

## The Role of Shame in Ethical Leadership

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*This theoretical paper addresses the role of shame in understanding and nurturing of ethical leadership. One health – One Planet initiatives dictate the need for ethical leadership, the one which is aware of own responsibility in front of the health of people involved, and planet in general. Scandals around many world iconic companies and different local business practices question the ability of some business leaders to critically evaluate own moral judgements and be aware of the results of own moral choices. This paper argues that although the external mechanisms of ethical regulations dictated by compliance to law, fashion for CSR, marketing good image activities, etc. are to a some degree shifting leadership decisions towards enhancement of the societal health, without internal regulation such as shame, they are diminishing the value of personal choice and moral maturity. The paper states that shame should become an operational category for the business, and take its part among the virtues of leadership.*

**JEL Codes:** Business Ethics/ Leadership/ Management

### 1. Introduction

This theoretical paper explores the role of shame in leadership process. It has been widely discussed (Donaldson 2000; Freeman 2005; Maak & Pless 2006; Ciulla 2005) that leadership's competence is rooted in the ability to care for the followers. The examples of exceedingly irresponsible leadership at such famous companies as Enron, AIG, Parmalat, Allied Irish Bank, WorldCom, Bear Stearns, Shell, Nike, Barclays Bank and many others, question however the appropriateness of the usage of term "leadership" in some cases. In order to distinguish, the lack of empathy, selfishness, short-term orientation, corruption, lying, hubris in the process of leadership are associated with "toxic" (Lipman-Blumen 2005), "psychopathic" (Boddy 2010) or "narcissistic" (Symington 2004) leadership.

Normative perspective, which states that 'how' is as important as 'what' in evaluating achievements, calls for moral awareness of people in charge and their responsibility for their lines of arguments, for their choices and actions in all the stages, and not just the results. Following this perspective, "leadership" today is getting a connotation of "responsibility" (Ciulla 2005; Pless 2007), servant leadership (Greenleaf 1997), developed ethical intelligence (Maak & Pless 2006), implicitness (being seen as a leader by others), trust-building abilities (Groves & La Rocca 2011), abilities of bringing up the best in people, abilities of building a stakeholder dialogue (Freeman 2005), care for the well-being and health of society (e.g. Humphries et al. 2012).

Sometimes the line between "poor" and "good" leadership is vague though. Firstly, it depends on the standpoints of the evaluators, their goals and ethical standards. Unethical actions, rooted in the lack of education of society as to what leadership is, can be provoked by the expectations of the followers (Kellerman 2004), by the amount of the

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decisions, their complexity and ambiguity (ibid.), by the challenges embedded in status differences (Marx 2000; De George 1999), by high economic demands, and external uncontrollable factors (Porter 2008). Strong moral confidence is needed in order to keep up with duties and provide support to others. In other words, for being moral one has to be moral. The question remains – what is in the root? and how to maintain a “good leadership” practice? Literature reflects the richness of current debate among academics and practitioners as to how to lead “well”, which virtues should be addressed, which processes emphasised, which procedures developed. Taking into consideration all the cultural and personal diversities, it is a vast and ambiguous discussion.

This article argues that shame can be used as an operational category in understanding ethicality of leadership, and it contributes to the discussion as to how to enhance ethical leadership. Shame has not been largely discussed in a managerial literature, and some negative connotations of this word might be the reason for it. Here the rationale for highlighting shame will be addressed and some problems in these regards will be observed. This paper will tackle basically three questions in the context of the function of shame in leadership process:

1. Why should we speak about shame in leadership?
2. What is the theoretical platform for its operationalization in regards to leadership?
3. How can shame be defined and how can it contribute to the understanding of leadership?

In the following sections the rationale of the topic will be addressed; the theoretical platform for discussing shame in leadership will be demonstrated in the brief literature review section; the results section, followed by the major findings of the theoretical analysis will state the need of studying shame in leadership. The conclusion part draws the main conclusions of the study; it also contains limitations of the current study and some perspectives for the future research.

