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Management as a Calling

Adam Smith began his classic work, *The Wealth of Nations*, with the claim that the greatest increases in productivity come from increases in the specialization of labor. A truly self-sufficient person—a Robinson Crusoe—is virtually unheard of; instead, specialization occurs within families, small communities, and certainly in modern market economies.

In several of his letters, the Apostle Paul uses language similar to Smith’s discussion of the specialization of labor. Paul says that not all are apostles and not all are prophets, but that God grants different gifts to different people for the building up of the whole body of Christ. While the gifts and callings Paul discusses in this context are spiritual in nature, the Church has developed the doctrine of *calling* further. Although in modern times the idea of calling has narrowed to be equivalent to work or occupation, the calling is an important Christian concept that can illuminate the Christian’s participation in all aspects of modern life.

Our task is to examine the doctrine of calling and to apply it to business. In particular, we examine the role of middle-level management as a calling. Without the work of managers the possibility for using highly specialized and productive labor to produce goods and services would be greatly reduced. The business historian, Alfred Chandler, has chronicled the rise of large-scale enterprises in the latter half of the 19th century, and shown how investment in management and organizational structures was essential to permit greater specialization of labor and the greater material wellbeing that accompanied it. Although middle-level managers do not set business goals, they do make it possible for large organizations to operate. We believe that such work can be seen as a calling, through which managers love their “neighbor” and contribute to the welfare of others.

I

In today’s language, calling has come to be almost synonymous with vocation. One’s calling is seen as related to one’s occupation or way to make a living. A more Biblical view of calling would be to acknowledge that a person is called to follow Christ. Karl Barth notes:

Our premise is that the word vocation is not known to the New Testament in its present meaning, i.e., in the narrower technical sense in which it denotes the definite area of man’s work. In the New Testament κλήσις always means quite unambiguously the divine calling, i.e., the act of the call of God issued in Jesus Christ by which a man is transplanted into his new state as a Christian, is made a participant in the promise (Eph. 1:7; 4:4) bound up with this new state, and assumes the duty (Eph. 4:1; 2 Pet. 1:10) corresponding to this state.¹

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, III.4. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961, p. 600.

Thus, the call of God affects the entire person and is not merely related to occupation or life work.²

Another Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, notes that we are called by God as people in particular historical circumstances. Brunner argues that the person who knows that he or she is justified by God's grace, and knows that he or she is called by God, is able to act in good conscience and can avoid the fanaticism of a reformer who believes the conditions must be altered before one can serve. Brunner writes:

“...what matters most is not the improvement of one particular place in the world, of conditions and circumstances...nor the search ‘for the right place for me,’ but the thankful acceptance of the place, at which I am now set, from the hands of Providence, as the sphere of my life, as the place in which, and according to the possibilities of which, I am to meet my neighbour in love.”³

In addition to its orientation toward service, work as vocation is understood to be a person's specific gift and assignment by God. Calvin pointed out that in the absence of a sense of calling, people are ever at the mercy of “the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne hither and thither,...its ambition.” Rather than leave us slaves to indecision or rashness, God has “assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life.” Calvin wrote that, “in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendour and value in the eye of God.”⁴

Brunner maintains an eschatological basis for the idea of calling, and claims that such a basis is necessary to protect against the process of secularization at work in the world. He states, “...in the New Testament the ‘Calling’ always means to have a ‘share in the heavenly inheritance.’”⁵ The character of our calling works itself out through service to others. That is, while serving in our role in the economic system, we ought not to forget the heavenly kingdom. “To be ‘on the spot’—working with the Eternal End in view, *that* is Christian action within the Calling.”⁶

Brunner refers to the orders of creation that God created to maintain and preserve creation. By “orders,” Brunner means that each person is born into a sphere of social and natural relations, which include legal structures, customs, habits, and families. Examples include being a son or daughter, husband or wife, farmer, lawyer, church member, and so on. While these orders are contingent, they are also real and are valuable because they create order.⁷ The orders must be effectively maintained and the Christian has a duty to cooperate in this task of preservation. “To act in his ‘office’ means to act in accordance with the legal obligations imposed by the ‘orders.’”⁸ Brunner continues:

² Two further quotations from Barth illustrate. “Vocation is the ‘place of responsibility’, the *terminus a quo* of all recognition and fulfillment of the command, the status of the man who is called to freedom by the command.” *Ibid.* p. 598. “That a man's vocation is exhausted in his profession is not more true than that God's calling which comes to him is simply an impulsion to work. He will always live in widely different spheres if he receives the divine calling and is obedient to it.” *Ibid.* p. 599.

³ Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*. Translated by Olive Wyon. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1937, p. 203.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 10, par. 6.

⁵ Brunner, p. 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*

“Every human being has an ‘office,’ just as every human being grows out of the community of his or her own people, and can only live within this community. If the Christian’s ‘official duty’ causes pain and perplexity to his conscience, it must simply be endured... There certainly *is* an insoluble dualism between the law of the orders and the commandment of love; but since this contradiction is based upon the sin of all men, it must also be borne by all.”⁹

The Christian may want to act always directly out of love, but the “office” held by the person may not permit this. The orders are there to provide order to society; so we must accept the fact that our duty often conflicts with the ideal. “I must behave differently to my neighbour in my capacity as a judge, a policeman, a bank official, a schoolmaster, etc., from the way I would behave towards him in a ‘private’ relationship—as man to man. But consideration for the nation as a whole, of which my neighbour also is a member, requires this distinction.”¹⁰

The Christian is called upon to serve his or her neighbor. Can work in a business or large corporation be conceived of as service to neighbor? Brunner would answer affirmatively, “Our fundamental service to our neighbour consists in taking part in the production and the appropriation of goods within the natural system of the division of labour or the order of callings which arises out of co-operation and exchange.”¹¹ Brunner sounds like Adam Smith when he writes:

It is a divine method of education which forces people, through necessity, to come together, even where in a selfish way they only seek themselves, and indeed He uses their very egoism itself to accustom them to community and to exercise them in it. And it is the Divine Wisdom of the Creator that He has so arranged the natural process of production and appropriation, in co-operation and exchange, that even one who only works for himself is working in reality for the whole. The believer ought to perceive this, and he should then absorb this secret will of his Creator into his own conscious will. This is what is meant by the expression: to fulfill one’s calling to ‘the glory of God and the good of one’s neighbour.’”¹²

Lester DeKoster defines work as, “...the form in which we make ourselves useful to others.”¹³

But what if the sinfulness of the particular circumstances we are in makes it impossible to serve God in these orders? Brunner admits the possibility of such a situation but describes it as an extreme case. All circumstances are entangled in sin, and “...there is *no* calling which does not raise difficult questions in our minds, questions which the individual cannot answer because he cannot alter the said conditions; we must

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 253. We do not want to exaggerate the similarity between Brunner and Smith since Brunner was very critical of modern capitalistic societies. He also was very critical of the socialist societies that existed in his lifetime.

¹³ Lester DeKoster, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life*. Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 1982, p. 3. The proper orientation of all vocations to service has long been prominent in Christian teaching. Thus, in Pope John Paul’s *Redemptor Hominis*, we read that Christians participate in Christ’s mission by “rediscovering in [themselves] and others the special dignity of our vocation that can be described as ‘kingship.’ This dignity is expressed in readiness to serve, in keeping with the example of Christ...”[#21].

realize that fundamentally exactly the same could be said of every man-made calling.”¹⁴
Brunner offers an example:

“The judge must deliver his sentence in accordance with the law in its present state—even though ‘personally’ he may be convinced that this present law is unjust. He does not make any ‘compromise’ when he acts in this way—that is, if he is really acting in the spirit of faith. For he knows that at the moment he cannot create a better system of law, but that in this world law is necessary; but he also knows that so long as the people who frame the laws are unjust—that is, to the end of our life on earth—there will be no truly just system of law.”¹⁵

Calling has a broader application than is often used today. A person is called to follow Christ, and this calling comes to a unique individual in a specific place and time. A person may be a husband, father, teen-ager, employee, or homemaker. A person may hold several “offices” and the requirements of the offices likely differ. The Lutheran and the Reformed notions of calling emphasize that the tasks undertaken in a specific order may require behavior that is different from what a person would be expected to do if in a personal relationship with another. Jesus commands us not to judge, but if a person is a Judge, he or she will have to judge another. That is part of the “order” in which he or she is called.

