

## **Relational Leadership**

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In the 1980's whilst working for the software house Logica, I recall being told by an instructor on a leadership training course that it was important to keep a distance from staff and not to develop friendships as this could impact our effectiveness! Since the 1990's the term Relational Leadership has emerged in the management sciences literature as a new theory for leadership. The idea of relational leadership goes beyond leaders simply liking people and thriving on relationships! There are many different meanings being attributed to Relational Leadership with some ideas overlapping and terms being interchangeable whilst others differing significantly in their orientation. Traditional ideas of Relational Leadership have focused on the leader and have been predicated on objective truth and a separation of mind and nature. Such ideas have been concerned with the importance of leader-follower relationships and behaviour styles that are supportive, considerate or develop trusting relationships.

### **Behaviour or process?**

More recently Relational Leadership ideas have developed in a different direction conceptualizing leadership not so much as the behaviour traits of leaders but as the outcome of a social process that recognises leadership as what emerges from that process. Behind this is the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and distributed rather than simply "mind stuff".<sup>1</sup> Relational leadership thus moves away from the concept that leadership resides in an individual and towards the notion that it revolves around relationships. There can be no leadership if there is just one person.<sup>2</sup>

Writing from a Christian worldview perspective, Schluter and Lee in their book "The Relational Manager" suggest that relationships are the key to effective leadership and effective organisations.<sup>3</sup> Their conceptualization of Relational Leadership is more in terms of the importance of the quality of relationships surrounding an organization whether with staff, shareholders, suppliers, customers and even wider society.

Where are the ideas of Relational Leadership located in a Christian Worldview and what do they have to contribute to the thinking and praxis of leadership? In order to answer these questions we need to take a closer look at the ideas behind Relational Leadership models and theories.

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<sup>1</sup> Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social process of leadership and organization, Mary Uhl-Bien, *The Leadership Quarterly* 17:6, December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Pearce, Conger and Locke, 2007 cited in Relational leadership as collective leadership: Mapping the territory, Erica Gabrielle Foldy & Sonia Ospina, in *Relational Leadership: New Developments in Theory and Practice Symposium*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Relational Manager*, Michael Schluter and David John Lee, Lion Hudson, 2009.

### **A process view**

One view of Relational Leadership proposes four key elements of a process, illustrated in figure 1. Described briefly, relational leadership as this model sees it involves empowering workers to contribute in a purposeful way to set and achieve the organizations goals in a process that is both inclusive, transparent and ethical. The approach recognizes that workers may have more detailed knowledge than the leader but the leader provides coaching and higher level input in the process as the group work towards a common goal. In this view, the leader is just one voice amongst many and the focus is not on what leaders do but on the processes that promote the values and interests of the social group that is the organisation. Leadership is the process by which social order and change is constructed and ultimately reality is not located in the individual but is socially constructed. One might say that the traditional view of Relational Leadership aligns with Modernism whereas current Relational Leadership perspectives are Postmodern.<sup>4</sup>

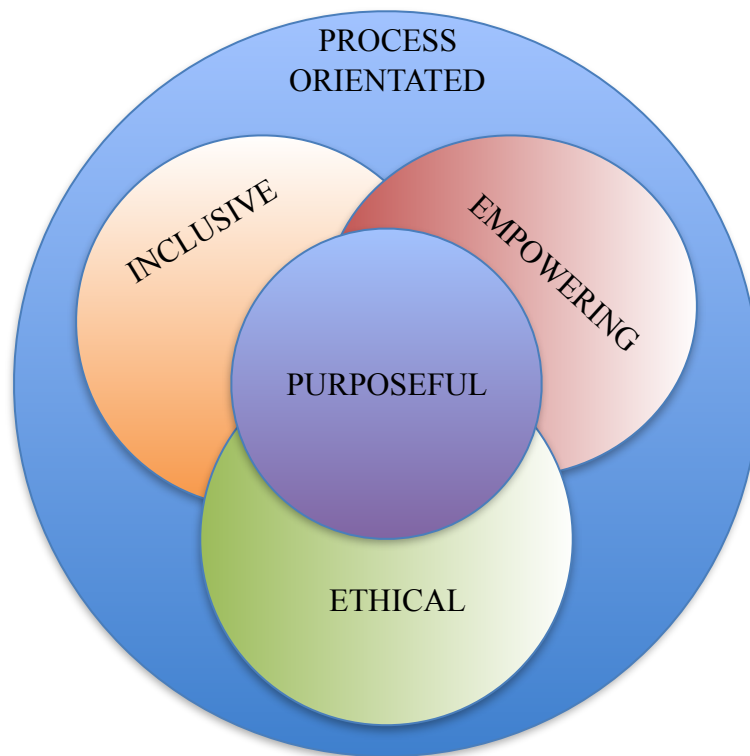


Figure 1: Elements in Relational Leadership

After Komives, Lucas, and McMahon. Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference, "The Relational Leadership Model." 2007

### **Relational proximity**

Schluter and Lees work is more concerned with the praxis of leading or managing relationally and is more traditional in that it's focus is on what leaders or managers do (or should do) and sees the quality and strength of relationships as something that can

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<sup>4</sup> Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social process of leadership and organization, Mary Uhl-Bien, The Leadership Quarterly 17:6, December 2006, p 666.

be measured. Their emphasis on the quality of relationships within and outside an organization does perhaps capture something of the inter-relatedness that is the hallmark of current process orientated Relational Leadership thinking. Some of the five qualities of what they call “relational proximity”, encounter, storyline, knowledge, fairness and alignment, mirror some of the dimensions of the Relational Leadership model such as inclusiveness and shared purpose with an ethical underpinning of relationships.

