Practical Leadership: Learning from Great Rulers in History

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Abstract

This paper examines the applied principles and leadership styles of great ancient men in the light of the Bible as the Word of God. Practically speaking, scholarly literature in leadership and management lacked attention to studying biblical figures as leaders. The author utilized secondary analysis of qualitative information from documented life stories of renowned leaders in human history. This paper uses qualitative content analysis to evaluate patterns of famous ancient leaders' styles in leading their subjects. With content analysis, the author is obliged to read and re-read the text, specifically the Bible as the main source of data and focusing on the specific timeline of the ancient world. The scope and limitation of this paper cover only the discussion on the prominent historical people, specifically Biblical characters and does not include the current leaders of our time. This paper hopes to bring back the basics on leading people worth emulating by modern-day leaders. It explores the successes and failures of these ancient leaders that shaped history and even world cultures.

Keywords: Ancient, History, Values, Character

INTRODUCTION

Practical leadership is a concept which applies the word "practical" as a guide to help us become better leaders (Arizala, 2010). The term "practical" connotes being concerned with ordinary things that can be adapted or designed for actual utilization ("practical", n.d.). So, if we put all things together, it is a kind of leadership that anyone can practice. With this idea in mind, the author thought of studying the ancient leaders from the Bible, learn from them and come up with a proposed model that modern-day leaders can integrate into their current leadership styles and strategies.

In the own perception of Nocera (2012), organizations that seek to improve society rather than to earn profits follow moral capitalism. According to Hjelmgaard, there is another kind of capitalism, in which firms are just thinking about profits and taking advantage of others, and that includes clients and customers. Hjelmgaard continued that; it is also very alarming to note the increase in income inequality where only the top one per cent of society will soon consume fifty per cent of the world's wealth (Hjelmgaard, 2015).

In this paper, the ancient leadership values were figured out and analyzed on the premise that they can be used to restore the ideal of leadership. Lives of ancient leaders and how they managed their constituents and wealth, which were written in one of the most well-read and bought books of all times – the Bible, were explored by the author to understand why despite their shortcomings and imperfections, they were able to become great leaders who even changed cultures and history of mankind.

Religions with monotheistic beliefs, such as Judaism, Christianity and Muslim, were slightly touched in this paper. The writer of Islamic history and civilization states that: "equality, justice, compassion, freedom of consciousness and human rights and dignity are stressed out by these

religions" (Ali, 2011). However, scrutinizing the beliefs and dogmas of these three major religions was not the scope of this study. The aforementioned religions all have their origin from the Middle East and recognize Abraham as their first prophet and father of their faith. One of the author's subjects of investigation is Abraham's life and leadership practice as the patriarch of his culture and nation.

Graft and corruption are committed by leaders on a global scale. In this paper, one can realize that even ancient leaders were bound to commit human errors and mistakes (Friedman and Friedman, 2018). It is the greatest inspiration of the author to cite that the main source of her document content analysis is the Bible – as the most popular book of all time and the infallible truth. It is also the most translated and most frequently purchased book in the world (Open Education Database, n.d.).

The goal of this study is to look for the answer to the **central question:** What can we learn from the practices of ancient leaders in history? ; and to the following **sub-questions:** (1) How the ancient leaders overcame their shortcomings and imperfections? (2) How absolutely necessary is morality in leadership? (3) What makes a good and bad leader? (4) Is social leadership a thing in the past, or is it applicable today?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many written studies and write-ups in the field of leadership. But there is a shortage of studies encouraging practical methods that lead to becoming a better and more resilient leader. The goal of this literature review is to compare the past and most recent studies and articles about the rise and fall of leaders, organizations or business firms, kingdoms and cultures due to the dearth of good governance. In our present time, many issues emerged regarding dishonesty, fraud and placing priority on personal motivation with self-serving interest.

This study tackles the life stories of ancient leaders in the light of the Bible, which will make us understand that they were also epitomes of human frailties and flaws. But it is also interesting to note that they thrived as good leaders who changed the course of world history and the trajectory of their nation's fate. The study of Ancona (et al., 2019) mentioned that society always has high expectations from executives and leaders. But being imperfect, no person can live up to the highest standards. The myth of a complete leader has to end. It is interesting to note that the case of Enron (2021) forced AICPAs (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants) to engage in significant damage control (Thomas, 2002). As a result, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 was enacted as a comprehensive reform of business financial practices (Carlson, 2019). It is a US federal law that was passed to respond to a number of corporate financial reporting scandals. The issue of lack of values in leadership is a factor why in our modern-day, we encounter problems in either corporate governance or political management (World Economic Forum, 2014). According to Deakin and Konzelmann (2011), the act of Sarbanes-Oxley Law of 2002 is like a mirror-image of Enron, which needed a point for point act against corporate governance failures. Likewise, in order to contribute to solution against business scandals, this study probed to look into the basic aspect that a leader must possess.

In his paper, Van Wart (2014) discussed that virtuous leadership is also tantamount to responsible and ethical leadership. Additionally, the study by Rivera and Karlsson (2017), building

a culture of integrity which means putting in place governance structures effectively and include processes and control mechanisms that discourage wrongdoing, are the best ways to prevent lapses and instant scandal in the corporate world. In this paper, the author tried to reconcile the resiliency and improved leadership to deeply rooted integrity and character formation of the ancient leaders. The author made a content analysis of the life stories of each ancient leader mentioned in this paper. It is similar to what other authors recognized, such as personal stories and their power, including narratives, are getting attention which is becoming popular in the business world (Gallo, 2016; Howard, 2016; Prive, 2016).

