



Reinventing the Wheel: A New Spin on American Business Leadership

By Jonathan D. McDowell

Tumbling markets. Expensive bailouts. Securities fraud. Increasing unemployment rates. These words conjure up images of front page newspaper articles printed across the United States starting around November of 2008. American faith in corporate leadership has been shaken. Even with a considerable run-up in the stock market, investors are still apprehensive to trade ("Browning, E.S., "Bears are wary as bull returns," *The Wall Street Journal* 27 March 2009, sec. A, p. 1). Even so, trading apprehension seems mild compared to the ouster of a "big three" CEO -- at the behest of the U.S. Government (King and Stoll, "Government forces out GM CEO Wagoner," 30 March 2009, sec. A, p. 1). Continual corporate doom and gloom stories run the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. There is an obvious need for leadership in American business. How can American business redeem itself in the wake of leadership fallout? By reinventing the wheel. A very, very old wheel . . . with a brand new chrome finish. The purpose of this article is to exhibit the need for good leadership in today's business world and identify what that kind of leadership would look like.

The Squeaky Wheel Needs the Oil

Is there a shortage of leaders? Is leadership development missing the mark of developing leaders? Does anybody know what the term "leadership" means anymore? While social scientists have attempted to answer these questions, the American culture has become a squeaky wheel in need of oil. Shelves and shelves of books line the aisles in major bookstores telling customers how to become the best leader. Person after person has Linked In and Twitter accounts dedicated to finding the most followers to whom they can bombard with leadership quotes. If there is such a massive amount of literature on the topic of leadership, and desire for many to become so-called leaders, why is the American public suffering from poor

business leadership? Current business thinkers suggest a few reasons why.

Paula Ketter suggests the term "leadership" has lost its true operational definition. Mary Key of the Institute of Corporate Productivity says, "'leadership' is tossed around a lot . . . and all of us assume we know what it means" (Ketter 2009, 51). She goes on to say that any organization "needs to get clear on a definition of leadership" (Ketter, 52).

If leadership today has a vague definition, it would make sense that so-



called business leaders stand on shaky ground when it comes to understanding their role. In fact, the loss of definition and misunderstanding of a leader's role could be a result of large booksellers stacking their rows of books with "How to" leaders guides. A popular trend in business circles is to "focus on your strengths" and stop wasting time on skills that are undeveloped. Robert Kaiser reasons that this type of thinking is a sure-fire way to spell leadership disaster. He gives two reasons why the focus of strength rationale does not work. First, he says, "weaknesses matter" (Kaiser 2009, 58). Performance

will suffer if a leader cannot perform the unelected roles he will be subject to

playing (Kaiser, 58). Second, focusing on strengths can create a one dimensional leader. Overuse of a strength can cause misapplication and minimizes the leader's perspective. Kaiser puts it aptly, "The bigger their hammers, the more everything looks like a nail" (Kaiser, 58). Instead, a leader should have a broad perspective with a range of skills and abilities (Kaiser, 58).

It may seem bad enough to have throngs of one dimensional leaders equipped with a vague definition of themselves, but wait, there's more! Call now and you can get an ever increasing amount of Generation Y-ers!" Add this to a workforce and a one dimensional leader that does not know the definition of leadership, and you've got a recipe for an organization on the rocks.

The leader that faces an entrance of Generation Y-ers, or millennials, will face a few unconventional challenges that probably are not in a leadership manual. A main challenge is going to be crossing the "digital divide" (Behrens 2009, 20). Those in Gen-Y have been immersed in technology from the time they were born. This has led to their ability to stay connected to technology and learn new technologies quickly (Behrens 2009). Because they have been tuned in to technology on a regular basis, the likelihood of their ability to connect with others in a team environment is decreased (Behrens, 20). A traditional leader will need to find a way to connect with this type of employee in a manner that exemplifies sound teamwork while utilizing their technological prowess (Behrens, 21). Millennials also expect to walk onto the scene at a higher position than is normally warranted and have minimal patience for lengthy advancements (Behrens, 21). A culture that is bringing this attitude to the table (with the skills to back it up) needs a leader that is willing and able to collapse the

traditional hierarchical organizational structure.

The Old Wheel is the Oil

The squeaky wheel is sounding. America wants to get the cylinders of business pumping and churning again. Conventional oil is a long shot from what is needed. Although the method of reinventing business leadership is an old wheel, it is by no means conventional. The foundational approach that American business leadership must build on is a 1,950-year-old wheel. The approach is written by a leader that built a following that spanned Europe and the Middle East. The Apostle Paul provides the foundation for successful leadership in a passage from the Bible in Romans 12:9-12. In this passage, Paul the Apostle describes the keys to unlocking others' confidence. He titles the passage, "The Love Sincere."

