which they will act and live? Honestly, that is why most people who find their lives shattered by personal or professional misconduct are surprised when they realize how utterly destructive their behavior has become.

Now consider the definition of morality. It comes from the Latin word *mores* and refers to the customs, norms, virtues and folkways of a society. The focus is on the values of the group. As a member of Illinois ASBO you have a set of group values and ethical behaviors depicted in a code of ethics. This is a great place to begin and one of the important functions of associating with other professionals. You essentially agree to live by a standard or a set of beliefs that are tested by the larger society and to which there is some accountability. As you can see, even here we use the terms interchangeably.

My argument over the years has been that we live in a culture that embraces moral ambiguity. It is not politically correct to say that anything is absolute. This means the "*mores*" of our society are left somewhat undefined. However, that does not mean that people don't judge the behavior of others. They just do it from their own perspective. Now, combine that with leaders who take little time to set personal standards or define personal beliefs and it is no surprise that we see headlines depicting ethical failure across every level of leadership. It is hard to say, "I said what I meant" when we say nothing at all.

**I meant what I said, and I said what I meant.
An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent.**

A COMMITMENT TO PERSONAL ETHICS

My challenge to you is to take some time to do your own personal ethics audit. Do not just give it lip service; make a "Horton-like" commitment by defining what you are and what you will be as an ethical leader.

As a place to start, I share with you below a list of virtues that I have been sharing with school business professionals for the past 15 years. Originally these were the qualities that two young men were told to look for when choosing church leaders. The young leaders were named Timothy and Titus and the mentor who instructed them was the Apostle Paul. This standard is a high one, but if you choose to live by something, you will likely hit what you aim for.

Ethics Audit Checklist

Put a check next to a virtue if you feel it is something that is highly visible in your leadership every day. These are your strengths. For all the rest, choose a few that you would like to develop. For a full review and more reflection questions go to the resources page (44-45) to find access to the complete ethical leadership assessment.

Personal Virtues of Ethical Leaders

- Temperate
- Prudent
- Not Pugnacious
- Gentle
- Not Contentious
- Free From Love Of Money
- Tested Through Experience
- Not Self-Willed
- Not Quick Tempered
- Loving What is Good
- Just
- Self-Controlled

Public Virtues of Ethical Leaders

- Above Reproach
- Hospitable
- Of Good Reputation
- Sober Minded
- Dignified

Family Virtues of Ethical Leaders

- Faithful in Marriage
- Good Manager of His/Her Household
- Children Under Control with Dignity

Growing as an ethical leader is about direction,
not perfection.

Access the full Illinois ASBO code of ethics at iasbo.tools/schoolbusinessethics.

WILL YOU ANSWER THE CALL?

After completing your audit, how do you answer the question, “Are you an ethical leader?” Can you say like Horton, “*I meant what I said, and I said what I meant. A school business leader is faithful, one hundred percent?*”

In the first course of the Illinois ASBO/Northern Illinois University Masters in School Business Management program, I pose this question as one of the most important considerations for those desiring to enter the field of school business management. The assignment is to develop

a personal code of ethics. It seems quite simple to the students at first, but as they begin to write, I often hear that it was one of the most difficult assignments of the semester.

Why? Well, there isn't a simple textbook answer. It requires some introspective thinking and commitment of personal values. Students who desire to be employed in this field in Illinois know that I will ultimately see their behaviors and hear about the quality of their leadership. It is a high stakes assignment for them. I trust that as you read this article, it is a high stakes consideration for you as well.

Be the leader who doesn't stop growing.

Remember that the point of an introspective evaluation of your own ethics is both confirmation and conviction. You have identified those areas where you are strong and now need to accept that there are areas you need to work on. In all of my workshops I stress one important conclusion — growing as an ethical leader is about direction, not perfection. When you identify a virtue that you need to address, you are already pointed in the direction of change. Celebrate that and don't worry about finding out that you aren't perfect. Instead, be the leader who doesn't stop growing. Your profession will thank you, your family will thank you and your community will be proud of the quality of your leadership. The profession needs strong, ethical leaders. **Will you answer the call?**

**I meant what I said,
and I said what I meant.
A school business leader
is faithful, one hundred percent!**