

Ethics 101 Book Review

Alfred Matthews

Center for Professional Development, Old Dominion University

CPD 410, Leadership Ethics

Professor Garrett Shelton

April 4, 2023

Abstract

John C. Maxwell's book Ethics 101, There's Only One Rule for Making Decisions presents the case that with ethical decision making we should all be following the Golden Rule. This review contains my overall recommendation about the book and the challenges and benefits with using the Golden Rule for ethical decisions.

A Review of John Maxwell's Ethics 101

I chose this book based off the requirement to review a book on leadership and with the title of the course being Leadership Ethics this seemed a natural fit. I have also read other books by John Maxwell and found that they often contained nice take aways that are easily applied to our everyday life. This is not a recent book with a 1993 publish date. It is still easily accessible in different format through a variety of sellers. I chose to go with a digital copy with the mindset that I may forget to carry a hard copy of the book with me, but if I have it in digital format, I can access it on my phone or other device that I usually carry with me. This worked well, though I miss the convenience of earmarking a page or using a bookmark to capture items I want to remember or go back and look at. I found the book easy to read with 82 pages of actual content that is organized and builds from the main idea of how to develop and maintain ethical behavior.

What I like about this book are the numerous stories, quotes, and examples that the author used throughout to reinforce and highlight the points that are made throughout the book. The use of stories and examples made the arguments for ethical behavior come alive. I realized after finishing the book that I did not sit down and read this book in a traditional manner. Instead, I found myself reading a section and the supporting information, then pausing and reflecting on what I had just learned. I enjoyed the opportunity to really give thought to the concepts in the book.

Some might argue that the concepts Maxwell proposes won't work because it is up to the individual to enforce them, instead of the organization or society setting the standards for ethical behavior. This book is not an instruction guide or an outline on how to implement to implement ethics in your organization. I believe that instead it is designed to make the reader

think about their individual role with ethics. What follows is a brief synopsis of the book and how Maxwell proposes we can improve our ethical behavior.

The preface of the book contains an important piece of context about the book and how the reader should interpret the information. I assumed based on the author and his other works that I am familiar with that this would be a book on business ethics for leaders. In the preface the author describes a lunch with a fellow businessman who recommended that Maxwell should write a book on business ethics. Maxwell's response was that there is no such thing as business ethics, there is only ethics. That statement sets the framework that the book is not about being ethical as a business leader, but simply behaving ethically.

The beginning of the book sets the sentiment people had at the time about the lack of ethical behavior with leaders in numerous positions. Scandals involving large corporations like Enron and Adelphia that collapsed due to shady accounting practices costing investors millions including the pension plans of their employees. Maxwell notes that poor behavior is not limited to the business world describing plagiarism from best-selling authors and the scandals in the Catholic Church. The results from a poll reveal how little the public's confidence at that time was in executives of large corporations and politicians with the results showing that only three percent of the population had trust in those individuals.

Maxwell believes that because of the scandals at the time people started to talk about why these types of things happen and what we can do about it. According to Maxwell people behave unethically for several reasons: convenience, the desire to win, and we rationalize our actions.

The book mentions that the conventional methods of creating ethical behavior through outsourced training, providing targeted training to offenders, or simply relying on the laws to determine what is allowed or ethical. Maxwell believes this only creates moral chaos because

there is not one standard. Ethics is not a business or social issue but a personal one. For ethics to work we must hold ourselves accountable and not just worry about the actions of others. In an interesting example the book notes that 84 percent of college students believe that the United States is experiencing a business crisis and 77 percent believe the CEOs of those companies should be held accountable. However, 59 percent of that same student population admitted to cheating on an exam. The results of this one poll reinforces the need to think about ethics individually before judging others.

What is Maxwell's proposal to improve society's ethics? Maxwell proposes that people can use one simple rule as a guideline for their ethical decision making. That is the Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Would you want someone to cheat, lie or steal from you? Then you should not do that to others. The Golden Rule also exists in nearly every culture making it easy to apply as a universal standard. When making his point that we should apply this one rule for our ethical decisions Maxwell notes that the golden rule is accepted by most people. It is easy to understand, let's both sides involved in a decision win, and can be our moral compass when we need direction.

In theory Maxwell's suggestion that all we must do is follow the Golden rule sounds simple, the reality can be more challenging than most people realize. To get an idea of how long the Golden Rule has been around it has appeared in the Gospels and writings of Confucius 600 years before the time of Christ (The Historian Hut 2016). Considering how long the Golden Rule has existed how many people in the past or present take the time to think about it or follow it? We must also consider what motivates individuals. Is it the fear of punishment that makes most individuals follow the law or the desire to do the right thing? The Golden Rule may only be able

to influence a small portion of society, the rest follow the rules from fear of the consequences if they do not.

I believe that the society we live in today makes the concept of following the Golden Rule challenging. What do we value today? Money, power, fame? We idolize social media, Hollywood, and sports celebrities whose actions that make them famous runs contrary to the principle of the Golden Rule. We also must think about what we would give up by following the Golden Rule. Money, a promotion, popularity?

This is where we can see that this book really is for leaders. Imagine how differently we might look at our political leaders if they all adopted and followed the Golden Rule. Do we want to follow the examples that our leaders are setting, and as a leader am I setting the example that others should follow? If our leaders show us that following the Golden Rule is more important than material trappings, then you have set an example others can follow. As a leader if your behavior is not ethical then you should have no expectation that anyone under you would behave any differently. Maxwell's message is simple, as a leader if you follow the rule, you are setting the example others can follow.

Considering all the challenges in creating a culture of using or implementing the Golden Rule this book should not be used as a prescription to fix wrongdoing or as a new corporate policy. This book can be a written conscious for leaders, comparing their actions to the fundamentals listed in the book to assist them on an ethical journey.

Maxwell finishes the book describing a meeting in 1923 with some of the most influential and wealthiest people on Wall Street at a Chicago Hotel. Astonishingly none of these men maintained their success. Several committed suicide, some went to prison, and others died broke. The moral of the story? These men chased the wrong thing. They traded their lives,

morals, and well-being for money or power and ended up with nothing. An interesting reminder of what can happen if our priorities are wrong.

In conclusion I would recommend this book for anyone, but especially leaders. This book should be viewed as a companion that can be picked up and referenced as needed.

Read a section and then take the time to reflect on the message and how you can apply it. A great guide to keeping your moral compass pointed towards true north.

References

Maxwell, J.C. (2003) *Ethics 101: There is only one rule for making decisions*. Warner Books.

Hachette Book Group.

The Golden Rule is Older than You Think!. (2016, November 16). The Historian's Hut.

<https://thehistorianshut.com/2016/11/16/the-golden-rule-is-older-than-you-think/>