PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP: RESTORATION LEADERSHIP IN A VOLATILE,
UNCERTAIN, COMPLEX, AND AMBIGUOUS WORLD?

Hartwell T Paul Davis, Ed.S., MA

Oviedo, FL 32765

(407) 285-6644

pdavis@hartwelldavis.com

Abstract

Leadership studies continue to be among the major topics in academia, business, politics, and theology because it is necessary, complex, and applicable to all cultures, significant to the understanding of human and organizational behavior – and most of all because of the illusive Holy Grail – finding the perfect model of leadership. The perfect leader would be a super-hero capable of leading an organization into the future in a world that touts the need for adaptability, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability to meet the need of changing times? What if changing times means volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous? Prophetic leaders are in demand because they see the future and must act as revivalist and restorers of those things we did not want to lose because of changing times.

Prophetic Leadership: Restoration Leadership in A Volatile, Uncertain,
Complex, And Ambiguous World?

Leadership research continues to be a major interest for academia, business, politics, theologians, and as a multi-disciplinary subset of all humanities education. The fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history are research avenues of interest. The trend of leadership studies is an increased partnership between academia and the world of business and politics because of major environmental trends. Challenges facing future leaders mean that there are new questions about development requirements, human behavior in new settings, and whether leaders can be good enough to lead in a global society.

Petrie examines future trends in leadership development pointing out that what has been known about leadership does not answer all the questions considering the challenges now facing leaders.   Petrie writes "The last decade has seen many industries enter a period of increasingly rapid change. The most recent global recession, which began in December 2007, has contributed to an environment that many interviewees believe is fundamentally different from that of 10 years ago".[1] Using the army phrase V.U.C.A., Petrie describes the new environment in which leaders must work as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.[2]

What is the meaning for leaders? It can mean intense reactions to decisions that are made, new paradigms for risk management, different requirements for both technical hard skills and soft skills for leadership, and the suggestion of ambiguous means that questions of values and ethics may be changing. In fact, I posit evidence shows that to be the case with the increase of moral relativism, reduced spirituality, increased secularism, and heterogeneous cultures.

Petrie notes research criteria such as a large number of interacting elements, new information systems which include differences in communication and technology, and the inability to predict results because of new changes "make complex environments especially difficult to manage".[3] A telling criteria noted by researchers is "hindsight does not lead to foresight since the elements and conditions of the system can be in continual flux".[4]

---

[1] Petrie, Nick. "Future Trends in Leadership Development." *Center for Creative Leadership*, December, 2011 (2011): 36, p. 7
[2] Ibid. p.8
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

This last statement suggest that all the historical data, research, theories of management, and prior knowledge of human behavior may not predict leadership behaviors and models needed for this future complex environment. Petrie adds final thoughts that are telling in understanding trends in teaching leadership or in trying to deal with complexity. Petrie writes,

> Yesterday, I had lunch with a pair of New Zealand friends who are recent graduates from two prestigious Boston universities. While discussing how to start a new business, my first friend said that at his school, professors now tell them not to bother writing business plans, as you will never foresee all the important things which will happen once you begin. Instead they are taught to adopt the "drunken man stumble," in which you keep staggering forward in the general direction of your vision, without feeling the need to go anywhere in a straight line. "That's interesting," said my second friend. "At our school they call it the 'heat-seeking missile' approach. First you launch in the direction of some potential targets, then you flail around until you lock onto a good one and try to hit it.[5]

While this is a surprising revelation, and a bit of a shock if the approaches are indeed being taught, the inferences are clear. First the need for leadership studies should remain a high priority as a means of identifying problem areas as they develop. Making corrections and adjusting best practices is still a best value of research. Secondly the complexity and ambiguity may be impacting long held core principles of leadership and this does not bode well for the future.

The latter leads to the hypothesis of this paper: A world of turbulence is not new, nor is the issue of declining values, states of confusion, and absence of great leaders. While the scope of the problem is global and our view is now widespread, the conditions of V.U.C.A. have existed in the past. It was in such conditions that the style of leadership that we call *prophetic leadership* has always had the greatest impact. The difficulty for the prophetic style of leadership historically is that men must often stand alone, grounded in their convictions against an overwhelming majority of naysayers, protagonist, and even rebellious individuals that oppose the leadership vision. Instead of supporting change, prophetic leaders at times must acts in contradiction to change in order to hold to or restore values that should not be lost to the future.

