

## Servant Leadership

Senior leaders would do well to consider a service approach to leading by utilizing servant leadership. At the core of servant leadership are a set of attributes senior leaders are encouraged to embody, these include the way one conducts oneself with others: with humility, vulnerability, and awareness of the human spirit. Leaders at the top have significant demands, and servant leaders meet these challenges with a particular kind of depth described as courage, discernment, and a strong intellect. Finally, the senior leader who leads as a servant must consider her impact on the organization by serving as a role model, demonstrating presence, comfort with ambiguity, and most importantly, stability.<sup>10</sup> Leading can be conceived as occurring along a continuum from managerial control on the one end to spiritual holism on the other end. Inexperienced leaders often demonstrate their leadership as a managerial function, utilizing a very transactional way of leading. As one grows and matures as a leader, one's values begin to take on greater clarity and centrality and the expression of leadership moves from transactional to more transformational. Eventually the leader embraces the responsibility and vision to engage in changing cultures within organizations and/or society. Finally, at its end point, leadership is a spiritual endeavor.<sup>11</sup> Moving from one end of this spectrum to the other involves giving up control in favor of serving people and directing systems

toward moral ends. This is quite similar to James MacGregor Burns's idea of transforming leadership, which occurs "when one or more engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality."<sup>12</sup>

Servant leadership fits very well with a spiritual or Christian approach to building an organizational culture of inclusivity, trust, and partnership.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, servant leadership, as a values-based approach, aligns with the important board function of articulating an organization's guiding values. Proper governance requires the delineation of values that guide the board's leadership. However, simply creating an undifferentiated list of inspiring values provides too little guidance for the actual work of governance. Dividing values between those that inform purpose and those that guide the methods to achieve the purpose is far more useful. In this regard, the board is essentially speaking to itself about the values that inform the governance process at the level of officers, committees, and individual board members.<sup>14</sup> Such a process enables a board to directly link servant leadership characteristics to specific governance actions, for example, devising concrete ways to genuinely listen to and seek input from the management, staff, and constituents of an organization.

### Politics at the Top

Spiritually rich organizations enjoy the free flow of information and place high value on participation. It would seem such organizations have figured out how to reduce the perception of politics often expressed "as uncertainty, ambiguity, and, [frequently], worker insecurity."<sup>15</sup> If indeed organizations are political in nature, as Henry Mintzberg suggests,<sup>16</sup> and since leadership at the top of the organization is political, how might a faith-based leader embrace servant leadership in the politically charged context of board leadership? Political skill has long had a negative connotation, implying ruthless manipulation and using people as a means to an end. Indeed, historically, political ability has been defined as the use of influence, persuasion, and manipulation.<sup>17</sup> However, more recently, political skill has been redefined to align more with emotional intelligence, using one's ability to understand others as a means of influence. Characteristics of political skills from this vantage point include sincerity, honesty, integrity, self-awareness, social and emotional intelligence, interpersonal influence competencies, and social capital.<sup>18</sup> Using this definition suggests the possibility of employing political skill in the service of organizational strategy while maintaining an intact moral value system.

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very well with a spiritual or Christian approach to leadership, as a values-based approach, aligns with the delineation of an organization's guiding values and the actual work of governance. Dividing the board into differentiated lists of inspiring values for the purpose and those that guide the methods of governance is useful. In this regard, the board is essentially a servant leadership process. Such a process links individual board members to genuinely link servant leadership characteristics to management, staff, and constituents of an organization.

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## Religious Perspectives on Senior Leadership

Perspectives from religious traditions can offer insight into faith-based strategies for leaders at the senior level of organizations.

### Buddhist Radical Economics

According to Buddhism, the central characteristic of human life is suffering or inadequacy. This spiritual tradition originates from the northern part of India in the fifth century BC and was founded by Gautama Siddhartha, who liberated himself from suffering through his unique spiritual practice of meditation. After his supreme enlightenment, he taught his doctrines of compassion, wisdom, and calmness of mind for more than forty years.<sup>19</sup>

In the Buddhist tradition, suffering is a condition common in life, in some cases brought on by overattachment and the craving of material things and power. At other times suffering results from loss, sickness, aging, and death. The instrument or means to escape from suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the core of the Buddha's teachings. It sets the foundation for an understanding of right behavior and has eight elements in three divisions: wisdom, virtues, and spiritual practice (concentration).

#### Wisdom

1. Right view
2. Right decision

#### Virtues

3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood

#### Spiritual Practice (Concentration)

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration<sup>20</sup>

The Noble Eightfold Path is an ongoing spiritual development, a virtuous spiral that leads to liberation, or the final cessation of suffering, which is the foremost goal of Buddhism.