According to Luther, vocation represents a call for Christians to use, “in trust,” whatever particular resources and responsibilities God has given them. Thus, whether rulers or simple workers, people are called to specific “offices and stations” (#19), where they are “not placed...to choose their own pleasure, but solely for the service of God.”

In the context of *service*, vocations are callings to follow the example of Jesus. However, the Lutheran theologian and ethicist, Robert Benne, warns Christians of a dangerous temptation—namely, to misidentify the unique vocation of Jesus with their own. Unlike Jesus, who avoided making certain commitments to family, job, and citizenship, Christians must exercise their responsibility precisely within such circles of commitment. “We would be irresponsible, if not blasphemous,” writes Benne, “to imitate [Jesus’] vocation. We are not called to represent all persons before God or to redeem the whole creation through one decisive act of sacrificial love. We are to live as Christians in the *limited and specific places of responsibility we have been given*.¹⁶

One may wish to reform the “order” in which he or she operates. However, the ability to do so is not entirely within the individual’s control. Our work in an “order” involves cooperation with other people. The more people we have to cooperate with, the less influence any one person has on the practices followed in the order. Out of the respect they owe others, who are also created in God’s image, Christians should go beyond secular norms. However, the regulations associated with an “order” still need to be followed. For example, as college professors, we do not believe we can grade on the basis of grace, but grade students on the basis of performance, or law. Having said that, as Christians we can also show students, whether “A” students or failing students, that we

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253-254.

¹⁶ Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988, p. 112, emphasis added. As we will see later, the warning not to mistake one’s personal vocation as messianic does not imply that Jesus leaves Christians without direction regarding the practice of faith, love and hope through their jobs and professions.

regard them as “neighbors” and as people created and loved by God. Likewise, we can help them hone their gifts and discover their vocations. We see no reason why these principles of vocation—seen as service, embedded in orders—cannot be applied to managers in modern corporate America.

II

An emerging literature in business puts the concept of *leader* in a perspective that is at the same time more “down to earth,” and also more inspiring than the popular view. It avoids focusing attention on spectacular CEOs who have made a name for themselves as *change* agents, by exercising the power of their personal vision, and by wielding their authority from the top of an organization. Instead, the new literature examines leaders—working at many organizational levels—who achieve results by exercising the skills and virtues of what one writer calls, “quiet leadership.”¹⁷ Of all the concepts of leadership, this one bears the closest relationship to the Christian notion of vocation (or calling) as it applies to managers.

There is an important affinity between Christian portrayals of vocation and the new literature on “everyday leaders.”¹⁸ It describes leadership in terms of the following methods and attitudes¹⁹:

- Effective leaders do not impose their vision on others or misuse their power to punish and reward employees according to their eagerness to embrace that vision.
- Effective leaders exercise the “lowly” but critical virtues of patience, care, prudence, self-restraint, disciplined tenacity, humility, and trustworthiness.
 - *Patience and disciplined tenacity* allow them to focus and persist in pursuit of long-term goals and relationships, rather than “buying” short-term advantages or allegiances.
 - *Self-restraint* leads them to carefully investigate “problems,” by learning from the expertise and experience of others, rather than seizing on a course of action that has guts appeal but is unlikely to provide a lasting solution.
 - *Humility* enables them to work in teams, with a shared sense of vision and responsibility, rather than presuming to be the all-purpose expert.
 - *Prudence, care, and trustworthiness* press them to carefully consider the costs and benefits for all stakeholders of each approach to a decision. They willingly accept the inevitable ambiguousness of every situation, in terms of competing values, their own limited powers to change events, and their commitment to integrity.

Since the time of Adam Smith, economists have demonstrated the productivity of specialization and trade. We believe that this economic doctrine relates well to the Christian idea of calling, described above. It is also key to understanding the particular vocation of those called to be “everyday leaders” in the arena of management in business (as well as other organizations.)

¹⁷ Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr. *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

¹⁸ Vicki R. TenHaken, “Everyday Leaders.” *International Business and Economics Research Journal*, 2 (May 2003), pp. 87-96.

