

Leadership and Culture Creation

In his classic novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo tells of Jean Valjean, a former criminal hardened from serving 19 years in prison for simply stealing bread in his poverty. The passport that he carries upon his release, his official identity, marks him as a former convict. Essentially, “convict” becomes his identity, the story spoken about his life. He is unable to find work while innkeepers who inspect his passport refuse him shelter. Increasingly angry and embittered, he becomes no more than an embittered animal sleeping on the streets.

In the village of Digne (*digne* is French for “dignity” or “worthy”), the village bishop Myriel Bienvenu (*bienvenue* is French for “welcome”) generously offers him food and shelter without asking any questions. However, in the night, Valjean steals precious silverware from the bishop and flees. The police capture Valjean and return him to Myriel who, instead of demanding his right of recompense and justice, insists to the police that he indeed gave the silverware to Valjean. In an act of overwhelming mercy, the bishop reshapes the story of Valjean’s life:

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice:

"Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop had emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity:

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

By this extraordinary kindness, Myriel imparts to Valjean a new life that he never imagined could be true. Instead of reinforcing the former story of undignified convict upon Valjean’s

heart, he offered him a welcome into a new life. Valjean realizes that God has given him a new identity, one that will ultimately shape his destiny and impact those he loves.

Christian leadership reflects the same redemptive motivation that Hugo so beautifully captures in this story. Jesus also told stories about his kingdom that captured the hearts of his followers and engaged their imaginations in the significant possibilities for their lives. Like Bishop Myriel, Jesus' life and sacrifice offers welcome into a kingdom marked by his mercy and love. They are given the dignity of a new identity. They are now citizens of that kingdom who honor their King by reflecting his mercy and advancing his redemptive mission: "But the Holy Spirit will come on you and give you power. You will be my witnesses. You will tell people everywhere about me – in Jerusalem, in the rest of Judea, in Samaria, and in every part of the world" (Acts 1:8, ERV). The global nature of this mission requires communities of kingdom-people who live out the story of Jesus' mercy within the local contexts where they live and work. These local Jesus communities who incarnate the story of Jesus in their contexts can create new cultural horizons that expand his good reign throughout the world.

Desire Shapes Vision

As a behavioral science, leadership theory contemplates the transactional dynamics between leaders and follower. It attempts to deduce the requisite actions and reactions that forge strong teamwork and accomplish common goals. Leadership expert, Peter Northouse, notes that a psychodynamic approach to leadership presumes that a complex web of motivations, emotions, rationales, and developmental experiences influences human behavior. Essentially leadership theory and practice attempt to unlock the deeper psychological forces at play in an individual's behavior so that a leader can influence the individual to behave in preferred ways.

Certainly, leaders can scientifically explore the psychology and sociology of follower behaviors. Many needful insights and principles of leadership emerge through such study. But leadership practice built solely upon scientific discovery devalues followers as cogs in a wheel – merely pawns manipulated by those with the power for the advancement of some organizational or society goals. History has proven that this approach has led tragically to dehumanized systems which benefit some and oppress others. What science does not acknowledge is that every person, organization, or society is animated by some social imaginary, a story of human flourishing. But it is those who hold power whose story defines the driving narrative of the community, often to the exclusion of others. Either they get on board, or they get out of the way.

The *art* of leadership forces leaders to deal with the unpredictably mysterious realm of the human heart. Impactful leaders understand that desires profoundly shape the stories of their followers. Jesus says, “Good people have good things saved in their hearts. That’s why they say good things. But those who are evil have hearts full of evil, and that’s why they say things that are evil. What people say with their mouths comes from what fills their hearts” (Luke 6:45). If you want to know people, find out what they desire. That is their story, and they express it through their behaviors.

Neither intellect nor belief primarily shape human motivation. Our thoughts or beliefs may be overly idealistic or distressingly pessimistic. Wise leaders know that they can only shape their followers’ investments into the mission by addressing what they love. Author and philosopher James K. A. Smith agrees, “We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends.” Because love primarily motivates people, transformative leaders institute habitual practices, or liturgies, in which *all* team members participate. These liturgies allow the team to embody the

story so that their imaginations are captured the story they are acting out and the story creates a shared communion among all participants.

