

REVIEW ARTICLE

LEADING WITH MEANING: USING COVENANTAL LEADERSHIP TO BUILD A BETTER ORGANIZATION

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*Leading with Meaning:
Using Covenantal Leadership to Build a Better Organization*

Moses Pava

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Moses Pava's *Leading with Meaning: Using Covenantal Leadership to Build a Better Organization* offers a distinctly Judaic viewpoint of leadership that focuses on the sacred nature of individuals and the covenantal duties of organizations. The key to the "leadership covenant" is to "foster human growth, development, and the satisfaction of legitimate human needs" within the framework of the organization (2). Pava defines the foundation of leadership as one's explicit theory of what it means to be a human being. He observes that the values that we embrace and "our theory of being human is inextricably related to how we construct organizations" (18–19).

Covenant and Community

Covenantal leadership, the heart of Pava's philosophy, reflects the Old Testament theme of a shared community. Implicit in covenantal leadership is the concept that lives are interconnected and that one's responsibilities extend to a larger society and contain an array of moral responsibilities. Pava emphasizes that covenants are

- open-ended and emphasize mutual responsibility, but are general rather than specific;
- long-term in nature, often expected to continue indefinitely;
- respectful of human integrity, and intended to ensure the identity, uniqueness, and personhood of the participants.

The intent of a covenantal relationship is to provide people with free agency within a living community where duties to others are acknowledged yet not always clearly articulated.

Pava views covenants as offering individuals many paths, a key theme of his discussion of leadership. The metaphor of many paths suggests that

- 1) Leaders pursue a journey that may have resting places but that leaders rarely arrive.
- 2) There may be multiple leaders, and all who covenant in accordance with correct principles may be covenantal leaders.
- 3) Many paths leading to a desired location suggests a pluralistic set of possibilities with more than one acceptable option.
- 4) Paths may intersect at many points with the opportunity to share perspectives with others.
- 5) The flexibility of many paths suggests that covenantal leaders do not need to be imprisoned by prior decisions.

This multiple path approach to leadership acknowledges the complexity of leadership and the obligation of the leader to pursue transforming change that pursues the collective interests of leaders and followers.

Applying Moral Imagination

The antithesis of covenantal leadership is "idolatry"—the "self-induced illusion of certainty in the face of uncertainty" (34). Arrogance about what one presumes to know results in leaders redefining the covenantal relationship and establishing their own judgments as a rule of law. Specific rules and policies cannot apply to every situation and leaders must ultimately be able to interpret the intent of the law in situations that may be complex and fraught with moral dilemmas. Ultimately, the ability to apply moral principles to new situations while demonstrating a balanced commitment to all stakeholders is the essence of great moral leadership. Pava suggests that this ability to resolve conflicted moral situations while clarifying to others the lessons that come from resolving moral dilemmas integrates the roles of leader as both servant and teacher. The great leader articulates the application of principles as the community adapts to the demands of change.

Organizations must ultimately rely upon "moral imagination"—the ability to follow the fundamental assumptions about human values that undergird the covenantal relationships of people working together. Pava suggests that ethical rules that are independent of this value-based human imagination are of questionable value in solving the moral dilemmas of leadership. He observes: "To suggest that moral imagination begins precisely where rules end is not to denigrate rules, but to emphasize that the usefulness of rules is limited" (73–74). Moral leadership must be based upon a commitment to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of the community and the pursuit of

outcomes that satisfy the higher level needs that optimize the value of human interchange at more than the economic level (cf. Kouzes and Posner 2003).

The clash of ideas over ethical questions becomes an opportunity to enlarge the community and to examine moral choices. Diversity of opinion can become a competitive advantage, yet keeping organizations from “exploding under the weight of a cacophony of multiple interests, multiple goals, and different cultural assumptions” is not easy (101). Moral imagination includes the ability to “seek out truth everywhere and encourage all members to do so”—rather than imposing a top-down solution to decision-making (101). Covenantal leadership is not about getting others to follow against their desires. It is about helping everyone in the organization contribute toward achieving organizational goals, contributing their creativity, and creating a space big enough for everyone to thrive and grow.

Modeling the Way

The heart of the covenantal model is the belief that organizations can and should foster the growth and development of their members. Great leaders are the role models of that growth. Pava explains that in the process of producing the goods and services of the organization, great leaders lead the way in the attempt to “explore values, to examine beliefs, to learn new skills, to relate to others, to be with others, and to enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human among other human beings”—the process by which leaders model the search for meaning in organizations (98).

The inevitable conflicts that occur within the context of that growth require the ability to act with integrity. Moral development in a time of change requires “ethical improvisation” that must be principle-based and that returns constantly to the fundamental valuing of individuals. The danger of ethical improvisation is the inability of growing organizations to respond to individual situations when decisions are made based upon expediency rather than moral ideals (cf. Selznick 1992). Community, Pava acknowledges, is “hardly the natural state of human beings” but is the “culmination of rational beings struggling and reasoning together in the face of life’s difficulties” (127). The great moral leader honors the responsibility to learn continually and to share what is learned so that the community may continue to grow.

The value of the covenantal model of leadership is its focus on the value of the individual as the foundation of the moral community. Pava suggests that covenantal leadership uses “yesterday’s language to solve tomorrow’s problems” (154).