Paul begins a seemingly disjointed list of admonitions in 12:9-21 with the words, "Love must be sincere" (Rom 12: 9-21, NIV). The English translation adds a verb that is not included in the Greek (Moo 2000, 409). The original reading would be "the love sincere" (Moo, 409). Both Bekker and Moo transliterate the Greek word for love as anypokritos or literally, "not hypocritical" (Bekker 2007; Moo 2000). That definition is to be thought of as the reader moves through the different topics describing a person of peace and humble character. This practice alone would seem to change the current landscape of current leadership expectations.

Paul moves to a rapid fire list of admonitions starting with, "Hate what is evil, cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9b, NIV). This charges the leader to "do the right thing." And that is the jumping off point of love to others and leading well (Bekker, 2007). Paul quickly switches to, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (Rom 12:9b-10a, NIV). This type of love is reminiscent of a familial love and is a call to exhibit intimate tenderness for "one another" (Moo, 409). He continues to jump from topic to topic for two reasons. Paul is attempting to get the reader to react to each exhortation specifically and strongly (Moo, 415). As Paul continues with, "Honor one another above yourselves," the reader should begin to realize that "the love sincere" is more than a thought or feeling. It is an active, self-sacrificing love that charges them with a lifestyle that continually aims at elevating others around them. John Maxwell states this idea succinctly in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* like this: "the bottom line in leadership isn't how far we advance ourselves but how far we advance others" (2007, 51).

Barram shows the usefulness of this passage by employing the terms "concretely" and "exhibit" to describe these exhortations (2003, 425). Barram's idea of concrete exhibition is a good way to view this passage. Every admonition should be put into practice. And every practice should include these admonitions, or better stated, "This . . . refers . . . to all aspects of life" (Morris 2006). Morris interprets the admonition "Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" as pertaining to everything the reader participates in (Rom 12:11, KJV).

The next drastic jump displays how "the love sincere" handles adversity (Bekker 2007). It "stays the course" and shows patience for those times that do not seem akin to happiness, yet still prays faithfully (Moo, 410). Paul seems to visit that idea quickly, only to return a few verses later. Instead of sticking with that, he moves to outward quantifiable displays of love. "Share with God's people who are in need." Plainly put: practice hospitality (Rom 12:13, NIV). This exhortation returns to the familial love from verse 10 and expands on that to show love by applicable practice: giving to those in need (Moo, 410). The NIV does not quite catch the imagery that Paul is depicting in 13b. The NIV uses practice, but the Greek literally means to "pursue" hospitality. Or, as the King James Version reads, "given to hospitality" (Rom 12:13b, KJV). For leaders, this means to put the organizational members and the organization first. Self-seeking will tank an organization, but generousness, the pursuit of hospitality, will attract others to a leader's following.

We now turn to a section break at verse 14 of the passage. Bekker posits that this section break gives exhortation to behavior that is counterintuitive (2007). Moo says that Paul calls us to go beyond human boundaries of love (2000, 411). And that, of course, can only be done by returning to an exhortation in verse 12: "Never be lacking in zeal . . . serving the Lord."

This section tells the reader to "Bless those that persecute you" and to rejoice and mourn with those who rejoice and mourn, respectively. "Live in harmony . .



THE PATH TO SUCCESS

PURPOSE	COMMUNITY	FORTITUDE
Romans 12: 9b, 11, 20, 21	Romans 12: 10, 13, 15-16, 18	Romans 12: 14, 17, 19-20

. do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" (Rom 12:14-16). The five sentences in verses 14-16 seem to include a range of different attitudes, but the mini theme here is pride and harmony (Bekker 2007; Moo 2000). Harmonious living, with everyone, is not easily done unless pride is absent (Moo, 412). Bekker suggests we need to see "all people as people" and not allow barriers resulting from pride to stand in the way (2007).

This call to humility is indeed an important one for leaders. How many leaders exemplify the personification of humility? Think about the people you want to be around the least. Does their pride make it difficult to live with them harmoniously? If you are a leader and wonder why your relationships are strained or non-existent, take a moment to ponder how to live humbly and try to put it into practice. You will see an increase in your leadership function.

The remainder of the passage exhorts us to "never avenge ourselves," but to live at peace with everyone (Barram 2003, 425; Rom 12:18). This includes non-retaliation. Vengeance would not be in accordance with any of Paul's admonitions, but only for God to do (Rom 12:19). Instead of retaliation to enemies, those reading this passage are exhorted to do the polar opposite, give unto them (Rom 12:20). This seems quite contrary to our leadership model and, in fact, will be hard for many to accept. How can a leader overlook disagreeable actions and still maintain leadership. Doesn't that show weakness? In my experience, attempts at vengeance take too much time away from productive activities and escalate a situation into a mess. A true leader with confidence in their authority will gladly overlook an insult on their way to success through wisdom.