Liberation from suffering is facilitated very specifically by following five precepts that spell out how to conduct one's life in alignment with the virtues

set forth in the Noble Eightfold Path. The five precepts (also called the five mindfulness trainings) resemble the Ten Commandments and present a Buddhist perspective of a global ethic. One need not be Buddhist to practice these principles.

The five precepts are as follows:

1. *Reverence for life*: Practice compassion, do not kill or harm, and do not let others kill or harm.
2. *True happiness*: Practice generosity in thinking, speaking, and acting; refrain from taking what is not given.
3. *True love*: Cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society; refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. *Loving speech and deep listening*: Practice loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in oneself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations; refrain from false speech.
5. *Nourishment and healing*: Determine not to try to cover up loneliness, anxiety, or other suffering by losing oneself in consumption; refrain from taking in toxicants.<sup>21</sup>

If a Buddhist perspective were applied to the strategy of an organization, the result would be a radical realignment of the economic goals of the company. According to Laszlo Zsolnai, a Buddhist economic practice has five distinguishing characteristics, which provide a model of Buddhist economic strategy:

1. *Minimizing suffering*: An economic enterprise is worthy if it aims to reduce the suffering for every stakeholder and furthermore ensures good-quality basic necessities for humans with the lowest resource consumption.
2. *Simplifying desires*: Rather than cultivating or multiplying desires, an economic enterprise should simplify desires, ensure contentment, and encourage moderate consumption.
3. *Practicing nonviolence*: The reduction of violence to the lowest possible level is identical to the reduction of market forces to a small, adaptable scale for the benefit of every participant.
4. *Genuine care*: This is the opposite of the instrumental use, treating stakeholders as goals and not as tools in themselves, with significant economic outcomes.
5. *Generosity*: People are "homo-reciprocants," tending to behave gratefully and reciprocate favors.<sup>22</sup>

that permeated the times.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he valued intellectual stimulation, a component of transformational leadership, by offering his followers a new worldview. In addition to raising their spiritual awareness, he urged them to engage in learning and to excel in whatever field they pursued. Followers were encouraged to search for and acquire knowledge not for self-aggrandizement but rather to get closer to and to serve their creator. Taking this to heart, Muslims developed some of the first universities and led in many scientific areas for centuries.<sup>30</sup> Muhammad also showed components of servant leadership in his commitment to service before self; he stated that “a leader of the nation is their servant.”<sup>31</sup> Clearly, his character-centered leadership modeled the virtues he preached, and he is unique in that he blended elements of transformational and servant leadership styles.

Based on five principles critical to Islam—intention, awe, gratitude, consultation, and accountability—Muhammad’s example provides a leadership approach for senior leaders. Intention is important when discerning the intent guiding the behavior of other people, including other leaders. Virtuous leaders have reverence and awe for God, holding the leaders to high standards. Such awe maintains an inner consciousness and sense of duty to God. Gratitude is a key element of Islam and a reminder of the boundless generosity of God toward humankind. Without such gratitude one is likely to become arrogant and self-centered, but upholding gratitude enables one to remain humble. Consultation is the practice of seeking the counsel of others, especially in decision making; this is an important attitude for senior leaders, as it stresses consensus building. Accountability ensures one is true to one’s word with regard to tasks; it ensures integrity, justice, and trustworthiness because the leader’s actions will be judged by somebody else. Muslims believe everyone will have to account for their actions on the day of judgment—leaders notwithstanding.<sup>32</sup>

Eboo Patel is the founder of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a nonprofit dedicated to promoting interfaith cooperation by building interfaith advocates across college campuses. A practicing Muslim, Patel embodies the five principles of Islam and translates these into his leadership. Recognized as a global leader of the interfaith movement, Patel has extended the discussion about faith and religion into the public square in an effort to promote peace and collaboration by helping young people build on their commonalities across various religious and nonreligious identities.

Eboo’s core belief is that religion is a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. Indeed the work of IFYC shows how gratitude for those who hold different religious beliefs fosters acceptance and dismantles ignorance. IFYC has built a nation-wide interfaith collaboration of students staff and faculty across

secular and faith-based college campuses with the intent that interfaith dialogue will spread to the broader society. Patel is inspired to build this bridge by his faith as a Muslim, his Indian heritage and his American citizenship.<sup>33</sup>

Patel has written books and articles and has spoken to numerous audiences, among them the United Nations and the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference.<sup>34</sup>

### *Christian Shared Leadership*

Shared leadership is an approach to governance that fits well with the model of servant leadership. C. L. Pearce and J. A. Conger define shared leadership as “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both.”<sup>35</sup> This influence process is peer to peer, and the title “leader” is not specifically assigned. Even the board chair is considered first among equals and does not have formal authority over members of the board. When power is shared in this way the board of directors can be thought of as a system of leadership.<sup>36</sup> Shared leadership suggests individual board members must be accepting of one another’s temporary leadership and equally adept at followership.<sup>37</sup> This is a fluid process in which “directors continuously switch between ‘leader’ and ‘follower’ roles based on desired capabilities and expertise given the situation at hand.”<sup>38</sup> Designing organizational structures where leadership and power are shared aligns well with lateral shared leadership and the stewardship component of servant leadership.