## 2. Rationale: Why Speaking of Shame?

For many years the response of Nestlé to critique of their marketing policy in developing countries and health dangers of their infant formula was to blame mothers' education and the conditions of water... Bob Diamond at Barclays charmingly smiles in his interview being convinced that his “pay for performance” is worth of 20 million pounds a year... Many other examples make a public cry for shame. Using theme analysis technique, which searches for relationships among the domains, and addresses how such relationships are linked to the overall cultural context (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2012), some areas where business sometimes is aloof for expressing shame were extracted. Applying the argument (e.g. Ketz De Vries 1987; Trist 1990) that organisation can be observed as a unique personality, the attempt was made to connect these problem areas to the personality level problems:

- Lack of shame in over-evaluating own capacities and limitations: some companies claim themselves professionals in the sphere, whereas they are lacking competences, knowledge and skills needed. Quality of their product does not correspond to the advertised statements; they lie to customers and partners. Some companies are constantly unable to produce or deliver service or product in time, etc. This happens because of over-estimation of capacities or just due to deliberate lies. On the personal level this indicates on self-esteem problems;

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- Lack of shame when polluting environment: not mentioning the US story with the Kyoto protocol, many businesses do not consider as their responsibility to care for the ecology and planet, they continue to produce toxic pollutions or leave the garbage for others to worry about. On the individual level this can be compared with person living in a dirty, anti-hygienic conditions, which is a symptom for psychiatrist;
- Lack of shame when using cultural resources and simultaneously being unpatriotic, disrespectful to this culture and its inhabitants. This arrogance is compared with selling members of own family, only degenerated mind can do it;
- Lack of shame while innocently demonstrating loss of the common sense: company is guilty, but it continues to fight in courts and demonstrates condition similar to the loss of orientation (Ford Motor with their Pinto model, Enron scandal, Latvian 3 million energy loss case);
- Lack of shame while ignoring the golden rule: on the individual level this ego-centrism according to Piaget (1969), must go to the end by the age of 7.
- Lack of shame while doing business abroad and applying only own cultural standards. There is no goal to overcome ethnocentric biases, but learning cultural peculiarities instead of trying to change culture is in the core of cross-cultural ethics; applying only own cultural standards is compared to arrogance and ignorance of mind;
- Lack of shame when being too far from the needs of the rest of the population and the world poverty: scandals between multi - billionaires Berezovsky and Abramovich can serve as an example. Ego-centrism is seen in these actions.

Despite of the fact that a more rigorous theme and domain analysis is needed to state the areas of shameless business practices and more work has to be done in order to draw the link between the “organisational personality” disorders and such shameless behaviours, this brief overlook of practical evidence serves to demonstrate the necessity of addressing shame in business and its leadership.

Studies suggest that leaders “matter” when it comes to organizational ethics and organisational decisions (Mayer et al. 2011). As to Ciulla (Ciulla 2005), the more power leaders have, the greater is their responsibility for what they do and do not do. Treviño, Hartman and Brown (Treviño, Hartman & Brown 2003; Treviño & Brown 2004) research demonstrates that executive leaders play an important role in communicating ethical standards, and the values of leaders get transformed into organisational values (see also Mayer, Davis & Schoorman 1995).

Unethical behaviour at workplace would drop, according to 58 per cent of workers surveyed by Ernst & Young (The CPA Letter 2002), if managers were better role models and leaders. For today though, only 15% of the organisational leaders do realise their role in organisational culture (Institute of Business Ethics report 2003). How can we reduce shameful business practices if leaders do not consider the impact of their believe system and behaviour on organisational culture? And yet another point – how can we raise the issue of shame in business, if there is limited volume of studies in these regards, and

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shame as an important internal mechanism of self-regulation has not been addressed in managerial literature?

In a Western tradition shame has a rather negative connotation (Wettlaufer et al 2013); shame is associated with restricting, prohibiting, punishing instance, which hinders free creative spirit of personality, spontaneity, and the drive for acting. This could be the reason for not studying shame in relation to leadership. Fossum and Mason in their book *Facing Shame* (1986) state that shame is a painful feeling of dissatisfaction about oneself as a person. A successful leader did not need to be weak.

But as an era of the 'bold leadership' comes to its end (Bower et al 2011) - for example, Badaracco (2002) in *Leading quietly* stresses that we must adjust our vision of leadership from heroic leadership to the effective one, Sonnenfeld (2001) underlines that in educating leaders for tomorrow the image of infallibility and loud heroism should no longer be promoted and Lawrence (2006) is suggesting the concept of neo-humility to demonstrate that leadership is based on simple, modest actions - it is probably the right time to look at shame as to the normal virtue/instrument which helps building a more balanced life. Instead of attempting to overcome shame by not even mentioning it in the business literature, more information on shame is needed so that leaders can learn about and learn (grow) from it.

