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MOSES AND MODERN LEADERSHIP: LESSONS IN PURPOSE-DRIVEN SERVANT LEADERSHIP FOR THE AGE OF DISRUPTION

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Abstract

Can ancient wisdom solve modern leadership crises? As organizations face unprecedented disruption, leaders are finding traditional management obsolete. This paper proposes that Moses, among the most studied biblical leaders in history, offers a revolutionary blueprint for navigating today's chaos. Drawing from Torah analysis and leadership research, this study demonstrates that Moses was not just a servant leader; he pioneered purpose-driven leadership millennia ago. His profound humility, radical power-sharing, and fierce identification with his people created a model that resonates powerfully with today's demands for ethical governance and meaningful work. However, Moses's story also warns that even great leaders fail when they stop adapting. His inability to enter the Promised Land offers critical lessons for executives facing accelerating change. The paper analyzes his seemingly minor error of striking the rock instead of speaking to it, revealing timeless truths about anticipating crises rather than reacting, accepting accountability, and recognizing when it's time to pass the torch.

Keywords: Age of disruption, Collective Intelligence, Moses, Purpose-driven leadership, Servant leadership, Spiritual workplace, Meaningful work, Succession planning, Leadership adaptation

Introduction

The demands on modern leadership are radically different from any previous era. Unlike past industrial revolutions, which unfolded over generations, today's transformation, driven by the rapid convergence of digital reality, blockchain, and advanced cognitive technologies, is redefining entire industries in a matter of years rather than decades. This unprecedented acceleration has made relentless change, uncertainty, and ambiguity the new standard, rendering traditional leadership models obsolete. Leaders are now required to be far more than operational managers; they should be architects of the future, possessing the visionary foresight to anticipate multiple scenarios and the resolve to make strategic decisions based on incomplete information while navigating continuous turbulence.

This expanded requirement aligns with expert views on digital leadership, which emphasize cultivating mindsets that champion innovation, data-driven strategy, and agile, human-centered cultures. Effective leaders should continuously balance innovation with practical operations, learn constantly, and influence complex systems without formal authority to thrive in a high-stakes environment where delays risk disaster.

In the current landscape, organizational success is intrinsically linked to harnessing the collective brainpower of the entire workforce. Relying exclusively on a handful of top executives for strategy and innovation is a clear path to failure. High-performing organizations understand that their most valuable and often underutilized resource is employee creativity, a force that thrives best within collaborative settings. Disturbingly, current research suggests that many companies only tap into a fraction of this collective intellectual potential (Caroselli, 2011, p. 4).

Further studies indicate that while AI and other advanced technologies generate insights, improve efficiency, and amplify learning, their full implementation presents significant challenges in achieving a true combined intelligence of human and machine resources. This is where the emerging science of collective intelligence becomes vital. It is an unusually diverse field, bringing together computer scientists, social scientists, behavioral scientists, and anthropologists who work together to understand how value can be created in new ways. Leaders should cultivate the complementary, distinctly human qualities, such as vision, judgment, and daring, that work alongside these tools. Although organizations are actively trying, many consistently fail to unlock the full scope of this collective intelligence, leaving vast untapped potential within both their human capital and technological assets (Harvard Business Impact, 2025; Taylor & Ren, 2025).

The Bible is the most widely distributed and read book in the world, a position that speaks to its unparalleled global influence. Indeed, it is on the list of the "50 Most Influential Books of All Time" (OEDB, n.d.). For billions of believers, it is revered as the word of God, serving as a timeless guide for leading a meaningful, spiritual life. Yet, its significance extends far beyond religious devotion. Even non-believers recognize the Bible's immense value as a foundational work of literature and a critical source for understanding enduring lessons and cultural history. Given this profound impact, it is entirely expected that a significant body of scholarly literature exists within the discipline of leadership, dedicated to examining the lives of biblical figures to derive contemporary lessons for management and ethics. Moses is one of the most studied leaders in the Bible (e.g., Anisfeld, 2011; Baron & Padwa, 1999; Beck, 2003; Ben Hur & Jonsen, 2012; Cohen, 2007; Friedman & Langbert, 2000; Grumet, 2014; Helfgot, 1993; Herskovitz & Klein, 1999; Kah, 2007; Litke, 2011; Morris, 2006; Wildavsky, 1984; Zivotofsky, 1994).

Leadership Amid Disruption and Uncertainty

Moses serves as an ideal model for the age of disruption, embodying adaptability, visionary foresight, and profound resilience in the face of constant upheaval. He guided the Israelites through a period of unprecedented change and uncertainty, confronting unfamiliar challenges with both courage and humility. Leaders today can learn from Moses's strengths and weaknesses as he navigated numerous crises while guiding his people toward a promised future, despite overwhelming obstacles, and consistently made critical decisions with incomplete information. Furthermore, his leadership successfully balanced firm moral conviction with practical flexibility, maintaining cohesion across diverse and often fractious groups. These timeless qualities resonate powerfully with the demands placed on modern leaders, who should navigate relentless transformation and ambiguity while inspiring both trust and a clear sense of purpose.

This paper demonstrates that biblical and secular leadership principles are converging as organizations increasingly embrace purpose-driven leadership. Leaders seeking to lead with purpose can draw profound insights from biblical exemplars such as Abraham and Moses, whose experiences offer timeless lessons in vision, perseverance, and transformational influence.

