



RESEARCH

Making room for prophets, poets, and peace-makers: leadership's ethical responsibility

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This paper highlights three aspects of ethical leadership that I believe to be little understood or practised by many in Bible Translation. These are, first, an understanding of the role of a whistle-blower (who has been likened to fill the role of a biblical prophet). Related to this unsought role is the notion of agency, and the recognition that standing up for what one understands to be 'ethical' can lead to one becoming a change-agent.

A notion closely allied to the matter of whistle-blowing is the need for a proper system for conflict management. Leaders at every level need to ensure that they establish a robust structure for disagreements to be given attention, and solutions sought, without delay. My experience shows this not to be evident in many parts of our organizations, and thus the paper sets out a few important criteria to consider.

Related to agency are the notions of 'creativity' and 'innovation', which any organization does well to encourage. However, it does take particular management skills to recognize the value of 'out of the box' thinking, and to encourage such in their domain (and outside thereof). This requires that leaders be open to new ideas proposed by 'mavericks' in the organization, and create space for new innovations to be explored.

This paper hopes to provoke serious thinking about these three important issues.

1. Introduction

I have been part of a faith-based organization for 35 years. Just prior to joining the organization, I had completed an MBA, but I entered the organization as a technical specialist rather than as a manager. Over the years, I have experienced difficulty in certain areas, and hence wish to raise issues that are not easily spoken about when one is offering service as a result of one's faith.

My concern is with leadership's responsibility in three areas: those of responding to the "prophets" in the organization (those who speak an ethical perspective into a corrupt situation), the "poets" (those who work with their imagination to propose creative ideas), and the "peace-makers" (those who ensure that there is a proper communication channel for conflict resolution).

In my experience as an ordinary, female worker in a sphere of service that is strongly patriarchal, I cannot say I have experienced certain necessary elements of a healthy ethical organization. And so I urge leaders to provide the following:

- a place where prophets have space to alert leaders to unethical matters occurring;
- a system where misunderstandings can be dealt with in an honorable way;
- a structure to share “outside the box” ideas which could possibly contribute significantly to innovation.

In this paper, “organization” refers to a major enterprise, or to a small group working together on a project. In some cases, members of the organization may come from different faith-based organizations, but regardless, the principles in this paper need to be in place—*every small group* working on a project needs to have a well-defined and well-understood system for people to raise issues (whether they be creative ideas or conflict problems).

I will deal first with the “prophet’s role” in an organization as it is the least understood and embraces the other two issues. I base my thinking on the work of Avakian and Roberts (2012) and their very enlightening paper, which compares whistle-blowers in an organization to biblical prophets. They show how some people in the organization find themselves in a situation where their moral values cannot accept an immoral situation they come up against, and they speak out, or act in some way, which may be unaccepted by leadership. Often, with the passage of time, the truth of their claim is proven and they become, unwittingly, agents for change.

2. The Whistle-Blower: A Prophetic Role in an Organization

Three elements are important in understanding the situation of whistle-blowing:

- The established order of an organization (its structures, policies, and procedures) is challenged, resulting in tension concerning its stability.
- The whistle-blower is motivated by moral concern for the welfare of others who are being deprived in some way (and in response to what they believe is ethically correct).
- The whistle-blower plays a vital role in facilitating necessary change.

Concerning the first, truth is being ignored, and thus the prophet must speak (Achtemeier 1996). Second, the whistle-blower is not only aware of the wrong, but is willing to act, albeit putting himself at risk. Others may be aware, or made aware, of the moral problem, but they choose to turn a blind eye. Nam and Lemak (2007) find that individuals that *could* become whistle-blowers show varying degrees of tolerance towards accommodating an illegitimate act, depending on the strength of their commitment to moral values.

Sometimes management even judges the whistle-blower as arrogant or “culturally insensitive,” to cover their failure to stand against wrong. But as in the biblical text, the prophet/whistle-blower sees his role to expose acts that prevent social justice being extended to the vulnerable (Brueggemann 1994) and that violate the norms of moral society (Johnson 2004; Arbogast 2008).

Consequently such prophets come into direct conflict with those with vested interests (Cortina and Magley 2003). But their concern for justice and truth enables them to take an unpopular stand (Brueggemann 1994). Reference to “justice and truth” requires a caveat. Some think that non-Westerners differ significantly from Westerners in the priority they would give to such attributes. Thus the next paragraph considers this view.

