



Strengthening and Guiding Decentralized Organizations

DARYL D. GREEN | GARY E. ROBERTS

Jesus spoke. People listened. As he proclaimed, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19, KJV, the great commission launched one of the greatest decentralized organizations. As Christians of that day operated under persecution and in a hostile environments (Acts 28:22), the culture, guided by the Holy Spirit, began to shape the organizational structure of what is known today as *the Church*.

However, how can a leader guide followers that cannot be seen? This dilemma of the apostles is the same issue that executives in business, government and nonprofit organizations must address today. Answering this leadership challenge, the Apostle Paul began to virtually create community, order and structure through his pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 2:1-6:1). In this sense, there was not a distinction made

between church culture and structure. They were integrated.

Businesses today face a similar challenge. Globalization and technology advancements create opportunities, but also provide a new set of problems for traditionally structured organizations. Demographic changes continue to shape the realities of globalization. For example it is difficult to apply the same marketing approach for a product or service in multiple countries.

Doing work globally requires two dimensions of complexity: business and cultural complexity. Furthermore, global customers require businesses to humanize globalization. In responding to this market need, multinational companies are decentralizing their workforce.

The church faced similar issues of business and cultural complexity. The early church’s foundational strategy was

the development of a clearly defined and embraced world view. The first century Roman world presented similar diversity challenges and the only means to unite the geographically dispersed Jews and the many ethnic and racial gentiles was to develop a unified culture with a common set of suppositions or theology to cultivate mission, vision and values consensus.

More and more employees are working remotely today; therefore, they function like a virtual organization, which is geographically separated and has very little personal contact. As a result, some workers feel alone and disconnected. Today’s organizations are increasingly becoming self-directed. Furthermore, the impact of globalization has decentralized most multi-national companies and damaged the value alignment of organizations.

Contemporary leaders can benefit from

models of the early Christian church in learning how to lead followers in decentralized organizations. Three key lessons from Acts of the Apostles demonstrate how leaders in a decentralized context can create vision; develop a unified world view and encourage followers in the face of adversity.

Leaders Create

Exemplary leaders provide a vision for followers. Vision relates to the ability to look beyond physical constraints of the natural realm; a shared vision denotes that followers have bought into the leader's vision. In the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the disciples did not understand Jesus' mission. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit was critical in forming the vision for the church and supplying it with the vital skills (Ephesians 4:11) for service. Thus, the works of Jesus and his apostles are perceived as the eschatological outworking of the divine plan for renewal among God's people.

For example, the Apostle Paul supported the vision established by Jesus Christ. He understood that this vision was the unified force to a scattered group of believers undergoing persecution. In Ephesians 4:3-5, Paul encourages, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism." The unified vision enables organization members to focus with clarity and precision on specific goals and objectives. It enables, what Jim Collins notes in his acclaimed book, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, the necessity for organizations to avoid distractions and rabbit-trails that lead to mission drift.

Likewise, in dealing with decentralized organizations, contemporary leaders need to create a shared vision for employees. The inherent power of vision can inspire followers to action. For example, research conducted by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner found that highly effective leaders inspire a shared vision. However, most business leaders are too busy with the current issues of today and find little time for vision building. This leaves workers, as well as the organization, unfulfilled. In a changing environment, communicating

a clear vision is important for survival. Having a shared vision provides an organization with a competitive advantage. Many senior executives carry the burden of leader and do not want to share strategy for the organizations. In this type of organization, information does not flow well, and employees are kept in the dark about major organizational changes. This leader may



feel he or she is protecting this staff by keeping the vision hidden. However, it creates an environment with no clear direction. Therefore, today's leaders should inspire their workforce with a shared vision.

There are numerous modern day examples of the power of vision casting across all sectors. The growth and success of Southwest Airlines is a testament to an intense focus on high quality customer service within tightly defined parameters. Southwest did not attempt to emulate the growth of other airlines by trying to maximize customer choice. Rather, they focused on the key issues most important to customers: price, reliability, safety and customer treatment; then unabashedly devoted all management systems to solely implementing those values.

Leaders Build

Leaders must provide an organizational structure for achieving their objectives that is flexible and organic. From the very beginning, God provided structure for His people. In the Old Testament, God's people were led by priests, judges, prophets/prophetesses and kings. However, at times, followers paced

slowly behind the leaders. In the ancient world, a few typical leadership types emerged: leaders chosen to make the decisions and exercise authority, a Roman characteristic; leaders chosen to carry out the will of the people, a Greek trait; and a society of unequal members where leaders make decisions in conjunction with other members, a Jewish trait. The last type of community was characteristic of the early Church.