Moses as a Model of Humble Servant Leadership

The biblical text offers several profound insights into the qualities that established Moses as an unparalleled leader, qualities that closely align with the modern concept of servant leadership. Moses is memorialized as the "servant of God" (e.g., Numbers 12:7; Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 1:1-2), a title that appears 18 times in the Hebrew Bible (Sacks, 2015, p. 207). This designation immediately establishes him as a servant leader who prioritizes the welfare, needs, and development of others above personal gain or power. Although Robert K. Greenleaf popularized the concept of servant leadership in 1970, this paradigm has biblical origins that stretch back millennia (Asamoah, 2018; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). As we shall see, Moses was considerably more than a servant leader.

The Foundation of Humility

The second statement, found in Numbers 12:3, illuminates the essential trait required to sustain such service: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else upon the face of the earth." This profound humility enables a true servant leader to be self-effacing. Contemporary leadership theory affirms this connection. van Dierendonck (2011), in a comprehensive review of servant leadership literature, explicitly identifies humility as a cornerstone trait, noting that the style is characterized by sincerity, openness, acceptance of people, accountability, and the empowerment and development of people. There is significant evidence that intellectual humility leadership enhances thriving and performance by fostering positive job attitudes (Chen et al., 2025; Gao, Niu, & Yu, 2025).

Institutional Safeguards Against Pride

The Torah directly counters the prevalent ancient hubris of kings, who often claimed to be divine and infallible. To prevent arrogance, it mandates that a king carry a Torah scroll (Deuteronomy 17:20), reminding him he is not "lifted above his brethren." The king's wealth, wives, and horses were strictly limited (Deuteronomy 17:16-17) to curb haughtiness and greed. These restrictions reflect a profound understanding of how power corrupts character. This ancient wisdom aligns remarkably with modern psychological research, which shows that greater wealth can diminish empathy, reduce compassion, and foster selfish behavior (Grewal, 2012; Lv et al., 2023). Interestingly, people tend to exhibit reduced empathy towards individuals who prioritize material possessions (Zeng et al., 2025).

The Torah's institutional safeguards against pride represent a radical departure from ancient Near Eastern norms, in which monarchs positioned themselves as gods or demigods deserving unlimited reverence and resources. By requiring the king to remain accountable to divine law and to stand equal in the eyes of God with the humblest citizen, the Torah established a revolutionary model of leadership grounded in humility rather than self-exaltation.

Intellectual Humility in Practice

Moses exemplified the humility he embodied by seeking wisdom wherever it could be found, even from unexpected sources. He readily accepted counsel from Jethro, his father-in-law and a Midianite priest, demonstrating that genuine leadership requires openness to guidance regardless of its origin. When Jethro observed Moses attempting to judge all

disputes alone, he offered crucial advice on delegation and leadership selection, instructing him (Exodus 18:21-22): "And you shall seek out from among all the people stronghearted men, God-fearing people, men of truth, people who hate money (that is, incorruptible individuals), and you shall appoint them as leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, and leaders of tens."

Moses immediately implemented this advice, recognizing its wisdom. This account reveals several profound principles: that true leaders acknowledge their limitations, that wisdom transcends religious or cultural boundaries, and that effective governance requires competent subordinates chosen for their character rather than their connections. Jethro's criteria for leadership (strength, reverence, integrity, and incorruptibility) established a timeless standard that prioritized moral qualities over wealth, status, or political advantage.

Beyond Empathy: Identification with the People

Moses's connection to the people he led transcended mere empathy; it was a profound identification. He did not just feel *for* them; he felt *with* them. Though raised in the palace as a prince of Egypt, he immediately identified with the Hebrew slaves. His first act as an adult was "to go out to his brethren and observe their burdens." He then killed an Egyptian who was beating one of the slaves (Exodus 2:11).

This intense bond was immediately put to the test at the start of his mission. After Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh, the situation catastrophically backfired: Pharaoh escalated the oppression, forcing the Hebrew slaves to maintain the same brick quota while now gathering their own straw (Exodus 5:6-8). Witnessing this immediate, devastating consequence of his actions, Moses did not hesitate to challenge God directly (Exodus 5:23): "My Lord, why have You done evil to this people? Why have You sent me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to these people, and neither have You rescued Your people." Moses' bold questioning of the Almighty may have shown a lack of faith, but it was a desperate cry born of his overwhelming, all-consuming solidarity with his suffering nation.

After the incident of the Golden Calf, when God was ready to destroy the Israelites, Moses stood firm. He confronted God, demanding, as written in Exodus 32:32: "But now, please forgive their sin, but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." According to many classical rabbinic commentaries, Moses was telling God to remove him from the book of life, essentially to kill him, if the people were not forgiven for the sin.

Later, when the Israelites made another serious blunder by believing the false report of the spies (Numbers 13-14), God offered Moses a chance to become the leader of an entirely new nation made up of his own descendants (Numbers 14:12): "I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of you a greater nation and mightier than they." Moses, a true servant leader, was not only willing to give up his own life for his followers; he could not be tempted to abandon his flock, regardless of how good the offer was. While contemporary executives cannot be expected to literally sacrifice themselves for subordinates, they should possess the passion and compassion required to genuinely care for the people in their organizations.

Courage and Decisive Action

The Torah first highlights Moses' bravery in a startling act of physical intervention. In Exodus 2:11-15, he witnesses an Egyptian taskmaster violently beating a Hebrew slave and immediately intervenes and kills the Egyptian. This establishes an early pattern in Moses' character: he does not remain a passive observer in the face of injustice. Instead, he acts decisively, fully aware that doing so places his own security, status, and future at risk. The narrative thus frames him from the outset as a leader willing to assume personal cost in

defense of others. Moses's conduct during subsequent military confrontations further reinforces this portrayal of embodied leadership. Rather than delegating entirely from a distance, he remains visibly present, assuming responsibility in moments of collective threat and crisis.

