The Golden Rule as a Management Tool: A Clarification

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INTRODUCTION

The Golden Rule, which many of us learned as children: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is an old and honorable maxim that has been a powerful force for honesty and compassion, serving the world well as a guide to personal values and moral behavior. We believe as Covey (1989) that as an ethical imperative and guide, the Golden Rule’s “…essential meaning is to understand them [other people] deeply as individuals, the way you would want to be understood, and then to treat them in terms of that understanding” (p. 192). Difficulties arise, however, when managers apply a strict, literal interpretation of the Golden Rule, abiding by the “letter of the law” and not its intent. These managers treat people like they themselves would like to be treated, from their own perspectives, discounting the viewpoints of others. Doing so implies that people are alike and that what we want and need is exactly what others desire. However, each of us is unique and the downside to this interpretation is that we can alienate those who have different needs, desires, hopes, and aspirations.

An old fable vividly dramatizes the negative consequences of following the Golden Rule literally, and is an appropriate metaphor for the kinds of problems that can arise when supervisors strictly follow this well-intended axiom.

Once upon a time, there was a great flood; and involved in this flood were two creatures, a monkey and a fish. The monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the swift current. With the very best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable (Adams 1969, 22).

Just as the monkey in the story assumed that the fish’s needs were similar to his own and behaved accordingly, so too do many managers assume that their employees think, feel, and want to be treated as they do. Such well-intentioned behavior frequently results in similarly unfortunate circumstances. Let us move from an old tale to a current management scenario:

Pat, a top performer in the organization, was recently promoted to division manager. His new supervisor was orienting him to his new assignment and asked him his assumptions about working with people. Pat responded, “I trust my gut and go by the Golden Rule, treating others the way I’d like to be treated.”

The intent of people like Pat is admirable yet “the trick is not to learn to trust your gut feelings, but rather to discipline yourself to ignore them” (Lynch 1997, 419). Some individuals and organizations believe a
strict interpretation of the Golden Rule is the ideal principle for guiding all interpersonal interaction, including management practice (Handlin 1992; Manz 1998; Schonfeld 1994; Sheridan 1991).

In some cases, the use of the Golden Rule may work as intended, especially if respectfully applied to human differences. However, difficulties frequently arise when we use ourselves as the measure of how to treat others (Perreault 1996). The problem is when others’ perspectives and orientations to life and work are assumed rather than assessed.

With a literal interpretation of the Golden Rule the criteria for treatment of others are one’s own wants, needs, and perceptions, which does not take into account others’ perspectives and preferences. Such an approach implies that supervisors use themselves as models for understanding how to manage people. A corollary to this rule is that managers treat employees the way the managers themselves want to be treated. “Our tendency is to project out of our own autobiographies what we think other people want or need. We project our intentions on the behavior of others” (Perreault 1996, 47). Often, though, employees do not want to be treated as their managers or supervisors would like, but respond to different methods (Hill 1992). Hence, the strict application of the Golden Rule is not an appropriate model for managers. Given these considerations, Pat’s management philosophy may be problematic.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

How can a literal application of such an ingrained, common sense adage, one of the oldest ethical maxims, (Matthew 7:12) not be the best way to manage people? The reality is that what one employee appreciates, another may despise. This is because most of our preferences in life are learned and are highly individualized (Zimbardo and Weber 1994), including how we like to be treated by supervisors.

The tendency to assume that others share our opinions, feelings, and behavior is called the false consensus effect by social psychologists and is considered a fundamental bias in our thinking about other people (Dawes 1989; Marasch 1992; Marks, Graham, and Hansen 1992). We commonly believe that others hold similar political opinions, find the same movies amusing, or feel that baseball or football is the distinctive American game. Individuals tend to overestimate the proportion of other people who agree with their attitudes about drugs, abortion, seat belt use, university policies, politics, and even Ritz crackers (Nisbett and Ross 1991; Suls, Wan, and Sanders 1988). In other words, we assume that people agree with us to a greater extent than they actually do across a wide variety of issues. The saying, “The thief thinks everyone else is a thief,” is apt.

