From Diabolical to Dialogical: Transforming Ethics Through Dialogical Leadership

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FROM DIABOLICAL TO DIALOGICAL: TRANSFORMING ETHICS THROUGH DIALOGICAL LEADERSHIP

Abstract: Much like the example of David and Nathan in 2 Samuel 11–12 demonstrated, moral lapses victimize the entire organization, and members often persist in ethical misconduct without full comprehension of the gravity of their actions. As an antidote, organizational members must be vigilant and resolute in watching for the signs of ethical degradation, forming a noticing organization. However, as opposed to confronting ethical misconduct head-on, dialogical leadership, encompassing a Trinitarian perspective, attempts to preserve the fabric of community through strategic narrative and transparent dialogue aimed at raising ethical awareness and inhibiting unethical behavior.

Keywords: *Dialogic storytelling, ethical blindness, isolation of leader, ethical transformation, dialogical leadership*

Introduction

"You are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7, NIV)! In exclaiming this brief yet irrefutable indictment, Nathan convicted the then king of Israel and turned the tide of what, until that point, had been diabolical behavior of epic proportions. While the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11–12) remains a paragon of God's grace and, ultimately, David's humility (Baldwin, 1988; Goldingay, 2011; Youngblood, 2009), Nathan's challenge in the face of the king's heinous crimes stands as a witness to his courage and a model for establishing ethical climates within the organizational environment. What follows attempts to show how Nathan, using dialogical leadership, strategically employed storytelling and dialogue in order to lift the scales from David's eyes and restore ethical character to the royal household. At the heart of dialogical leadership, however, lies a commitment to Trinitarian principles that heighten ethical awareness. The art of storytelling and dialogue, then, reverberates from the biblical account into the modern organizational arena, bridging theology and social science into a robust mixture of leadership methodology which transforms ethical climates from diabolical to dialogical.

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The Causes of Ethical Blindness

Unfortunately, David's adulterous betrayal and murderous conspiracy reflect an all-too-common tale within the domain of leadership and organizational life (Gini, 2004; Sims & Brinkmann, 2003). In this light, it is necessary to first understand the reasons why leaders cross ethical boundaries and, therefore, why dialogical leadership offers such a powerful tool for combating ethical lapses.

Ambiguity

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) cited ethical blindness as a common cause of moral degradation. Ethical blindness refers to either an intentional or unintentional desensitization or ignorance toward ethical boundaries, resulting in a gradual loss of moral compass (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Pittarello, Leib, Gorden-Hecker, & Shalvi, 2015). Losing sight of ethical boundaries might occur due to mistaken assumptions regarding the reality of the situation, false assumptions made about other people, or an over-exaggerated sense of self-importance and ability (Messick & Bazerman, 1996). In any event, blurring of ethical boundaries produces enough situational ambiguity that ethical sensibilities weaken and distort, allowing moral compromise to occur (cf. Gen. 3:1–7; Camp, 2011).

Bypass

Although any one of these misperceptions might result in ethical failure, Argyris (1998) contended that an even more perverse phenomenon occurs within the organizational environment. In what he called "bypass" (p. 263), Argyris identified the process whereby organizational actors, in order to maintain a sense of psychological safety, deceive themselves into believing that the organization functions appropriately. The loss of negative feedback induces single-loop learning which, in turn, dampens ethical responses (Argyris, 1976) and, again, leads to desensitization, incrementally weakening and/or distorting ethical bearings.

Isolation

At the same time, leaders, due to their position, become particularly susceptible to ethical ambiguity and bypass behaviors. Perhaps the prestige of position and authority results in an over-inflated sense of privilege, convincing leaders that the rules no longer apply to them (Price, 2004), or encourages an overwhelming sense of entitlement, leading to unadulterated self-indulgence (Fedler, 2006; Ludwig & Longenecker, 1993). Kets de Vries (1989), on the other hand, proposed that leadership by nature isolates leaders further and further

from sources of moral support and correction. As a result, their perspective gradually becomes strangely introverted and skewed, allowing significant errors in judgment to occur. At any rate, in all the aforementioned cases, the inability or refusal to properly integrate and/or acknowledge feedback mechanisms produces ethical blindness and opens the door for moral temptation and failure (Argyris, 1976).

