

# Serenity, Courage and Wisdom:

Changing Competencies for Leadership

by Tim Harle

**Modern change management theory and Christian theology are found to have much in common, in the light of the prayer on change attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr.**



Tim Harle

## Setting the Scene

“I’m called to be a priest, not a manager. Discuss”. An essay title for aspiring clerics provides the starting point for exploring the interplay between the worlds of business leadership and theology. What, if anything, can the disciplines learn from one another? Using the framework of a widely cited prayer, the article finds parallels between theology and the contemporary language of change management. It suggests that traditional management competency frameworks might usefully be augmented by such attributes as serenity, courage and wisdom.

Such an examination is not new. Robert K Greenleaf’s *Servant Leadership* (Paulist 1977) achieved a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. From a European perspective, Charles Handy and John Adair have explored this theme. Spiritual approaches can find a place in Business School libraries<sup>1</sup>.

Not all links are explicit: two examples illustrate religious language. Rakesh Khurana’s book on CEO selection was entitled *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton 2002). An article<sup>2</sup> by Peter Case, subtitled *The Rhetorical Appeal of a Managerial Salvation Device*, referred to ‘sacred motifs’, ‘absolution of the collective guilt’ and ‘attempts to acquire secular converts’.

## A Framework for Exploration

Management competency frameworks have received critical attention. In a paper for the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Workshop on *Studying Leadership* at Exeter University’s Centre for Leadership Studies in 2004, Richard Bolden reviewed public, private and generic frameworks. He noted “the importance of personal values and vision are absent in over one third of the competency frameworks analysed; trust, ethics, inspiration, adaptability, flexibility and

resilience are absent in over two thirds; and personal beliefs, moral courage, humility, emotional intelligence, coping with complexity, personal reflection and work-life balance are missing in over 80%”.

Should we look elsewhere? What competencies might be relevant to those aspiring to business leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was Professor of Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion at Union Theological Seminary, New York City from 1928 to 1960. He addressed the interface between religion and society, but his wider legacy comes in the form of a prayer, attributed to him, which has made the liturgical leap from seminary to fridge magnet:

*God<sup>3</sup>, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

It forms the basis of this exploration.

## Attitudes to Change: Unpacking the Paradox

The prayer sets out different reactions to change. A common word association - from the hymn, *Abide with me* - links change with decay:

*Change and decay  
in all around I see:  
O thou who changest not,  
abide with me.*

Hymn singers are in good company with their negative association. One of the biggest selling Harvard Business Review (HBR) reprints was John Kotter's *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*.

The hymn speaks of the unchanging divinity. But a more subtle attitude may be at play. Liturgists speak of the links between worship and belief. Consider the *Gloria Patri*:

*As it was in the beginning  
is now and shall be for ever.*

The average worshipper may not be aware that this derives from a lively christological debate as to the humanity of Christ, but constant repetition of the timelessness of the Godhead hardly encourages openness to change.

Some point approvingly to the constancy provided by the Roman Catholic church: "those characteristics which are its greatest strength: its self-confidence, its internal order, its unchangeability"<sup>4</sup>. Pope John XXIII promoted *aggiornamento*, 'bringing things up to date' - it is heard less often these days. "Timelessness' is a word often used in relation to the Orthodox



Caravaggio - The Conversion of St Paul

Church, either as a commendation of its sense of the holy and the continuing tradition of the church, or else as a condemnation of its failure to face up to political and social issues in a rapidly changing world"<sup>5</sup>.

Such an attitude to change is paradoxical, because many religions have change at their heart. Myths of (re)creation talk of bringing about new realities, whether order from chaos (as in the Genesis account) or the Noble Path leading to final enlightenment, *nirvana*. St Paul emphasised the radical nature of the transformation offered in the Christian worldview: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Christian tradition talks of conversion. Exploring one of the Greek words it translates, *metanoia*, reveals an interplay between process, event and attitudinal change. Among

concepts it evokes are turning and changing one's mind (or God's mind in the Hebrew Bible). It is better conceived as a process, rather than an event: St Paul's experience on the Damascus road may be the exception to prove the rule (as John Finney's research has shown). Conversion of life is one of the Benedictine vows.