The bias of assuming that others behave, think, or feel as we do is an error in perception that arises because most people want to believe that others agree with them (Mullen et al. 1985). This way of viewing the world tends to enhance people’s confidence that their own actions, judgments, or lifestyles are normal or appropriate and serves as an affirmation and confirmation of the correctness of their own views (Marks and Miller 1987). However, overestimating the trustworthiness of our own ideas can be a significant hindrance to rational thinking. We can always believe there is plenty of support “out there” for our opinions, no matter how egocentric they may be. Hence, people may operate under the false assumption that their beliefs are widely held. Thus, false consensus bias can serve as justification for imposing one’s beliefs on others. Surely they think, feel, and act as we do, anyway (Fiske and Taylor 1991)!

The negative effects of false consensus may likewise operate in groups and lead to obstacles to their decisions. Cohesive groups of highly qualified, experienced individuals often share the false belief that
everyone in the group agrees with the group's judgments (Janis 1982). Such an illusion of unanimity is a key symptom of faulty decision making called "groupthink," which has been cited in a number of poorly executed, but critical decisions. Notable examples include: the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1962 by President Kennedy and his advisors, decisions made by President Johnson and his counselors between 1964 and 1967 to escalate the Vietnam War, and the 1986 decision made by NASA and Morton Thiokol to launch the tragic Challenger space shuttle (Robbins 1997). This form of "collective dumbness by smart people" (Feinberg and Tarrant 1995, 155) also is practiced in business. For example, a group of smart people made the decision to produce the Cadillac Allanté, a beautiful and expensive car that turned out to be a commercial failure because everyone wrongly believed that the other individuals in the group strongly felt the vehicle would be a fabulous success. Similar groups also approved NBC's rigging of crash tests for a sensational exposé about explosions of General Motors trucks in collisions (Feinberg and Tarrant 1995). Finally, Von Bergen and Kirk (1978) reported how a decision involving the implementation of time clocks for salaried workers went awry because taskforce members erroneously believed that others on the committee wanted time clocks in order to implement a flexible work hours program.

WHERE A LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE GOLDEN RULE PROVES INADEQUATE

The following six key areas denote where literally "doing unto others as we would have them do unto us" may not be an effective strategy and where following the intent of the Golden Rule and tailoring our approach to others based on their needs and perceptions is generally more appropriate.

Rewards

The range of potential differences between ourselves and those we manage can be great. For example, consider rewards that we might provide employees. Managers sometimes assume that what rewards them likewise will reward employees. A manager may reward a worker with higher pay when the worker really wants prestige, recognition, or more vacation time. Hence, the proffered reward fails to motivate performance as anticipated. For example, many plant managers have taken a top performer and spouse to an extravagant dinner when that was the furthest thing from that particular couple's desire. They may well have preferred beer and pizza or dinner alone! Of course, the opposite mistake is also made when we assume that because of certain background factors a couple would prefer beer and pizza when in fact they want to go to a fancy restaurant. We may think, "If I were from that kind of background that's what I'd want." Similarly, many of us have heard someone say, "Everybody likes public recognition." The fact is that in Daniels' research, most employees say they do not (Daniels 1994). They give various reasons, but most center on concern about what peers might think about them. The effective manager or supervisor knows which people like public recognition and which do not and decides on a plan of action accordingly.

Kovach (1987) demonstrated that managers frequently do not understand what motivates their employees. Supervisors were asked to rank ten motivational items according to what they believed their employees wanted from their jobs. There were significant differences between these rankings and those of employees. For example, employe rated interesting work as their most important job reward. However, supervisors claimed that their workers' highest preference was for good wages (supervisors ranked interesting work fifth). Additionally, employees rated "full appreciation of work done" and the "feeling of
being in on things” as their second and third priorities, respectively; supervisors rated them eighth and tenth. Overall, supervisors had surprisingly inaccurate perceptions of what motivated their employees. It is significant that these different perceptions were obtained from a number of surveys over a 50-year period.