The Amalekites: During the battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16), Moses' raised arms, supported by Aaron and Hur, were essential to the Israelites' victory. Although he did not personally wield a sword, his spiritual authority served as the true weapon, and his unyielding presence on the edge of the battlefield demonstrated that he was unafraid of the enemy. In his commentary on Exodus 17:12, the preeminent commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki; 1040-1105) offers a key insight into Moses' leadership style, citing the Midrash (Mechilta). Rashi suggests that Moses' arms grew heavy because he had neglected his duty to personally lead the troops, having instead delegated the command to Joshua. This heaviness was a form of divine reproach, implying that God expected Moses to be physically present at the head of his army.

Sihon and Og: As the Israelites approached the Promised Land, Moses directly confronted and defeated two formidable opponents. When Sihon, king of the Amorites, denied them passage and sent an army against them, Moses led the successful charge that vanquished him and his army (Numbers 21:21-31; Deuteronomy 3:1-10). Following this, Moses faced Og, the giant king of Bashan (Numbers 21:31-35; Deuteronomy 3:11). In an extraordinary display of personal valor, Moses, despite being 120 years old, personally engaged and defeated Og, as recounted in the Babylonian Talmud (BT Berachos 54b). This final confrontation is a powerful testament to Moses' lifelong commitment to active, fearless leadership.

Moses' desire for his successor confirms his belief in an active leader. When petitioning God to select the next leader (Numbers 27:17), Moses requested a successor "who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out, and who shall bring them in." Rashi, drawing from the Sifrei (Numbers 27, 139), explains that Moses wanted a leader who would emulate his own hands-on approach and personally lead the people into battle, just as Moses had done against Sihon and Og. Moses explicitly sought a king who would not remain safely at home while sending his armies to fight. Rashi then proves that Moses' successor, Joshua, indeed followed this model by noting Joshua's active presence on the battlefield (Joshua 5:13). This courageous, hands-on style of command was later mirrored by other great Israelite leaders, such as David, who actively fought alongside his troops (I Samuel 18:16).

The Origins of Shared Leadership

Initially, when God approached Moses at the *seneh* (burning bush) and told him that he would be the one to free the Israelites from the Egyptians, Moses refused. Moses presented numerous arguments for sending someone else, and God refuted them all. The last remark made by Moses (Exodus 4:13) was: "Please, my Lord, send anyone else whom you wish to send!" Hearing this, the "wrath of the Lord burned against Moses" (Exodus 4:14). Some commentators believe that Moses had sinned, and that this is why the priesthood, intended initially for Moses, was given to Aaron and his descendants. However, another way of looking at this passage is that Moses was not interested in power because of his great humility. God overcame Moses's objections and told him that Aaron, his brother, would serve alongside him as his spokesperson (Exodus 4:14-16). Shared leadership and separation of powers became important in Jewish history (Myers, 2022).

Later on in the wilderness, Moses complained to God that the task of leadership was too much for him and demanded help in leading the people:

And Moses said to the Lord, Why have you afflicted your servant? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you place the burden of this entire people on me? Have I conceived this entire people? Have I begotten them, that you should say to me, carry them in your bosom, as a nursing father carries the sucking child, to the land which you swore to their forefathers? (Numbers 11:11-13).

God listened to Moses and instructed him to gather seventy elders. To ensure Moses would not "bear the burden of the people alone" (Numbers 11:17), God endowed the elders with prophetic powers. Consequently, Moses shared power, a portion of his prophetic spirit, with the High Priest and these seventy. The seventy formed a council to assist Moses in governing the people during their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. This exemplifies that a true leader is not jealous of others and does not insist on making all decisions unilaterally. Sacks (2012) emphasizes that the Israelites were led by three complementary figures in the wilderness: Moses, the spiritual link to God; Aaron, the bridge to the people; and Miriam, the leader of the women and the source of support for her brothers.

The council of seventy elders ultimately vanishes from the biblical narrative; the Torah does not record when or how this body ceased to function. However, the precedent of a seventy-member council was revived in later Jewish history, serving as the model for the Sanhedrin, the supreme legislative and judicial assembly of ancient Israel. The idea of separation of powers, however, continues after Moses dies.

The Torah's design for ancient governance, as emphasized by Friedman and Krausz (2024), intentionally distributed power among three distinct roles: the king, the high priest, and the prophets. This tripartite structure ensured a crucial balance, with each role serving a unique purpose. The king provided political leadership, the high priest managed religious duties, and the prophets offered foresight and moral guidance (Sacks, 2012). Crucially, the high priest and prophets advised the king, ensuring his decisions adhered to the Torah's ethical teachings. Friedman and Krausz draw a parallel, concluding that any organization serious about ethics requires a Chief Ethics Officer to guarantee that all decisions integrate ethical principles.

The Evolution from Servant Leadership to Purpose-Driven Leadership

Moses's experiences reveal the limitations of a leadership style focused primarily on serving followers' immediate needs. This insight helps us understand why modern leadership theory has shifted toward a more purpose-driven approach.

The Dark Side of Servant Leadership

Despite its virtues, servant leadership possesses a "dark side." Although the framework emphasizes a deep commitment to subordinates, this intense loyalty can unintentionally facilitate unethical behavior. If collective survival is threatened by financial instability or job insecurity, servant leaders might abandon moral standards to protect their group. This highlights a significant flaw in the model where the desire to safeguard follower well-being can supersede ethical boundaries (Lynch & Friedman, 2013; Uymaz & Arslan, 2022).

