



Toward an Understanding of Leadership Development from a
Foundation of Humility: An Examination of Leadership Development
in Philippians 2

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The need for leadership development has begun to take center stage in secular organizations.¹ This focus on leadership development can be traced back to organizations that have publicly failed to meet the challenge of organizational change needed in this rapidly changing economic environment. However, the need for understanding and applying leadership development is not just a secular need. In the past decade the church has also seen the need to change. With the introduction to the mega-church movement and the multi-site church model, churches are embracing the culture and innovating for church growth. Weathering these obstacles of change rests upon the shoulders of leaders. For Organizations and Churches to see this change through, leadership development must be made a priority. These examples are part of the reason there is a rising focus on leadership development.

However, leadership development is not a new idea. From the foundation of the earth God has been developing leaders to carry out His plan as seen in the lives of many great leaders in the Bible. This is why it will be crucial for leaders of both the Christian and secular organizations to explore the scriptures to better understand leadership

¹ David V. Day, "Leadership Development: A Review in Context." *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581-613.

developments foundation. This paper focuses on Christian leadership development in hopes to set a foundation for all leadership development to begin.

Leadership development requires that the leader develop humility due to its ontological nature. This foundation of humility creates the environment in which the leader will need to receive further development, and enable him to apply it to his life. However, to fully grasp this virtue, one must look to the greatest example of humility, Jesus. This paper explores the concept of leadership development, identifies humility as foundational to said development, and analyzes Philippians 2:1-11 as the model of humility for the leader to mimic. From there, humilities place within ethics, authentic leadership, and servant leadership will be discussed.

Literature Review

Leadership Development

Leadership development is often used synonymously with leader development; however, this is not the case. Leader development finds its focus on the formation of the leader. It often takes the form of self-examination and self-discovery.² However, leadership development focuses more on the leader developing leadership within those he/she may be leading. For this study, the focus will be more toward leadership development. Day defines leadership development as, “Expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes”.³ Daft defines leadership development as a way of directing a follower to

² Ibid

³ Ibid, 582

improve specific skills or to achieve a specific development goal.⁴ By looking at both of these definitions, it becomes clear that leadership development requires a purposeful transformation toward higher levels of leadership ability in the follower. Not only is it a transformation but it is a process as well. Clinton identifies this as a process that includes several stages of life lessons, and experiences.⁵ As the leader learns the lesson through the life experience, he/she is able to advance to the next stage in leadership. Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy discuss how this experience is the fundamental way in which leadership development is done. Furthermore, they identify how the perception of the leader can effect the interpretation of, and actions in response to development.⁶ This is a critical point. If perception can effect the interpretation of the development process, then the lessons learned can be manipulated either by pride or humility. This supports the notion that humility creates the environment the leader needs to receive correct development. If those being developed are full of pride and are self-focused, the outcome of the development could support negative behavior. However, if approached with humility, the perception of the one being developed creates the ability for learning and application in one's life to happen. This is due to humility's ability to realign focus and understanding.

⁴ Richard L. Daft, *The Leadership Experience* (Mason, Ohio: Thomson/South-Western, 2011).

⁵ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 2012).

⁶ Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 2012).

To better understand leadership development it is helpful to understand how it can be accomplished successfully. When leaders were asked what the leading factors were that contributed to their growth and development, respondents ranked insightful feedback as one of the most important elements.⁷ Daft agrees with this statement and adds that, when done correctly, followers see feedback as a route to improvement and development, not as something to dread or fear.⁸ Daft outlines four guidelines that help leaders initiating leadership development to be received well. First, “make it timely.” Leaders should give feedback as soon as they observe a behavior or action that they want to correct or reinforce. Second, “focus on the performance not the person.” Feedback for leadership development should always focus on what the follower can do to improve, not on critical elements within the person. Third, “make it specific.” Leadership development should focus on particular behaviors and their associated consequences whether positive or negative. The worst thing a developing leader can experience is knowing growth is needed but not knowing the specific area to focus on. Finally, “focus on the desired future, not the past.” Leadership development is about changing for the better, for the future. By bringing up the past in the development process, one can stunt the forward progress in the leader’s development.⁹

To summarize, leadership development has been shown to be a process. This process requires the leader to focus on the development of the follower for positive

⁷ Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, and Beth Axelrod, *The War for Talent* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

⁸ Daft, *Leadership experience*, 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

outcomes in the follower's leadership and ultimately the organization. This process requires the leader to approach the development with humility. A leader who is self-seeking, prideful, and uses his position as strictly a power source, can poison and destroy the environment of leadership development. To better understand humility's role in the development process, a review of the literature and an examination of its practice in leadership must be done.

