

Helping Students Integrate Faith Practice with Business Practice: A Case Study in Nehemiah

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Abstract

The genesis of modern management theory occurred at the advent of the 20th century, but modern management principles can be evidenced centuries prior to this. As chronicled in the Bible, Nehemiah followed Henri Fayol's four functions of management in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem in the 5th century BC. As a method of biblical integration the Book of Nehemiah can be used as a case study in management. A study of this approach found that this can be an effective means of practically integrating Scripture into a management course.

Introduction

Often students choose faith-based institutions of higher education in hopes of avoiding the common disconnect which they experience between the "taking care of business" which our world often practices and the practices of their faith. They desire an integration of vocation and faith whenever possible and expect their professors to highlight places where God's wisdom and good business practices travel the same road. This research helps students integrate faith and business practices in two ways. First, it shows students that some business practices were clearly used by God's people thousands of years before they were "discovered" or articulated in the era of "modern management."

Secondly, this study shows ways of using a case study of the biblical book of Nehemiah to reveal Nehemiah's integration of faith practice with business practice. As a godly project manager, Nehemiah followed the classic management flow of activities from planning to organizing to leading to controlling. The effectiveness of this integrative case is also tested with graduate students in management classes to determine its most beneficial application. The research shows we can support our students' integration of faith practice with business practice while building their confidence that the two go hand in hand.

"Modern" Management Theory

Although the genesis of modern management theory occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, modern management principles can be evidenced hundreds and even thousands of years prior to that time. Henri Fayol, a French mining engineer, who became the managing director of Comentry-Fourchamboult-Decazeville, a mining and metallurgical combine, in part led in the formation of modern management theory. Fayol's work, along with the work of Frederick W. Taylor, the Father of Scientific

Management, has become known as the classical management approach (Ivancevich, Lorenzi, & Skinner, 1997). Taylor's research focused on finding the one best way to perform a job to increase efficiency, while Fayol concentrated on the challenges encountered by top-level managers in an organization (Ivancevich et al., 1997; Wren, 1994).

Since Fayol's work focused on the management of organizations, it has been termed classical organization theory. He cited fourteen principles of management: division of work; authority and responsibility; discipline; unity of command; unity of direction; subordination of individual interest to the general interest; remuneration; centralization; span of control; order; equity; stability of tenure of personnel; initiative; and *esprit de corps* (Fayol, 1916/1987; Fells, 2000; Ivancevich et al., 1997). However, Kennedy (1999) postulates that Fayol's principles of management were foreshadowed by St. Benedict, a 6th century AD monk, with the establishment of a written set of rules and guidelines by which to organize and maintain the operation of the monastery communities. Kennedy parallels St. Benedict's Rule and Fayol's fourteen principles of management. The Rule of St. Benedict consists of seventy-three chapters in which St. Benedict presented his principles, and this management approach is still being adhered to in many monasteries today. Therefore, many of Fayol's principles were communicated and practiced centuries earlier.

Fayol also separated broader organizational activities into six categories: technical, commercial, financial, security, accounting, and managerial (Breeze & Minor, 1980; Fayol, 1916/1987). The managerial activity was distinctive, and Fayol viewed management as a process for which he posited four management functions or elements. In Fayol's original work he proposed five functions: planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling (Fayol, 1916/1987; Wren, 1990, 1994, 2001). In current literature there are variations of the five functions, and they have often been commonly combined into four functions: (Creighton, Arendall, & Pray, 1995; Ivancevich et al., 1997).

1. Planning. ... managers should (a) make the best possible forecast of events that could affect the organization and (b) draw up an operating plan to guide future decisions.
2. Organizing. ... managers must determine the appropriate combination of machines, material, and humans necessary to accomplish the task.
3. Leading (Commanding). ... managers should set a good example and have direct, two-way communication with subordinates. Finally, managers must continually evaluate both the organizational structure and their subordinates, and they should not hesitate to change the structure if they consider it faulty or to fire incompetent subordinates.
4. Controlling. ... ensures that actual activities are consistent with planned activities. Fayol did not expand the idea except to state that everything should be "subject to control" (Ivancevich et al., 1997, p. 38).

Even though these four functions of management were innovative when

introduced by Fayol, evidence of these same four functions of management can be witnessed over two thousand years prior to Fayol's work in the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem led by Nehemiah in the 5th century BC. Creighton et al. (1995) examined seven biblical characters utilizing the four functions of management by analyzing the managerial behavior of Noah, Joseph, Joshua, Nehemiah, Abraham, Paul, and Jesus. This study examines God's use of just one man to accomplish the incredible by the blending of faith and sound management principles: "A Case Study in Nehemiah."

Seeing Good Business through Eyes of Faith

People of faith must avoid two extremes in looking at great accomplishments, both in life and in the Bible. First, they should avoid attributing great achievements just to a person. In a society that worships individualism and practices personality cult following, we are vulnerable to this personality idolatry. Even in biblical stories and studies, we can admire the person and achievement so much that we overlook God's influence through them, the help of others, and *the wise process* that he or she was led to follow.

The second extreme to avoid is undue confidence in the process we are using without acknowledgement of a need for God's direction. The Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-9 shows that people can accomplish incredible projects yet be in rebellion to God's wisdom. Using the book of Nehemiah as a case study helps our students notice both God working through the person and the wise process that was followed to accomplish the incredible. Faith practice in business practice can become the student's normal practice.