Modern iterations of servant leadership incorporate elements of spiritual leadership and a broader concern for humanity, drawing their foundations from the Torah (Friedman & Mizrahi, 2022; Lynch & Friedman, 2013). While the academic consensus often identifies altruism as the core of this style, Hurt and Nolan (2024) propose a more multifaceted origin. They argue that the model is driven by a dual motivation that integrates rational self-interest

with the concept of *agapao* love. *Agapao* is what keeps leadership grounded in genuine care rather than simple exchange. It is the love that animates servant leadership.

Organizational crises often test these boundaries, as leaders may feel pressured to act unethically to save the company and protect employee jobs. On a larger scale, a nation facing economic collapse might engage in conflict to secure resources for its people. Such dilemmas force a re-evaluation of the servant leader's primary duty. One should consider whether a leader should prioritize the immediate welfare of their followers at any cost or if steadfast ethical integrity is the true requirement of genuine service.

A Purpose-Driven Vision Exemplified by Moses

Today, servant leadership is not sufficient to make an organization thrive. Moses embodied servant leadership through his profound devotion to the welfare of his people, prioritizing their interests above his own. His complete absence of personal ambition emerges powerfully in his declaration: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His spirit upon them" (Numbers 11:29). This extraordinary statement reveals Moses's willingness to relinquish his unique prophetic status entirely if it meant every Israelite could commune directly with God. Rather than guarding his privileged position, Moses actively desired his own obsolescence for the greater benefit of his people. This selfless vision stands in stark contrast to leaders who cling to power and resist developing successors who might eclipse them.

Moses exemplified a type of servant leadership that integrates spiritual guidance with service. He recognized that his purpose was to elevate people's spirituality and teach them concepts emphasizing the importance of caring for the most helpless members of society, including orphans, widows, and strangers. In essence, Moses' biblical designation as a "servant of God" was underpinned by his unmatched humility, illustrating the timeless truth that the capacity to lead others often flows from a profound lack of ego. Moses's servant leadership prioritized serving God, and ethics and morality came first.

Moses taught the people that there were three loves one should cultivate: love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5), love of one's fellow human (Leviticus 19:18), and love of the stranger (Leviticus 19:33-34). Loving the stranger is mentioned numerous times throughout the Hebrew Bible, far more than loving God. Hertz (1959) maintains:

No command is repeated as often as the law not to oppress the stranger; not to injure, annoy or grieve him. These commands are without parallel in the legislation of any ancient people; and in the practice of modern peoples, the duty of loving the alien is almost universally unheeded... The alien was to be protected not because he was a member of one's clan, community or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, man discovered the idea of humanity (Hertz, 1959, pp. 90-91).

Perhaps one of the most significant terms in the Hebrew Bible is "*chesed*," which appears 248 times (Griffin, 2022). The term defies easy translation and has been rendered in various ways, including mercy, kindness, steadfast love, and unfailing love. Its most encompassing meaning may be "lovingkindness," a central ethical principle of the Torah. *Chesed* embodies values such as love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. An individual guided by *chesed* demonstrates empathy toward society's most vulnerable members and actively seeks to uplift them, restoring their dignity and humanity. One should have empathy for all the needy and helpless members of society. God makes a point that He takes a personal interest in their welfare and will severely punish anyone who mistreats them (Exodus 22:20-23, 26).

Moses was a purpose-driven leader, charged with transforming a people newly freed from Egyptian bondage into a nation guided by moral and spiritual ideals. This transformation centered on a covenantal ethic of obedience and responsibility, with the explicit warning that violating these divine principles would ultimately result in exile from the Promised Land.

The Torah (Leviticus 26:14-46), in the passage known as the *Tochacha* (admonition/warning), describes the awful consequences of not obeying God's laws in the Promised Land. The admonition was not only repeated in Moses' own words to the second generation during their 40th year (Deuteronomy 28:15-69), but it was also reinforced by the Song of Moses (*Haazinu*, Deuteronomy 32:1-43), taught specifically so the people would never forget that inheriting the Promised Land was strictly conditional upon adherence to the commandments.

In the contemporary workplace, those seeking to emulate Moses's leadership style should strive to cultivate what is often described as a spiritual workplace, where employees perceive their work as meaningful and purposeful beyond financial rewards. Through a systematic review, Syahir et al. (2025) confirm that meaningful work enhances employee well-being, engagement, and ethical behavior across global contexts. Purpose-driven leaders inspire individuals to view their daily tasks as contributions to the greater good, fostering a sense of shared mission, moral significance, and belonging within an inclusive and cohesive community.

Purpose-Driven Leadership Today

Modern employees increasingly demand that their work be a meaningful path to personal fulfillment, not just a paycheck (Batuchina et al., 2025). Gen Z (86%) and Millennial (89%) professionals consider organizational purpose vital for well-being and fulfillment, making it a non-negotiable talent priority (Deloitte, 2024). Approximately four in ten professionals reject jobs that conflict with their values, prioritizing integrity over financial or career gain. This trend is reinforced by data showing that about 70% of employees would not work for a company without a strong purpose (Stobierski, 2021). Importantly, this emphasis on purpose is not only employee-driven but also associated with firm-level outcomes. According to the Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (2025), in 2023, companies with a corporate purpose had revenue 58% higher than those without one.

