

# SHAME AS A LEADERSHIP VIRTUE: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL GROUNDS

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Scandals around world famous companies as well as local business practices question the abilities of some business leaders to critically evaluate own moral judgements and be aware of the results of own moral choices. This research paper argues that although the external mechanisms of ethical regulations dictated by compliance to law, fashion for CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), ‘other’ marketing good-image activities are to a some degree shifting leadership decisions towards enhancement of the ethicality of business, without internal regulation such as shame, they are not emphasising enough the value of personal choice and moral maturity. The rationale of this research paper is highlighting the meaning of shame to ethical leadership, specifically in Latvian business context.

**Design/methodology/approach** The research investigates the social representations of the word “shame” in understanding the phenomena of ethical leadership among employees of banking and gambling sectors in Latvia. These sectors were chosen due to their ambiguous relation in regards to societal ethicality. Associations of the word shame and those connected to shame in leadership were analysed on the sample of 200 employees in both industries.

**Findings** The paper prepares theoretical platform for discussing shame as leadership category, and the study reveals in the minds of Latvian employees the concept of shame as referred to leadership reminds of ‘responsibility’ and of ‘a lost value’.

**Research limitations/implications** the study was conducted in Latvian business context, and a cross-cultural study would make a more rigorous look at the phenomena of shame as referred to leadership. The sample consisted of just 200 employees, a bigger survey would be needed for generalisation of the results.

**Practical and social implications** The paper argues that shame should become an operational category for the business, and take its part among the virtues of leadership. This can raise the question of raising such quality for the leaders of tomorrow, in its “healthy dosage”. Previous studies demonstrate this would benefit the society and increase the social responsibility and moral awareness of the companies.

**Originality/value** Shame as an important internal mechanism of self-regulation (Nebylitzyn, 1991, Freud, 1937) has not been in the scope of scholars’ attention in the field of management and ethical leadership; negative connotations of this word might be a reason for it. Here the rationale for highlighting the meaning of shame to ethical leadership specifically in Latvian business context is addressed. This study contributes to our understanding about how shameful business leadership practices can be reduced. Additionally, some problems in these regards are observed.

**Keywords:** shame, ethical leadership, social representations, Latvian business context

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For many years the response of Nestlé to critique of their marketing policy in developing countries and health dangers of their infant product 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...

As Bradley and McDonald (2011) state that world-known companies by employing ‘some of the smartest business people not only in the room but in the world’, came close to causing a collapse of the U.S. and European economy. Indeed, the global economic crisis in 2008 have demonstrated that ignoring shame in business can have significant negative consequences to national economies and global development. 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 the appropriateness of the usage of term “leadership” as such.

If business creates its strategies without concerns for the complications they might bring for society, culture and planet, there is a serious danger for everybody. Business leaders do not lead in the vacuum. 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 to 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, partners, and the planet.

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 also cautious about the usage of external regulations in developing moral judgements. He has argued that the highest, post – conventional moral abilities, are demonstrated by the individuals who have developed internal mechanisms of moral regulation; compliance in his model was interpreted 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 activate the moral doubts and feelings of confusion so necessary for the growth of morality. Indeed, compliance is often considered to be a ‘kind of a cost of doing business’; it creates value by protecting the 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 socially responsible activities in order to build a good image).

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. This paper tackles basically two questions in the context of the function of shame in leadership process:

1. Why should we speak about shame in leadership?
2. How shame in regards to leadership is understood in Latvian context?

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 and the study of social representations of the employees of gambling and banking sectors will state the need for further studying of shame in leadership. The conclusion part draws the main results of the study; it also contains limitations of the current study and some perspectives for the future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a self-conscious emotion, shame informs one of an internal state of inadequacy, unworthiness, dishonour or regret about which others may or may not be aware (Psychology vocabulary, 2012). Given that shame makes one to feel as though the whole self is flawed, bad, or becomes a subject to exclusion, it makes the person to want to withdraw or to hide him/herself. Although shame is often confused with guilt, the connotations with the self-worth are different; shame does not separate “bad” behaviour from the “bad” subject who has conducted this behaviour (Waller’s psychological vocabulary, 2012). Briefly the difference between two emotions is summarised in the tab below.

Table 1

**Brief differentiation and summary of shame and guilt**

Shame	Guilt
A failure to meet own standards of behaviour	A failure to meet other's standards of behaviour
Shame is personal	Guilt is public
It tells "I am bad"	It tells "I did something bad"
Results in internal sanctions: "I feel badly"	Results in external sanctions: "I will be punished"

*Source: the psychological vocabulary by Wallers AP, 2012, extracted by the author*

In the Western tradition shame has a negative connotation; for a long time shame was associated with restricting, prohibiting, punishing instance which hinders free creative spirit of personality, its spontaneity (Wettlaufer, Yasuhiro, 2013), and this could be the reason why it was not studied in the scope of leadership research. At the first glance, shame does not benefit the leader, as a "heroic", "successful leader" is the one who does not need to be weak; the topic therefore does not seem to cause a motivating discussion.