Schubert (2008) does note from his research that there is a strong variance in the value given to different ethical characteristics by Western and African (Tanzanian) Christian leaders. However, they agreed that the same five characteristics were important. Organizations that have interactions between both Westerners and non-Westerners would do well to discuss openly such matters, for it would seem to be more a different *perspective* than a different value. Schubert's (2008) work shows that Western leaders highly value “justice” and “faithfulness,” whereas African leaders give priority to “love” and “mercy.” However, a good discussion between all concerned might help each to see that such characteristics are all intertwined, and “love and mercy” (for the vulnerable) will also require there to be “justice” for them. Thus, not exposing corruption (perhaps seen as an act of “mercy” to the abuser) is in fact resulting in a *lack* of “love” for the one abused. Time needs to be given to understanding one another's perspectives, and such communication should be a regular part of the organization's cycle of “open hall” meetings.

Organizational “prophets” thus perceive themselves as possible change-agents “whilst exercising resistance against an illegitimate act” (Kulik 2005). As Bandura (2001) comments, understanding one's self as an “agent for change” strengthens the individual's perseverance in a difficult situation.

The work of whistle-blowers has three consequences:

- The established order of the institution is challenged. This often results in retaliation against the whistle-blower (Cortina and Magley 2003), which they may or may not expect. Nowadays secular organizations have legal protection for whistle-blowers, but in faith-based organizations, this is rarely the case.
- The welfare of those being wrongly treated is brought to light. However, sadly this often takes far too long, as the warning of the whistle-blower is usually ignored for some time.
- The organization is forced to change, often with unprecedented consequences. Again, early intervention (in response to a whistle-blower's action) could result in far less harm to workers in the organization.

This section then has outlined the important role played by those prepared to stand up to injustice that they come across in their work. They are prepared to be agents for change, for the benefit of the vulnerable or those who are being abused. However, their action has introduced conflict into the organization, thereby highlighting the vital need for a proper structure for conflict resolution.

3. Conflict Management

As noted, a matter arising out of consideration of the whistle-blower is the need for a robust structure for dealing with matters of conflict. This of course is also needed for other, smaller areas of conflict. My experience has been that many minor matters of conflict arise all the time, but as there is often no proper channel of communication, conflict issues are not addressed, and work relations deteriorate. This is neither a healthy nor an ethical way to operate. With a system in place, any problems could be promptly voiced, and opportunity given for those concerned to dialogue (with a third party if necessary). Without this, staff quickly become disenchanted and demotivated.

Moreover, it is important that leaders understand that conflict is not to be avoided at all cost, but in fact is necessary for effective functioning of the organization (Mills and Mene 2020, 540). Campbell (2003) even asserts that conflict management is a form of “disciplined communication” which requires speaking and listening skills, commitment to try to understand the issue, and a problem-solving approach, seeking to achieve a satisfactory end. Indeed, conflict, properly managed, births innovation and creativity (Mills and Mene 2020, 543). New possibilities emerge beyond those initially assumed by just one of the parties. However, it is vital that there be an

organizational climate that empowers people to think originally and encourages them to put forth their suggestions and opinions without fear (Mills and Mene 2020, 541).

3.1. Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Although conflict is inevitable in an organization, and indeed should be welcomed, most faith-based organizations do not have a well-designed system for conflict management (Kemp 2010; Bloch 2009, 1). Moreover, without a proper “conflict management system,” decisions at times of conflict are made on the basis of power (top-down, justice-over-mercy approach). Approaches based on “rights” are rare (Bloch 2009, 2). Consequently, without such a system, interpersonal disputes are hardly ever fully resolved (Bloch 2009, 4).

In terms of its importance, Kiitam et al. (2016, 13) observe the following about conflict management:

The art of dealing with conflict in the workplace may be the most significant skill that leadership must learn to handle. Addressing conflict in the workplace should *not* be seen as a task to be avoided. On the contrary, leaders can embrace conflict as a mark of a productive workplace environment.

Indeed, conflict is not necessarily negative. “It can contribute to the effective achievement of organizational goals in that it stimulates creative capacities and draws attention to problems that may otherwise be neglected. But if problems are not addressed, even minor disagreements can fester and escalate” (Abioro et al. 2019). To avoid this, it is vital that all persons in the organization are aware of a strong structure in place for dealing with situations of conflict. Moreover, all those in leadership positions must undergo significant training in conflict management and resolution. Without such, team conflict with all its negative consequences is inevitable (Dunaetz 2010).

Despite the vital importance of conflict management to the health of any organization, Kemp (2010, 2–3) notes that many Christians equate conflict with “sin,” and thus conflict situations are often not addressed. Instead “the problem simply becomes deeper and more dangerous” (Kemp 2010, 3). Further, very few understand the nature of conflict, and do not have the skills to move the situation in a positive direction. They do not recognize that the goal is not to solve the difference of opinion as quickly as possible but to appreciate that such a situation offers the possibility for constructive change (Lederach 2015, 6).