A purpose-driven leader plays a pivotal role in inspiring and motivating employees by connecting their daily work to a larger, meaningful mission that transcends routine tasks and mere financial objectives. These leaders are the catalyst for positive change, actively transforming potential into progress and inspiring employees to reach their full potential, enabling them to make a tangible difference in the world. They do not just manage; they articulate a clear and compelling vision that deeply resonates with their teams, ensuring employees understand precisely how their individual contributions create a positive impact and advance organizational goals. Purpose-driven leaders create an environment in which employees feel that their work is meaningful and good for the world. The organizational identity forged by a compelling purpose instills a robust sense of belonging. This pride in making a positive difference significantly boosts employee morale and commitment, serving as a significant factor in retaining top talent. Meaning is not confined to certain professions or nonprofits; it can be found daily in any role, especially with strong leadership. Meaningful work is not defined by job titles (Duncan, 2025)

By encouraging this profound sense of purpose, such leadership cultivates work environments where employees discover personal meaning in their roles, thereby fundamentally enhancing engagement, satisfaction, and resilience during difficult times. The organizational identity forged by a compelling purpose instills a robust sense of belonging.

This style of leadership promotes authentic, values-based decision-making and an empathetic understanding of what genuinely motivates each team member, ultimately forging strong relationships and developing a fiercely committed workforce united by shared aspirations.

Purpose is the ultimate talent attractor: it secures top-tier candidates who share the organization's values and mission. By focusing on meaning and purpose, purpose-driven leaders recruit those who are fiercely passionate about making a difference, thereby forging a high-performance team built on a shared commitment.

The demand for purpose-driven leadership has become increasingly critical as employees seek far more than financial compensation; they need to feel that their work matters and contributes to the broader community. When employees perceive their work as meaningful, they consistently demonstrate higher motivation, creativity, and loyalty, which directly drives superior organizational performance and innovation. A shared purpose that links innovation directly to meaningful impact unlocks creative thinking, prompting employees to consistently propose groundbreaking solutions.

Recent research increasingly identifies that purpose-driven leaders and purpose-centered organizations cultivate higher employee engagement, stronger affective commitment, and greater person–organization value alignment (Allan et al., 2019; Henderson & Van den Steen, 2015). This crucial alignment is essential for attracting and retaining younger generations, who actively prioritize meaningful work over traditional incentives. The enhanced collaboration drives more innovation. Consequently, leaders should intentionally embody and champion purpose to sustain cultures where employees know their efforts create genuine positive change (Ribeiro, Costa, & Ramos, 2024).

Meaningful work is highly correlated ($r > .70$) with work engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019). It also shows a moderate to strong link ($r = .44$ to $.49$ in the meta-analysis) with life satisfaction, meaning, and general health, and significantly reduces withdrawal intentions. This demonstrates its broad impact on employee well-being and retention.

Spiritual workplaces and purpose-driven leadership share a symbiotic relationship, mutually reinforcing and enabling the creation of meaningful work environments. Purpose-driven leaders, by articulating a mission beyond profit, naturally cultivate a workplace where employees connect their work to something larger than themselves. Conversely, a spiritual workplace, rich in meaning and values, requires leaders who consistently prioritize and model these dimensions. While leadership sets the strategic direction, the spiritual culture provides the daily experience and inner fulfillment that sustain that purpose. Both elements are essential, recognizing that people are motivated by significance and contribution, not just transactions, and that one cannot thrive without the other.

There has been extensive research on the concept of a spiritual workplace. Religious workplaces can substantially enhance employee well-being; however, organizations should strike a balance between religious expression and inclusivity to create a supportive and harmonious environment (Syahir et al., 2025). Additionally, compassion, ethical alignment, and meaningful work enhance employee well-being, creativity, and retention (Ohri & Dutta, 2025). Spiritual leadership aligns individual and organizational goals, boosting synergy, harmony, and positive outcomes for employees, customers, and the community. This ultimately enhances performance, commitment, and the attainment of corporate goals.

Education as a Leadership Priority

Effective leaders understand that their purpose extends beyond addressing immediate needs to equipping people for long-term success and fulfillment. Education becomes essential to achieving this goal.

Education, Literacy, and the Future

According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, a leader addressing a people newly freed from centuries of oppression would typically speak about the concept of freedom. However, Sacks points out that Moses deviates from this expectation by repeatedly emphasizing children, education, and the distant future (Exodus 12:26-27, 13:8, 13:14). Moses explicitly mandates that the Israelites educate their children about their duty and the meaning of their freedom: "And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8). Moreover, Moses constantly recalls their history as slaves in Egypt throughout Deuteronomy. Sacks concludes that this focus underscores the idea that educating the next generation is the essential way to enact change and keep the spirit of liberty alive (Sacks, 2015, pp. 73-75).

Moses made teaching the Torah to one's children a priority. Spirituality and ethics have to be part of one's daily routine: "You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, while you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you arise" (Deuteronomy 11:19). You need continuous learning and not only when at home. Education is so vital that it is the last commandment of the Torah. Moses renewed the covenant with all of the people—men, women, children, and "from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water" (Deuteronomy 29:10). Even the most ignorant of people were responsible for obeying the laws of the Torah.

The Torah's final commandment (Deuteronomy 31:19) mandates that every individual write their own Torah Scroll and "teach it to the children of Israel, place it in their mouth" (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Sefer Torah 7:1). Although the verse refers explicitly to writing a "song," the Talmud and later codifiers broadened this obligation to include the entire Torah. This commandment profoundly emphasizes the importance of universal literacy and education, lifelong learning, and the continuous, generational transmission of Jewish law and teachings. Consequently, all Jews are obligated both to ensure the creation of new Torah scrolls and to actively engage in studying its statutes. The best way to guarantee universal human dignity is by educating everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Sacks, 2006, pp. 125-141).

