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THE INFLUENCE OF PRAYER ON LEADERS

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Abstract

This short paper provides literature about the role of prayer on local, national, and international leaders by synthesizing scholarly research up to 2021. Prayer is a common denominator among sectors, countries, cultures, communication styles, socioeconomics, and religious affiliations of all persons and is central to understanding how to enhance well-being and effective leadership. It is natural for people to link the concept to a religious belief system. However, the scope of this literature does not focus on religion or meditation. Throughout literature, leaders who pray had commonalities that included: being centered, going inward to seek guidance from a higher power, and relying on faith.

A doctoral candidate in physics is said to have asked Albert Einstein for ideas about a potential dissertation topic. “Dr. Einstein, “I am supposed to research a topic upon which no one else has written, but it seems as if every possible area of inquiry has already been taken. What should I write about?” Einstein replied, “Find out about prayer, someone needs to find out about prayer” (Nunes, 2009, p. 53).

Prayer is not often discussed in academia or the workplace, yet it constitutes the core values and beliefs of individuals, worldwide. Pew Research Center (2014) reported that of 102 countries surveyed, on average 55% of Americans prayed daily, higher than every other country. Moreover, in 2008, over 90% of Americans engaged in prayer (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2004). This means it is probable that a majority of employees in any company, organization, and University pray. Research has shown that individuals who pray have a more positive outlook on life, report feeling healthier and less anxious, have a greater purpose in life, and are more confident when making career decisions and exploring career options (McCullough, 1995). This literature review focuses on the impact that prayer has on individuals in leadership roles. Prayer has shown to affect leaders who face challenges in the workplace and oversee policy development across the globe, from presidents and scientists to authors and historical figures.

Definition of Terms

Prayer is defined as an address in word or thought or an internal exchange (Rohr, 2019). It is described as a conversation with or statement to a higher power, as well as having faith or trust in someone or something. It is interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, styles of communication that I teach in communication courses. The word prayer may evoke preconceptions of its meaning; it is natural for people to link the concept to a religious belief system. However, this research does not focus on religions or meditation. According to Zed

(2016), meditation is a type of prayer that uses techniques that includes breathe work to clear the mind, achieve a state of relaxation, and reduce stress.

In Be My Guest (1957), former CEO of Hilton Hotels Conrad Hilton stated that prayer is a means of communication. It involves thoughtful silence and observing deep feelings and an inner voice of truth (Delbecq et al., 2004). Levy (2000) describes prayer as being deeply engaged, practicing regular reflection, and connecting with “the inner quiet” (pp. 130-131). Moreover, according to Author and Psychotherapist Dr. Will Miller, prayer is being present or self-aware; it is the power of being in the now and looking at reality. “Prayer, being centered means being within yourself and not looking at your identity through somebody else. It clarifies who you are talking to, and it is true in every belief system. No matter what system it is: written out prayers, patterns of praying, to whom you’re praying, how you visualize to whom you are praying, what they all have absolutely in common is to pull away from the world and to be within yourself and to take stock in where you are and what your values are (Miller, 2014).”

Leadership has many definitions. For this article, it is defined as, “...a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2004, p. 3).” Leaders who are effective and ethical are in high demand and “...change the way people think about what is possible (p. 10).” Leadership it is a lifelong process of discovering and carrying out one’s deeply held values and beliefs that affect personal, public, and professional spheres of life. Authentic leaders have similar values for their personal, profession, and public lives, which interface and is a necessary agent of change in an ever-evolving world where boundaries are blurring between these three spheres. A leader who is balanced and centered is a valuable resource in today’s global society. According to Delbecq et al (2004), “The daily life of leaders encompasses constant decisions: to share or not to share information, to act or delay, to

confront or avoid, to promote from within or from outside, to centralize or decentralize, to open or close specific company locations (p. 146).” Relying on analytical tools for decision-making is no longer an only option; rather, leaders must integrate “wisdom, human sensitivity, and value premises for effective leadership (p. 146).”