---

[5] Ibid, p. 28

Visionary leadership

Leaders are characterized by those that have influence. There are differences in roles, levels, styles, and traits. Leadership is related to vision, concepts, power, and change. More importantly leadership is about relationship. Leaders only exist where there are followers and it is because of relationship that leaders operate and function dependent on leadership skills and leader characteristics that make, maintain, and retain the relationship. Followers are ultimately those that become a measuring stick for leadership. A person can lead a mob and it says something about the quality of leadership. A person can lead an underperforming organization, and that too says something about leadership. A person can lead a movement and that also says a great deal about leadership.

I posit that often misunderstood is that leader relationship does not require that the leader and follower be unified in direct leader-follower relationship which entails an organizational structure where the leader has a specific and direct role. Many leaders never touch their followers directly. Martin Luther King was a great leader of a nation of black Americans that he never met. While many knew him personally, most followers of Martin Luther King only knew his vision and that is what they followed.

Northouse writes, "Despite the multitude of ways in which leadership has been conceptualized, the following components can be identified as central to the phenomenon: (a) Leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs in groups, and (d) leadership involves common goals".[6] I point this out because in a discussion about prophetic leadership or when a leader stands alone, the issues of roles, decision making, and authority are going to be attacked, but the bigger problem is an attack on vision, values and culture that are core to leadership and to the identify of an organization or a movement. It is at that time that a visionary leader, the prophetic leader, must remember the great leaders who led on the strength of the vision. These include Marin Luther King, Ghandi, Jesus Christ, as well as others, who ultimately did not lead by physical presence but by a vision that was a reflection of the leader's character, traits, values, and skills.

---

[6] Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership Theory and Practice*. 5th Edition ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2010, p. 2.

What is a visionary leader? Burt Nanus writes, "To start with, we need to acknowledge that a vision is a mental model of a future state of a process, a group, or an organization".[7] Nanus contends that such visions are powerful and transforming which have special properties. "They are appropriate for the organization and for the times. They fit in terms of the organization's history, culture, and values, are consistent with the organization's present situation, and provide a realistic and informed assessment of what is attainable in the future".[8] A visionary leader is a person who uses such vision to influence others toward goals that are consistent with the vision.

Nanus further contends that such visions set standards of excellence and reflect high ideals, clarify purpose and direction, inspire enthusiasm and encourage commitment, are well articulated and easily understood, reflect the uniqueness of the organization [sic or the movement], and are ambitious.[9] We have spoken about the vision, and when the vision is articulated by a leader, the vision itself became the personification of the leader and this is what men follow as the connector between leader and follower.

The world is changing and it is because of such change that many great leaders are facing the challenge of seeing an erosion of the vision for their organization. In a Christian nation, many organizations including business, churches, and non-profits are feeling the pressures of political and cultural change. Leaders and organizations are now fighting against cultural pressures that threaten core values. It appears that many organizations simply change and some leaders choose to resign themselves quietly to accommodate such pressure, but others will take up the fight to hold to traditional values at great personal risk.

In other parts of the world, globalization, technology, and generational differences are stressing long-held traditional values. Such issues as gender, diversity, sexual orientation, and differing values are impacting the whole world. The Bible foretold the current state of V.U.C.A.; volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous as recorded in various passages. Daniel writes, "But you, Daniel, keep this prophecy a secret; seal up the book until the time of the end, when many will rush here and there, and knowledge will increase".[10] Luke writes "And there shall be

---

[7] Nanus, Burt. "Finding the Right Vision." Chap. Twenty-Four In *Business Leadership*, edited by Joan V. Gallos. 311-23. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 313
[8] Ibid. p. 315
[9] Ibid. p. 316
[10] Daniel 12:4, NLT.

signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity".[11]

In times like these many visionary leaders must take up the mantle of prophetic leadership which puts them in the company of great men who often felt alone. Notably are names such as Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist. Earmarks of prophetic leadership has been defined as charismatic, spiritually empowered, and purpose driven.