David's Ethical Blindness

While there were undoubtedly facets of each of these ethical factors which contributed to David's descent into moral calamity, the biblical text, curiously, underscored his self-imposed and highly unusual sequester from combat (2 Sam. 11:1; Baldwin, 1988; Youngblood, 2009) that eventually led to his encounter with Bathsheba (11:2–4). As Kets de Vries (1989) warned, isolation leads to moral distancing, and certainly that effect is observed in David's circumstance. Consequently, the king took what did not belong to him (11:4; Janzen, 2012), clearly violating the scriptural admonition that Israel's leaders should never depart from the law nor consider themselves better than their fellow countrymen (Deut. 17:20; Ludwig & Longenecker, 1993; Price, 2004).

Yet, in the final analysis, David's ethical failure resulted from an inability to properly consider and integrate individual and corporate interests. Indeed, the universal nature of sin ensures that such ethical compromise will occur, disrupting the created order and God's intended harmony within relationships (Wallace, 1997). Consequently, Cafferky (2011) insisted that herein resides the quintessential conundrum facing organizations—the delicate and paradoxical tension between individual freedom and organizational solidarity. Ultimately, ethical lapses occur as a result of disregarding corporate interests in favor of indulging individual desire. In that respect, David's behavior remains an unfortunate yet instructive depiction of the destructive consequences of individual desire run amuck.

Of course, the issue of integrating the one and the many has plagued mankind since the Fall (Frame, 1994; Van Til, 1955). That is, equitably addressing the concerns of the universal and particular at the same time has, historically, challenged ethical sensibilities (Cafferky, 2011). The impetus behind the Ten Commandments, in fact, resides in ensuring that individual interests do not supersede that of other community members. Although insight into solving this enigma has remained somewhat elusive, the Trinity offers an exemplary model of dialogical leadership which seamlessly harmonizes the one and the many and, as a result, reorients ethical perspectives to genuinely consider the interests of others (Jensen, 2001).

The Trinity and Dialogue

In this respect, the Trinity appropriately informs the study of ethics and concretely establishes a theological basis for dialogical leadership. Because the members of the Trinity exist in a perpetual plurality of one, communication occurs transparently and effortlessly. At the same time, such unequivocal unanimity does not diminish individual identity or distinctiveness (Bavinck, 2003). In this manner, then, the Trinity interweaves the one and the many into a vibrant yet indivisible community of persons equally concerned with individual as well as corporate interests (Tumblin, 2007).

Undeniably, the biblical matter resonates with Trinitarian language demonstrating the veracity of this principle. For example, within the prolific hymn of Colossians 1, Paul spoke vividly of Christ's involvement in the creation event, stating that "through him God created everything" (v. 16, NLT). In saying this, Paul described the process by which both the Father and Son have existed in everlasting union and cooperated together seamlessly and harmoniously, quite literally, in the creation of reality (cf. John 1:1–3). Christ himself spoke at length regarding the intimate relationship between Himself and the Father, reinforcing the concept that neither acts without the complete knowledge and agreement of the other (John 10:25–39) and exemplifying the notion of dialogical communion. Christ also testified to the reciprocal relationship between Himself, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, indicating that the third member of the Trinity participates equally and co-creatively in the activity of the Father and Son (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–15). Likewise, in his eminent treatise on Christian unity (Eph. 4:1–16), Paul, following a conspicuously Trinitarian formulation (vv. 4–6), emphasized the necessity of fostering harmony between the one and the many.

Although human relationships, as intricate as they are, pale in comparison, the Trinity represents the ideal model for dialogical leadership whereby transparent and unrestricted communication between the various members sustains and maintains communal cohesion and, in turn, promotes ethical behavior (Chase, 2013; Ellens, 1974; Reid, 1974). For only within the dynamic yet inseparable community of the Trinity does the space exist for diversity to flourish without threatening the inherent union that binds members together (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–31; Tumblin, 2007). As with all forms of authentic dialogue, awareness of alternate perspectives stimulates pause for genuine ethical consideration. In other words, illuminating the existential unity of the whole challenges egotistical assumptions and dampens the desire to harm others knowingly.

Accordingly, authentic dialogue transpires within the safety of dialogic containers (communicative spaces) that promote the suspension of judgment and defensive routines (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2010). As Argyris (1994) concluded,

sincere transformational communication rarely occurs in the organizational environment due to the hesitance to confront, for the sake of saving embarrassment, the most critical matters concerning the maintenance of healthy and, therefore, effective relationships. Instead, organizational members pander to one another in an intricate dance of denial and deception intended to sustain a rather dysfunctional status quo. On the other hand, dialogic containers create a sanctuary where organizational members can explore alternate perspectives without fear of reprisal, leading to a broader range of ethical considerations. Unquestionably, within the interior of Trinitarian communion, such dialogic conditions exist, providing the pattern from which to establish dialogical leadership.