To summarize the key findings taken from the listed literature and studies, in general, society has a high standard and expectations from corporate leaders though it is an established fact that humans are imperfect creations. Misreporting specifically of the financial status led to several sorts of scandals and legal procedures against corporate officials. Virtues and moral values are essentials towards better and successful leadership. Finally, the business world is starting to focus its attention on the power of personal stories and their narratives. The significance of the findings of the above-related studies and literature to the current study is that those findings pointed to understanding how the ancient leaders resolved their imperfections and shortcomings prior to the creation of modern federal laws or being educated under a very popular leadership "guru". This study attempted to discover the former practices of ancient leaders and what can we learn from them that we may apply to our present time.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper utilized the qualitative content analysis to evaluate patterns of popular ancient leaders' styles in leading their subjects. Luo (2021) discussed that content analysis is a method in research, and to be able to conduct it, an author can collect data from sets of texts which can be written, oral or visual. Some examples of these are books, magazines, interviews, photographs, social media posts, etc.

This paper focused on qualitative content analysis – that is, understanding and interpreting the data gathered from the number one source: the Bible. With content analysis of secondary data and documentation, the author is obliged to read and re-read texts, specifically the Bible, as one of the sources of data and focusing on the specific timeline of the ancient world. The Bible has 66 books – 39 books in the Old Testament; from Genesis to Malachi and 27 books of the New Testament; from the book of Matthew to Revelation. Primarily the author read, re-read and continually re-reading it more than ten times at this point in time to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership practices of selected kings, leaders and patriarchs in ancient times. By investigating the successes and failures of these leaders, this research makes a drawn conclusion which is set at the last part of the paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The major task of writing about practical leadership and what we can learn from ancient leaders is to make contextually grounded points that will become a contribution in the field of leadership. This study shows that equality, social justice and human dignity are best kept in mind by leaders who believe that mankind is created in the image of God. A good leader is fair and loves

justice. This is similar to that of a former study by Schroeder et al. (2019) on a four values framework that includes fairness, respect, care and being honest. Through each story on the life of ancient leaders, the author found out that anyone is not exempted from offences even as a leader. Ancient leaders who were resilient and successful were able to overlook offences, be forgiving and not personally take into account everything that slighted them. Humility and servant attitude are also vital, as in the example of David's life. In the midst of life crises resulting from his very own imperfections and mistakes, he humbled himself before God and begged for forgiveness. A true virtue that can be adopted by political leaders and public officials in countries of the world. Also, compassion should be the first motivation to lead and not to oppress or take revenge. A similar study by Okpala and Caldwell (2019) mentioned that humility, forgiveness and love are the heart of ethical stewardship.

An article written in Management Research Review-Journal by Hendriks et al. (2020) indicated that there are five individual core leader virtues which are: prudence, temperance, justice, courage and humanity, which positively influence work-related being. The current study revealed that intelligence and wisdom without character might make a great leader looks like a fool. Secondly, courage and firmness of decision is another innate character that a good leader must possess.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions are drawn to answer the central research question: "What can we learn from the practices of ancient leaders in history?" Their exemplified life teaches us the following: (1) A leader should be transformational with values just like Abraham as mentioned by Friedman & Langbert (2000); (2) Educating the succeeding generation of leaders should always include moulding the strength of character; (3) A successful leader is compassionate and loves humankind, humble, not envious of others and welcome the stranger and the needy; (4) The focus of leadership is not to oneself but to the welfare, benefit and the good of the majority.

It has been said that "the problem of the heart is the heart of the problem". This adage reminds us that CEOs and national leaders, no matter how intelligent they are, will always shrink down to nullity when their heart is not right and free from greed or self-aggrandizement. Throughout this study, it is imperative to note that ancient leaders were not complete and perfect, yet they overcame these weaknesses by the higher virtue of humility and admitting their mistakes in handling matters. This provides us answer to the first sub-question. For the second sub-question, the morality and virtuous life of justice and righteousness lead to successful leadership and therefore is absolutely necessary. Further, anyone can be a diabolical genius without acknowledging that the source of wisdom, skills, strengths, power, authority and success is God. It is also very important that a national leader must surround himself with counsels who have the "fear of God". Vision provides guidance to the people, and it should be based on ethical standards. People respect leaders with integrity and willingly support them. A good leader also ensures that all weights and measures are honest. The aforementioned statements led us to the answers for the third sub-question. Finally, social leadership began since time immemorial. It is a position of authority that is being given to anyone by the community out of trust and reputation earned over time. Ancient leaders were also social leaders, and anyone can become a social leader by just leading a team or group of people.

A further study is recommended that will be focusing on the successes and failures of modern-day leaders and heads of states and compare the principles learned from this paper to the current trend in leadership. It is also suggested that social leadership be tackled further and in consonance with sustainability leadership. Another very interesting topic for future research is the significant relationship between longer-tenured CEOs and other national leaders. Humility is a trait of leaders that are not popularly taken as a topic in leadership. Anyone might as well plunge into this new trajectory in leadership researches.

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