Leadership versus management

The important factor for our discussion is that leaders often manage, and managers may often lead, but leadership and management are not the same things. The two share so many characteristics they are often considered as being synonymous. It is important to clarify the distinction because we are talking about the leader and not the manager. Nelson states managements is defined as the "act, practice, or process of managing; an executive skill".[12] Nelson notes the U.S. Army field manual defines leadership as "influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization".[13] One of the subtle realities of V.U.C.A. is the greater risk for leaders as compared to managers. The reason is that leadership provides the vision and core values that define an organization separate and apart from processes. An attack on leadership is also an attack on the vision and values that are at the core of an organization or a movement.

Let me first give you a scenario of how they differ. David Green is the founder and CEO of Hobby Lobby, a nationwide arts and crafts retailer. In addition Green owns a subsidiary Christian book chain, Mardel. While the public may have never made a connection between the Christian faith of David Green and Hobby Lobby, it is likely assumed for the owner of a Christian bookstore. Never-the-less the culture, the organizational behavior, and the operational procedures for Hobby Lobby are based on the values of David Greene as a Christian. This includes providing employee health coverage that excludes providing coverage for abortion-inducing drugs.

---

[11] Luke 21:25
[12] Nelson, Thomas S. "LEADERSHIP VS. MANAGEMENT: FINDING THE BALANCE." *Fire Engineering* 158, no. 11 (November 2005): 93-96. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed July 30, 2013), p. 93.
[13] Ibid.

The Affordable Care Act, also known as Obama-care, includes a requirement that employers provide without co-pay abortion-inducing drugs coverage in its health care insurance plan, a requirement that is inconsistent with David Greene's Christian faith. Green stated "By being required to make a choice between sacrificing our faith or paying millions of dollars in fines, we essentially must choose which poison pill to swallow".[14] Hobby Lobby on September 12, 2012 filed suit against the Obama administration challenging the law as an infringement on religious beliefs.

Northouse observes "leadership involves influence, as does management. Leadership entails working with people, which management entails as well. Leadership is concerned with effective goal accomplishment, and so is management".[15] Northouse also observes "Management was created as a way to reduce chaos in organizations, to make them run more effectively and efficiently".[16] There is certainly chaos for Hobby Lobby, but the primary function of management is planning, organizing, staffing, and controlling. The risk for Hobby Lobby is an assault on the vision, the culture, and the values of Hobby Lobby that are inextricably tied to the Christian faith of David Green, the leader. The risks for Hobby Lobby include the environmental public policies, but can also include backlash from pro-abortion customers or employers.

It is in the sphere of leadership where vision, culture, and values reside which impacts followers. In an organization it is often called *top management*. But leadership is not management and does not necessarily pertain to an organizational position or even an organizational structure. When it does, an attack on an organizational culture is also an attack on the leader. David Green's personal Christian faith became an issue for Hobby Lobby as an organization. The question becomes, how does a leader respond in the face of criticisms aimed at core principles and values that are shared between the leader and the organization? Does the leader sacrifice values to allow organizational change in order to be sustainable in a changing environment?

V.U.C.A. is nothing new

---

[14] McCABE, NEIL W. "Hobby Lobby Sues Over HHS Mandate." *Human Events* 68, no. 35 (September 17, 2012): 6. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed July 30, 2013).
[15] Northouse, ibid. p.9
[16] Ibid.

It is worth noting that politics, environmental influences by the changing culture, political correctness, issues of diversity, and generational differences are at work as contravening influences against the traditional visions, values, and cultures of many of the world's organizations. This is not only true in the Christian culture, but is true in any culture where tradition and deeply held family or religious values have existed. It comes as a part of the changes in the 21st century global society, which includes tensions between anything that is secular and religious. It comes because of decreasing standards of morality in many cultures where music pop culture, television pop culture, and western pop culture has made inroads that have displayed false messages related to wealth, pleasure, and unrestrained sexual immorality. The impact on business is because of the changes in attitudes in the younger generation toward moral values.