So, with the possibility of a more positive attitude to change, we can look at Niebuhr's three-fold prayer.

## Serenity

The first request is for serenity. Religions are often accused of providing an escape from harsh realities through an other-worldly orientation.

Serenity finds a particular place in the Buddhist tradition. A Buddhist monk prompted a modern book *The Monk and the Riddle* (Harvard 2000). Written by an American West Coast entrepreneur, Randy Komisar, The Times described it as a "self-help manual and business fable rolled into one". Yet the fable emphasises the need to face up to the here-and-now. Jagdish Parikh, prompted in part by the disconnection he felt when thrown from his native India into the hurly-burly of a North American MBA programme, went on to write a book, *Managing Your Self* (Blackwell 1991). He cannot be accused of escapism: his book is subtitled *Management by Detached Involvement*.

What of the Christian view? It parts company with its fellow Abrahamic monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Islam, in the doctrine

of the incarnation. Whatever one's view of the birth narratives, if the Godhead became one with humanity, then little is beyond the divine reach.

A significant contribution to dealing serenely with change comes from the pastoral perspective on change as part of the journey in dealing with grief. Building on the pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross at the Tavistock Institute on bereavement, others have noticed how reactions to change evoke familiar emotions: denial, anger, guilt, depression (see eg Daryl R Conner's *Managing at the Speed of Change*. John Wiley 1998). As clergy and counsellors encourage the bereaved to work from passive to active acceptance of the situation, so change agents can encourage a positive approach - not denying the strength of reactions to change, but working through them. In Conner's scheme, uninformed optimism moves on through informed pessimism, hopeful realism and informed optimism to completion.

Although 'serenity' does not usually feature in English Bible translations, some of the ideas it contains can be found. "Be still, and know that I am God" wrote the psalmist in a psalm (46), which can be of particular help for those suffering hurt (it starts, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble"). A prophet points to the source of inner calm: "In quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). St Paul combines pastoral awareness with a divine promise: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by

prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6f).

## Courage

Next, courage. Successful change normally involves a vision, a leader and companions on a journey. Embarking on a journey and leaving comfort zones can involve risk-taking at both a personal and corporate level. It may be uncomfortable, but it is often through such experiences that growth happens: Warren Bennis has coined the term 'crucible' for key formative experiences, while Joseph Badaracco talks of 'defining moments'<sup>6</sup>.

In a widely read book, *Leading Change* (Harvard 1996), John P Kotter nominates 'Establishing a Sense of Urgency' as the first stage in his process for successful change. Many programme managers talk of establishing 'burning platforms'. Contrast this with a radically different approach: by observing animal behaviour, a new perspective sees a manager's key task as providing a secure environment in which individuals can safely exercise their innate tendency to explore<sup>7</sup>.

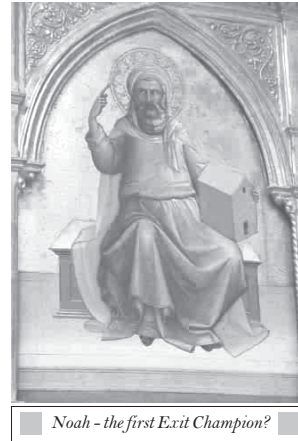
In this context, it is illuminating to look at the results of MODEM's research project on spiritual energy in management<sup>8</sup>. If managers were more ready to take risks, it was more likely that

spiritual energy would be released. It would make a fascinating research project to study if the converse is true: are managers with a spiritual orientation more likely to be risk takers? The hypothesis is attractive: those whose 'certainties' lie elsewhere are more likely to take risks and embrace change. David Hillson touched on this in an earlier FiBQ article<sup>9</sup>.

In a HBR article entitled *Why Bad Projects Are So Hard To Kill*, Isabelle Royer noted the "faith that wouldn't be shattered" (HBR, February 2003). Recognising the "seductive appeal of collective belief", she proposes a new role to complement the traditional Project Champion: the Exit Champion. Religions are familiar

with the problem of collective delusion, and are not afraid of invoking direct action.