Humility

For most of the early secular ideas of leadership, humility was looked at as a quality less desirable within the construct of leadership. Northouse considered humility to be a quality of the past.¹⁰ Many scholars disagreed with humility belonging in leadership, stating it is a quality given to slaves that lessens oneself, which would then limit the leader's influence ability. However, not all secular thought believes humility to be a hindrance to leadership. Taylor argues that one of the most needed characteristics of tomorrow's leaders is humility.¹¹ This is due to the fast paced culture in which we live. Leaders have to be able to admit failure and be willing to work through defeat. Humble leaders embrace failure not as moments of loss but as moments to gain knowledge and understanding.¹² Furthermore, Owens, Rowatt, and Wilkins say that team-based

¹⁰ Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 2011).

¹¹ Chris Taylor, "Modern management education: how it needs to lead to leadership," *Managing Service Quality* 7, no. 6 (1997).

¹² David Pollitt, "Curtis Fine Papers aligns strategy and leadership style with business priorities," *Human Resource Management International Digest* 13, no. 6 (2005).

structures and information-based economics make the workplace difficult to work in, making “Humility in organizations an idea whose time has come.”¹³

Vera and Rodrigues-Lopez believe that humility is frequently misunderstood with a lack of confidence or ambition, passivity, or being shy.¹⁴ This is due to the humble leader’s desire to learn from others, their ability to acknowledge their limitations and mistakes, their ability to accept failure, the desire they have to serve, and their willingness to share recognition and honor with others.¹⁵

Collins says that personal humility in a leader demonstrates a compelling modesty that is never boastful and shuns public attention.¹⁶ It is the understanding of the leader that leadership is bigger than self, and his/her service is just as valuable as the next person’s in the success of the company. Collins explains that humility in a leader manifests itself in an unwavering focus on people and the vision/direction of the organization.¹⁷ When the leader focuses and places attention on the organization, the followers, and gives credit to where credit is due, loyalty and a desire for success is generated. To understand humility as a foundational virtue in Christian leadership development, one must look to the scriptures to fully understand its use.

¹³ Bradley P. Owens, Wade C. Rowatt, and Alen L. Wilkins, *Exploring the relevance and implications of hyumility in organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 260.

¹⁴ Dusya Vera and Antonio Rodriguez-Lopez, "Strategic virtues: Humility as a source of competitive advantage," *Organizational Dynamics* 33 (2004).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James C Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2001).

¹⁷ Ibid.

Jacob was the leader God had chosen to be the head of His twelve tribe and give the Promised Land to. However, Jacob found himself prideful providing for himself. This pride would be the cause of his deceit and theft of his brother's birthright. Because of this deceitful act Jacob was sent to his father-in-law's land to escape his brother's wrath. In Genesis 31, God used Jacob's time with Laban to give Jacob a dose of his own medicine. Laban has experienced great blessing due to the blessing on Jacob's life and he was going to do whatever it took to keep Jacob around. Laban used Jacob as Jacob used Esau for gain.¹⁸ Jacob complained to the Lord ten times as seen in Genesis 31:7,14 about Laban's unfair business practices. By the end of the Jacob-Laban story, Jacob looked to God for deliverance from his hostilities (Genesis 31:16,42,53). Wiersbe identifies this account as God creating desperation in Jacob to be set free from Laban's deceitfulness and selfishness.¹⁹ This desperation is what led him to humble himself to God and ask for deliverance. It is in this humility we see Jacob confront his father-in-law and declare that it was because of God, not Laban that he had been blessed and increase had come (Genesis 31:42). Jacob became humble and identified that it was God who blessed, and because of this, God then delivered him from Laban.²⁰ God used this time for Jacob to "taste his own medicine" of self-reliance and move him to humbly identify that God is the one in control. This humility would be the foundation on which Jacob would learn the many lessons thereafter. To better understand God's design for leadership development

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26 (Vol. 1B)* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005).

¹⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be authentic* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Pub, 1997).

²⁰ Ibid.

and the foundational role humility plays for Christian leaders, one must look to Christ's example and then to its application within the early church.

Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11

Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation is the exploration of a text in a, "broad yet systematic manner."²¹ Furthermore, "Socio-Rhetorical criticism is an approach to literature that focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the text and in the world in which we live."²² It is looking at a text with the understanding that there are many layers, or textures, in which to view it from to fully understand what is being said, why its being said, all while understanding the cultural differences, and then applying it to today. To successfully understand what is being said in Philippians 2: 5-11, one must apply a socio-rhetorical analysis of the sacred texture due to the need to understand the connection of humanity to divinity.²³ In order to grasp the connection of this passage to leadership development, a scriptural and historical analysis will be made. Paul's letter to the Philippian church uses a hymn that calls for humans to model the divine in life and leadership due to its call to model Christ.