Educating the Workforce

The reciprocal relationship between a spiritual workplace and purpose-driven leadership fosters genuinely meaningful work environments, where each element is dependent on the other. Purpose-driven leaders articulate a compelling mission that extends beyond mere profit, thereby cultivating a spiritual workplace where employees feel their contribution matters and connects to something greater than themselves. Conversely, a spiritual culture—defined by meaning, core values, and human connection—demands leaders who consciously prioritize and consistently model these dimensions. While the leadership provides the strategic "north star" that gives work its foundational meaning, the spiritual workplace practices create the daily cultural experiences and inner fulfillment necessary to sustain that sense of purpose.

This dynamic is mirrored in the importance of continuous learning for employees, a principle underscored by Rabbi Sacks's analysis of Moses's counterintuitive leadership. Sacks notes that Moses emphasized education, children, and the distant future to the newly freed Israelites, recognizing that true liberty is not a one-time event but a generational duty that is preserved through teaching. In modern organizations, continuous learning serves a similar function: it is the primary way purpose-driven leaders ensure their mission survives and remains relevant. By investing in employee growth, leaders signal that they value the whole person and their long-term significance, not just their transactional productivity. Just as liberty dies without education, a company's purpose becomes a hollow slogan without a

commitment to employee development, making learning essential for enacting change and sustaining the spirit of the mission.

Planning for Succession

Preparing the next generation through education is only part of a leader's responsibility.

Purpose-driven leaders should also identify and develop successors who can carry the mission forward.

Ensuring Mission-Centered Leadership Continuity

Moses epitomized selfless leadership, consistently prioritizing the collective welfare above any personal or familial gain. This commitment is powerfully demonstrated in the succession narrative, when, instead of seeking to establish a dynasty, Moses urgently requested that God appoint a capable and suitable leader for the congregation, asking that "God's congregation not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Numbers 27:15-17). His concern was not personal legacy but the continuity of the community's covenantal mission: its spiritual direction and long-term stability. When God designated Joshua, an unrelated and proven servant (not even from his tribe), as the successor, Moses accepted the decision without protest. This critical choice shows that his ultimate loyalty was fixed solely on the community's continued security and effective guidance, not on securing a hereditary title for his descendants.

It is revealing to consider the precise biblical language used in Moses's address to God: "Moses spoke (*vayedaber*) to God, saying" (Numbers 27:15). While the formula appears frequently in the Torah, it is always, with this one exception, God who "speaks" to Moses. The verb "*vayedaber*" is significant because it conveys a tone of firmness or forcefulness, standing in sharp contrast to the gentler speech implied by "*vayomar*." Moses's use of this stronger term reflects a bold, resolute appeal, suggesting he was demanding an immediate and decisive response from God rather than merely making a soft request.

Rashi, citing the Midrash (Sifre Numbers 138), notes that in their final moments before departing this world, leaders who are genuinely dedicated set aside all personal concerns and devote themselves wholly to the community's affairs.

Moses consistently rejected the temptation of self-aggrandizement, refusing to leverage his unmatched influence and always attributing Israel's liberation entirely to God. His entire life was defined by selfless service, culminating in his death just outside the Promised Land. This symbolic finale underscores his unwavering commitment to the people's ultimate welfare, placing their entry and future above his own personal fulfillment. Moses's enduring greatness stems not from what he gained for himself or his family, but from what he sacrificed and secured for the future of his followers.

Moses as a Failed Leader: Strategic and Moral Lessons

Moses achieved extraordinary things, yet he also made consequential mistakes. These failures provide important lessons about the complexities and challenges of leadership.

Failure to Adapt and Evolve

Can a leader as great, humble, and purpose-driven as Moses still fail in his mission? The Torah reveals that his act at Me Meribah ("Waters of Strife"), when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as commanded, was so serious that it disqualified him from continuing to lead the people. What, then, was the true nature of his transgression? The Midrash lists six transgressions committed by Moses.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "See here, Moses, you have committed six sins, and I have not disclosed one of them. First you said, (in Exodus 4:13) 'Please my Lord, send anyone else whom you wish to send!'; secondly (in Exodus 5:23), 'For ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, [he has dealt worse with this people, and You have still not delivered Your people]'; thirdly (in Numbers 11:22) 'If the sheep and cattle would be slaughtered for them, would it be [enough] for them'; fourthly (in Numbers 16:29), 'The Lord did not send me'; fifthly (in Numbers 20:10), 'Listen, you rebels, [shall we bring forth water for you from this rock]'; sixth (in Numbers 32:14), 'And now you brood of sinners have arisen in place of your ancestors.' But were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sinners, for you to say this to their children?" (Midrash Tanchuma, Vaetchanan 6; based on a translation by Sefaria.org).

However, the Torah explicitly states that both he and Aaron were punished for the sin committed at Me Meribah (Numbers 20:12). The reason given there for not being allowed to enter the Promised Land was, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel." The Israelites' complaints at Mei Meribah echo those voiced by their parents at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1–7), an episode that occurred roughly forty years earlier. In both instances, a lack of water sparked widespread unrest.

At Rephidim, the people's demand for water grew so intense that Moses feared for his life. As their thirst deepened, so did their accusations; they charged Moses with leading them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. In response, God instructed Moses to strike a rock (*tzur*) with his staff, and water miraculously flowed. The site was subsequently named Massah and Meribah, meaning "Testing and Strife," reflecting the tension and hardship experienced by both Moses and the people.

The latter incident at Mei Meribah took place in the Wilderness of Zin, near Kadesh, close to the border of the Promised Land. The location itself became known as the Waters of Strife (Mei Meribah), and the consequences for the leadership were severe: Moses and Aaron were denied entry into the land they had journeyed toward for decades.