With respect to benefits, some organizations have realized they may have erroneous ideas of the needs of their workers and have attempted to remedy this situation by implementing cafeteria-style or flexible benefit systems (Barringer and Mitchell 1994). The idea is to allow employees to put together their own benefits package by picking and choosing from available options. Thus, a young parent might opt for the company’s life and dental insurance plans, while an older employee may choose an improved pension plan. Flexible benefits programs have grown in popularity.

Though self-selected benefit systems are useful, their motivational power may be limited in daily work situations. Managers still must choose and administer many rewards on a regular basis. Certainly, individualizing those rewards is a key to effectiveness but not without other considerations. Two points need highlighting: the difficulty of predicting employees’ reward systems and others’ perceptions of preferential treatment. Knowing employees well enough to accurately determine individual rewards and motivating factors may seem a daunting task, especially if the number of persons is large. Make no mistake; it is time-consuming and involves a heightened sense of interpersonal awareness on the part of managers, but it is not impossible. It does, however, take special effort and may entail even keeping notes on who likes or dislikes what. Also, when a worker is first presented personalized rewards there is the chance that others may feel the employee “of the moment” is receiving special treatment. Yet, if we are open and clear about what we are doing as managers, in this regard,

repeated use of personalized pay-offs with a widening circle of employees can put this concern to rest. After a while, individualized reinforcement can be observed not to be limited to a selected or privileged few. Does it take special effort to learn what people prefer and administer those preferences in a fair manner? Certainly! Some aspects of being a manager take special effort and short cuts may not be possible.

Diversity

Diversity is a second issue that brings a strict interpretation of the Golden Rule into question. Demographic changes have created a more varied society and this trend will continue. In the U.S. workforce these shifts and the impact of the civil-rights and follow-on movements have generated more and more workers with differing value systems and backgrounds. Companies are initiating numerous programs geared toward enhancing appreciation of diversity. Valuing diversity means being responsive to a wide range of people unlike oneself. Included are numerous distinctions such as: race, gender, class, native language, national origin, physical ability, age, sexual orientation, religion, professional experience, personal preferences, and work styles. Valuing diversity involves going beyond a literal interpretation of the Golden Rule (Carnevale and Stone 1994). It requires one to be receiver-centered rather than self-centered with regard to one’s actions. Valuing diversity involves treating others as they wish to be treated, not how we wish to be treated. The implications of this shift in perspective are profound and more closely follow an empathetic and respectful interpretation of others via the Golden Rule, one fostering respect for individual differences. This latter understanding requires setting aside one’s own perspectives or personal perceptual filters and preferences in order to perceive others for who they are. It means recognizing that other people’s standards and values are as valid as our own. Sound simplistic? Yet, in a culture that
has long been accustomed to being relatively monolithic, dominated by white, male, European values, the shift is often difficult and painful.

Once managers understand and accept basic sources of uniqueness in their workers and errors in their own thinking, they become better equipped to meet each worker on his or her own turf, as it were. Then, they can more effectively explore what particular interactions and methods will maximize each person’s contribution to the firm.

**Differences in Perceptions of Harassment**

The appropriate legal standard for determining behaviors that constitute a sexually “hostile working environment” has not been clearly established (Li-Ping Tang and McCollum 1996). The problem is the behaviors that typically comprise a hostile working environment are subject to individual perceptions, definitions, and interpretations; in other words, behaviors like sexual jokes or comments, or touching and patting may hold entirely different meanings for various individuals. There is no doubt that certain behaviors constitute sexual harassment. For instance, “quid pro quo” behavior (e.g., a supervisor telling a subordinate that the person either performs a sexual favor or will be terminated) is clearly sexual harassment. Nevertheless, where the behaviors are not so blatant and may still constitute a sexually hostile environment, the question of defining how a reasonable person would interpret behavior becomes much more challenging.