Dialogical Leadership

In this light, authentic dialogue, it would seem, offers the appropriate vehicle to engage with organizational constituents in order to encourage the formation of an ethical community. If, indeed, leadership entails the ability to influence others toward objectives, then the ability to alter how people perceive reality involves the application of ethical considerations and forms the basis for dialogical leadership (Wines & Hamilton, 2009). Inherently, dialogue entertains storytelling as a means to invite participants to collaborate in the co-creation of reality, dampening competitive behaviors (Mitra, 2013; Nielsen, 1990; Olsen & Morgan, 2012). This is, potentially, the most salient aspect of organizational dialogue, in that it promotes and enhances the learning behaviors which are essential for enabling an ethical organizational environment (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008).

Fostering Dialogue Through Storytelling

Human beings, by their very nature, communicate through story—it is simply part of mankind's DNA (Barker & Gower, 2010; Denning, 2007; Randall, 1999). Narrative leadership harnesses the power of storytelling as a means to connect with and relate to that intrinsic human nature (Denning, 2007). Consequently, storytelling involves the creation of meaning and reality in a dramatic and episodic format, inviting the listener to not merely observe but rather become part of the story (Barker & Gower; Boal & Schultz, 2007; Fønnebø, 2011; Mitra, 2013). From an ethical perspective, it is therefore imperative that storytelling not only invite listeners to participate but to co-create reality as well (Denning, 2007; Mitra, 2013; Olsen & Morgan, 2012). As a Trinitarian perspective aptly demonstrates, only through collaborative co-creation of reality does the necessary ethical balance between the interests of the one and the many take place.

In this respect, Nathan provided an exceptional example of dialogic story-

telling to confront unethical, and in his case diabolical, behavior. Of particular theological importance to this contention, the biblical text recorded that the Lord "sent Nathan . . . to tell David this story" (2 Sam. 12:1, NLT), emphasizing divine intent to employ storytelling as a leadership technique. Rather than challenge David directly, which could prove mortally dangerous for a prophet (Goldingay, 2011), Nathan obediently and cleverly leveraged the power of story to create a dialogic container from which to gain agreement on principle (12:1–6) and, only then, convict David of his crime (v. 7). Surprisingly, David reacted not with contempt but with painful realization that he had committed heinous acts not just against his fellow man but, in the larger perspective, against God (v. 13a), validating the notion that dialogue entreats participants to lower defenses and suspend judgment in favor of conscientious reflection. Likewise, Psalm 51 has been recognized traditionally as David's lament in light of his grievous actions, underscoring the sincere remorse he felt upon Nathan's pronouncement that he was the very man depicted in the story (Youngblood, 2009).

The Otherness of Others

Indeed, as David's response proved, dialogue heightens the awareness of and intensifies consideration for others (Deetz, Simpson, & Cissna, 2004; Olsen & Morgan, 2012). Buber (1958) contended that typical human interactions involve the I/It distinction, treating others as mere instruments through which the personal agenda is achieved. Unquestionably, such a mindset befell David when he observed the beautiful Bathsheba from his rooftop vantage (11:2). From that moment on, everyone else became only means through which to further his diabolical plans (Janzen, 2012). Conversely, dialogical interaction, according to Buber, promotes the I/Thou distinction whereby others are viewed as ends in themselves. Dialogue, then, initiates a process of interchange that emphasizes and, as a result, stimulates genuine concern for otherness (Deetz, Simpson, & Cissna; Olsen & Morgan). Cavanaugh (2008) argued much the same, stating that through the act of communion, participants become so absorbed in the otherness of Christ that they cannot help but become acutely aware of the pain and suffering of those around them.

In this way, storytelling presents common language and imagery from which to invite others into a participative narrative (dialogue), entreating them to experience others' perspectives (Denning, 2007; Mitra, 2013; Olsen & Morgan, 2012; Wines & Hamilton, 2009). Narrative is so powerful because stories reflect a basic facet of human existence and provide the ability to communicate on an innate level (Barker & Gower, 2010; Denning, 2007; Randall, 1999). By engaging in an emotional and dramatic manner, leaders captivate listeners and draw them into their narrative (White, 2008). Yet, from a dialogical

perspective, the narrative remains open-ended so that listeners have the opportunity to contribute to the story as well. Although a difficult paradox to articulate, dialogical communication allows both parties to maintain their position while genuinely appreciating the position of others (Pearce, Pearce, & Cissna, 2004).