Indeed, as described by Darwin (1872), shame is an affect which consists of the confusion of mind being expressed in downward cast eyes, a slack posture, a lowered head, and blushing. Fossum and Mason (1986) state that shame is a painful feeling of dissatisfaction about oneself as a person; shame is connected with self-esteem, and the person realising own wrong-doings arrives to the conclusion that he/she is a bad person (Broucek, 1991). Other studies of shame demonstrate that it is genuinely associated with dis-honour, disgrace and condemnation, the person experiencing shame feels being un-covered, unprotected and vulnerable (Lewis, 1992).

The 'utility' of the discussion is hindered however in the changed look on the nature of leadership (Browne and Mitchell, 2010). Following the normative perspective, which states that 'how' is as important as 'what' in evaluating achievements, leadership today implies the process of trials and errors, re-evaluation and growth; it becomes "quiet" and less heroic one. (Badaracco, 2006, Kellerman, 2004). Provided there is a shift in a leadership paradigm, this study is concerned if there also appeared a space for shame among the virtues of leadership and possibilities to add to the discussion of what ethical leadership is.

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).

According to 58 per cent of workers surveyed by Ernst & Young (The CPA Letter, 2002), unethical behaviour at workplace would be diminished, if managers were better role models and leaders. The other study suggests that it is only 15% of the organisational leaders who 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 belief 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 shame as an important internal mechanism of self-regulation has not been addressed in managerial literature?

"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 a-moral 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.

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 (Lewis 1971), or directs on un-willingness 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.

Interestingly, although there is practically no literature which would stress shame as an important condition (virtue/emotion or cognition) for leadership, literature reveals the concept "*lack of shame*" when it comes to leadership. It stands in line with *selfishness*, *short-term orientation*, *lying*, *hubris*, *manipulativeness*, and the *lack of empathy*, and is referred to "toxic" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), "psychopathic" (Boddy, 2011) or "narcissistic" (Symington, 2004) leadership, being opposed to "ethical" and/or "responsible" leadership (Ciulla, 2005, Maak and Pless, 2006).

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'.

Sharing opinion with Wettlaufer and Yasuhiro (Wettlaufer & Yasuhiro, 2013), shame affects a person's identity and is in the fundamentals of the social competence. Company can be more stable, its employees can have higher self-esteem (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992), if they don't need to experience shame for themselves and/or their leader. It should not be achieved however on the account of a *loss of shame*, this fundamental self – regulating ability. Further studies are need to address the role of shame for leadership in its "healthy dosage".

The purpose of this study is to prepare the platform for further work in this sphere. The social representations of shame among the employees were studied in order to address which connotations has this word in Latvian context, specifically among the employees of gambling and banking sectors.

One of the basic society reasoning elements is the formation of social representations. Moscovici following Durkheim (1982) idea that people in order to communicate have to share common understanding of reality, has developed the theory of social representations. According to Moscovici, social representations are systems of communication and they provide a certain social influence that constitutes social reality with its common knowledge, practices, and affiliations. Due to this shared knowledge the members of a certain group can identify themselves and others, and it constitutes the basis of ego – concepts of individuals. S.Moscovici (1993) has proved that humans choosing activity do not refer to the stimulus of objective reality but rather to the perceptions and imaginations of what this reality is. Being in the basis of self-awareness and abilities to make conclusions about the world, social representations are socio-psychological phenomena, which contains all cognitive functions, i.e. thinking, imagination, knowledge, and they are shared by all the members of a certain society (Moscovici, 1995). In other words, by giving meanings to different phenomena such as shame human beings make interpretations of their social world.