The exact nature of Moses' and Aaron's transgression has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Commentators such as Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508) and the Ohr HaChaim (Chaim Ibn Attar, 1696–1743) catalog ten distinct interpretations offered by earlier sources attempting to clarify the sin. Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto, 1800–1865) states that there are at least 13 explanations of what Moses did wrong. Beneath the surface of the narrative lies a profound exploration of moral authority and the limitations even the most revered leaders may face. In the context of modern leadership studies, this episode serves as a potent reminder that essential qualities like humility and vision do not shield leaders from ethical errors or the consequences of poor judgment.

This analysis draws on the work of Helfgot (1993) and Herskovitz and Klein (1999) to examine what went wrong at Mei Meribah. Both sets of scholars emphasize Moses' failure to adapt his leadership to the needs of a new generation. Herskovitz and Klein connect this issue to contingency theory, which argues against a fixed, one-size-fits-all model of management. Instead, effective leadership requires flexibility and the ability to evolve in tandem with one's community. Moses's choice to strike the rock rather than speak to it reveals his inability to adapt; he responded to a new challenge with the same strategy he had used decades earlier, a decision that highlights a critical lapse in leadership.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni Chukas 763*) underscores the distinction between a staff and speech. In a child's early years, discipline typically focuses on consequences; parents often warn about the punishments that will follow misbehavior. However, this method

becomes less effective as children age, making the adoption of more logical, reasoning-based approaches essential. Similarly, the young nation emerging from Egypt needed firm, authoritative guidance, much like the "stick" approach. In sharp contrast, the next generation required leadership that appealed to their ability to reason and understand.

This paper posits that Moses demonstrated he was not the best leader for the second generation by failing to adapt his leadership style and by not becoming proactive. The biblical narratives in Exodus and Numbers record ten instances of the Israelites' complaints (Anisfeld, 2011), revealing their predisposition for constant grievance. While it is understandable that a population of former slaves would be accustomed to having their needs met by others, a more surprising aspect is Moses' consistent pattern of reacting rather than taking proactive leadership. Presumably, upon realizing that the people's water supply was dwindling, Moses should have been praying for divine intervention rather than waiting for the inevitable public outcry.

This recurring pattern of popular complaint appears to be a direct consequence of Moses' tendency to delay action until the crisis was already at hand. Moreover, despite having nearly four decades to teach the people to express their needs more respectfully, Moses failed to change the community's habit of resorting to grievance. The subsequent transition highlights this leadership challenge: when Joshua took over, the Israelites ceased their complaints about food, water, and the hardships of war.

Failure to Anticipate Problems

Moses' failure as a leader was less about a single act of disobedience and more about his inability to develop the foresight and attentiveness that great leaders possess. Effective leaders anticipate problems before they escalate and maintain early warning systems to detect signs of trouble. Instead of reacting to crises, they act proactively to prevent them from occurring. Had Moses responded promptly to the emerging water shortage and addressed it before it became a major crisis, the confrontation at Meribah might never have happened.

Given how rapidly the environment changes, an effective leader's core duty is to proactively seek out and understand their subordinates' concerns. This requires employing both systematic methods, such as surveys and polls, and organic approaches, such as informal dialogue and everyday conversations. This diligence is necessary to accurately gauge the organization's psychological health. Because these internal dynamics shape the work environment, failing to accurately assess the organization's intrinsic strengths and weaknesses is a critical oversight that can have catastrophic consequences for the enterprise's stability and success.

Several commentators suggest that his true misstep was in labeling the Israelites "rebels" when they panicked over the lack of water, a natural reaction for people fearing death from thirst. The deeper question, therefore, is why Moses did not learn to listen more closely to his people's needs and recognize early that dwindling water supplies required immediate leadership action. Maimonides (c. 1135–1204; see his Introduction to Tractate Avot, Eight Chapters) focuses on the inappropriateness of Moses losing his temper and calling the Israelites "rebels." God was not angry at the Jewish people because their request for water was reasonable. By losing his temper, Moses led the people to believe that God was angry with them, when in fact God was not. Moreover, leaders should display equanimity even under tremendous pressure.

Moses's failure to offer a hymn of thanksgiving for the provision of water is viewed by some commentators as a sign of a lack of gratitude to God, possibly resulting from his losing his temper. This incident is sharply contrasted by the response in Numbers 21:17. On that occasion, the people were miraculously given a well and spontaneously sang a song of appreciation, beginning with the words, "Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well! Sing

to it!"

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of expressing gratitude in organizational settings (Chen et al., 2023; Fehr et al., 2017; Luo, Ng, & Choong, 2025). Effective leadership requires modeling the behaviors and norms one seeks to institutionalize. Some may view expressions of appreciation as cliché or insincere, but their impact depends largely on authenticity and consistency. Sustainable cultural change occurs when leaders visibly and genuinely practice gratitude themselves. If those at the helm fail to embrace and foster an environment of appreciation, it's unreasonable to expect such norms to take root among their teams.

Failure to Properly Attribute Credit to the True Source

Another misstep by Moses, noted by several commentaries (e.g., Rabbeinu Chananel ben Chushiel, c. 990–c. 1053), is the problem associated with Moses' use of the word "*notzi*" rather than "*yotzi*" in Numbers 20:10. Saying "*notzi*" means "shall we bring forth." This suggests that Moses and Aaron would miraculously produce water when the miracle was from God. They should have been cautious in their speech and emphasized that they were simply agents and that God would provide them with water. Leaders should be careful when speaking and never take credit for someone else's accomplishments. Beck (2003) also posits that saying "we" rather than "God" might lead the Israelites to believe that Moses and Aaron were magicians with special powers. They should have made it clear that the water was from God.