Liturgies contextualize teamwork into a grander narrative of the mission. They hold tremendous power to shape human desires formed around a common story in which all participate and move forward. In this way, liturgies infuse meaning even into the daily grind of administrative details, conflicts, discouragements, and failures.

Making Something New of the World

At a macro level, every cultural tradition, in one form or another, attempts to internalize its stories to form the values, desires, and dreams of its communities. For example, the “American Dream” has shaped the desires of generations of Americans toward its idealized vision of white-picket fences, healthy and happy families, and successful careers. This dream gives meaning to people as it shapes the story of their lives.

Storytelling is at the heart of culture creation. Storytelling gives meaning to our day-to-day experiences so that we can make sense of the world we inhabit. Andy Crouch argues that we make sense of the world by making something of the world. We have an inherent need, instilled by God, to create culture. In Genesis, God created humankind in his image, to be like him (Gen. 1:26-27). He defines what human image-bearing looks like with a culture-making mandate: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Have many children. Fill the earth and take control of it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the air. Rule over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:28). Having made all the forms of the world and filling them with life, God creates his image bearers who will continue the project of creation as his regents in the world. They will extend the goodness and wholeness of the creation by cultivating the earth and creating cultures that, as Abraham Kuyper states, unlock the thoughts of God in the creation. The

man and the woman, in loving oneness that reflects the nature of the triune God who made them, are commissioned to take the “very good” world God made (Gen. 1:31) and shape into a something fruitful, something that extends the horizons of its possibilities.

The sin of the man and the woman corrupted their capacity to create cultures that reflected the good and just reign of the God they image. The cultures we make often degenerate into disorder, disunity, and disillusionment. A lie poisoned the hearts of the humans, and it became the dominant narrative of human history: “But the snake said to the woman, ‘You will not die. God knows that if you eat the fruit from that tree you will learn about good and evil, and then you will be like God!’” (Gen. 3:4-5). Instead of live full lives of self-giving love under the gracious provision of their God, they made a grab for power to be like God himself. This corrupted narrative still compels us and its output is anticulture. It threatens to undo the flourishing God calls us to create within our local contexts.

But Jesus redeemed and reconstituted the cultural mandate through his life, death, and resurrection. Listen to Paul’s hymn of praise to Jesus:

No one can see God,
but the Son is exactly like God.
He rules over everything that has been made.
Through his power all things were made:
things in heaven and on earth, seen and not seen—
all spiritual rulers, lords, powers, and authorities.
Everything was made through him and for him.

The Son was there before anything was made.
And all things continue because of him.
He is the head of the body, which is the church.
He is the beginning of everything else.
And he is the first among all who will be raised from death.
So in everything he is most important.

*God was pleased for all of himself to live in the Son.
And through him, God was happy to bring all things back to himself again—
things on earth and things in heaven.*

God made peace by using the blood sacrifice of his Son on the cross.
(Col. 1:15-20, italics added)

Jesus is the ultimate image bearer of God's glory. He calls his followers to embody his redemptive story as his witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Those who are in him are being renewed in his image, becoming more like him (Col. 3:1-11).

Leaders and followers share this cultural mandate to make something new of this world; to infuse new meaning into those places that are dark and disordered, formless and void (Gen. 1:2). Mother Theresa answered a call to serve the poor of Calcutta, India. Instead of living out a story of worthless poverty and hopeless causes in lost places, she restored dignity to others by telling them a redemptive story, "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, 'This is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him.' I serve because I love Jesus." Even for-profit enterprises are not amoral in this regard. The cultural mandate is the ultimate aim of any human endeavor because ultimately, we create what we love. And if we love Jesus, we will create cultures that reflect his mercy, justice, kindness, and goodness.

Global Leadership & Culture Creation

The global nature of this cultural mandate requires that people, in community, discern the stories embedded in the cultural contexts in which they live. They must also surface and evaluate the cultural stories motivating their own desires. If missed or misunderstood, these embedded stories can potentially derail mission success because of competing, rather than complementary, worldviews. When a diverse, global team assembles, effective global leaders recognize that the inherent cultural stories of team members are the raw materials that need to form into a new cultural story, one that unites the team and inspires their common mission. As leaders navigate the varied cultural differences of team members, they create space for team members to express

their worldviews and cultural differences in order to uncover how they affect the team dynamics and lead to the discovery of new approaches. Consequently, team learning must be a priority in global leadership.