The charge to live peaceably with those that harm could be said to be the culmination of the passage. Paul says this behavior will "heap burning coals on his head" (Rom 12:20). Some

commentators believe this act was to bring contrition to the enemies (Day 2003, 415). Others think this is an assurance of God's punishment on the enemies (Day 2003, 418). Either way, believers' peaceable actions towards their enemies should be a priority and ultimately steadily increase. This is what Paul meant by "overcoming evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

Taking the Old Wheel for a Spin

In order for the passage in Romans to be applicable to the reinvention of new business leadership, three themes must be displayed. Whereas words that could describe a leader's character are ambitious, creative, determined, honorable and self-confident; the focus of leadership reinvention should be on purpose, community and fortitude (Daft 1999; Kirkpatrick and Locke 1991; Northouse 1997).

A reinvented leader must pursue his role with purpose. This does not mean with drive or strong directive, but rather a higher reason or calling. Therefore, the leader is not simply doing a job, but fulfilling a calling. Gary Hamel describes the perspective as "focus[ing] on the achievement of socially significant and noble goals" (2009, 92). For the reader of Romans 12:9-21, it means to fervently "serve the Lord" and to "overcome evil with good" (vv. 11, 21). The pursuit of serving the Lord requires continual leadership of the highest quality in all situations. It ensures adherence to integrity through all adversity. The result is a strong foundation for the reinvented leader's purpose: not only to stay away from deceit and dishonesty, but to "cling to what is good" and lead for a purpose outside of self.

The reinvented leader must lead for community. The focus should be turning the organization into a functioning community with cohesion, teamwork and a flat hierarchy instead of merely achieving socially acceptable goals. Hamel states that "management systems must reflect the ethos of community" and



leaders must "become social architects . . . to create an environment where every employee has a chance to collaborate, innovate and excel" (2009, 92-93). This replaces traditional hierarchies with a "natural" hierarchy, where status and influence correspond to contribution" (2009, 92-93). Taking a community outlook for a Romans reinvented leader means to "honor one another above yourselves . . . live in harmony with one another . . . [and] be willing to associate with people of low position" (vv. 10, 16). Honoring others above oneself will ensure outside involvement and employee input. It will create cohesion and synergy. It will maximize influence and ultimately success. Therefore, a reinvented leader must lead with and through community.

Fortitude could be the reinvented leader's most potent weapon. Fortitude

is the ability to stand strong in the face of opposition, criticism and dirty politics. To stand strong, a leader must first understand his strengths and his weaknesses. Kaplan and Kaiser warn that the overuse of a strength can quickly become a weakness (2009, 101). Because of that, once the leader is aware of a strength, the opposite becomes a weakness (for instance sacrificing kindness for assertiveness) for the leader (Kaplan and Kaiser 2009). Finding the balance in this sensitive area requires counter-action that is specifically aimed at reducing only the consequence of the strength, not the strength itself (Kaplan and Kaiser 2009). When the leader understands his weakness, he can build that weakness into a functioning weapon. Increasing one's arsenal will give a leader confidence and stability in adverse times. This confidence will give the leader an ability to overlook malicious

behavior and focus resources on what counts. The reinvented leader will shake off the opposition and continue to move forward with momentum, understanding that there is a better use of crucial energy. Achieving a fortuitous character will allow the leader to come full circle and better fulfill their true purpose.

Reinventing the Wheel

The reinvented leader must understand there is a need in American business. Once that call is heard, that leader must apply the baseline description of "new" leadership from Romans 12:9-21 while focusing on purpose, community and fortitude. The reinvented leader now has the tools to overcome a vague definition with purpose. A sense of community can be created which will prepare any organization for the nuances of Generation Y-ers or something more

radical. Equally as important, fortitude will give the reinvented business leader the strength and wisdom to stand against criticism and continue to



move the organization forward. With these elements implemented successfully, the gap between traditional business practices and multi-generational influence can be bridged.



Jonathan D. McDowell and his wife, Sandra, are attorneys in Kansas City, Missouri. Jonathan practices employment and labor law, including ERISA and FMLA; and sports related intellectual property law. Jonathan's leadership-topic specialties are organizational leadership, social dynamics and members expectations of leadership characteristics. He holds a B.S. in Government and Psychology from Evangel University in Springfield, MO, and a Juris Doctor and MBA from Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA. Jonathan is currently finishing a book titled, "Fail-Safe: Surefire Steps to Leadership Failure." He enjoys playing the trumpet, piano and studying TaeKwonDo. You can follow his blog at www.sidebarsfromthesidelines.blogspot.com. For consulting or speaking engagements, please email him at jonathandmcdowell@sbcglobal.net.

Notes

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