Failure to Act Decisively Under Pressure

Kreisel (2024) cites Avvat Nephesh (14th-century supercommentary on Ibn Ezra) and Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, c. 1550–1619), both interpreting Moses and Aaron's sin as failing to act decisively during the water crisis. Instead of taking immediate action, they retreated to the Tent of Meeting out of fear (Numbers 20:6). These commentaries suggest that effective leadership requires prompt, decisive action and trust in God's support, especially in urgent situations. The primary reason for Moses's errors at Me Meribah was his failure to foresee the challenges and his subsequent loss of self-control when the crisis arose. Losing one's temper commonly leads to poor judgment. In the midst of a disaster, leaders may also succumb to fear, hindering their ability to act decisively.

Failure to Take Responsibility

The Book of Deuteronomy recounts the words Moses spoke to the people during the final weeks of his life. Two things stand out. The first was Moses' great desire to lead the people into the Promised Land. He begged God to allow him to finish his mission. God forgave the people numerous times for their transgressions, but was unwilling to allow Moses to lead them into the Promised Land. God even had to rebuke Moses, telling him in Deuteronomy 3:26, "Do not continue to speak to me further about this matter." It was not only about striking a rock. God knew that Moses was not the right person for the job. The fact that Moses never stopped blaming the people for his failure might provide another reason why God decided a new leader was needed.

Moses constantly blamed the people for his misfortune of not being allowed to enter the Promised Land. In his discussion with the Israelites regarding the incident of the spies, he made a parenthetical remark in Deuteronomy 1:37: "Also the Lord was angry with me for your sakes, saying: You also will not enter there." Of course, the incident that caused him not to enter the Promised Land happened about 38 years later at Me Meribah (Numbers 20:12). Moses repeated the accusation two more times in Deuteronomy (3:26, 4:21). Clearly, Moses felt that it was because of the Israelites, not his own mistake, that caused God to punish him

and not allow him to enter the Promised Land. The question begs to be asked: Should a leader blame the people for his own mistake? Perhaps the people would have learned more about doing the right thing by hearing Moses take full responsibility.

There is one other important observation regarding Moses' final weeks of life. In much of Deuteronomy, Moses repeats what God had said directly. However, when Moses paraphrases the Tochacha in Deuteronomy (28:15-69), there is one striking difference between the two admonitions. The one in Leviticus ends on a message of hope (26:45-46): God says that He will not annul His covenant with them and will remember for them the "covenant of their ancestors." In other words, God would never forget the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses' admonition (*tochacha*) to the new generation had no positive outcome. In fact, it ends abruptly in Deuteronomy 28:68: "And the Lord will return you to Egypt in ships, by the way that I promised that you should never see it again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer!" It appears that Moses was so angry with his people that he did not want to convey a message of hope to them.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Exodus–wilderness narrative can be read not merely as a theological account, but as a model of purpose-driven servant leadership in times of disruption. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land reflects a profound transformation: from slavery to freedom, from fragmentation to covenantal community, and from reactive survival to purpose-centered nationhood. These transitions provide a lens for interpreting the disruptions organizations confront today, including technological upheaval, geopolitical instability, and ethical complexity. Moses was the purpose-driven leader whose job was to teach the people. The nation was molded: divine law was delivered, communal order was established, and moral maturity was instilled. This essential preparation ensured that Israel was finally equipped to inherit the covenanted land and faithfully fulfill their responsibilities. The wilderness functioned as an adaptive learning environment in which law, governance structures, and ethical norms were established. This aligns with contemporary leadership scholarship emphasizing humility, authenticity, and stewardship (van Dierendonck, 2011).

The Torah regards Moses as the greatest prophet who ever lived and a profoundly humble individual. While this paper analyzes instances in which Moses faltered as a leader, it concludes by highlighting his greatest success: the valuable lessons he offers as a purpose-driven servant leader. Although Moses did not personally lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, he fundamentally transformed the world. Over the forty years in the wilderness, he instilled revolutionary ideas in the people, establishing foundational principles for a just society. These principles include compassion for society's most vulnerable members, welcoming strangers, accountability in organizational leadership, and a deep commitment to social justice. His teachings also covered purpose-driven governance, environmental ethics (including the protection of animals and environmental conservation), and spiritual practices (such as rejecting superstition and cultivating a direct relationship with God). Ultimately, Moses's legacy is defined by his insistence on humility in leadership and a fundamental respect for human worth (Friedman & Gefen, 2025).

Great leaders should recognize the reality of a finite tenure. Moses, for example, accomplished a tremendous amount over his forty years in the wilderness, giving the people a shared purpose. However, the first generation of newly freed Israelites proved unable to conquer a land and found a new nation based on monotheism and social justice. Perhaps their extended time as slaves in polytheistic Egypt created a psychological block too challenging to overcome. Their children, on the other hand, were ideally suited to the task of creating a revolutionary new country, a society unlike any other in the pagan world.

Many successful leaders establish powerful empires, but these often collapse soon after their deaths, as seen with those of Attila the Hun and Alexander the Great. This was not the case when Moses died. The seamless transition from Moses to Joshua remains the classic model of effective leadership succession. Moses deliberately mentored Joshua to complete the mission of guiding the Israelites into the Promised Land and advancing ethical monotheism throughout the world. More than 3,000 years later, his legacy endures as a testament to leadership grounded in purpose and moral vision. For modern executives navigating digital disruption, climate risk, and social fragmentation, the implication is clear: corporate legacy should not be assessed primarily by market capitalization or executive compensation, but by long-term societal contribution, stakeholder uplift, and ethical impact. As contemporary stakeholder theory similarly argues, organizations exist within broader moral ecosystems and bear responsibility to multiple constituencies (Freeman, Dmytriiev, & Phillips, 2021).

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