MacKewn and VanVuren did research on business undergraduates in American Universities concerning moral development. Moral relativism is a philosophical dynamic in decision making that holds there are no absolutes in judging right and wrong. For example cheating is wrong sometimes but justifiable at other times. MacKewn and VanVuren concluded in their research that moral relativism was higher among business undergraduates than non-business majors. They write,

> The first phase of this study presented evidence that, in theory, business students are more relativistic in terms of their ethics positioning when compared to non-business students. Comparison of the mean differences on the individual questions on the questionnaire indicated that on 6 of the 10 relativism questions business majors indicated a more relativistic outlook than the non-business majors. These results suggest that business students tend to reject universal moral principles.[17]

The conclusion by MacKewn and VanVuren states "The self-reported rate of cheating in business schools has been found to be higher than other majors and colleges, with 82% of

---

[17] Mackewn, A. S., & Vanvuren, K. W. (2007). A Study Of Moral Decision-Making: Business Majors Versus Non-Business Majors. *Global Journal Of Business Research (GJBR)*, *1*(1), p 139.

business majors reporting cheating during their undergraduate years."[18] This presents a distressing scenario for the future of business leaders, just as the earlier statements about what is being taught about business planning.

The dilemma of declining moral principles and increased moral relativism is nothing new but reflects a similar attitude held by many of the Israelites under the period of the Judges. Recorded in the Bible more than once is this statement concerning the overall moral condition of the nation of Israel. "In those days *there was* no king in Israel, *but* every man did *that which was* right in his own eyes."[19] Are organizations on the verge of an epidemic of confusion about moral and ethical behavior? Do leaders have to change their organizations to acquiesce to the dark side of societal change?   Many already have and I posit it is a statement about their leadership. Some may call it adaptation to change while others may suggest it is compromise and cowardice. The contrast is the prophetic leader that resists changes in culture and values. In modern leadership studies, to resist the new model labeled *corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability* would be anathema. Leaders must be concerned about environmental issues, leaders must be adaptable to stakeholder needs, but as in many areas of life, a line must be drawn in the sand when it comes to morals and ethics that are not defined by man but by higher principialities.

Prophetic leadership in a V.U.C.A. environment

Elijah lived in a time when Israel was in moral decay at the top under the reign of Ahab, a corrupt king, followed by Ahaziah and Jehoram who were as corrupt. A period of three years of drought and famine suggest hard economic times for the nation. The moral condition was a nation turned to idolatry where even true prophets of God had to hide themselves from persecution. How does Elijah's time reflect volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous? The historical period followed closely on the heels of the great division between the Northern and Southern kingdoms where Israel was established in the North and Judah in the South. The nation was divided very much like the condition now existing in the United States and other nations around the world. Jeroboam had set up a false religious system of idolatry where the nation was

---

[18] Ibid.
[19] Judges 17:6, 21:25, KJV.

in spiritual confusion. Political confusion resulted in several kingly assassinations. The people were in spiritual decline resulting in a charge by Elijah saying "I have been very jealous for Jehovah, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."[20] Forsaking the covenant and throwing down altars suggest a disregard for law and the former spiritual practices that had been a part of the national culture.

The personal toll on Elijah included conflicts between himself and the political establishment. The battle between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah is seen by Berlyn as "Elijah's battle for the soul of Israel".[21] Most telling is the feeling by Elijah that the odds are against him and he stands as a minority of one prophet that thinks one way against 850 other prophets leading in a different direction. The scene is one of competing visions where the majority is clamoring with great energy and enthusiasm to pull the nation away from the heritage of worship to one God. Elijah is attempting to restore confidence and faith in the true God. He is not seeking a new vision but trying to bring Israel back to the original vision of the one true God.

The primary characteristic of a prophet is one who has a vision and one who speaks a message in keeping with the vision. What is most interesting about their ministries is not that they were committed to prophesying something new, but they were acting as revivalist to return to the original vision of the one true God. Even the mission of John the Baptist was not preaching "new news" but "good news". The terms of the gospel are reconciliation, redemption, and restoration. Prophetic leadership is more about holding onto or returning to the original path rather than seeking a new and different direction. The whole of Bible prophecy is a forward look at what it takes to return to God.

One of the major dangers of a V.U.C.A. environment is the emphasis being placed on corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability. The mantra is organizations must keep up with the changing world. The problem is that the most likely occurrence for change related to the theme of corporate social responsibility happens based on the loud voice of the minority. There is the appearance that everyone must be appeased and at some point volatility

---

[20] I Kings 19:14, ASV

[21] Berlyn, Patricia J. 2012. "Elijah's battle for the soul of Israel." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 1: 52-62. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed August 1, 2013).

simply means an eternal state of flux. At some point someone must stand against change and act as prophets against such confusion.