¹⁹ This list of virtues is adapted from Badaracco’s book, *Leading Quietly*, pp. 169-179.

Smith observed that where production efforts are organized in such a way that workers specialize in particular tasks, daily output of goods tends to be higher than where each worker attempts to cover all tasks. With specialization, less time is spent moving from task to task; skills are better developed because attention is devoted to particular tasks; and close attention paid to specific jobs increases the likelihood that more productive methods will be generated.

Smith argued that in market-oriented economies that are based on firm foundations in law and morality, productivity gains in enterprises typically raise the living standards of ordinary people: they earn higher wages and pay lower prices for many goods. This is a moral, as well as technical achievement, he argued, since ordinary people are the primary source and goal of the wealth of nations. Smith carried the model further, demonstrating that specialization in the production of certain goods and services by firms, regions, and nations (and the allocation of those goods and services through local, regional, and international trade) normally raises both overall output and average family living standards.

Adam Smith focused primarily on the advantage of specialization for raising *production* levels and living standards. Below, we intend to show how the geographic expanse of markets and the growth of average enterprise size have led to a differentiation and refinement of management skills and categories, far beyond the owner-manager-and-laborer model that Smith had in mind. We firmly believe that Christians can both applaud material advances made possible with the growth of specialization—across and within professions, including management—and also affirm the practice of Godly values within and through each particular calling.

In the new literature of “everyday leadership,” the most relevant virtues are usually homely ones, like those mentioned above, rather than heroic virtues or attitudes often attributed to leaders who are said to have built or saved companies. Furthermore, everyday leadership shares with vocation a common realism about situations, expertise, and values. Values are not useful without knowledge, skills, and attention to systems (or orders) within which one’s work is embedded. Thus, Benne refers to “technical excellences,” which are required for the effective practice of any calling:

“These technical ‘excellences’ have moral dimensions but cannot be reduced to moral capacities. There are worldly practices that simply must be mastered in order for the social order to work. The church has no particular expertise in them nor does it have a blueprint stipulating their exact shape. These ‘excellences’ have an integrity of their own that *cannot be replaced by good moral intentions*.²⁰ Furthermore, Badaracco adds that quiet leaders are realistic about their own mixed motives and those of others:

“To some, this perspective seems pessimistic, cynical, and disheartening, but this view actually reflects an astonishing convergence of classical wisdom and contemporary science. The old Testament and ancient Greek tragedy portray men and women as fractured, complicated creatures, pulled in different directions by a multitude of hopes and fears, wants and needs.”²¹

Quiet leaders take mixed motives into account. Their keen awareness that motives are not all “pure,” does not, however, leave them in a state of moral arrest. Their “challenge

²⁰ Benne, p. 71. Emphasis added.

²¹ Badaracco, p. 40.

is not to suppress self-interests and low motives, but to harness, channel, and direct them.”²²

Like the writers who describe the traits and actions of ordinary leaders, Adam Smith was a realist about morals, motives, and systems. On the one hand, Smith argued that people should (and generally do) pay attention to their moral compass, which requires direction and reinforcement from religion and the law. On the other hand, he demonstrated how competitive forces in market systems harness natural human desires to look after one’s own interests for the good of all. Furthermore, the immediate circle of individual interests naturally broadens to include wider circles of interest and responsibility, such as family, friends, co-workers, community, and nation.

One of the advantages of the view that vocation and specialization are embedded in values and social systems (like markets) is that the calling of leaders can be seen to be holy—not in spite of their own limitations of place, time, expertise, and “competing” responsibilities and values, but precisely *because* of those unique features. As Smith argued, the very “narrowness” of specialization is an advantage to productivity. However, it is also the very stuff of one’s calling. Here, where nobody else can possibly know the special abilities, character, and personal circumstances of the members of a work team, ordinary manager-leaders are privileged to be able to facilitate a collective shaping of vision, responsibility, and action. As mentors and facilitators, they respect members of the team. After all, God also calls the individual team members, each of whom is responsible for discerning and freely choosing their own commitments within a particular profession, setting, and circle of responsibility.

