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ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN MANAGEMENT. SEVERAL IMPORTANT LESSONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM JUDAISM

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Abstract

This paper examines an ancient commentary on part of the Hebrew scriptures, attached to the biblical text and shows that there are many important messages about leadership embedded in it. This paper intends to answer a few questions: “Is Judaism connected to modern management?”, “What lesson does the storyteller impart to his audience?”, “What does Judaism teach us about leadership?”, “What is the impact of intercultural contexts in management and leadership?”, “What is the difference between hearing and listening?”, and “What is the nature of leaders?”. The key lessons are that leaders must be compassionate; humble; and have a willingness to listen, make changes, and admit to mistakes. Competent leaders should have full command of the main areas of the leadership elements, and should be able to use each of these elements according to the requirements of the case. This paper also examines the influence of compassionate leadership and servant leadership on productivity and profitability.

Keywords: leadership, management, storytelling, intercultural management, Judaism.

Introduction

Storytelling skills are becoming an important device to be used to present an organization’s mission statement in a meaningful and memorable way. Sweeney and Gosfield interviewed 36 super-achievers for their book and found good storytelling among the ten most common practices of these individuals (Prive, 2016). A well-told story is persuasive and has the ability to inspire people.

In today’s marketplace, consumers are becoming increasingly particular about what they purchase and whom they purchase it from. Conveying the cornerstone of your company’s mission in ways that bridge to the world at large, beyond the bottom-line, is critical to success in today’s environment (Howard, 2016).

This is why founding stories are used as a simple way to connect with stakeholders such as customers, investors, and employees (Bluestein, 2014). The author remarks also that the creation myth is not an asset just for startups. As those businesses grow into established firms and individual founders figure less prominently, the origin story can serve as both a

road map and moral compass. Keeping that story alive, keeping it true, and keeping it relevant—these are the challenges more mature businesses must contend with.

Stories are also an effective way to help a firm raise funds. Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment Group, was once trying to convince the mayor of Las Vegas to provide funding to support a new baseball stadium. He realized that the PowerPoint presentations filled with numbers were not doing the trick. It occurred to him that if you want to persuade others, a good story is more effective. The trick is to aim for a person's heart and soul, not brain (Gallo, 2016).

The following quote from Guber says it all: “Stories have a unique power to move people's hearts, minds, feet, and wallets in the storyteller's intended direction” (Gallo, 2016). One firm that discovered how impactful storytelling can be in getting employees to be engaged was KPMG, one of the big four accounting firms that is also into consulting. They “literally took their managers, and helped transform them all into storytellers, so that the managers were constantly telling stories of the history of KPMG — how KPMG has shaped the world; how they continue to shape industries and lives, and make the world a better place.” This was done to improve morale and make employees feel part of “a bigger mission” (Knowledge@Wharton, 2016).

There is no question that stories are an effective way of teaching people lessons. In fact, according to Charlie Rose, talk show host, “What sets TED talks apart is that the big ideas are wrapped up in personal stories” (Gallo, 2016). Stories made up more than 65% of the content of the 500 most popular TED talks (Dykes, 2016).

The sages of the Talmud were not historians; they told stories. These stories are a memorable way of communicating important truths ranging from ethics to theology. Rubenstein (2002) makes the point that the storytellers were not attempting to document “what actually happened” out of a dispassionate interest in the objective historical record, or to transmit biographical facts in order to provide pure data for posterity. This type of detached, impartial writing of a biography is a distinctly modern approach. Nowadays we distinguish biography from fiction. In pre-modern cultures, however, the distinction between biography and fiction was blurred. Ancient authors saw themselves as teachers, and they were more concerned with the didactic point than historical accuracy.

Rubenstein (2002) stresses that the correct question to ask about a Talmudic story is “What lesson did he [the storyteller] wish to impart to his audience?” and “What does the story teach us about rabbinic beliefs, virtues, and ethics?” Those are more important questions than whether the story is completely true, partially true, or a metaphor.

This story about Moses when he was Jethro's shepherd teaches us a valuable lesson about leadership (Zarchi, 2013). Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's sheep one day, when one of them bolted. Moses followed the runaway animal until it reached a body of water, where it stopped for a drink. Moses compassionately said to the sheep, ‘If only I had known that you thirsted for water. You must be exhausted from running’ Saying this, he scooped up the animal, placed it on his shoulders and headed back to his flock. Said God: ‘If this is how he cares for the sheep of man, he is definitely fit to shepherd Mine’ translated by Zarchi (2013).

This story demonstrates that a leader must have compassion. There is a great deal of evidence that compassionate leadership is especially important in the knowledge economy.

It is the nature of leaders to surround themselves with “yes men” and cater to the constituency that supports them. In Moses we find the opposite. His greatness was that he loved and cared for every member of the flock entrusted to him, never reconciling himself to the fact that some people are just not worth losing sleep over. He put his life on the line for the Jews who violated Judaism's most sacred tenet just days after they were given the commandment to not worship idols.