### **Seeing only in part**

One of the challenges in evaluating leadership theories is that they either analyse leaders and organisations to discover what makes an effective leader or organization and then proscribe a behaviour or set of behaviours that are seen to produce these desirable outcomes, or they theorise about what is more desirable as a leadership paradigm over another. These desirable outcomes in a business or organizational context are multifaceted but usually include success as measured by things like profitability, innovation, integrity and staff satisfaction. Leadership theories are often only partial views of what is in reality a complex activity and by examining leaders we are simply observing how they act and the impact they have on others and the organization. It has long been observed that effective organisations can be led by leaders with very different approaches.

### **Thinking biblically**

From a Christian Worldview perspective thinking about leadership works somewhat the other way around. Our behaviour either as a leader is proscribed by being “in Christ” and by our being transformed daily into His likeness regardless of the outcomes. Viewed from this perspective our leadership approach is not optional, there is a way in which we are to lead and relate according to God’s own heart and this then produces an outcome that is glorifying to God, whether or not the organization meets with material success. In addition to this a Christian Worldview is realistic about the real world of leadership and relationships and their messiness because we all live in a fallen world distorted by sinful actions and selfishness. One of the common characteristics of the many leadership models and theories that have emerged over the last 100 years is that, not surprisingly, they often offer a partial reflection of Judeo Christian values and biblical truth but without God. These models miss out other balancing truths and never include essential elements such as our fallen state that are foundational to both understanding the reality of leadership in the real world and to leading after God’s own heart.

### **Theories without God**

As we slip further and further from the Judeo-Christian foundations of Western society it is interesting to note that more modern theories and models of leadership look for support and justification in other areas such as virtue ethics, social justice or positive psychology. There is often an emphasis on leadership being ethical, as shown the Relational Leadership model, yet without any foundation for defining what is right or wrong and this is subject to the reconstruction of atheist philosophy that would have society determine what works for the majority.

The basis for current Virtue Ethics, seen by some as part of the Positive Psychology movement, is Aristotle's ideas of character and virtue and is now a collection of Judeo-Christian virtues and ideas from other religions and traditions and forms the basis for current developments in Character Education for schools in both the US and UK.<sup>5</sup>

The foundation of positive psychology is the notion that we choose to do things that we think will make us feel good and that we can reprogram our minds to make such choices, even for the common good or because we love someone. Making the right choices will make us happy.

Gable & Haidt's definition of Positive Psychology illustrates why it is regarded as having a strong contribution to Relational Leadership.

“Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions.”<sup>6</sup>

A fundamental problem for Christians with Positive Psychology and the associated developments of Virtue Ethics and Character Education is that Positive Psychology does not recognize evil.<sup>7</sup> This of course flies in the face of biblical truth. As Christians we also act and make choices according to God's revealed will and ethics, not just to make us happy.

### **Shaped by suffering**

From a biblical perspective we can also see that many Godly leaders are shaped by the suffering that God leads them through and all will testify to the way in which that suffering shaped their relationship with God, others and their leadership.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, **3** for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. **4** And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2-4

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<sup>5</sup> <https://about.futurelearn.com/blog/character-education/>  
<http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk>  
<http://www.goodcharacter.com>

<sup>6</sup> Gable, S. L.; & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology? *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 103-10. Cited on p 213 in Possibilities for a Christian Positive Psychology, Charles Hackney, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 2007, Vol 35, No. 3 211-221.

<sup>7</sup> Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.

So how are we to view the contribution made to leadership by the Relational model? Terms such as ethical, empowering and purposeful should resonate with a Christian worldview of leadership as these traits are part of the hallmark of biblically based leadership yet we need an authentically Christian interpretation of these elements.

### **Christian happiness**

When we think about “Relational Leadership”, viewed from God’s perspective we might consider that His concern ultimately is with the quality of both our vertical and horizontal relationships rather than just the material outcomes of what we do as an organization. These may or may not flourish according to His sovereign purpose but there ought to be a positive impact on those we lead. For ourselves, our motivation as leaders is to please God and serve Him and this gives us contentment and makes us “blessed” or happy. We accept His sovereign will for us, whatever the temporal outcomes.

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” Philippians 4:12

### **Copy the Master**

The example of Jesus’ leadership recorded nearly 2000 years ago is not one of an authoritative, command-control style of leadership that Relational Leadership models react against, but one where he spends significant time interacting with his followers, teaching mentoring and answering questions. This is not to say that Jesus does not have authority, clearly he does but this authority derives from his being the Son of God and equal with the Father. Any authority that a church leader has derives from the word of God rather than their position.