Furthermore, Christians understand that their vocations, taken together, are intended to equip the body of Christ for service to the world. Each member of the body, as St. Paul wrote, has its special function, and is not called to order the body about as if it, not Christ, were the head. It is the Spirit of Christ who knits together the body’s functions and coordinates its acts for service. The Incarnation of God in Jesus both limited what he could do while on earth and demonstrated God’s saving love for particular individuals. Scripture and the church teach that through the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s mission to persons everywhere now extends far beyond the confines of the villages and culture of first century Palestine.

The pervasive power of the Holy Spirit, and love of Christ, accomplishes God’s purposes through billions of individuals, who are called to particular professions, jobs, and work teams. Knowing this should be an inspiration for everyday leaders wherever they find themselves. With absolute trust in God’s calling and shaping them to perform their unique duties, ordinary leaders can intensively and vigorously apply themselves. They can invest in uniting their skills, and those of their team, to the tasks and visions of the larger organizations—each with its unique responsibilities to clients, customers, employees and stockholders.

III

Alfred Chandler documents the rise of the large industrial enterprise in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century.²³ Prior to the expansion of markets made possible by

²² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

innovations in communication (telegraph and later telephone) and land transportation (railroads), business enterprises were small and run by the owners. Some larger enterprises had foremen in factories, but that was the exception rather than the rule. The partnership was the dominant legal form for commercial enterprises. “The partnership, normally a family affair, consisted of two or three close associates. It was a contractual arrangement that was changed when a partner died, or decided to go into another business... The partnership was used by all types of businesses, from the small country storekeepers to the great merchant bankers who dominated the Anglo-American trade.”²⁴

The railroad was the first large-scale business enterprise in the U.S. The geographic scope of the railroads meant that a single person could not effectively monitor and coordinate the movement of the trains. Safety also was an important issue. Accidents led to government inquiries and internal investigations by the railroads themselves. A committee for the Western Railroad called on the firm, “...to fix ‘definite responsibilities for each phase of the company’s business, drawing solid lines of authority and communication for the railroad’s administration, maintenance, and operation.’”²⁵ The Western Railroad became the first American business enterprise to operate through a formal administrative structure that was operated by full-time, salaried managers.²⁶

The expansion of railroads permitted firms to exploit economies of scale that led to larger production facilities. Further, the growth of the economy and the development of larger markets encouraged technical innovation that revolutionized American industry. As organizations became large, and per-unit costs fell with larger volumes of output, firms sought to secure customers and distribution networks to customers in order to maintain the large volume of output. Chandler shows how first-movers in many industries expanded by means of backward vertical integration, or forward vertical integration (or both), to be able to maintain the high “throughput” that was necessary to keep costs low. The result was the development of the modern industrial enterprise. Chandler defines this enterprise as:

“...a collection of operating units, each with its own specific facilities and personnel, whose combined resources and activities are coordinated, monitored, and allocated by a hierarchy of middle and top managers. It is the existence of this hierarchy that makes the activities and operations of the whole enterprise more than the sum of its operating units.”²⁷

An operating unit is a factory, a research laboratory, or a sales or purchasing office, which operates at a specific geographic place and usually with a single function. It has its own administrative office, managers and staff, and its own set of accounting books. Theoretically, it could serve as an independent firm, but is actually part of a larger enterprise. The number of the operating units determined the number of middle and top managers the enterprise hired.

²³ See Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977. The themes are expanded in Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990.

²⁴ Chandler, *Invisible Hand*, p. 36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97, quoting from a committee report for the Western Railroad entitled, “Report on Avoiding Collisions and Governing the Employees.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁷ Chandler, *Scale and Scope*, p. 15.

Chandler provides some case studies to illustrate how the process of expansion occurred in the decades around the turn of the Twentieth Century.²⁸ Lower level managers tended to perform the tasks that the men who owned and ran a single independent factory or enterprise performed. “But the tasks of the middle managers were entirely new. Middle managers had to pioneer in the ways of modern administrative coordination.”²⁹ This new type of managers devised ways to coordinate the high volume-flow from suppliers of raw materials to ultimate consumers. They also developed ways to expand markets and to speed up the production and distribution processes. These activities of middle managers led to lower costs, increased output, and increased efficiency in distribution that contributed greatly to the rising material standards of living during this time period.