One problem is gender-based differences in the ways men and women view various actions (Baugh 1997). For instance, Abbey (1987) has repeatedly found that men are more likely than women to attribute a woman’s friendliness to sexual interest. This misreading of warmth as a sexual come-on can lead to behavior the woman regards as sexual harassment (Saal, Johnson, and Weber 1989). Additionally, females are much more likely than males to report that they experienced some form of unwelcome sexual attention and to define more social-sexual behaviors as sexual harassment (Gutek 1989). Similarly, males are less likely to attribute responsibility for sexual harassment to the alleged harasser than are females, and men are more likely to place blame on the female target than are females. Females assign responsibility for sexual harassment to the harasser.

Supervisors must understand that it is the perceptions of the allegedly harassed individual that will be meaningful in a courtroom. A comment that a male supervisor may perceive as complimentary could be perceived by a female as uncomfortable or insulting, creating the basis for a sexual harassment charge. It is essential to keep in mind the fact that it is the perceptions of the person on the receiving end, not merely the intentions of the sender, that ultimately determine whether an action is unwelcome. Again, it is evident that basing our behaviors on our own understandings may produce unfortunate consequences and doing to others as we would have them do to us may be an improper managerial model.

**Differences in Ethical Perceptions of Business Practices**

Ethical decision making has emerged as an important managerial concern in both the academic literature and the business press (Labich 1992; Paine 1994). Franke, Crown, and Spake (1997) performed a sophisticated statistical analysis of research on gender differences (20,000 respondents in 66 samples) in perceptions of ethical decision making and found that women are more likely than men to perceive specific hypothetical business practices as unethical. These differences may carry over to men and women’s underlying moral structures, value systems, and ethical frameworks.

Other differences exist, however. Konovsky and Jaster (1989) reported that men and women differed in the justifications used to
support unethical behavior, and Betz, O’Connell, and Shepard (1989) found that men were more willing to participate in a wide variety of unethical behavior including padding travel expenses, using inside information to buy stock, engaging in computer-based theft, and shortcasing paperwork procedures. Tyson (1990) found that in order to save their jobs, men were more likely than women to conceal negative performance from superiors, maximize short-run performance even at the expense of long-run company welfare, bend labor rules to cut costs, and authorize release of a profitable—but potentially unsafe—product. In examining ethical behavior among marketing research professionals, Ferrell and Skinner (1988) found that women in data subcontracting and marketing research firms reported higher ethical standards than men.

A problem with a strict interpretation of the Golden Rule is that, as seen above, people’s ethical values differ, and they may mistakenly assume that their preferences coincide with others. Given differences in ethical perceptions, it is understandable how such variance may create problems at work, because both genders tend to see ethical situations from their own (often contradictory) perspectives. Additionally, it may sometimes seem hard to apply the Golden Rule in corporations where the interests of individuals are subordinated to the needs of the firm and where competitive activities demand selfish behavior.

**Cultural Differences**

Just as individuals have distinct personalities, different cultures possess unique characteristics that must be understood. Managers who have failed to recognize these differences have committed a number of mistakes. Ricks (1993) documented numerous blunders that result from individuals being insensitive to other cultures. For example, Arabs typically dislike deadlines. Many Arab faced with deadlines tend to feel threatened and backed into a corner. A significant proportion of Americans, on the other hand, try to expedite matters by setting deadlines. As a result, American-owned electronic devices may sit untouched in Middle Eastern repair shops because the device owners made the mistake of requesting that the work be completed by a specific time.

In a related example, the acquisition of the Firestone tire company by Japan’s Bridgestone did not proceed as smoothly as hoped. In fact, John Nevin, the crusty former chairman of Firestone, admitted that his style appeared abrupt and abrasive at times to the Japanese whose manner is much more subtle. Nevin needed to be less direct and forceful with the Japanese, and they had to become more aware and tolerant of American directness (Harris and Zweig 1991).

