

The Only True Leadership Is Values-Based Leadership

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Do the right thing and the best you can. The rest will take care of itself.



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My students told me time and again, "You should write a book!" Finally one of them handed me a transcript of my lectures that he had done and suggested I use it as a start.

As a clinical professor of management and strategy at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, I've been privileged to engage in many thoughtful discussions with my students about values-based leadership, and I saw that a book could take this crucial topic to a bigger and broader audience. And so I wrote *From Values to Action: The Four Principles of Values-Based Leadership*.

In the final analysis, writing the book was just the right thing to do. And that is what values-based leadership is all about.

As I tell my students, becoming the best kind of leader isn't about emulating a role model or a historic figure. Rather, your leadership must be rooted in who you are and what matters most to you. When you truly know yourself and what you stand for, it is much easier to know what to do in any situation. It always comes down to doing the right thing and doing the best you can.

That may sound simple, but it's hardly simplistic. Doing the right thing is a lifelong challenge for all of us. Fortunately, there are guiding principles that can help.

From Values to Action centers on what I call the four principles of values-based leadership. The first is self-reflection: You must have the ability to identify and reflect on what you stand for, what your values

are, and what matters most to you. To be a values-based leader, you must be willing to look within yourself through regular self-reflection and strive for greater self-awareness. After all, if you aren't self-reflective, how can you truly know yourself? If you don't know yourself, how can you lead yourself? If you can't lead yourself, how can you lead others?

The second principle is balance, which means the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives and differing viewpoints to gain a much fuller understanding. Balance means that you consider all sides and opinions with an open mind.

The third principle is true self-confidence, accepting yourself as you are. You recognize your strengths and your weaknesses and strive for continuous improvement. With true self-confidence you know that there will always be people who are more gifted, accomplished, successful and so on than you, but you're OK with who you are.

The fourth principle is genuine humility. Never forget who you are or where you came from. Genuine humility keeps life in perspective, particularly as you experience success in your career. In addition, it helps you value each person you encounter and treat everyone respectfully.

The beauty of these four principles is that they can be applied by anyone, whether the president of a country, the chief executive of a company or the junior-most person in an organization. You don't have to--or want to--wait until you have hundreds of people reporting to you. You can always apply the principles of values-based leadership. It is never too early or too late to become a values-based leader.

I have relied on the principles of values-based leadership throughout my career, from the time I was a junior analyst in a cubicle at **Baxter International** ([BAX - news - people](#)) until I became the chairman and CEO of the multibillion-dollar health care company. Since I left Baxter, these principles have kept me aligned with my values in my current career as a professor at Kellogg, as an executive partner with Madison Dearborn Partners, a Chicago-based private equity firm with a portfolio of more than 40 companies, and as a member of about a dozen boards of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations.

In all of these roles I have stayed committed to values-based leadership. No matter what title I've had, whether corporate executive, professor, executive partner or board member--or for that matter soccer coach, volunteer parent or Sunday school teacher--I've never lost sight of who I am and what matters most to me. By knowing myself and my values, being committed to balance and having true self-confidence and genuine humility, I can far more easily make decisions, no matter if I'm facing a crisis or an opportunity. The answer is always simply to do the right thing and the very best that I can.

Today there is widespread lack of confidence in leadership, in business, government, education and elsewhere. Every leader needs to regain and maintain trust. Values-based leadership may not be a cure for everything that ails us, but it's definitely a good place to start.

Harry M. Jansen Kraemer Jr. is the author of From Values to Action: The Four Principles of Values-Based Leadership (Jossey-Bass, April 2011). A former chairman and CEO of Baxter International, a global health care company, he is a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, an executive partner with Madison Dearborn Partners, and a member of several boards of directors of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. In 2008 he was voted the Kellogg School professor of the year.