Conflict may arise from various sources such as poor communication, structural matters (e.g. leadership styles, reward systems), differences in values, or differences in goals (Kiitam et al. 2016, 4; Hocker and Wilmot 2013). The first is a major problem. Insufficient exchange of information, or too

much information (producing “noise”), can lead to conflict (Robbins et al. 2014). Further, effective communication is also essential for conflict to be resolved. It is not enough for managers to acknowledge that they are “poor at communication”—they need to give significant attention to this matter; indeed, make it a priority.

With regard to structural problems, Dunaetz and Greenham (2017) note that team morale is negatively impacted by the enforcement of decisions that affect the team without due consultation. This includes excluding their ideas when presenting the work of the team. Unfortunately, leaders in faith-based organizations may expect subordinates to simply accept their unduly assertive (or “pushy”) behavior, in the light of the biblical principle (often misunderstood) of “submission.” This has a serious negative impact on the function of the team and of course, the individuals concerned.

Within conflict, the trigger may be “affective” (with an emotional base) or “cognitive” (stemming from different interpretations of a matter). The first is particularly destructive and must be addressed. Further, an important notion is that conflicts usually are goal-based (Dunaetz 2010, 2–3) and thus the goals of the disputing parties should be verbalized.

Strategies for addressing both types of conflict may result in “lose-lose,” “win-lose,” or “win-win” outcomes. “Lose-lose” results from avoiding the problem, smoothing (playing down the problem by highlighting areas of agreement and similarities, thereby ignoring the real issues involved), or compromising (in which the underlying causes of the conflict remain to initiate future conflict). A “win-lose” outcome leaves one or more parties still feeling aggrieved, and the possibility of the problem recurring is very real. If both parties are to have a sense of “win,” they must both acknowledge the reality of the problem and commit themselves to *listen well* to one another. Only then can they find a solution, one that may in fact meet a superordinate goal (Kiitam et al. 2016, 7–8).

One would hope that, in our faith-based organizations, the pattern of leadership would be one that seeks to *serve* rather than to enforce one's own ideas. However, there is very little research data on servant-leaders in faith-based organizations and their approach to conflict management (Segundo 2021, 37). Nevertheless, the literature is replete with well-tested experience of a leadership pattern that provides for a healthy response to both conflict situations and those wanting to share creative ideas. Below are some important concepts to which a leader should give attention (Thakore 2013):

- The leader should promote an organizational climate where initiative is encouraged and the contribution of individuals is valued. Confidentiality and trust are also vital.

- Formal procedures, well understood by all, must be in place for those who wish to raise issues.
- The leader must *listen (without judging)* to those who bring a matter forward.
- There should be occasional seminars on conflict management so that everyone is aware of how issues should be dealt with in a positive way. This can then prevent future conflict from escalating to an unmanageable level.

3.2. Responding to a Whistle-Blower

As a whistle-blower is often perceived (at least initially, until the truth becomes apparent to all concerned) as a rebel or troublemaker, the person is often reprimanded or criticized by leadership. Although “member-care” is written into most faith-based organizations’ structures, it is often seriously lacking, particularly for those “on the field” (those working outside of their home country). Camp et al. (2014) find that there is a dearth of activities such as “counselling, crisis care, conflict resolution, and debriefing,” and in particular, the perspective of the whistle-blower is ignored or not sought. Indeed, as Cabodevila (2020, 4) concludes, many faith-based organizations typically conform to a secular mind-set and regulations. As a result, often no consideration is given to the spiritual and emotional stress the whistle-blower is enduring (Mills and Mene 2020, 540).

In a properly planned system for resolving such a situation, the organization will provide space for the whistle-blower to speak and share their perspective. It is vital that the leaders concerned listen well, without prejudice. All parties concerned should be part of the discussion (one at a time), and once all have set out their point of view, there should be opportunity (via a third party) for the two opposing parties to speak to one another. Once the situation has been clarified, there needs to be apology if the whistle-blower has been shamed for “having done wrong.” This is very important, and too easily overlooked. The whistle-blower has experienced significant emotional damage from the initial response of leadership, and this needs to be repaired. There should also be public notification of the matter, so that everyone concerned has no doubt about the truth.

In many ways, a whistle-blower can be seen as a change-agent, someone able to act against the current. Such persons are greatly needed in organizations, particularly those that describe themselves as faith-based. Similarly, creative thinkers and innovators are persons able to think “outside the box,” not simply giving in to the view or ideas of the majority. Such persons play a vital role in achieving new and better ways of functioning. They are further described in the next section.