Abric (1994) distinguishes among the core and peripheric elements of social representations. The core elements conventionalise objects, persons and events in such way that they hardly get questioned and they become of an utmost importance for the orientation in social reality. Duveen (2007) states that principles of rationality are contextually determined, and if one studies particular responses of individuals to the particular stimulus, one has to learn what were the conditions provided; in other words, what is the historical, technological, professional, social, religious, economical, etc. context. Social representations are the results of social construction, but they also form new social representations.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research investigates social representations of the word “shame” in understanding the phenomena of ethical leadership among employees of banking and gambling sectors in Latvia. These sectors were chosen due to their ambiguous relation in regards to societal ethicality, as it has been discussed in a recent academic literature and in press (e.g. <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing>, [www.ethicscentre.ca](http://www.ethicscentre.ca), [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), <http://bizgovsocii.wordpress.com>). It is argued that historically the banking sector had no ethical concerns for the society and made its business in an unethical way, overcharging the clients and imposing values of low morality (Jeucken, 2002). In Latvia there are 27 banks and all together it employs 4000 people ([www.csb.gov.lv](http://www.csb.gov.lv)). As to the gambling sector, it has been a long discussion of its business philosophy, and many countries impose serious restrictions to this industry, while in others it is a forbidden business as such. In Latvia the gambling sector employs over 3,500 people and 17 companies of this industry bring 51,7 mln euro in taxes according to the data of 2013 ([www.leta.nozare.lv](http://www.leta.nozare.lv)).

Associations of the word shame and those connected to shame in leadership were studied through the answers of the 200 respondents sample (100 employed in gambling industry and 100 people who work in the bank sector), aged 29–63. Three major banks’ (in financial terms) employees and two major casino employees participated in the survey by being selected randomly. Initially there were 226 respondents sample but some answers on the latest stage were not taken into consideration as they did not demonstrate the comprehension of the terms. Participants were approached personally, in a separate room at their working place, applying the method of free association analysis, which is widely used in the research of social representations (e.g. Di Giacomo, 1980; Doise, Clémence, Lorenzi – Cioldi, 1993; Tsoukalas, 2006; Zakrizevska, Bulatova, 2012). The sampling was not stratified by gender, age or national differences in regards to distinguish social representations but the sample nevertheless was homogenous consisting of 55% of men and 45% of women with the medium age of 34 of both Latvian and Russian nationals working in Latvian business context.

The following research question was formulated: What are the social representations of shame in understanding ethical leadership among Latvian employees in gambling and banking sectors? Each respondent was asked to produce three associations with the word shame and then three associations connecting shame to ethical leadership.

### 4. RESULTS

Association field analysis demonstrated that shame has generally high frequencies of its association field. There was not found a statistically significant difference among the answers of employees of gambling and banking sectors.

Highest frequency associations were *embarrassment, being disappointed about oneself, conscientiousness*; these associations composed 52% of the total amount of the associations. The associations with a high percentage were respectively *self-awareness* (38%) and *remorse* (31%). When shame was asked in connection to ethical leadership the associations of *responsibility* (27%), *courage* (18%) and *good leadership* (11%) appeared mostly. Among a frequency of 8 - 10 x, there were the following associations: *moral, duty, must, self-control, guilt and the lost value*. A frequency of less than 7 x was found with the associations of *lost face, quiet, punishment, pressure, humiliation of others, wish to be hidden*. There were 82 words in total research which appeared only once, and the major part of them did not open up the meaning of the construct but were nevertheless interesting for the association field analysis, for example, *stupid, slow, darkness, lost, gift, reimbursement, Bible, suicide, justice*.

Results have demonstrated that shame is understood as an internal punishing instance, connected to self-awareness and a humiliating opinion of others; it involves embarrassment and

disappointment about oneself. In connection to ethical leadership it has a connotation of responsibility and courage as well as duty and self-control. A nostalgic call for a good but lost value for leadership appeared in the answers of respondents in creating associations with shame and ethical leadership. This suggests that employees in bank and gambling industries are missing leadership practice which would reveal the respect for shame.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND ENDING NOTES

The study is a work in progress, and it contributes to the argument that although the external mechanisms of ethical regulations dictated by compliance to law, fashion for CSR, marketing good-image-creation activities are shifting leadership decisions towards enhancement of the societal ethicality, without internal regulation (such as shame) they are diminishing the value of personal choice and moral maturity. The study argues that shame should become an operational category in business and find its place among the virtues of leadership.

The topic of shame for leadership seems to be controversial. Theoretical analysis revealed many unanswered questions as to the relationship among the concepts of leadership and shame, due to 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. Leadership free of shame proves to be amoral and devastating.

The study of social representations has revealed that shame has the connotations of 'embarrassment', 'conscientiousness', 'self-awareness', 'responsibility', and a 'must'; in the minds of Latvian employees the concept of shame as referred to leadership reminds of 'responsibility' and of 'a lost value'.

Further research is needed to study "healthy" and "unhealthy" manifestations of shame for the process of leadership. Further studies are also needed to test the hypothesis of its connection with leaders' ethicality and courage, also in different cultural contexts. The purpose of this article was to raise awareness towards the concept of shame in leadership and to demonstrate that there are grounds for its studying as well as necessity for so doing, which is dictated by the demands of theory and practice.

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