Cultural norms also affect leadership style regarding what subordinates come to expect from managers and supervisors. For instance, a manipulative or autocratic style is commonly accepted in Arab, Far Eastern, and Latin countries, whereas a more participative or involving style is required in other countries like Austria, Sweden, and Denmark (Hofstede 1980). In Sweden, specifically, it is traditional for employees at all levels to be involved in the decisions affecting them. However, in India where autocratic decision making is the norm, it would be considered a sign of weakness for managers to consult subordinates about decisions (Greenberg and Baron 1997). Therefore, an American manager, accustomed to participative decision making, may undermine his or her efforts in India by treating employees in a way that he or she would like to be treated, and not as local customs dictate.

**Leadership**

A final area of interest relates to the use of contingency leadership. Contingency leadership calls for using management techniques in a selective, situational appropriate manner. The contingency approach
Achievement-Oriented Leaders (accentuating excellence and challenging goals) are more effective:

- with individuals who have high needs for achievement and
- when jobs involve complex tasks.

Employee performance and satisfaction are likely to be maximized when leaders compensate for factors lacking in employees and/or work settings. However, leaders who spend time explaining tasks when they are already clear or when employees have the ability and experience to handle them, will find their input likely to be ineffective because employees will see such directive behavior as redundant and/or insulting (Wofford and Liska 1993). Yet, the supervisor may persist because he or she believes the action to be desired by others, since it makes personal sense.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Productive management strategy is not a matter of being aware of our own needs and responding to employees based upon them, simply because we assume that others want to be treated like us. Instead, productivity is brought about by being sensitive to others, then treating them accordingly. Generally, executives will be most effective when they take into account the perspectives and preferences of their subordinates and not use themselves as models in managing others. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Be continuously aware of your assumptions about people and your interactions with them. This is a lifelong process, not an end to be achieved, then forgotten. Do you assume the best about people, or the worst? People will perform up or down to our expectations (Eden 1990; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). Do you assume people share your values, perspectives, and preferences?
Be aware that your views, preferences, and needs are not necessarily shared by others. This seems obvious, but people forget. The cliché, “What you see depends upon where you stand,” is appropriate because everyone sees the world from their own unique viewpoint. Remember, we all take different paths to get to our particular vantage points.

Learn as much as you can about individual differences. These include race, culture, personality, family background, gender, religion, and nationality. The more you know about differences the better you will be able to see beyond your own vantage point. Accumulating knowledge in this area is the first step; experiencing and valuing differences the next.

Engage in dialogue. Decisions about the welfare of others ought to take into account their understandings. When unsure, ask! It is amazing what people will tell you, especially if they believe that you genuinely want to know. For example, a policy-making process that includes consultation with employees could disclose others’ unknown needs and preferences regarding the issue at hand. Pay attention to nonverbal cues. Due to the power imbalance in supervisor/subordinate relationships, it is common for subordinates to avoid verbally sharing their beliefs or feelings. Learning to understand the possible meanings of nonverbal behavior can provide cues to true feelings. White knuckles desperately clasping the arms of a chair do not signify comfort or agreement, no matter how vehemently the person says otherwise!

Finally, it is easy to judge others if we assume they are similar to us. This “like me” effect results in an individual’s perception of others being influenced more by what the observer is than by the other person. Indeed, it may be said that assumed similarity is a “lazy” way of managing others (Robbins 1997). People who assume that others are like them will be right some of the time, the rest of the time they will be wrong, leading to inaccurate perceptions and invalid data for making predictions and decisions. This is something like the proverbial broken clock; it’s right twice a day.

A final recommendation for managers is to apply an adaptation of the Golden Rule, what Alessandra and O’Connor (1996) call The Platinum Rule. It states, “Do unto others as they’d like done unto them” (p. 3), which means understanding other—and then dealing with them ways best for them, not only for us. It means taking the time to know and appreciate the people around us, and adjusting our behavior to make them more comfortable. It means using our knowledge and our sensitivity to try to put others at ease and apply the spirit of the Golden Rule—not the letter.