4. Creativity

Connected to the important notion of a change agent is the person who gives time and commitment to think creatively when faced with a difficult situation. Such a person does not simply take the majority view but is willing to give time to seek alternative solutions. It has been said that “Interruption is not an obstacle—it is an opportunity for innovation.” Indeed, as in poetry, interruption of a rhythm highlights something important, which if given attention in an organization could lead to innovation. Thus, to refuse “interruption” is to deny an opportunity. Rather, the organization needs to be flexible enough in its goals and time commitments to allow space for unexpected thinking. The very culture of the organization needs to encourage and welcome such topics—those that are “outside the norm”—for discussion. Indeed, the support of leadership is the most important factor in encouraging an innovative culture (Mokhber et al. 2018, 108).

Research (James 2009) has found that leaders in faith-based organizations (having “spiritual” authority as well as that arising from their position of leadership) are more likely (than other leaders) to negatively impact the introduction of positive change. My experience of some of the structures in various faith-based organizations is that there is “no room” for including unexpected initiatives (especially from parties outside the recognized structure). This is a great loss, as creative thinkers are usually those “beyond the boundaries.” In fact, it is because they do not carry the constraints of being within a department with tightly constrained goals that they have the opportunity to explore new ideas to achieve goals that could positively impact the organization.

Thus, a lack of openness to new ideas may result from an inflexible goal schedule. However, sadly, it may also arise from an abuse of power. Creative thinking is disruptive, and consequently managers who are unsettled by new ideas may simply reject or ignore any thinking that does not submit to their tightly managed systems. This leaves the creative person being “unheard,” resulting in reduced motivation as well as a sense of injustice.

4.1. *The Nature of Creativity*

To engage in a creative process, first there must be a generation of as many ideas as possible, by an individual or a group. This is known as “green-lighting.” Then these ideas need to be evaluated, and the best selected for use (Ritter and Mostert 2018). Often sharing ideas in a group can be most productive for generating further ideas. One person’s contribution triggers ideas for another, through association and categorization (Deuja et al. 2014), resulting in more possibilities. However, individual thinking can also be productive in that it allows a person time to process their idea through, without being interrupted in their thinking by other people’s sharing (Ritter

and Rietzschel 2017, 112). Thus, most theorists of creativity (e.g., Ritter and Mostert 2018, 263–264) suggest there be a hybrid process with participants first thinking alone and then sharing in groups (or vice versa).

Creative persons, if given the opportunity, can foster innovative ideas, for innovation is an application of creativity (O'Shea and Buckley 2007; Da Silva and Davis 2011). However, the organizational leadership plays a significant role in influencing whether this happens: leaders impact the degree to which individuals in the organization embrace innovation, generate ideas, and are able to implement innovative processes (Standing et al. 2016, 50). For example, the way a person's job is designed, and the openness of managers to provide support and opportunity for innovators to explore creative ideas, will impact the possibility of new ideas developing and becoming integrated into the organization.

4.2. How Management Can Encourage Creativity

A democratic management style and an encouragement of “different thinking” are conducive to innovation. Some organizations highlight such idea-generation by recognizing a “Creative Thinker of the Month” or by organizing regular “think-tanks” for all in their department. In such an environment, communication of possible new ideas becomes much easier, and people are stimulated to stretch themselves in new ways (Szczepańska-Woszczyna 2020, 2–3). Both teams and individuals should be encouraged to think “outside the usual limits,” and leadership styles must empower those who display such creativity (Standing et al. 2016, 55).

Particularly important in the generation of creative thinking is the ability to make connections between issues, and across knowledge areas. This requires inter-department thinking; thus *boundary spanning* activities must be planned (Standing et al. 2016, 58). Further, those who show interest in innovation should be given time and opportunity to explore *outside* of their immediate field, to promote new insights that will result in innovation.

5. Conclusion

I suggest that, even in faith-based organizations, power relations are very evident even within the same culture (and across gender lines), with those not in management often excluded from a voice in decision-making. This of course impacts the quality of the work, with creativity being sidelined or not given voice. Furthermore, the lack of being heard, concerning any matter relating to the work (and particularly when situations of corruption are noted), leads to demotivated and frustrated workers. It has been said that those working in faith-based organizations as “volunteers” (without a salary) start out as the most motivated of all, and yet with the passage of time are the most abused.

The fact that people join faith-based organizations with a sense of call, and very high motivation to serve, should not mean that their concerns be disregarded through a lack of structure. Hence this paper seeks to suggest some ideas which could be built upon, to encourage and develop creative ideas, and to provide for a structure that permits conflict to be easily and regularly addressed. Moreover, it draws attention to the important role played by whistle-blowers, those whose contexts expose them to immoral activity, and who are prepared to pay the price and stand against injustice, for the benefit of those they serve.

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