On inclusion and shared leadership, Mark Strom makes the case that Paul is one of the strongest advocates in classical literature for equality of women with men. Intentionally, Paul avoided the vocabulary of leadership, choosing language to “ignore rank and subvert status.”<sup>39</sup> For example, he used the word *phronēsis* (“virtuous thought”), particularly in Philippians, to convey the idea of everyone having the same mind. In so doing he is taking a sharp departure from the conventional mind-set of hierarchy prevalent at that time; not everyone can be of the same mind because there is a very distinct and commonly understood class system. Paul replaces this class system with an egalitarian mind-set that is radical in its relational emphasis.<sup>40</sup> Paul called for radical egalitarianism, writing that there is neither Jew nor gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). Against a backdrop of leadership by rank and social status, Paul modeled a new social order of antileadership, recasting influence as the result of service: “in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3–4). Moreover,

we learn from Paul's writings that early followers of his teachings met in small groups using shared leadership to discuss and explore new ideas. This radical model of shared governance and leadership was perpetuated throughout the region, forming a movement that continues today.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, although not a Christian institution, embodies the goals of egalitarian leadership. Often called the leaderless orchestra, Orpheus has perfected the art of leading through community. Unlike most orchestras, Orpheus does not have a conductor; instead, responsibility for conducting music is shared among the players. The designated leader for a given piece of music is responsible for giving the downbeat and "leading" the orchestra to the completion of the piece while at the same time maintaining his or her role as a performing musician. A core group within the chamber orchestra takes responsibility for a first set of thoughts on how each piece should be interpreted and performed, which is brought to the larger group, where everyone in the orchestra has an opportunity to provide input—something unheard of in a standard conductor-led orchestra. Power and influence are shared; everyone contributes, and thus each one has a voice and a sense of responsibility for the outcome.<sup>41</sup>

This strong egalitarian culture permeates the entire Orpheus Chamber Orchestra organization, from the business side to the board of directors to the musicians. But when the founder of this radical approach left, in 1999, the orchestra struggled to keep the culture of shared leadership alive. A departure from shared governance on the business side of the operation brought the organization to near collapse.<sup>42</sup> However, with the help of a new board chair, the orchestra returned to the structure that fits its culture: more egalitarian and shared responsibility, less boss. Essential in shared leadership is that the influence process sometimes involves peer, or lateral, influence, and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence.<sup>43</sup> At the core of this approach is thus a focus on leadership rather than leaders, and the acknowledgment that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon that is not strictly confined to a formal or assigned leader.<sup>44</sup> Orpheus is a beautiful and poignant example of what is possible when a group of people understands that leading is not so much about role and rank, but much more about an outcome made possible by the collective contribution of all.

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God, the extension of his kingdom (1 Cor 1:7). Qualitatively (holiness of character) and quantitatively (expansion to the unreached frontiers). The apostle Paul stands before us as the premier example of the missional leader driven by the divine agenda. A clearly defined mission (1 Cor 1:17), a regular reaffirmation of its core values and message (1 Cor 11:23-26), and the ability to contextualize the message to different audiences (1 Cor 9:19-23) preserves Paul from three respective common pitfalls: (1) **Mission ambiguity**: failure to clarify from the outset one's purpose for existence; (2) **Mission drift**: subtle and gradual erosion of the sharp edges of the defining purpose; (3) **Mission confusion**: failure to adapt one's methodology and orient one's message to fit changing circumstances because the mission and its method for accomplishment are not clearly distinguished.

We conclude with a set of questions that can be used in regular self-assessment to determine whether one's ongoing practice of leadership is biblical or secular, that is, grounded in the principles and precepts of Holy Scripture or conditioned by the prevailing models of one's culture.

1. Do I take the **initiative** and actively seek opportunities to impact others for the sake of the kingdom of God?
2. Does my character evidence in increasing measure the virtues of **godliness** so that I impact others toward a life of holiness?
3. Has there been a posture of faith in God's sufficiency when facing hardship and adversity so that my **character** exhibits a refined solidarity and resiliency?
4. In the innermost core of my being do I sense a passion for God's glory and the welfare of others? Or do I detect self-aggrandizing **motives** that have not yet been honestly faced and staked to the cross? Am I conscious of exercising leadership of others before the Audience of one or the audience of many?
5. Do my activities point toward a singular focus on God's **mandate**—the discipling of the nations—or are other competing agendas displacing a kingdom perspective with an organizational or programmatic one?