Organizational learning expert Peter Senge explores how group learning aligns a team toward a singular direction. He asserts that dialogue allows team members to objectively observe their thinking and unpack how it contributes to or breaks down alignment. Effective dialogue requires deep listening to one another. In dialogue, the team uncovers the presuppositions behind complex issues that enhance or inhibit solutions. Team members freely and safely express their perspectives, while at the same time, they suspend their own positions so that discovery of new insights can emerge.

As team members dialogue with each other, they are able to appreciate the cultural distinctions in each other's perspectives and motivations. They may also spot and respectfully evaluate the inconsistencies and gaps in each other's thinking. As leaders shepherd their team or community through the disciplines of effective dialogue, the group builds momentum in creating redemptive cultures that expands the horizons of God's good reign in their local contexts.

Safe and productive dialogue creates two essential cultural artifacts that build a unifying vision of desired outcomes: storytelling and the formation of group norms.

Storytelling

Telling good stories epitomizes Jesus's leadership. Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus told numerous parables in order to engage his followers' hearts and shape their desires for his kingdom mission. Through the Gospel story embodied in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he compelled his followers to catch a kingdom vision that enraptured them into a calling of culture creation. This calling was so much bigger than the lives they previously knew!

Several disciples were fishermen, one was a hated tax collector, another a political zealot, and none of them were significant prospects as world changers. Yet, Jesus shaped their desires with vision stories and sent them out as his image bearers to create cultures inspired with the Gospel story. Leadership author Leighton Ford describes Jesus's leadership model:

He was able to create, articulate and communicate a compelling vision; to change what people talk about and dream of; to make his followers transcend self-interest; to enable us to see ourselves and our world in a new way; to provide prophetic insight into the very heart of things; and to bring about the highest order of change.

Jesus's brand of transforming leadership tells compelling redemptive stories that forge life-changing vision for his community of followers. His culture-creating mandate (Acts 1:8) is so grand that it requires transformative global leadership. Global leaders shepherd diverse followers to embody the life of Jesus so that the story of Jesus resounds in every culture they create. Global leaders' primary task is to tell compelling stories about the mission. They know that these stories have power to produce life-changing vision in the hearts of their people. They effectively reshape their followers' lives, as well as their own, into a grander story that drives culture creating activity.

Group Norms

Furthermore, leaders develop group norms that transcend existing cultural preferences that exclude others and create the fertile soil in which a new community can grow that manifests a Gospel culture. Monolithic cultures tend to protect their status quo with deeply entrenched cultural rules. Crouch explains, "it is the embodied practices of a culture that most powerfully enforce what that culture makes of the world." Consequently, when diverse cultures begin to interact to achieve a goal, the potential for protectionist resistance is rife. The emergence of new cultural norms that accommodate new cultural stories requires the wisdom of leaders to navigate the friction points of culture clashes within their teams.

For example, some cultures prefer to receive negative feedback directly while others consider direct negative feedback insulting. Some cultures are more strongly task-oriented while others are relationship-oriented. Effective leaders recognize these and other cultural distinctions that could potentially sabotage the growth of new group norms. As group norms develop, they deepen the team's alignment toward the pursuit of their vision.

Where is the Treasure?

The global mission of Jesus' kingdom transcends all boundaries as he calls his followers to make disciples in all nations (Acts 1:8). Therefore, global leaders also serve their teams by challenging individual cultural preferences so they can reimagine a new culture that embodies the story of Jesus in their diversity. It reshapes the desires and dreams of followers and gives them a new vision. Jesus said,

Don't save treasures for yourselves here on earth. Moths and rust will destroy them. And thieves can break into your house and steal them. Instead, save your treasures in heaven, where they cannot be destroyed by moths or rust and where thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will be where your treasure is." (Matt. 6:19-21)

Healthy leader-follower relationships reinforce in dialogue the treasures of Jesus' kingdom and its cultural stories that shape desires, redefine meaningful work, reimagine human flourishing, and motivate a unified pursuit of the ultimate aim – making something good and redemptive of this world.