IV

William H. Whyte begins his 1956 book *The Organization Man* with the observation that: “the white-collar people [who] take vows of organization life...are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions.” He maintains that the group of people who have since come to be called middle managers are “the dominant members of our society...and it is their values which will set the American temper.”³⁰ Some 45 years later, research shows that the most influential factor in a person’s satisfaction at work is the quality of his or her immediate manager – greater than the leadership of the organization or even pay.³¹ The work of the middle manager in business is not “service to neighbor” only because it makes possible the operation of large organizations in producing greater material wellbeing for society (as we have just seen). Such work also has a major role in directly contributing to the welfare of others.

Given the influence of middle managers on both the success of our organizations and the satisfaction of the people who work in them, why do they receive so little recognition? Both the media and business education focus almost exclusively on those who lead organizations and their executive teams. The contributions of middle managers not only are ignored, but also often maligned. Warren Bennis’ best-selling book *On Becoming a Leader*, says: “I tend to think of the differences between leaders and managers as the differences between those who master the context and those who surrender to it.... The manager is a copy; the leader is an original. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager imitates; the leader originates. The manager is the good soldier; the leader is his own person.”³²

Middle managers are disproportionately affected by corporate restructuring, reengineering and downsizing, in part because those making the decisions about which jobs an organization can do without have been seduced by this view of middle managers as not adding much value. However, middle managers are the people in whom the bulk

²⁸ Chandler, *Visible Hand*, p. 381 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

³⁰ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 3.

³¹ “*The Compelling Offer: A Quantitative Analysis of the Career Preferences and Decisions of High Value Employees*,” Corporate Leadership Council (Corporate Executive Board, Washington, D.C. 1999). A survey of 11,000 employees in 200 FORTUNE 500 companies on factors that attract and retain professional employees rated Manager Quality at 5.02 on a 6-point scale. Base pay was 4.6; Total compensation and benefits, 3.8; Company reputation 3.65; and Co-worked quality, 3.54.

³² Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. 1989), 44-45.

of corporate knowledge resides – as these organizations eventually discover when they end up hiring new people to fill the very positions they eliminated in their restructuring zeal. Middle managers build up their expertise through daily attention to the details of planning, organizing, leading and controlling. They cannot do their job well without building a store of knowledge regarding how to address all the problems and opportunities that come along, whether little or large, mundane or unusual. They are not simply yes-men and women carrying out the directions of others. Their jobs do not come with built in time outs to check with some higher authority before making decisions. Such centralized decision making may have worked in the mid-20th century, but in today’s world of “just-in-time” manufacturing and “real-time” business information it would be as outmoded as typing carbon copy letters or producing mimeographed employee newsletters.

Middle management may be perceived as a boring, thankless, unrecognized calling. But a calling it is, perhaps precisely because of its anonymity, epitomized by “the man in the gray flannel suit.” Abraham Zaleznik in an award winning *Harvard Business Review* article describes managers as becoming “emotionally detached from their work” in their efforts to “create an ordered corporate structure.”³³ We believe that nothing could be farther from the truth. The middle manager’s main role is to serve others: the organization and its goals, as well as the people being supervised and their needs. As such, they are *very* emotionally involved in the true “life” of the organization.

When the middle manager’s work is done well, no one notices. Doing their work well means there is nothing *to* notice – other than a smoothly running operation populated by satisfied workers. No grand new strategies or risky decisions or bold endeavors. Says Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*: “For these people, work is about what they *build*, create and contribute, comfortable with the idea that most people won’t even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts.”³⁴

Take, for example, a manager of a new product development team. Such a team is usually comprised of professionals from within and outside the organization: designers, engineers, suppliers, purchasing agents, manufacturing specialists, computer analysts, financial analysts, marketing specialists, etc. Such a manager is given a direction to fulfill, often with unrealistic time lines and budget constraints. It is her job to plan the project, coordinate the disparate skills and personalities of the people on the team, allocate tasks and resources, as well as to make decisions all along the way when this part of the original design can’t be engineered safely or that part can’t be manufactured efficiently. Halfway through the project, the marketing representative comes in with ideas for changes to better address new customer needs. Should the changes be made even though it will likely mean the project will not be completed on time, or if costly re-dos will be required?

