# A Leadership Challenge

By Jim Oliver, CPA, CGMA, 2017-2018 TSCPA Chairman

At the TSCPA Annual Meeting this year, Alfonzo Alexander spoke on ethical decision making. He serves as president of the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy's Center for the Public Trust (CPT). The Center's mission is "to champion the public trust by advancing ethical leadership in business, institutions and organizations." With a positive perspective, they aspire to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Their Student Center's mission is "to promote ethical thinking in the developing character and conscience of students." The work done by CPT and its Student Center deserves more recognition and support from our profession.

Alonzo presented us with specific steps toward making ethical decisions. You can read more about the steps in the Annual Meeting article in this issue of *Today's CPA*. He shared personal testimonies and real-life scenarios, including one where we attendees had to role-play different parts and consider how to handle a challenging situation. One valuable take away for me was how an organization's culture can increase the difficulty in making ethical decisions. The "tone at the top" influences how an individual decides to act.

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Organizational leadership sets that tone not only by what it espouses, but also by how it acts, especially how it interacts with its employees. Where organizational management seeks their own desires without regard for the needs of those under them, they reinforce self-protective decision-making by employees. When an organization focuses solely on making its numbers and not on valuing its people, employees do not feel secure. They will more likely make choices and take action for their own benefit rather than for the organization and those with whom they work.

Millennials have brought new challenges to workplace leadership. While many of us Baby Boomers complain about certain traits that differ from our own, we should recognize that many of their generational characteristics actually set Millennials at a higher level. As a group, they seek to have impact and to do work that has meaning. They readily accept diversity and see business as a means to serve all stakeholders as a responsible corporate citizen.

As a result, they rightfully reject a "command and control" organizational culture as they seek a collaborative opportunity with a higher purpose and vision. While Millennials may seem more impatient and less committed than Boomers, they also exhibit more courage to walk away from what has no meaning. Why should they be patient with, and committed to, an organization whose value and purpose is muddled or undeserving?

The challenge for those who lead is to examine how we do so, what tone we set and what vision we offer those for whom we are responsible. If we want team members who willingly make ethical decisions and sacrifice for the good of the organization and their fellow team members, we must be willing to sacrifice what we desire and set a vision that values people over numbers. We must offer a values-based culture, not one merely rooted in compliance to organizational rules or management edicts.

Bad "leadership" is nothing new, nor is it limited to the business world. The prophet Micah indicted the nations of Israel and Judah, and especially their government leaders, for corruption, injustice and outright theft as they mistreated those under their authority. Looking at government institutions during my lifetime, I have seen dysfunctional, unethical decision-making as some in authority make it all about their winning, maintaining power or enriching themselves, rarely exhibiting those characteristics of true leadership. Micah's advisory exhortation to the corrupt leaders of his time rings as true today as it did in his day: Act justly; love mercy; walk humbly.

John Maxwell notes that a leader requires two things: followers and a direction. Followers must trust both the character of the leader and the value of the vision that guides them. That trust arises out of seeing that the leader is willing to sacrifice for the success of those who are following. Simon Sinek writes: "Leadership is about integrity, honesty and accountability; all components of trust."

With those as intrinsic values of our profession, CPAs should be on the forefront of ethical leadership. Just as we seek to be trusted advisors to our clients and employers, we should also strive to be trusted leaders in our workplaces, our communities and our families. Equally important, we should also be empowering those around us to lead and succeed as together we face the challenges that the future will bring. ■

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