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians while a prisoner of Rome, around 60 to 63 B.C.²⁴ This means that Paul wrote this letter during the reign of Nero. In Roman society, the habit of emperor worship would have been known by both Paul and the Church in

²¹ Vernon K Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1996), 132.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hestor Bullock, *Study Helps to the Understanding of the Bible* (New York, NY: Williams Collins Sons & Co, 1952).

Philippi.²⁵ Furthermore, Paul would have been aware of the frustration held for Nero due to the liberties and surpluses during his reign, not to mention the persecution practiced against Christian during that time.²⁶ Paul knew that the culture that was set by the emperor was prevalent and practiced by the Philippians. What Paul was attempting was to limit its influence within the church. Because of this understanding, it would make sense that Paul would use the appealing message of this hymn to communicate the development that he had desired for this church and its leaders.

The words in Philippians 2:6, “Though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,” were to remind the Philippians that even though Jesus was God, He did not come in the form of an emperor, nor did he desire it.²⁷ This reminder was used to develop the church and its leadership. This development would have to take place due to the culture of the time creeping in on the church and the leadership. Furthermore, in 2:7 we see Jesus “emptying himself” and, “taking on the form of a servant.” Gray points to this as being completely opposite of the claims of Nero that he was a god.²⁸ Jesus, being one who could confidently and rightfully make the claim that He was God takes the servant role, while Roman emperors used their privilege to elevate themselves at the expense of others. In 2:8 the church would come to understand that Christ, “humbled himself and become obedient unto death, even death on

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ David R. Gray, "Christological hymn: The leadership paradox of philippians 2:5- 11," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 2, no. 1 (2008).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

a cross.” Paul was communicating to the church the level in which Christ took on humility. The cross was a death typically reserved for slaves and criminals.²⁹ In these short verses Paul would begin to develop the church by contrasting the culture of leadership being developed by Nero with the culture of leadership demonstrated in Christ. Paul was urging the church in Philippi to reject the prideful self-exultation seen in the emperor and become a model of self-emptying and humility as seen in Christ.³⁰

In Philippians 2:9-11, Gray points to the fact that Paul was using this section of the hymn to reconfigure the political and social order.³¹ First, Christ is exalted by God in recognition of His faithful service. Because of this, God, “bestows upon him the name that is above every name.” The significance of this verse is that during this time in Rome, emperors would have their names engraved on statues and idols so that they would receive worship.³² Again Paul is contrasting the leadership of Christ with the leadership of Rome. Paul was using this section of scripture to develop the church and its leaders to faithfully serve and to not seek exaltation and promotion. It would also help the church to understand that it is God who exults and that it is not a self-sought outcome. Finally, in 2:10,11 Paul communicates to the church that Christ is greater than any earthly rule and is due a greater amount of respect. The point that is being made through the phrase, “every knee will bow” is that during this time in Rome, bowing was not a valued practice. In fact, it was such a disgraceful act that when Caligula’s effort to make it a

²⁹ Bullock, Understanding the Bible.

³⁰ Gray, Christological Hymn.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bullock, Understanding the Bible.

practice of emperor worship, people rejected and revolted against it³³. However, Paul was saying that the posture of humility toward Christ, and the honor due Him, will bring about this level of honor whether willing or forceful.

Through this hymn, Paul was communicating to this young church in Philippi to not allow the dissention and disunity of pride and self-exaltation that was so prevalent in the culture to continue in the church. Paul was desiring to develop this church and its leaders to be counter to the culture but able to function in it. The purpose for teaching this church to mimic Christ's humility was so that they would be in a place of receiving for future development and lessons.

For the Church and leadership development today, three points can be captured and applied for creating this foundation of humility that is seen in Christ. First, Jesus didn't selfishly cling to the outer expression of His divinity. Instead, He took the form of a servant. A humble leader doesn't flaunt his or her position of power. Instead, he or she identifies with the weakest member of the team. Humility in leadership allows the leader to not lord over or think too highly of themselves, which then opens the leader up to provide the development God has for His people in a safe and teachable way. Secondly, Jesus demonstrated humility through obedience to God the Father. A humble leader doesn't impose his or her will on God, but submits to God's commands. A leader's submission to God allows the leader to be free from self-reliance and opens the leader up to identify what God is doing in their life so that the lesson will not be missed. This in turn allows the leader to teach from a place of knowing and understanding and ultimately provides an environment that embraces humility. Lastly, Jesus waited for His Father to

³³ Gray, Christological Hymn.

lift Him up. A humble leader doesn't grab for power or position. He/she patiently waits for God to increase his or her influence. This speaks to the leader's ability to trust God for the future. Trust is crucial to the leader's ability to identify and cooperate with God. It creates the trust in the leader to be open and authentic during the development process knowing it is God, not man that exalts in His proper time. For the one being developed, being able to identify the leader's trust in God and His leading will generate the trust needed to then allow the leader access to the deeper areas of the follower for development.