"Having shame" means to maintain a sense of restraint against offending others; on the contrary, "having no shame" is associated with excessive pride, hubris, lies and other amoral qualities, which appear when such restraint is absent (Broucek 1991). Psychiatrist Herman (2007) concluding her observations, suggests that shame is an acutely self-conscious state in which the self is 'split,' imagining itself in the eyes of the others.

If business creates its strategies without embarrassment for the complications it brings for society, culture and planet, there is a serious danger for everybody. Highly progressing technologies in 21<sup>st</sup> century require highly developed morality. Business leaders do not lead in the vacuum; neither do they just for sake of business. Using their competences, leaders define sense for others and bring business to the needs of society and planet. It seems feasible to connect leadership with the concept of sustainability and "triple-bottom-line" approach, according to which leading means raising the well-being of society (Elkington 2002), meeting the "needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Brundtland report 1987:8). Leadership in business can also be observed from the One Planet – One Health standpoint, which dictates a self-assessment question of the leader of whether his/her own actions are contributing to the health and longevity of stable society or rather to the deformation of the health of employees, customers, and partners.

Can such self-conscious leadership be nurtured by compliance? In two experiments of Froming and Cooper (1977) compliance was found to be negatively related to the level of moral judgment. Kohlberg (1973) was cautious about external regulations. He has argued that the highest, post – conventional moral abilities, are demonstrated by the individuals who have developed internal mechanisms of moral regulation, and compliance was interpreted by him as a trend away from moral decisions. Despite of the fact that compliance gives the necessary orientation in the system of the common ethics of society, it nevertheless hinders individual's moral development (Kohlberg 1973), as it encourages conformity, but does not address the moral doubts. Indeed, compliance is often considered to be a 'kind of a cost of doing business'; it creates value by protecting the

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company's reputation and reducing the risk of litigation. For example, in food industry "health" is interpreted as the avoidance of legally unacceptable "non-health." Although compliance to law creates corridors of "allowed" and "not allowed", without internal regulations, such as shame, compliance can turn into blind obedience, and fashion's following (also fashion for being moral and socially responsible).

Shame is adjusting individual to moral laws (Lewis 1992); it disciplines and guides the decisions; till now it is not however mentioned as a unit of analysis in business practice. The purpose of the article is not to shame or blame the business; neither it is a call for the constant experience of shame or remorse by the leaders. It stresses that leadership should be aimed towards the health of society and planet in general by building healthy communications within the organisation and healthy collaborations with other stakeholders by not being involved in shameless practices.

Some theoretical grounds for discussing shame in leadership will be introduced in the next paragraph.

### 3. Brief Literature Review

In order to provide a research synthesis a constant comparison analysis and the keyword-in-context analysis were applied. According to Greene et al. (1989) using multiple and/or cross-disciplinary sources allows the reviewer to get more meaning about the phenomena. In particular, between-source expansion and between-source development took place; the usage of these techniques increase legitimation and representation of the secondary data analysis (Onwuegbuzie 2012). As this is a work in progress, the only extract of codes and major interpretations are provided here in order to stay in line with the main argument of this article: to draw attention to the necessity of addressing shame while speaking of leadership, and ethical leadership in particular.

Analysing psychological and psychiatric literature dedicated to shame, the main conclusion that follows is that we probably have to speak about the "healthy dosage of shame". On one hand, studies suggest that experiencing shame leads to lowered self-esteem (Gruenewald et al. 2004), and it was found that pathological shame blocks personality (Kerbikov et al. 1968). Shame demonstrated correlations with depression (Iljin 2005), predispositions for reflections and high moral awareness (Ingram 1990). On the other hand, a lack of shame or a fake shame is also considered to be a sign of a deviated psyche (Freud 1937; Gannushkin 1964). According to Freud (1937), shame is the tool of the Super Ego, the instance of our psyche responsible for morality, laws and traditions. It uses shame to punish Ego as well as for guiding it in a 'right', socially acceptable direction.

