The Content, Origins, and Effect of Follower Expectations of Ethical Leadership

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In the wake of numerous scandals in both the public and the private sector, the call for ethical leadership seems stronger than ever. As many of the scandals illustrate, leaders often have an important impact on the moral decision-making, behavior, and culture of their organizations. But do we all have the same ideas about what ethical leadership should look like?

This book considers ethical leadership from the perspectives of those most directly affected by it: the leader’s followers. In a series of qualitative and quantitative studies, it systematically explores follower expectations of ethical leadership. Moreover, it identifies characteristics of followers’ work that help shape these expectations and shows how expectations of ethical leadership can bias perceptions of a leader’s actual characteristics and behavior. As such, the book highlights the importance of actively managing expectations of ethical leadership and tailoring ethical leadership to the context in which followers operate.

Presenting a model of follower expectations of ethical leadership, the book suggests that leaders should maintain a certain ‘baseline’ of ethical leadership attributes at all times. Among other things, this baseline requires leaders to be open about their own mistakes and act as a safe haven that followers can turn to when needed. In cases where moral dilemmas are more common or profound, followers require a proactive approach to ethical leadership that includes more explicit discussions about ethics and values.