Discussion

Now armed with an understanding of leadership development, humility's place at its foundation, and examining the scriptures to identify God's design in its use, these applications in ethics and leadership will help to give a more thorough understanding. This section will discuss humility's place in leadership development within the context of ethics, Authentic Leadership, and Servant Leadership in hopes to provide a clearer understanding through application.

Ethics

Ethics is the "process of determining right from wrong."³⁴ Rae continues by saying that ethics is the basis on which you make moral decisions.³⁵ In essence, ethics is the study and practice of what is good, what is moral, and the application of these in decision making. Lombardo and Richter identify that most of today's societal problems

³⁴ Scott B Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 2009), 15.

³⁵ Ibid.

such as greed, discrimination, human suppression, selfishness, thoughtlessness, and the abuse of power over others, stems from the lack of understanding ethics and the lack of ethical virtues.³⁶

Both secular and Christian worldviews agree that ethical living and decision making comes from a solid foundation of virtues. Monahan examined several leaders from both secular and faith based organizations to identify the virtues that were in common. Of the virtues identified, honesty, character, patience, and humility were shared across the board.³⁷ For these virtues to be learned and developed in the leader, purposeful leadership development must take place. As examined earlier, humility sets the environment for this development. When the leader approached ethical situations with a focus on others and something greater than self, the potential to avoid selfish and poisonous decisions are minimalized. These ethical decisions made through the aforementioned process will then aid leadership development across the organization and an overall ethical increase will be seen.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is a current leadership theory gaining ground by organizations due to its high value on morals and virtues in the leader. It is seen in leaders who, “are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others values/moral perspective, knowledge, and straight; aware of the context in which they operate; and are confident, hopeful,

³⁶ Thomas Lombardo and Jonathan Richter, *Evolving Future Consciousness through the Pursuit of Virtue* (MA: World Future Society. Howard (Ed.), 2004).

³⁷ Monahan, Leadership Virtues.

optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character.”³⁸ Authentic leadership is highly focused on the leader becoming and leading out of being. This style of leadership requires a high level of self-awareness, self-identity, self-efficacy, and self-development, in the leader to achieve the desired leadership outcome. Authentic leaders know who they are, what they are capable of, where they need help, and seek development to improve in these areas.

For the Authentic leader, leadership development with a foundation in humility is crucial in their continued development to a better self. Humility requires that the Authentic leader come to a point in their understanding of self to have to be honest with who they are, regardless of if it is who they want to be. This proper perspective on their identity then allows the leader to enter development with an open and receiving posture. This posture of receiving allows the authentic leader to learn from, and apply the proper changes in order to improve self. This example of self-regulation and development by the leader will in turn create the culture of leadership development throughout the entire organization. Humility’s role is crucial in the Authentic leader’s success.

Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership is one of the newer leadership theory’s being developed today. The thought behind servant leadership is that the leader is one who seeks to serve

³⁸ Bruce J. Avolio and William L. Gardner, "Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2005).

first, and that this service is a natural part of who the leader is.³⁹ Furthermore, Patterson identifies that servant leadership is about focus, the focus of the leader on the follower and their development and wellbeing.⁴⁰ Patterson continues by saying that servant leadership is a leadership theory that is based around seven virtues that the leader must develop and deploy toward the follower.⁴¹ These virtues include, agapao love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service.

The development and deployment of these virtues speak directly to leadership development. In fact, the essence of this leadership theory is the development of the follower, by the leader, to become the best that they can be. In turn the follower's loyalty, ability, and effort will increase for the benefit of the organization. Servant Leadership embodies leadership development as its foundational practice. Furthermore, for the focus of the leader to be on the service and development of the follower, the leader must develop and function in a high level of humility. This humility is the virtue that allows the leader to shift focus off of selfish advancement and gain and understand that there is something grater at stake, that is, the human element of the organization. Thus, humility's role as the foundation of leadership development is crucial for the servant leader to understand as he/she looks to increase their leadership.

Conclusion

³⁹ Robert K Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

⁴⁰ Kathleen Patterson, "Servant leadership: A theoretical model," *Servant leadership research roundtable*, 2003.

⁴¹ Ibid.

By defining leadership development and examining humility's place at its foundation as seen in Philippians 2, one can understand its value in the organization facing change. Furthermore, exploring this within the context of ethics, authentic leadership, and servant leadership, has provided an understanding of its practice and value to leadership. Leaders who are motivated by a Christ shaped humility have a greater ability to provide organizations and churches with the leadership development to weather the storm of change.

For the future, a greater understanding of the development of humility would be beneficial to the leader. This understanding would help in the development of humility at the foundation of the leader. Furthermore, an examination as to the proper developmental level of the individual for the development of humility may be needed in order to avoid any damage to the development of self-efficacy.

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