Noah's flood is one of several examples requiring an Exit Champion from cultures



Noah - the first Exit Champion?

around the world. A hero is chosen to prepare a fresh start and subsequently survives a deluge with a select few companions. The early Exit Champions, together with their successors (eg the Jewish prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and Babylonian exile), appear to have been no more successful in conveying their message than

many of their followers – in religion and business – today.

Courage should not be seen as a ‘macho’ virtue. In a recent FiBQ article<sup>10</sup>, Ann Raven wrote of courage as a virtue requiring strength of character. Joseph Badaracco’s writings on business ethics refer to leading quietly<sup>11</sup>.

## Wisdom

So to wisdom. Corporate knowledge management strategies refer to the hierarchy of data-information-knowledge. But how many proceed to the more elusive wisdom? The index to eight collected HBR papers on *Knowledge Management* (Harvard 1998) has some twenty entries each under ‘information’ and ‘knowledge’, but none under ‘wisdom’.

“Is it a knowledge only of facts? Obviously not, for we all know students and professors whose learning is tremendous, but whom we should never judge to have wisdom. Wisdom, then, is different from learning, for an unschooled person may possess it, out of rich experience. On the other hand, there are people with rich experience to whom we would not attribute wisdom”<sup>12</sup>.

Hebrew wisdom literature speaks across the centuries: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” has passed into Anglo-Saxon culture. Yet it is based on a mistranslation of Proverbs 29:18 in the King James Bible (AV): the NRSV translates “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint”. A good paraphrase might be “without a vision, the people run around and do their own thing” – a text for change managers everywhere.

Wisdom literature, both in its biblical and contemporary forms, often stems from a community. The learning organisation has become such an oft-repeated mantra that the disciplines which Peter Senge identified in his seminal book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Random House 1990) are sometimes forgotten. Building Shared Vision and Team Learning were at the apex of Senge’s model. The concept even got an airing in a Church of England report, *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (The Hind Report, CHP 2003).

Unfortunately, the authors showed they did not understand Senge in two ways: learning is restricted to a few years either side of ordination and focuses on individuals, not teams. Senge’s model does not explicitly refer to wisdom, but the parallels are suggestive.

So much for corporate wisdom. What of the individual? One path towards greater spiritual intelligence (SQ<sup>13</sup>) is the Path of Knowledge: “The natural progression towards higher SQ leads from reflection, through understanding, to wisdom”. In his writings, John Adair highlights the importance of *phronesis*, practical wisdom<sup>14</sup>.

## Critical Reflection

Niebuhr addresses the divine, but his approach reflects one aspect of a worldview associated with Descartes: it is focused on the self. Should this be dismissed as Western individualism: *cogito ergo sum?* African and other thinkers promote an alternative perspective: “I am known, therefore I am.” Satish Kumar, Director of Programmes at

Schumacher College, draws on a Sanskrit dictum in his book, *You Are Therefore I Am: A Declaration of Dependence* (Green Books 2002).

Charles Handy addressed this question: “The idea that true individuality is necessarily social is one of the oldest propositions in philosophy... To be

ourselves we need other people. What I term a ‘proper selfishness’ builds on this fact that we are inevitably intertwined with others”<sup>15</sup>. But, the (properly selfish) I is still at the centre.

Relationships are emphasised in Daniel Goleman’s work on Emotional Intelligence: “The art of relationships is, in large part, skill in managing emotions in others”. ‘Relationship management’ is the last of the four key groupings of his Leadership Competencies<sup>16</sup>.

Christian theologians have a similar take on the issue. Vernon



Wisdom & Strength - Paolo Veronese

White proposes “Christian thought *in principle* as a profound, flexible and still-credible tradition which can secure the value of each individual person within the control of an equally secure relational and social vision. This vision has its origin in the nature of God and his [sic] relatedness”<sup>17</sup>.

The Christian Trinity provides a model to explore relationships. It has been used to create whole socio-political paradigms, eg by Leonardo Boff in *Trinity and Society* (Burns & Oates 1988). “Well did John Paul II say... ‘Our God, in his most intimate mystery, is not a solitude, but a family’.... We must see human societies, the social relationships among their members... as impulses poured forth into history by the most holy Trinity”<sup>18</sup>.