In these and many other situations, the manager must decide how to do what is right for the customer and the company. And often the “right” decisions come at a cost to her personal performance evaluation, if it means not completing the project on time or within budget. Further, her interpersonal skills in interactions with each person on the team set the tone for the team dynamics, favorable relationships among team members,

³³ Abraham Zaleznik, “Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?” *Harvard Business Review*, May-June vol. 64 1986: 48-49.

³⁴Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2001), 36.

and their ability to meet new challenges. The manager's integrity is exhibited on a daily basis in determining how differences are resolved or how to motivate frustrated team members. She slowly builds trust in her management ability through honest communication, evidence of concern for the organization *and* for her teammates, and delivering results.³⁵

If one were to ask high school or college students about their career aspirations, it is doubtful any would answer that their desire is to become a middle manager in corporate America. A recent television commercial mocked this as a possible answer to the proverbial "what do you want to be when you grow up?" question. However, a substantial number of students will eventually find themselves in that very role. How will they find meaning and satisfaction in a job few aspire to, and on which society seems to place so little value?

Middle managers find meaning in what they do because God works in partnership with them to contribute to society through the production of their organization and by creating an environment in which their workers can thrive. Their work is not the stuff that attracts the attention of the media and it has also been largely ignored by business education, which for the most part focuses on strategy development and training people to be leaders of organizations. Middle managers may desire, but do not often receive recognition or acclaim. They work on a different scale than the leaders who do gain such attention, but they are just as necessary.

As Joseph Badaracco says in his book *Leading Quietly*:

"Every profession and walk of life has its great figures, leaders, and heroes. Think of the men and women who create or transform major companies.... We exalt these individuals as role models and celebrate their achievements. They represent, we feel, the true model of leadership. But do they really? I ask this because, over the course of a career spent studying management and leadership, I have observed that the most effective leaders are rarely public heroes. These men and women aren't high-profile champions of causes, and don't want to be. They move patiently, carefully, and incrementally. They do what is right – for their organizations, for the people around them, and for themselves – inconspicuously and without casualties.... And since many big problems can only be resolved by a long series of small efforts, quiet leadership, despite its seemingly slow pace, often turns out to be the quickest way to make an organization – and the world – a better place."³⁶

The efforts of middle managers may not be recorded for posterity and they may not even be noticed by those around them, but they matter. They matter because these everyday leaders keep our organizations running.

Ordinary leaders need not wait to feel the fullness of their high calling until they occupy the status, and enjoy the visibility, of celebrity CEOs. Like the Kingdom of God, the fullness of vocation is already at hand, only to be recognized for what it is. Furthermore, ordinary leaders can find meaning in what they do precisely because God is at work—even through imperfect systems in organizations and markets—to accomplish

³⁵ Robert Bruce Shaw, *Trust in the Balance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 21.

³⁶ Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 1.

His purposes on earth. That is God’s promise—to work in partnership with each of us for the blessing of the entire world.

V

The Church is the community of those who have been called out by God to be His children and His servants. If we are to love God with our whole heart, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then part of our service to God involves serving other people. It is common to think of such service as involving specifically “Christian” or “spiritual” activities. However, the doctrine of calling suggests that we serve others through our faithfulness to our calling. Further, our calling, although not limited to occupation or job, includes the service to others we perform in our occupations. We have argued that this applies to middle level managers as well as to others.

As Emil Brunner noted, when we participate in the “orders” we are cooperating with others. Economists also see cooperation as an essential part of human economic existence due to the productivity of labor specialization. This includes the specialization of the butcher, the butcher, and the candle maker, as well as the specialization that takes place within large-scale enterprises. We have noted the productivity of managers as an important source of American economic growth, as documented by the business historian, Alfred Chandler. Finally, we discussed the lack of prestige often associated with the practice of management. We argued that the focus on charismatic leadership is misplaced, and that a greater focus on the important work performed by managers is needed. We challenge those who prepare students for futures as everyday leaders to hold before them their calling—one that is inspired and directed by God for service to others.