Making a Difference:
Ethics in Human Systems Dynamics

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With the very public examples of how unethical decisions have caused the collapse of careers and organizations, the idea of ethical leadership has been the subject of books, editorials, and documentaries. From exploration of the tobacco industry to corporate monopolies to questionable activities in the country's largest financial institutions, various operational practices have been measured against common agreements about what constitutes ethical behavior. Why is it that ethics is so important in human systems? What does a commonly accepted code of ethics offer a human system?

To clarify for the purpose of this article, "ethics" is defined as the "moral principles that govern a person's our group's behavior." For example, telling the truth and taking care of family are examples of moral principles that are important in our culture. Human systems dynamics (HSD) tells us that these principles emerge over space and time as people come together to live, work, and play. The principles become shared agreements that generate system-wide patterns. Those patterns, in turn, influence subsequent behavior of the individuals. What that means is that as people come together and begin to form a "society," they agree on what constitutes acceptable behavior and relationships. They then use those agreements as a foundation for informal rules and formal laws that inform future behavior of the society.

The reason these agreements are critical to a system is that they generate patterns of interaction that ensure the sustainability of the whole. When people agree about their code of ethical behavior, they *commit* to behave in *coherent* ways, behaving similarly across the system. They *communicate* their code to each other, building *capacity* of individuals and groups to understand and adhere to shared expectations. They establish *constructs*, like laws and rules that inform individual and group behavior and *connect* groups to each other inside the system. Finally, they use that common code to measure *continuous* adaptation and growth of individuals and groups toward system-wide ethical behavior. These patterns–commitment, communication, capacity building, coherence, constructs, connection, and continuous adaptation–emerge in society when individuals and groups live by shared agreements. The benefit is that those specific patterns also contribute to the ultimate sustainability of the whole system.

Nothing is intractable.

People in the society promulgate their shared ethics by establishing rules that inform future behavior. Rules are codified to define the "law of the land." Rules shape formal ethical codes for professional and social groups. Rules become the foundations for social mores that remain coherent, even as they vary slightly from one generation, family, or neighborhood to the next.

The ethics of a group or society contribute to sustainability because they influence decisions at all levels of the system. When an individual's actions violate the ethics of the greater system, that behavior is not sustainable over time. For example, what happened at Enron was not sustainable on a number of levels. First the leaders' behavior at Enron violated rules and laws that govern the industry (whole). Additionally their actions violated the trust and expectations of their individual clients and customers (part). Finally on a broader scope, the behaviors of those few individuals further eroded public trust in corporations, in general (greater whole).

Ethical behavior is not just a "nice" idea that invites us to be polite to each other. It is a fundamental necessity to ensure sustainability of our way of life.

Ethics contribute to sustainability because they inform the behaviors of individuals and groups as they respond and adapt to challenges and changes in the environment. As a whole and individually, ethical responses across a society are similar and ultimately contribute to the health of the whole system. For example, while the internal behavior of street gangs is very coherent with the internal "ethics" of the gang, it does not allow for responses that are adaptive and healthy for the greater society. Gang behavior is not sustainable on the greater level of the whole society. Even if that gang mentality became the dominant stance in today's culture, it is still not sustainable because it is not focused on the health and viability of the whole.

Ethics contribute to sustainability because they force individuals to consider their own behavior in the light of their contributions to the whole. Ethics call for groups– institutions, corporations, communities–to consider their decisions in the light of their impact on the whole of society. Increasing globalization requires greater acceptance of diversity as multiple cultures, religions, and nationalities have been called on to consider their own actions in light of the greater whole of the planet. This broader sense of sustainability has forced broader consideration of ethics on a global scale across cultures.

Nothing is intractable.

What might a system of ethics based on sustainability mean to the public institutions that frame our daily experience? It means that:

- ► Governance is about service to the citizenry rather than about social, economic, and political benefit to a few select individuals or groups.

- ► Quality education is provided to every child, according to individual needs, skills, and abilities.

- ► In healthcare, patient welfare and service outweigh the financial risk and political gain of individuals or corporations.

- ► Justice is truly blind, using her scales to measure fairness for all people, regardless of differences that separate them.

- ► Societal goods and services (i.e., community infrastructures, such as transportation, trade, public assistance, etc.) are available to all, regardless of disparities of social or economic station.

So what does that require of us as individuals as we make decisions about our own behavior and contributions to the sustainability of our society?

- ► It requires that we take responsibility for the impact of our actions on sustainability at all scales–even beyond our own selves.

- ► It requires that we stand in inquiry, seeking to understand more about the roles our lives play in contributing to the whole.

- ► It requires that we reflect on our actions, learning from the past to improve our decisions in the future.

- ► It requires that we consider the impact of our actions on the whole, the part, and the greater whole.

The tool we share this month is a self-assessment and journaling page to assist you in that reflection as you examine your own actions and their impact on the sustainability of the greater whole. We hope you use it to consider the options for ethical decisions that you face every day.

Nothing is intractable.

Ethics in Human Systems Dynamics

A Self-Assessment for Sustainability

The following assessment is designed to help you reflect on the ways your own personal ethics contribute to the sustainability of your community on a number of levels. Once you have rated your own contributions, use the journaling format to focus on an area you want to strengthen and identify ways you can shift the patterns to increase your own contribution to the sustainability of your community.

Please rate your own decisions and actions, using the following scale.

1=Very Often   2=Often   3=Sometimes   4=Seldom   5=Very Seldom

	1	2	3	4	5
1. In my work, I consider the impact of my own actions on the operations of my team, my department, my organization, etc.					
2. I pay attention to and participate in political processes to ensure that government is truly about service to the citizenry.					
3. I pay attention to the actions and events in my local community, looking for ways to contribute to its sustainable health and well being.					
4. I pay attention to actions and events on the national and global levels, looking for ways to contribute to sustainability of the greater whole.					
I engage others in considering ethics-based decisions and exploring ways to join forces to contribute to sustainability in each of the following areas:					
▶ Government					
▶ Education					
▶ Healthcare					
▶ Justice					
▶ Societal goods and services (community infrastructures, such as transportation, trade, public assistance, etc.)					

Nothing is intractable.

Critical Question Reflection

Date: Focus Question:

WHAT? *(What contributions do my actions make to sustainability at all levels?)*	**SO WHAT?** *(So what evidence do I see of the results of ethical behavior?)*

NOW WHAT?
(Now what can I do to strengthen my own actions to increase sustainability for myself, my family, and my community?)

NOW WHAT?
are my new questions?

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