The psyche is a self-regulating adaptive system. Evolutionary, psyche of the human was developed in the process of work and social life, and is a product of the brain activity. In order to be healthy it must reflect the real world adequately. In psychotic conditions determination of brain activity by the real world becomes deviated; mental disorders disrupt almost all cognitive and emotional sphere: e.g. learning skills, employment capabilities, abilities to sustain relationships, hygiene, etc. (Nebylitzyn 1991). It was observed that human psyche abilities for moral comprehensions slow down due to inability to experience shame; primitive concerns gradually substitute highest human qualities, if such could be developed on the first place (Pavlov 1955, 2001; Gannushkin 1964; Gilchrist, Blázquez & Torrens 2012). As to McGuire et al. (1994), mental illness decrease

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moral virtues and tend to increase selfishness, which is especially true for severe psychopathologies, such as schizophrenia, and psychopathy (Nesse 2001; Shaner, Miller & Mintz 2008).

Anthropological studies of shame suggest that genuinely it is associated with dis-honour, disgrace, or condemnation (Lewis 1992). Gilbert (2002) noticed that people lower their faces, avert their gaze and slump their shoulders while experiencing shame. Darwin (1872) in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* described shame affect as consisting of confusion of mind, downward cast eyes, slack posture, lowered head, and blushing. Today it is considered to be a panhuman emotion and cross-culturally is found to be connected to blushing (Casimir & Schnegg 2002). Shame has a humiliating part, as being connected with self-esteem, the person realising own wrong-doings arrives to the conclusion that he/she is a bad person (Broucek 1991). The person experiencing shame feels being un-covered, unprotected and vulnerable (Lewis 1992).

According to Lewis (1992), shame is connected with a self-conscious state in which the self is imagining itself in the eyes of the others. Lack of shame than means either inability to be self-conscious or to be self-critical (Kerbikov et al. 1968; Lewis 1971), or directs on unwillingness to use the same ethical standards as those 'existing for others' (Marx 2000; De George 1999; Price 2005). In all cases it does not lead to a positive dialogue and healthy relationship.

The analysis of managerial literature dedicated to leadership qualities did not however reveal shame or conscientiousness. Applying semantic analysis to these studies (Stogdill 1948; Kirkpatrick & Locke 1991; Astin & Astin 2000; Kouzes & Posner 2003; Locke 2003; Pierce & Newstrom 2006) the following main qualities were distinguished:

- Vision, a strong sense of purpose, ability to predict a successful result;
- Ability to organise others and transform the targets into 'tangible' tasks;
- Enthusiasm, a positive outlook which helps to motivate others;
- Integrity, stability: being aware of own core values and being consistent between beliefs and action;
- Empathy: genuine concern for others and the ability to put oneself in another's shoe. Agreeableness can also be referred here.
- Self-confidence: awareness of one's inner strength which does not imply over confidence and flawed judgments;
- Persistence: commitment to achieving the goals.

Some other "popular" leadership qualities that have been widely discussed include the ability to be realistic, ability to prioritize, to communicate, develop talents of others, ability to hire skilled professionals, delegate responsibilities, and to be a team player. It can be argued that shame has close meanings with such concepts as empathy and integrity. However, while integrity means being coherent with own values and virtues and empathy is a care and ability of co-experiencing pain or joy together with the other, shame is in the basis of self – regulation and self-adjustment; it is an internal control and permission to oneself to expose certain qualities and behaviours, and therefore it cannot be considered as a derivative of other qualities.

Although there is practically no literature which would stress shame as an important condition (virtue/emotion or cognition) for leadership, scholars of leadership use the

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phrase 'a lack of shame' in order to speak about "toxic leadership" (Lipman – Blumen 2005), "psychopathic leadership", "narcissistic leadership" (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985) phenomenon. Often, describing such destructive leadership lack of shame stands in line with the lack of empathy, magnetic superficial charm, manipulativenness, hubris, low morale, selfishness, short-term orientation (Gannushkin 1964; Lipman-Blumen 2005; Lubit 2004; Allio 2007; Kets de Vries 2009).