From a biblical perspective, relationships are fundamental and part of what it means to lead is to have meaningful relationships with those that we lead, they are not optional. This goes beyond the ethos of our relationships with others that are proscribed in Timothy and Titus where we are told not to be overbearing, quick tempered or quarrelsome and to be gentle. Our relationships as leaders are also not simply a means to an end but are born out of a love for people and a desire to enable them also to serve and flourish.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Luke 10:27

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Galatians 6:10

The leadership of Jesus gives us a deeper insight into how we lead relationally. Jesus as the Son of God was able to command others to follow him yet his approach to

leading these followers was to build close relationships where he taught in small groups, challenged, mentored and answered their questions. Listening, explaining, enabling and equipping by communicating thus plays a key part of being relational.

### **Improving communication**

A challenge for Christian leaders and indeed any leader is that whilst our world has never been so connected and communication has never been so easy, the quality of our relationships is not always what it should be.

How much do we rely on email, chat or social media to communicate rather than on face to face direct contact where we are able to communicate beyond the written word detecting emotions and nuances in another's communication and allowing the relationship to develop beyond the topic on the agenda?

### **Deepening relationships**

Developing a relationship and getting to know more about someone takes time yet surveys tend to show that millennials have a much greater tendency to job hop than older employees.<sup>8</sup> This can make it difficult to develop a relationship but perhaps we should see this as an opportunity rather than a threat. A right emphasis on being relational could actually keep millennials for longer. According to the Wall Street Journal, "companies like International Business Machines Corp. , Coca-Cola Co. and Visa Inc. have recently relaxed office dress codes and convened councils of millennial employees to weigh in on everything from marketing campaigns to workplace policies". One wonders if this behaviour was born more out of a desire to retain staff than a deliberate shift in leadership ideology towards Relational Leadership that gave rise to these initiatives!

Being more deeply relational may also require a shift of emphasis from the task orientated nature of Western management practice to allow time and provide the context for developing relationships, listening and drawing out ideas from others and discovering their knowledge base. This also assists in the discovery of the degree of alignment of others with the vision and goals of the organization and provides opportunities for realignment where there is divergence.

### **A changing world**

Leadership styles in the West are evolving in many organisations from a more command and control based approach to a flatter more collaborative engagement of workers as organizations seek to respond to the increasing complexity and change in society. I suspect that much of the current thinking about Relational Leadership, not only from the observation of leadership practice but also the theorizing about how to do it and new paradigms for thinking about it, has emerged from this shift away from command and control leadership.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2014 the median job tenure for workers aged 20 to 24 was shorter than 16 months. For those aged 25 to 34, it was three years.

## **Follow Jesus**

When viewed from a biblical perspective a command and control style of leadership is not actually one that is idealized by our Lord. Rather a biblical model of leadership emphasizes service with its attendant goal of caring for and empowering followers.

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:20-28

The ideas behind Relational Leadership are a useful reminder to us as Christians of the importance of relationship in leadership. But as is so often the case, a Christian Worldview of leadership pre-empts many of the discoveries and developments in secular thinking but also gives us a more balanced and rounded basis on which to lead. In the famous words of John Stott about double listening in regard to preaching, “we need to listen to the world and to the word” and in respect of leadership rather than preaching, have the confidence that the bible gives us a comprehensive and solid basis for leadership that avoids us latching onto the latest fads and fancies of the gurus and theorists.

## **Transformed by God not self**

What makes a good leader or an effective organization has many facets and there are dangers in following one trend or leadership fad. Some have demonstrated that good character produces superior business results,<sup>9</sup> others claim that measuring and improving “Relational Proximity”<sup>10</sup> can produce the goods, not only in business but in institutions as well as wider society. In his inspiring book “Return on Character” Fred Kiel demonstrates from his research how CEO’s with “virtuous character” improve organizational performance, yet for me the most disappointing part of the book is the section on becoming a virtuoso leader and developing a Return on Character organization. Put simply, he sets out six steps for personal change based on self examination and reprogramming of our brains to become the character or the “new you” that we want to be. Yet as one reviewer of the book put it, would a “self focused”, CEO want to change!

There is a dissonance between the philosophical underpinnings of some models of Relational Leadership and a Christian Worldview, particularly with respect to acknowledging evil and its influence in relationships and in motivation. It is vital that we maintain a biblically based and holistic view of leadership, one that embraces and is confident to declare the fundamental truth of our fallen nature and that our leading or following will always be potentially flawed. This provides the realism about what

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<sup>9</sup> Return on Character, Fred Kiel, Harvard Business Review Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> The Relational Manager, Michael Schluter and David John Lee, Lion Hudson, 2009.

can be achieved whether we lead in a Christian or largely non-Christian organization. It also provides the context in which we can strive with God's help towards improving our leadership and relationships, recognizing the flaws in ourselves and others that hold us back and contribute to dysfunction in an organization. Such recognition also provides the basis for lovingly seeking to encourage and transform those we lead. Ultimately, only the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit can provide the transformation that will enable any of these attempts to bear fruit and bring glory to God.