

My Faith Informs How I Lead

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Our company recently completed a culture shift. Our team worked on organizational culture for two years with great success. Previously, people had been leaving the company in droves. Employees felt uninspired, morally deflated, and unappreciated. It wasn't easy to change the tide. A lot of intentional work went into getting people to stay and thrive. But I was about to learn an important lesson. Even the best of cultures may not know what religious freedom means in the workplace. Nor do they know how to have conversations around creating a space where the majority does not rule or adversely impact others and their values.

In explaining how I led the transformation, an external colleague asked me, "Did they follow you because you were the CEO"? Her question implied that our organizational change had been accomplished through top-down directives. I replied, "True leaders don't create followers. They create other leaders." Leaders create and step into a space of mutual respect and trust a culture that nurtures members living out their values in an atmosphere of accountability and freedom.

Religious Freedom

Recently an employee voiced a complaint. "I see a lot of crosses and Bibles on the desks of leadership. My teammate also reserves the conference room to pray. If I am not Christian, will I struggle to get promoted in this organization?"

Although we had gone from a 60% turnover rate, to less than 5%, I faced a new problem. How can I be authentic to my faith while not offending the culture I cared so much about? After all, my faith was *the* vehicle for most of the tools I used to impact culture.

For example, I drew heavily from Dr. Robert Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership. Servant leadership is a concept repeated throughout the Christian Bible and embodied in Greenleaf's philosophy. Incorporating this theory into our organizational design, I turned our organizational chart upside down to place my role and other leaders at the bottom of the hierarchy. This was meant to symbolize a trunk of a tree, serving and holding up the branches of the organization. I also adjusted our roles to reflect how we serve others. Dr. Greenleaf said, "The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first."

I also tried to holistically care for employees as people, making sure to concern myself with their trials and tribulations not only at work, but at home, too. I demonstrated a commitment to them by requesting permission to pray for them (outside of work on my time) as an expression of my faith—regardless of theirs. I would ask permission to pray, saying, "I am a person of faith, my faith encourages me to pray for you. If it is okay with you, I will." I never had anyone turn me down. I believe the sincerity of my faith application in a non-threatening way contributed to building relationships filled with trust, appreciation, and loyalty.

George Floyd

Financially, 2020 had such a great start. We implemented a significant growth strategy, placing a lot of bets. The company ended the prior year in a decent place, and we were ramping up speed to meet new sales goals. Then COVID hit us like a Mack Truck. I had to contemplate furloughs, layoffs, doing whatever was needed to survive. I was frustrated. I was sad. I had worked so hard for the past couple of years to create something that was good and beautiful, and now, potentially gone. I was tired. I had to go the extra mile to encourage others and keep everyone overperforming. The summer came with some reprieve. Yet it wasn't over. George Floyd was murdered. A different type of trauma gripped us.

I had to work with our organization to choose how to engage. The enormity of the situation was incalculable. The implications were significant for getting it wrong or right—especially culturally. Using elements of my faith within my organization could isolate my employees and destroy my cultural work. I asked myself, “how can I turn to my faith to understand how to act? Can I? And at what risk?”

Our leadership team stressed to me that we could not ignore a corporate discussion on the George Floyd issue. Our employees wanted a corporate response, but I sensed that they first needed a way to process the injustice and what it meant for all of us as Americans. I turned to my faith to address an issue unfamiliar to our workplace but familiar to the Bible--injustice. I used faith to help me, and others in my organization consider how to act. And I sought someone from my faith tradition to guide our thinking on how we might respond.

In a company-wide address, I asked, “What is our responsibility to our neighbor, our country, our company? How do we navigate this significant moment in humanity? I hope to work with you all to guide ourselves to the best ways of conversation, mutual respect, and action. What does a mature response for a path towards a long-term solution look like? What does reconciliation look like?”

I paraphrased the work of John Paul Lederach, an American professor of Peacebuilding, as he defined reconciliation according to the Spanish translation of Psalm 85:10: Reconciliation is when truth and mercy embrace; and peace and justice kiss. I challenged our organization to take the time to reflect on his ideas and the scripture. I shared various elements of Lederach's philosophy with them, “Humiliation—the lived experience of disrespect and exclusion without some form of authentic acknowledgment of the harm or hurt received—leaves deep personal and social scars ... reconciliation requires that we remember and change, but with honesty about our experience and curiosity about the humanness of the Other for whom we fear.”

I instructed our employees to contemplate what pain existed, what a reaction might mean, and how we think about reconciliation. I said:

It takes great maturity to steward our commitment to the cause of equality and inclusion. And to the things we acknowledge and resolve ourselves to in this effort. Let us not be too hasty and miss the way. And let us not be too shy or casual in our response that we are ineffective. No doubt a lack of empathy and understanding breeds tyranny. Let us consider how we get to a place in our current reality, where we can define justice according to mercy and truth. I would like us as an organization to contemplate and reflect on our place in this moment. We must understand that truth without mercy is aggression. And mercy without truth is mere sentimentality.

Our employees found this approach helpful. They appreciated the conversation and my methodology and heart. Me being authentic to my faith in that moment created a safe place for others to be authentic to theirs, and to open their hearts and minds to exploring our community reactions and

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contributions to a hard reality. A culture implicitly informed by my faith deepened and expanded to explicitly talk about faith for every person in the organization, bringing the essence of their identity—their beliefs and behavior—to the discussion of George Floyd's death.

Despite our diversity, we were allied organizationally to plot a course of action and have an impact. We were in a position to move beyond acknowledgment of right and wrong, to truly understand ourselves, our community, our corporation, and how best to support reconciliation, equity, and justice. The journey is just beginning, with many lessons yet to learn.