Boddy (2011) blames leaders – psychopaths for the problems of capitalism, as such shameless leaders make decisions, which shake world financial stability and longevity. Leaders - psychopaths do not empathise to others, they are prepared to lie and are very disorganised in their management (Boddy 2010). Their selfish leadership attracts similar narcissists or dependent personalities (Lipman-Blumen 2005) and ruin others around them by creating the atmosphere of intrigues and despotism (Kellerman 2004), which destroys organisation in a long run. Symington (2004) believes that pathological organisations are not able to differentiate narcissistic characters and, instead of excluding them from the key positions, are promoting them. A success factor of 'good-enough organisations' according to him is linked to the ability of sensing shameless and ego-centric personalities and 'keeping them under control'.

Agreeing with the view of Wettlaufer and Yasuhiro (Wettlaufer & Yasuhiro 2013), shame affects a person's identity at a very basic level – the level of social competence. Company is more respected, its image is more stable, its employees have higher self-esteem and are therefore more healthy (Witmer & Sweeney 1992), if they don't need to experience shame for themselves and their leader; it should not be achieved however on the cost of a *loss* of shame, this fundamental self – regulating ability.

### **4. Results: The Call for Studies of Shame in Leadership**

The topic of shame in leadership seems to be controversial. On the first layer, feelings of being ashamed do not benefit the leader, so it cannot cause a motivating discussion. Its "utility" however is hindered in the very nature of leadership, and it goes to the deeper layer of understanding of leadership. Leader is not a ready-made product of the university; neither he/she is an "ended" result, a complete set of qualities. Leadership implies the process of tries and mistakes, re-evaluation and growth. A good leader takes a courage to admit mistakes, to stand up again after being disappointed by own behaviour and decisions; a courage to hear the voice of shame.

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), is enough to cross the borders of moral principles just once that the attitude towards actions would change. If repeated (Nebylitzyn 1991; Pavlov 1955), and especially if rewarded (Watson, Bandura In: Hayes 2000) it leads to normalisation of 'a new' behaviour. To become deaf for shame is then just a consequence. Shameless leadership however has nothing to do with qualities of ethical leadership, such as personal integrity, altruism, ability to create trust, moral competence, reverence, self-motivation, inspiration, and willingness to serve and contribute to the society's well-being (Kanungo & Mendonca 1996; Brown and Mitchell 2010), qualities which we would like to nurture in leaders for tomorrow.

The concepts of transformational leadership (Burns 2003; Browne & Mitchell 2010), servant leadership (Greenleaf 1997), reverence (Woodruff 2001) and neo-humility of leadership (Lawrence 2006) contributed to the new look of the leadership phenomena. From something loud and charismatic, contemporary leadership theory states that it is a

hard work the person goes through. An effective leader translates values and qualities into actions and cares for the sustainability of organisation and relationships (Maak & Pless 2006). Further studies are needed to look at the basis of this process and investigate how the effective internalised control over the own behaviour takes place, how shame is involved in this process, as well as more research is needed to study “healthy” and “unhealthy” manifestations of shame for the process of leadership.

### 5. Conclusions

Theoretical analysis revealed many unanswered questions as to the relationship among the concepts of leadership and shame. They are connected with the ambiguous nature of both concepts. Interestingly, practical examples demonstrate the topic’s rationality in a clearer manner. Shame can restrict and limit personality, but it can also serve as a resource for new ethical challenges and necessary moral growth.

It was demonstrated that shame is connected with self-esteem, social norms, and self-reflection and is responsible for adjusting personality to culture. Leadership free of shame is studied by the scholars, and it proves to be amoral and devastating for others.

Both, lack of shame and its “overdose” are hindering health and psychic maturity of the personality. The question of finding the “correct dosage” or usage of shame becomes actual. Further studies of shame in different cultural contexts are needed to test the hypothesis of its connection with leaders’ ethicality and courage.

As this study is a work in progress, there are several limitations of this article. As its aim was to introduce with the problem and explore the grounds for addressing shame in leadership, it is more concerned with rationale of the topic rather than with concrete results. Limitations are also embedded in the qualitative research methodology itself: searching for meanings, the subjective biases inevitably are present in the study. Concrete coding results are not presented in this article, neither the grounds of the between-study literature analysis are demonstrated. Keyword – in –context analysis was applied with the purpose to raise general awareness towards the concept of shame in leadership and to demonstrate that there are arguments for its further studying as well as the necessity for so doing, dictated by the demands of practice.

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