Dialogical Communion and Learning

Most importantly, dialogical narrative fosters extraordinary collaboration, inducing organizational communion in which a heightened sense of otherness transcends the rather limited perspective of any single participant. In other words, dialogical narrative, rather than suppressing or manipulating the creative powers of others, reveals a vibrant range of alternatives that might otherwise remain obscured behind self-interest and competitive behaviors (Barker & Gower, 2010; Boal & Schultz, 2007; Mitra, 2013). Without question, organizations' survival and efficacy not only depend on the degree to which members mutually cooperate toward common objectives but to the degree they develop resilience and improvisational skills as well. A Trinitarian perspective only strengthens such a conclusion and suggests that as unity and diversity proliferate in tandem, organizational efficacy increases substantially (Tumblin, 2007).

Thus, dialogical leadership instigates organizational learning as well. As such, narrative assists leaders in mediating organizational reality, either upholding organizational values or subverting them so that needed change can occur (Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1993, 2010; Wines & Hamilton, 2009). Notice that Nathan's narrative involved a recognizable case of Jewish hospitality and legal principles (Hyman, 2002; Janzen, 2012). That is, the obligation for the rich man to serve his guests set over against taking the ewe lamb from the poor man (2 Sam. 12:4) served to reinforce both social and legal customs prevalent within the Jewish culture of that time. David, acting as judge, immediately recognized and reacted to the legal ramifications, convicting only himself of violating both cultural standards in the process (Derby, 1996). In this way, the dialogic container Nathan constructed opened David's mind to other possibilities, serving to expose the severity of his crimes.

Because the propensity to share knowledge relates directly to organizational learning capacity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004), narrative more effectively disseminates information into digestible units (Conger, 1991; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Sillince, 2006), allowing participants to learn faster. In addition, dialogical narrative, by virtue of recognizing and respecting the otherness of others, facilitates psychological safety and builds trust more rapidly than what otherwise might occur under normal circumstances (Isaacs, 1998; Schein, 1993), contributing to learning behaviors as well. Once again, only within the context of Nathan's story did David realize

the awesome gravity of his regrettable actions (v. 13), reinforcing the concept of accelerated learning through narrative (Reich, 2003). As a result, the use of narrative dialogue engenders acute awareness of others (Buber, 1958; Deetz, Simpson, & Cissna, 2004) and heightened ethical awareness (Nielsen, 1990; Olsen & Morgan, 2012), making dialogical leadership the preferred method to address ethical blindness within organizational structures.

Embedding Dialogical Leadership

As Nathan's example testified, dialogical leadership presents a model for creating what Bazerman (2014) referred to as the "noticing organization" (p. 119) as an antidote to the moral distancing to which leaders and organizational members alike so frequently fall prey. The intent of the noticing organization, of course, resides in transforming ethical character and outcomes as opposed to simply suppressing unethical behavior. The key, as Argyris (1976) asserted, involves introducing feedback and stimulating double-loop learning—both of which noticing organizations accomplish. Consequently, applying the principles of dialogical leadership presents several practical guidelines for enabling an ethical organization.

Stay Visible

Because of their position, leaders often lack an appropriate peer group or find difficulty in relating to the rest of the organization (Kets de Vries, 1989). As a result, like David, they might withdraw into self-imposed seclusion, whether purposefully or unconsciously. In either event, the loss of external feedback dampens, if not entirely extinguishes, otherwise ethical perspectives. For this reason, leaders must resist the temptation to become islands unto themselves. On the contrary, by surrounding themselves with those who will hold them accountable, leaders maintain precious contact with the organization and ensure that a necessary check-and-balance mechanism exists. Entering into a covenant relationship with a few unfailing yet brutally honest allies anchors leaders and prevents them from plummeting over the edge of ethical impropriety. Reciprocally, upholding ethical values and behaviors sets the tone for organizational conduct (Morrison, 2001), providing members with an exemplary model to emulate (Voegtlin, Patzer, & Scherer, 2012). In this way, leaders remain faithful to Trinitarian ideals and therefore invite organizational communion to occur.