Zarchi (2013) finds another valuable lesson in this story. What Moses understood from his years of shepherding was that when a single sheep leaves the group and goes off on its own, it isn't an act of rebellion. It's just thirsty, and its leaders have not been able to quench its thirst. So, too, every Jew is precious; no one is expendable. When Jews wander off from their community, or even reject the Judaism they grew up with, it is a cry for help rather than insubordination. They are looking for inspiration, searching for meaning. Rather than criticizing, Moses lifts them up and says: I'm sorry, I didn't realize your spiritual needs weren't being met (Zarchi, 2013).

Leadership and management in intercultural contexts

Comparative research projects studying leadership values from one country to another show that the differences observed exist in the minds of both the leaders and those led, but often the statements obtained from those who are led are a better reflection of the differences than those obtained from the leaders. This is because we are all better observers of the leadership behavior of our bosses than we are of ourselves (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

As Rosinski (2013) observe, raising cultural awareness and viewing culture as a process, something that can be changed, can help leadership make better organizational choices and thus positively affect performance and fulfillment. Spirituality does not create new, specific values but can strengthen the presence of values in practices. (Warter & Warter, 2016a).

In ancient Greece around 350 B.C., Plato recognized a basic need for equality among people, but at the same time, he defended a society in which an elite class, the guardians, would exercise leadership. He tried to resolve the conflict between these diverging tendencies by playing on two meanings of the word equality, a quantitative one and a qualitative one, but to us, his arguments resemble the famous quote from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." (Hofstede et al., 2010)

Basic to Judaism is that in the conduct of everyday life and in the most mundane aspects of human interaction one fulfils duties or commandments concerning a person's obligations to other human beings (Warter & Warter, 2016b). Some interesting findings are revealed by Hofstede et al. (2010). They claim that all religions specify different religious roles for men and for women. In Christianity many Protestant churches now practice equality between men and women in their leadership and clergy, while the Roman Catholic Church strongly maintains the male prerogative to the priesthood. At the same time, in all Christian churches women are more religious than men. The authors conclude that God is apparently not an equal opportunity employer: He has a bias to the women.

An interesting theory of leadership model is offered by Trompenaars and Asser (2010). Competent managers and leaders should have full command of three main areas of the action-centered leadership model (strategic, operational, and team), and should be able to use each of the elements according to the requirements of the situation. In addition, autonomy is in fact inseparable from constructive communication and is a key ingredient of leadership (Rosinski, 2013).

A single god is a strong asset to provide continuity of existence for a numerous people surrounded by enemy peoples: a dangerous power vacuum that could lead to civil war need not occur when consecutive rulers pledge alliance to the same god, and religious rulers can be active in transferring leadership when a monarch dies. So, worldly leaders of states and empires have always tended to seek support of religion, even in secular countries (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Leadership, Listening and Advisors

Sacks (2016) has the following to say about listening: Listening lies at the very heart of relationship. It means that we are open to the other, that we respect him or her, that their perceptions and feelings matter to us. We give them permission to be honest, even if this means making ourselves vulnerable in so doing. A good parent listens to their child. A good employer listens to his or her workers. A good company listens to its customers or clients. A good leader listens to those he or she leads. Listening does not mean agreeing but it does mean caring. Listening is the climate in which love and respect grow.

The kind of listening described above is one which implies a willingness to make changes and not be obstinate. There is a huge difference between hearing and listening: Hearing is involuntary but listening implies paying attention and focusing on what is being said. Learning can only take place if one is listening (Horowitz, 2012).

Arrogant people generally have too much hubris and do not admit that they can learn from others. They make decisions unilaterally and surround themselves with sycophants who agree with everything they have to say. It is important for leaders to surround themselves with smart people who can disagree. President Woodrow Wilson once said: "I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow."

Reuben (2014) observes that Moses "turns for advice and counsel to a Midianite priest, a holy man from another religion, a practitioner and leader of another spiritual tradition." This is quite unusual. According to Van Dierendonck (2011), "Leaders who show humility by acknowledging that they do not have all the answers, by being true to themselves, and by their interpersonal accepting attitude, create a working environment where followers feel safe and trusted."

Leadership, Humility and Willingness to Admit to Mistakes

In the Torah, the king must not have too many horses, too many wives, and too much personal wealth. The reason given is "that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren and not turn from the commandment right or left."

Matthew Henry makes the following point in his commentary: "He must carefully avoid everything that would turn him from God and religion. Riches, honors, and pleasures, are three great hindrances of godliness." This story demonstrates that the "King of Kings" has great humility. Once a leader becomes haughty and self-absorbed, the organization (or kingdom) suffers.

Although humility is often neglected by the business leadership literature, it is the trait that unlocks all other personal and leadership virtues (Argandona, 2015). Prime and Salib (2014) surveyed more than 1500 workers from several countries and conclude that humility is a crucial trait for successful leaders. Van Dierendonck (2011), in his review of the literature of servant leadership, affirms that humility is a key trait in servant leaders: "Servant leadership is demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction."