What must leaders do in a V.U.C.A. environment?

Moral relativism is epidemic and it is dangerous and only one example of the changing nature of human thinking in modern society. It is predicated on rationalizing against uncertainty and is simply evidence of one's confusion in answering tough questions. There is no doubt that the Wisdom of Solomon would benefit every leader and the truth is some answers take a lot of thought. Was Abraham wrong to lie about his wife Sara saying that she was his sister? Is abortion acceptable in the case of rape? I question how often people take time to look for alternatives that can qualify as right things that can be done given circumstances. Abraham lied based on the assumption that it would be dangerous to say Sara was his wife? In the case of abortion, is adoption an alternative to be considered in the rape case?

In order to be a prophetic leader there are three principles of leadership that I posit are important both in resisting change and in restoration when it is needed. These are that prophetic leaders must (1) know and be true to their values, (2) resolve inner conflict, and (3) know you are not alone.

First, prophetic leaders must know their values and be true to their values. Luther cited Romans 1:19-20 stating, "By nature all men have the general knowledge that there is a God".[22] Most men also have a general knowledge of the law, but knowing something, believing something, and doing something are three different things. Prophetic leaders must operate in the realm of conviction that is more than knowing right from wrong. Prophetic leaders must be like the apostle Paul in three dimensions concerning values and ethics. Paul writes "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." [23] These three things are first *knowing*, then secondly *being persuaded*, and thirdly *being committed*. When Paul speaks of suffering it included ridicule, rejection, and opposition, and Paul gives an answer for how he withstood such environmental pressures.

---

[22] Zimany, Roland Daniel. 1975. "Enduring values of Luther's approach to knowing God." *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 1: 6-26. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed August 1, 2013).
[23] 2 Timothy 1:12

Secondly, prophetic leaders must resolve any inner conflict about the consequences of their decision. David Green of Hobby Lobby acknowledged the poison pill of decision making in his battle against Obamacare. On July 19th, a federal court granted Hobby Lobby a preliminary injunction against the Health and Human Services mandate to provide coverage for abortion-inducing drugs. His case is not over because the Obama administration has until October 1st to appeal the decision. Hobby Lobby must still seek relief at the Supreme Court. We do not know how David Green will resolve his conflict, but Paul faced a similar situation having to face courts of Rome. Paul writes, "And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered 'What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."[24]

Thirdly, prophetic leaders must know they are not alone. Elijah thought he was alone in standing against the prophets of Baal. God said, "Yet I will preserve 7,000 others in Israel who have never bowed down to Baal or kissed him!"[25] This third point is the most important to remember because a crucial step in resisting change is so often overlooked by leaders that fail to be effective. They try to do it alone instead of trying to collaborate and if need be recruit like-minded people to help them in battles against change.

Summary

In a literature review of prophetic leadership, it is difficult to find much in the way of research or even a clear definition of the concept. There is a mixture of religious thinking and narratives concerning Biblical prophets, which leaves me with a suggestion that a new look at leaders who resist change, stand for tradition and values, and that find themselves working at restoring traditions and the vision should draw attention in leadership studies. I posit there are issues with the suggestion that corporate social responsibility is all positive and acceptable. I suggest that in terms of globalization and cultural change many changes are good, positive, and needed, but will we still find areas of risk where a heterogeneous society can spell trouble?

---

[24] Acts 21:12-13, KJV
[25] I Kings 19:18, NLT

Consider the recent Muslim attacks in England that resulted in the beheading of a soldier. Consider the question of a dual legal standard between sharia law or English common law.

What are the dangers to Christian organizations under the new political environment that contravene long held Christian principles and what kind of leaders are needed for Christian organizations? How do other organizations in countries that have conservative faiths such as the Muslim or Jewish faith adapt to secular agendas and do they have the same problems we now face in America?

Considering some of the examples covered in this paper about trends in business undergraduates, the revelation about teaching concerning business plans, and knowing the attitudes of younger generations may differ significantly as we move forward into the 21st century, do we know if volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous will get better or worse? Do we know if the new crop of leaders will only add to the problem – or will they be able to solve the V.U.C.A. problem? I posit not all things new are going to be good – we need leaders who can restore some things that are lost in change.