Slow the Tempo Down

At the same time, in the frantic pace of the modern environment, ethical failures often occur simply due to lack of appropriate consideration (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). The key to recognizing and/or resisting unethical urges rests

in decelerating the decision-making process. Just as Nathan demonstrated, storytelling interrupts and slows the flow of time (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Boje, 2012), allowing ethical sensibilities to percolate and eventually overtake more insidious intentions. Leaders in turn benefit from entering a dialogic container as impulses to overreact and potentially attack accusers or offenders are tempered significantly as well (Isaacs, 1998; Schein, 1993). In the end, rather than jumping headlong into a questionable decision or confrontation over unethical behavior, dialogic leaders press the pause button, so to speak, in order to induce a dialogic environment which stimulates further contemplation of an ethical course of action (Nielsen, 1990).

Encourage Reflection

In concert with decelerating the decision-making process, dialogic leaders harness storytelling to impress listeners with the gravity of unethical actions. It is here where the otherness of others comes to the forefront of consideration. Somewhat akin to Socratic Method, storytelling causes listeners to engage in deep thinking and reflection (Daudelin, 1996; Swidler, 2012), amplifying openness to alternative ethical perspectives (Trammel, 2015). Christ, in fact, intended His parables to produce the same effect (Fønnebø, 2011). As thoughts stir, listeners begin to imagine themselves in the place of story characters, producing a conscientious and sympathetic response. Clearly David experienced the powerfully ethical pull of Nathan's story and, as a result of his sympathy for the poor man's plight, began the journey back to ethical awareness. Indeed, as Tumblin (2007) suggested, implementing a Trinitarian approach to leadership necessitates extending the grace necessary to create existential space within which change might occur. This is exactly what dialogic leadership accomplishes.

Rehearse Ethical Situations

As a proactive measure, Ncube and Wasburn (2006) recommended that small-group mentoring provides an exceptional platform from which to engage organizational members in dialogue and rehearse ethical decision-making. The mentoring environment, if executed effectively, can be used to simulate the stress of potential ethical dilemmas, affording both leaders and constituents the opportunity to enter into dialogic containers wherein alternate decisions and their consequences might be explored. Although enacted in a virtual environment, such practices nonetheless create "crucible experiences" (Mendenhall et al., 2013, p. 19) that trigger the development of mental-muscle memory (Reichard et al., 2015) should similar circumstances occur in the future. In this way, dialogic rehearsal induces organizational learning, generates organizational cohesion, and ultimately stimulates ethical behaviors. Like

any other discipline, practicing ethical conduct leads to virtuous performance when the pressure mounts.

Realizing Authentic Ethical Transformation

In the end, dialogical leadership involves an authentic quality which includes a mixture of self-awareness, reflection and humility (Collins, 2001; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Olsen & Morgan, 2012; Trammel, 2015), allowing organizational members to transform in the process (Berkovich, 2014; Mitra, 2013). The picture of David's remarkable change from diabolical murderer to humble penitent speaks volumes about the power of dialogical leadership to drastically alter the ethical nature of individuals and organizations. Similarly, Strom (2006) and Currie (2003) elaborated the concept of dialogical grace which fosters openness and cooperation yet constrains jealousy and strife. No matter what the designation, dialogical leadership integrates a paradoxical combination of corporate and individual interests, producing unexpected and extraordinary outcomes. Within such an environment, in Tumblin's (2007) estimation, "transformation becomes inevitable" and moral isolation "fades into" galvanized organizational "unity" (p. 72) of unsurpassed ethical character.

Conclusion

Rooted in the vibrant unity of the Trinity, dialogical leadership, by its very nature, occurs in the midst of community. As members cooperate together to co-create reality, they establish values which correspond to that reality. Incorporating the concept of the noticing organization, through dialogical leadership, community members guard against ethical blindness and use dialogic storytelling to challenge behaviors which contradict core values. At the same time, dialogical leadership allows for the otherness of others to permeate the conversation, precipitating an understated yet crucial tenderness which encourages trust and sharing without negating individual contributions.

Although leaders may isolate themselves and subsequently engage in unethical conduct, ethical failure never occurs in isolation. Much like the example of David and Nathan demonstrated, moral lapses victimize the entire organization, and members often persist in unethical behavior without full comprehension of the gravity of their actions. As an antidote, organizational members must be vigilant and resolute in watching for the signs of ethical blindness, forming a noticing organization. However, as opposed to confronting ethical misconduct combatively, dialogical leadership attempts to preserve and strengthen the fabric of community through narrative dialogue aimed at raising ethical awareness and therefore inhibiting unethical behavior.

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