A glimpse into the same concept, using a radically different language, comes from the Orthodox tradition of iconography. In Rublev’s icon, three figures – ostensibly the angels visiting Abraham (recorded in Genesis chapter 18) – are gathered around a table. The space at the table is on the viewer’s side: through the device of inverse perspective, we are invited to join the group, to complete the circle.

## Implications

What are the implications of our exploration for the management competency frameworks with which we started? And what are the implications for leadership training? Could we devise learning programmes that are mutually beneficial for those

aspiring to sacred or secular leadership roles? The business community can lay down a challenge to theological colleges and clerical continuous professional development schemes. Business leaders may be surprised to discover what they can learn in return.

Religious perspectives, reflecting on changing and the unchangeable, can help individuals and organizations embrace change.

Our exploration suggests that Niebuhr’s trio of ‘competencies’ could provide a useful basis to augment traditional leadership frameworks. Each requested ‘competency’ is linked with a purposive action: serenity to accept, courage to change, wisdom to know. Writing in FiBQ<sup>19</sup>, Dermot Tredgett relates how small groups suggested that the ideal ‘soul-friendly’ CEO should, “using his [sic] serenity and wisdom, enable other people’s spirituality to flourish”.

Reflecting critically on Niebuhr’s prayer highlights the importance of relationships. Suggestive parallels between the language of change management and theology across three millennia of human experience point to the benefit of continuing the dialogue. ■

*Tim Harle helps people and organisations going through change. Reflecting on his broad business experience, he also writes and speaks at business schools and theological colleges.*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ian Mitroff & Elizabeth Denton. *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*, Jossey-Bass Wiley, 1999.
- Georgeanne Lamont, *The Spirited Business*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002.
- Sue Howard & David Welbourn *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon*, Azure, 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Case. *Remember Reengineering: The Rhetorical Appeal of a Managerial Salvation Device*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 36:4, (1999), 419-441.
- <sup>3</sup> Many who, with Laplace, “have no need of that hypothesis” are happy to use the prayer without its opening address.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Johnson in *Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Restoration*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982. p124.
- <sup>5</sup> John Baggley in *Doors of Perception: Icons and their Spiritual Significance*. Mowbray, 1987. pxi.
- <sup>6</sup> Warren G Bennis & Robert J Thomas. *Crucibles of Leadership*. HBR, September 2002. Joseph L Badaracco *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right*. Harvard, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> See Peter Robertson’s *Always Change a Winning Team*. Marshall Cavendish Business, 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> See [www.modem.uk.com](http://www.modem.uk.com).
- <sup>9</sup> David Hillson. *Risk and Faith: Contradictory or Complimentary [sic]?* *FiBQ* 3:2, 1999, 8-12.
- <sup>10</sup> Ann Raven. *Courage in Business*. *FiBQ* 8:2, 2004, 4-7.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph L Badaracco. *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. Harvard, 2002
- <sup>12</sup> Samuel Sandmel. *The Enjoyment of Scripture*. Oxford, 1972, p208.
- <sup>13</sup> Danah Zohar & Ian Marshall. *SQ - Spiritual Intelligence The Ultimate Intelligence*. Bloomsbury, 2000. p244. The book’s subtitle suggests a pre-emptive strike. One wonders if leadership thinkers (not to mention commercial publishers) will be satisfied that we have, indeed, reached the last word on the subject.
- <sup>14</sup> Eg in John Adair. *The Inspirational Leader*. Kogan Page, 2003, p53ff.
- <sup>15</sup> In *The Hungry Spirit*. Hutchinson, 1997, p86f.
- <sup>16</sup> Daniel Goleman. *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, 1996, p43. For competencies, see Daniel Goleman et al. *The New Leaders*. Little Brown, 2002.
- <sup>17</sup> In his book, *Paying Attention to People*. SPCK, 1997, p159. Italics orig.
- <sup>18</sup> Leonardo Boff. *Good News for the Poor*. Burns & Oates, 1992, p69.
- <sup>19</sup> Dermot Tredgett. *Beyond the Obvious: Benedictine Spirituality in the Workplace*. *FiBQ* 4:1, 2000, p7.