Placing Pava’s Leadership Model

Pava’s model of the covenantal leader aligns Pava within the charismatic leadership school. The Greek word for charisma means “divinely inspired gift” (Lussier and Achua 2004: 340), and Pava’s framing of the covenantal leader as contextually responsive and extraordinarily qualified morally fits easily within the charismatic school (Conger and Kanungo 1987, 1998; Willner 1984). Conger and Kanungo

(1987) suggest five behavioral variables of charismatic leadership that seem to apply to Pava's covenantal leader:

- 1) A gap between the present situation and the vision advocated.
- 2) The articulation of a vision or direction and role modeling of the leader.
- 3) The use of unusual or unconventional strategies or paths.
- 4) An insightful and realistic perception of resources and constraints to achieve change.
- 5) The ability to inspire trust in the leader and the vision.

Charismatic leadership also focuses on the vital importance of meaningfulness or purpose in life (Lussier and Achua 2004: 342). Korotkov (1998: 52) defined personal meaning as "the degree to which people's lives make emotional sense and that the demands confronted by them are perceived as being worthy of energy and commitment." It is this search for meaning—this *being* rather than *having*—that Pava emphasizes as the key role of leaders.

Pava's leadership model also fits within the framework of transformational leadership, to the degree that the transformational leader seeks to change the status quo by articulating a compelling vision of new possibilities (Lussier and Achua 2004: 356). Both charismatic and transformational leaders rely on the trust, admiration and respect of followers and seek to obtain organizational citizenship buy-in and commitment. Just as Pava's covenantal leader creates new moral models for leading change, the transformational leader seeks to transform or change the basic values, beliefs or followers so that they are willing to elevate their performance (Campbell 2000).

There are also clear parallels between the covenantal model of leadership and "virtue ethics" models (cf. Solomon 1992; Cameron 2003). Solomon creates a framework of six contemporary virtues for ethics in business: Community, Excellence, Role Identity, Holism, Integrity, and Judgment (Solomon, 1992). Solomon's six virtues provide a foundation that is conceptually consistent with the factors of the covenantal relationship defined by both Selznick (1992) and Pava. Other scholars, (Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn 2003) suggest that this virtuous approach to organizational governance has not only an inherent connection with the interdependent duties of a community but has strong applicability to the modern business organization. The heart of the covenantal approach is its dependence upon values—to provide for "the interpretation of life's meanings in order to help foster human growth, development, and the satisfaction of legitimate human needs" (Pava 2003: 2).

Pava's analysis can also be usefully paired with Collins's (2001) concept of Level 5 Leadership, the combination of humility and fearlessness that Collins noted as the leadership style of the CEOs in fifteen outstanding corporations that he studied extensively. Collins (2001: 21) noted that "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but *their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, no themselves*" (italics in the original). The covenantal leader's perspective also puts the organization over self-interest, a

concept that Block (1996) identified as the fundamental quality of “stewardship” in his leadership model. Although Pava sought to distinguish his covenantal leader from the “servant leader” model of Depree (1989) and Greenleaf (1977), both Depree and Greenleaf incorporate the leader as inspired teacher and role model.

The Practicality of Pava's Model

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the covenantal model is that organizational leaders who focus on instrumental outcomes and efficiency-based models of management may infer that the normative nature of covenantal leadership is too “touchy-feely” for their personal styles. The religious framework that accompanies Pava's descriptions and examples may also be an uncomfortable value set for companies that do not operate within a Judeo-Christian context.

Traditional management thinking is critical of approaches that do not pursue bottom line results. Yet corporations are increasingly recognizing that their obligations are not one-dimensional, prompting McCoy to conclude that the paramount task of leadership in organizations is the management of instrumental organizational objectives and normative values (McCoy 1983). As Hosmer (1996) has suggested, the managerial dilemma of governance lies in the conflict between economic and social performance. Hosmer argues that we must extend the stewardship responsibility of management to long-term issues and to all stakeholders because the moral problems of management have 1) extended consequences, 2) multiple alternatives, 3) mixed outcomes, 4) uncertain consequences, and 5) personal implications for the parties involved (Hosmer 1996: 10–11). Pava's covenantal model is not, therefore, far removed from management thinking that would have us look beyond the short-term bottom line.

A growing body of literature (cf. Collins and Porras 1994; Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn 2003; Pfeffer 1998; Collins 2001) has found that organizations that seek to develop a defining set of core values that encompass treating employees as valued participants in the management process can also earn superior profits. But despite such findings, a covenantal approach to organizational leadership will seem threatening to many corporate leaders, especially those who possess “a control-focused paradigm for corporate governance that tends to treat employees either paternalistically or with little regard for their long-term welfare” (Caldwell and Karri, In Press: 24). Given the real economic and psychological benefits associated with treating employees as valued members of a team, one can only hope that the work being done by Pava and others to move us away from this control-focused paradigm will begin to take hold during the coming decade.

Although Pava's leadership model may well find itself criticized as “too conceptual” and “too idealistic,” the servant leader (Depree 1989) and stewardship (Block 1996) models—as well as Covey's (1990) “principle-centered leadership” model—have been tarred by a similar broad brush of accusation and have nonetheless become respected for their insights about leadership and organizations. A retrospective view of recent business history confirms that the lack of a value-based leadership model was at the

core of the demise of Enron, Worldcom, and other highly publicized recent business debacles (Caldwell and Clapham 2003).

As Pava notes, although the covenantal leadership model is not new, its application to modern business is worth closely examining. A growing body of literature advocates that the covenantal model can increase employee commitment and long-term organizational wealth (Barnett and Schubert 2002; Caldwell, Bischoff, and Karri, 2002; Caldwell and Karri, In Press). In context with the failure of today's leaders to make ethical choices that build organizational trust, Pava's covenantal model offers useful and practical lessons that merit thoughtful assessment.

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