Literature Review

Prayer pervades societal and cultural systems and brings together individuals from all disciplines and countries. Research has shown the impact of prayer on creating centered and balanced leaders. Leaders of organizations, who are considered to handle stress well, have reported using prayer as a major coping mechanism. According to Miller (2014), there is no question that prayer serves leaders many purposes. First, it can help leaders resolve conflict. Miller claims that being centered is the most optimal place to be, especially as a leader, and leaders who are not self-reflective become vulnerable and, thereby, cannot handle conflict as effectively.

Next, prayer transcends political party lines and religious affiliations. According to Author Eboo Patel (2007), “Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, the Aga Khan” were people of deep faith (p. XVII). Moreover, they were all of different faiths and became leaders at a young age. According to Newsweek (2001), shortly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers on September 11th, 2001, President George W. Bush invited clergymen of 27 different faiths to pray privately with him. During the prayer circle they prayed for patience, wisdom, strength, and clear thinking. Prayer has also played a role in President Barack Obama’s faith journey by guiding him to Chicago to “...work with poverty in hard-hit communities...It led me to Michelle -- the love of my life -- and blessed us with two extraordinary daughters. It led me to public service.” According to Obama, the longer

he serves, "...especially in moments of trial or doubt...", the more thankful he is in a power greater than himself (Obama, 2014, para 10)." Former U.S. Senator and President of the American Red Cross, Elizabeth Dole, relied on praying to a higher power when facing challenges. "To me it's very important to know I have a source of strength beyond my own. When I'm undertaking a difficult assignment or making a tough decision, I'm glad I don't have to rely on my own energy, wisdom, and judgment (Kehler, 2014, para 37)."

A commonality among many leaders is that prayer, thought, and action are interconnected. Business Professor, Author, and Behavior Coach, Beverly Flaxington (2012) stated in her book Make Your Shift, when she has a goal, bringing daily prayer into everything she does is essential. This sentiment is shared among business leaders. Hilton (1957) believed praying was necessary to live successfully. "You do the best you can – thinking, figuring, planning – then you pray...when I have a problem and have done all that I can to figure it, I keep listening in a sort of inside silence 'til something clicks and I feel a right answer (Hilton, 1957, p. 196)." Entrepreneur and Business Executive Ricardo Levy believes a leader's core beliefs are demonstrated and displayed in everything they do.

"Most of the time, especially in the case of the most difficult decisions, there is insufficient information, too many uncertainties, and a number of choices, none of which are clear-cut. So what does the business leader draw on to make the decision?... The answer is found not outside but within ourselves. The answer is in a quiet zone that transcends outside inputs and can give us strength and direction, a quiet zone that helps us overcome our ever-present weaknesses, biases, and fears. This zone of quiet in the midst of chaos is where our inner voice speaks."
- Levy, 2000, p. 130

Next, there is a positive correlation between prayer and an increase in motivation and goal setting among managers and employees in the workplace (McCullough, 1995; Masters, 2005). Prayer is found to play an important role as it relates to motivation (Marsden, Karagianni, & Morgan, 2007) and is positively related to an enhanced outlook on life (Conti, Matthews,

Sireci, 2003; Masters, 2005; Seskevich, Crater, & Lane, 2004). Prayer can foster a positive workplace environment and culture. Turman (2003) examined techniques and behaviors that motivated and demotivated University athletes to determine their impact on team cohesion. Turman interviewed 12 University football players, and 10 out of 12 said that praying as a team before and after games increased and helped maintain cohesion. Results of the study stated that prayer was the most effective coaching strategy for decreasing conflict, separation, animosity, and prejudice among teammates.

Literature about this topic is limited and there is much to be explored. Einstein stated that although scientists attribute every occurrence to the laws of nature rather than to prayer, knowledge is limited, and he held the belief that a spirit superior to man exists, which rests on faith. To date, literature revealed that leaders who pray have similarities such as being centered, going inward, seeking guidance from a higher power, and relying on their faith.

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