Furthermore, Jewish officials, such as scribes, were essential to certain functionaries within Jewish society during the Greco-Roman period. Jerusalem was the religious center for as many as four million Jews scattered abroad from Rome to Babylon. Mingled with these various beliefs in Jerusalem were the cultural, social and political influences of the Greeks and Romans. Even during the time of Jesus, an elite group in the synagogue selected which individuals could take leadership positions in a Jewish community. Unlike the Jewish establishment, the early church structure was agile, mobile and reactionary to hostile environmental forces. Faced by heavy persecution by the Jewish establishment and the Roman Empire, the church had to function remotely. Clearly, there is a transformation of the apostles' roles and status in the early church. Thus, the apostles were able to transfer leadership to the new church leaders, in effect, building the Church.

The autonomous, self-governing congregation had no external body or hierarchy ruling it. It functioned as a virtual organization, meeting with small groups of believers in homes for worship and fellowship. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, there was no ecclesiastical hierarchy; therefore, "fellow workers" provided this leadership led the by Holy Spirit.

The early church structure was a two-fold ministry of presbyter-bishops assisted by deacons in the churches over a wide geographical area in the latter part of the first century (Acts 11:30; Acts 15:6; Acts 14:23). There are elders (1 Timothy. 5:1), bishops (1 Timothy. 5:17-18) and deacons (I Timothy. 3:8). Therefore, strategy preceded structure for the early Christian church. Furthermore, exemplary leaders understand the importance of organizational development. On the

contrary, some senior managers want to provide the business strategy for getting the work done while leaving the details of organizational structure to their subordinates. When new strategies are implemented and fail, these same leaders are puzzled as to why their initiatives failed. In many cases, this is because the organization was not structured in a way that supported effective implementation of these initiatives. In today's contemporary organizations, leaders who want to be successful must provide structure for followers.

Successful executives recognize that strategy and organizational structure must be organically derived from the mission and vision, that purpose always trumps technique and process. This is a critical factor in the success of major corporations and nonprofit organizations such as Southwest Airlines and the American Red Cross, which both allow for varying combinations of centralization and decentralization based upon mission enhancement. For example, every Southwest employee is empowered and instructed on the need for working outside of their job description to solve problems, a form of accountability and ownership.

Leaders Encourage

Effective leaders inspire followers even in the darkest of times. In Acts, the early church was confronted with conflicts on several levels. As the Church faced persecution and spread to other parts of the world, factions formed over conflicting claims and interpretations concerning Jesus and the apostles. Without a doubt, the early church found itself in the midst of contentious struggle. During this time, heresy threatened the Church and at this point, the early Church needed something to unite its organization. Jesus knew that His church would face this challenge.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus responds to this challenge saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The early church leaders exhorted followers to continue despite their circumstances. Therefore, instead of destroying the early



Church, dissenting opinions and beliefs appeared to spur the development of a unified position that helped strengthen the dominant segment of Christianity. The enabling power of God came through the Holy Spirit as the central agent in Acts for the instruction and empowerment of the early church (Acts 1:2; 2:1-12). The Apostle Paul understood the psychological pressures of persecution and what it could do to an individual; therefore, he was constantly inspiring the early Church by having them focus on the ultimate vision.

Today's leaders need to provide encouragement to employees operating remotely. Good leaders know their followers' needs. Exemplary leaders provide a model for their followers by seeing these qualities in their leader.

One of the most important means for encouraging employees is driving fear from the workplace through values of godly excellence. This requires the redefinition of excellence as a long-term character and competency growth building process that by definition requires mistakes, errors and setbacks. Organizations should encourage and reward employees for good-faith efforts that fail to reach objectives through forgiveness policies and formally recognize and thank employees for their efforts and sacrifice.

For example, Men's Wearhouse embraces encouragement and forgiveness as essential mission elements. George Zimmer, founder and CEO explains that the policy of forgiveness provides tough love,

accountability and grace. This helps employees recognize the genuine care that the company demonstrates, which results in character transformation.

Concluding Thoughts

As today's companies restructure operations to better position for the global market, new ideas and approaches must be considered to ensure continuity of corporate values in decentralized structures. There are clear similarities between contemporary organizations and early Christian churches as it relates to decentralized structures.

Corporations are yearning for leaders who share a special connection with followers. Building effective organizations that operate remotely requires that leaders function within higher levels of complexity. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, leaders can be as effectual in today's virtual environments as the early church leaders were in their decentralized contextual environment.

Daryl Green is pursuing a doctoral degree in leadership at Regent University. Mr. Green received a B.S. in Engineering and an M.A. in Organizational Management. Currently, he is an ordained deacon and youth advisor at his local church.

Gary E. Roberts is a faculty member in the Regent University School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. Dr Roberts' current research interests center on the influence of religion and spirituality on occupational stress, the impact of the religious friendly workplace, organizational policies to promote employee work-life balance and mental health policy. He has authored numerous journal articles and book chapters. He can be reached for comment at garyrob@regent.edu

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