Collins (2005, 2001) posits that the most effective leaders are what he refers to as "Level 5" leaders; very few leaders reach this level. Level 5 leaders are individuals who have humility and fierce determination to make their organizations succeed. They have no interest in adulation. Yes, they are very ambitious but "their ambition is first and foremost for the institution and its greatness, not for themselves." They are motivated by "what they build, create, and contribute" and not by "fame, fortune, power, adulation, and so on." Collins (2001) maintains: "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious - but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves."

Closely tied to the trait of humility is a willingness to admit to mistakes. God has humility and not only listens to what mortals have to say, but admits to making mistakes. God is not averse to saying to Moses: "You have taught Me something." He could have said: "My way is better but let's do it your way." If God, who is omniscient, is willing to learn, then mortal leaders should also be receptive to new ideas. A willingness to admit to mistakes and even apologize for them is important for leaders. We have seen many leaders get into serious trouble because of cover-ups. Whitehurst (2015) has the following to say about a willingness to admit to mistakes and the ability to learn from one's mistakes: Leaders who show their vulnerability, and admit that they are human, foster greater engagement among their associates.

Llopis (2015) believes that admitting to mistakes is a way a leader may build a culture of trust in an organization. Moreover, a workplace culture that promotes trust allows employees to live with an entrepreneurial attitude, which stimulates innovation and initiative.

Leaders, Compassion, Gratitude, Appreciation to Followers and the Legal System

Baldoni (2009) also stresses the importance of humility and asserts that leaders that want to inspire followers must "acknowledge what others do" and see themselves as "talent groomers." Recognition of the accomplishments of others and promoting them is the way to lead an organization. Russell and Stone (2002) review the literature of servant leadership and consider "Appreciation of others" as a functional attribute: "Servant leaders visibly appreciate, value, encourage, and care for their constituents." (Russell & Stone, 2002). This is accomplished by listening to others and providing encouragement.

According to the American Psychological Association's 2014 Work and Well-Being Survey, only 47% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with employee recognition practices (APA, 2014). Conner (2014) posits: "Above all of the compensation and benefits, however, it's the unprompted words of genuine appreciation that inspire employees best."

The same questions that arise today regarding the interpretation of the Constitution were issues in Talmudic times about interpreting the laws of the Torah. There are questions today on how to interpret the Constitution. There are four approaches according to Kelso (1994): with regard to constitutional interpretation, the judge must decide, among other things, how much weight to give arguments about the plain meaning of the Constitution's text, the text's purpose or spirit, and historical evidence concerning the intent of the framers and ratifiers of the Constitution.

The late US Justice Antonin Scalia believed that the correct way to interpret the Constitution was according to the "public meaning"; He railed against using an approach that saw the Constitution as a "living," morphing, and evolving document. To him, the only good Constitution was a dead one (Murphy, 2016). There are jurists who strongly believe in the originalist approach to interpretation of the Constitution. Some of them are Textualists and give "primary weight to the text and structure of the Constitution"; others are Intentionalists and give primary weight to the "intentions of framers" (Linder, 2016). Religious people instituted many laws that considered the spirit of the law and the needs of people, rather than being purely text-based (Friedman, 2015).

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that compassionate leadership can help an organization flourish (Dutton & Workman, 2015; Dutton, Workman & Hardin, 2014; Frost, 2003, 1999). Boedker conducted a major study in Australia involving 5,600 people in 77 organizations examining the link between profitability and leadership styles. He found that compassionate leadership had the greatest influence on productivity and profitability. The study defined compassionate leadership as the ability of leaders to value people and "to spend more time and effort developing and recognizing their people,

welcoming feedback, including criticism, and fostering co-operation among staff” (Business Think, 2012).

Conclusion

Even the strangest religious text has many lessons embedded in it. The correct way to understand this type of religious text is to search for the hidden lessons. The key lessons deal with leadership and make it very clear that leaders must be compassionate and humble. They have to know how to listen and should be willing to admit to mistakes; they should show appreciation for followers who offer them good advice.

Leadership begins with taking responsibility, but no one can lead alone. Leadership means believing in the people you lead and learn from them. Leadership is about the future. Consequently, leadership is stressful and emotionally demanding.

Often religious leaders insist that their approach is the only correct one. This has caused many wars between different religious sects. God is receptive to different opinions and there is no reason to go to war over differences in interpretation. It is more than likely that this religious text was authored by someone who understood the danger of being too inflexible when it came to the understanding of texts, especially in situations involving peace or human dignity. It is certainly true that human dignity and social justice “are implicit in the biblical concept that man was created in God’s image” (Besdin, 1979). Leaders — political, corporate, and religious — must emulate God and possess humility; compassion; and a willingness to listen, make changes, and admit to mistakes.

The leader’s skill is in bridging the contrasting dilemmas of leading and serving, courage and caution, control and compassion, power over and commitment to others. Servant-leadership emphasizes the leader’s role as a steward of the organization’s resources. We could say that it encourages leaders to serve others while maintaining a clear focus on achieving results that are in agreement with the organization’s values and integrity. In the meantime, our opinion is that servant leadership is the most effective instrument to reconcile opposing viewpoints.

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