Nehemiah as God's Manager

Nehemiah has often been singled out for his personal leadership and resulting accomplishments. However, the emphasis primarily has been on Nehemiah's leadership qualities and has not included the process he used in leading. For example, we see leading through changes in "The message of Nehemiah: God's servant in a time of change" (Brown, 1999). Martinez (2003) identifies Nehemiah as a biblical example of great strategic leadership who is able "to discern God's will and vision for the organization and to create the environment necessary for the people to accomplish that vision" (p. 94). His "unselfish leadership" is highlighted by Kaiser (1997). We can read of "The Nehemiah Leadership Principle" which counsels us that "If God puts it in your heart to do something good, it can be done, no matter what it takes" (Mylander, 1982, p. 40). Details of Nehemiah's leadership have consumed books such as *Nehemiah: Laws of Leadership* which highlights twenty-four qualities he exhibited (Rendall, 1980). Even "Nehemiah: Master of Business Administration" focuses on his being a man of prayer, vision, action, compassion plus many other personal qualities (Yamauchi, 1979). Although studies and writings on Nehemiah are plentiful, they come out of theological circles almost exclusively. Nehemiah was also a practical manager as well as a leader.

Nehemiah, the leader, incorporated Fayol's four functions of management in the rebuilding process as is illustrated in the chart below.

Fayol's Functions of Management in the Book of Nehemiah

Chapter		Planning	Organizing	Leading	Controlling
1	Inquiry & prayer	x			
2:1-5	Asking for permission	x			
2:6-10	Asking for resources	x	x		
2:11-16	Inspecting the wall	x	x		
2:17-20	Casting vision & enlisting		x	x	
3	Teams to wall sections		x		
4	Opposition & discouragement		x	x	
5	Caring for poor/food			x	x
6:1-14	More opposition			x	x
6:15-19	Wall completed			x	x
7	Appointments & census		x	x	x
8-10	Law read & sins confessed			x	x
11	Influx of returnees				x
12	Celebration & dedication		x	x	
13	More reforms			x	x

Planning

In Chapters 1-2, after hearing of the devastation in Jerusalem, Nehemiah began to formulate a plan for the rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He began the “best possible forecast of events that could affect” (Ivancevich et al., 1997, p. 38) this initiative by praying to God, seeking permission of those in authority, and beginning to procure the needed resources. At the same time Nehemiah began to “draw up an operating plan to guide future decisions” (Ivancevich et al., 1997, p. 38) by inspecting the walls personally to determine the extent of the damage.

Organizing

Nehemiah began to “determine the appropriate combination of material and humans necessary to accomplish the task” (Ivancevich et al., 1997, p. 38) in Chapters 2-3. He shared with the Jews in Jerusalem his vision of rebuilding the walls under God’s authority. The people caught the vision that Nehemiah had for the city and joined him in the rebuilding. The people were organized into teams as the tasks (i.e. section of the wall) were divided so the repairing of the walls commenced. When confronted with opposition in Chapters 4-6, Nehemiah organized the people to defend themselves, shared the food, and kept the repairs going on the wall.

Leading

There is evidence of Nehemiah’s leadership throughout the biblical record of this project. Nehemiah directed the activities of the people, set a good example, established effective communication, continually evaluated how the task was structured, and did not

hesitate to take action when the situation warranted action. In Chapter 3 he disseminated the work; in Chapter 4 he dealt with opposition to the project; in Chapter 5 he set an example for others to follow in his generosity and compassion; in Chapter 7 he set up a structure of organization; and in Chapters 8-10, Nehemiah was proactive in re-establishing the law, making a covenant, and dedicating the walls.

Controlling

To ensure “that actual activities were consistent with planned activities” (Ivancevich et al., 1997, p. 38) a census of those available was taken and authority was delegated through the appointment of individuals to positions of responsibility in Chapter 7. The people were taught the laws of God, confessed their sins, and signed a covenant to observe and obey the commandments of God in Chapters 8-10.

Under God’s direction Nehemiah and the Jewish people effectuated an impeccable feat in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days. These timeless management functions provided a structured framework to accomplish a significant task.

Approaches to Integrating Nehemiah into the Classroom

The book of Nehemiah is an incredible resource for business students and can be an effective way to integrate faith and learning in business courses. Incorporating Nehemiah into a principles of management course allows for a natural transition, since management textbooks are often organized by the management functions of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Bateman & Snell, 2002; Brown, 2000; Griffin, 1999; Kreitner, 1998).

In a Principles of Executive Management course in a Master of Business Administration program reading the book of Nehemiah is assigned along with the textbook reading assignments. During each class meeting the Nehemiah reading assignment is part of the class discussion. In the course two case studies are assigned, one is a traditional corporate case study and the other case study is Nehemiah. In the Nehemiah case study the students focus on the four functions of management by analyzing how Nehemiah implemented each of the functions and how effective each was. In this analysis the students are required to breakdown the entire book of Nehemiah into the four classic management functions. The other case assignment in the course is a traditional case study of a corporation such as General Electric or Wal-Mart.

In this approach the student is challenged to discover the applicability of biblical principles in the academic discipline of management. From a course survey of students who had completed the MBA management course most of the students indicated that:

- Using Nehemiah as a case study helped to illustrate modern management theory
- The four functions of management are clearly evidenced in Nehemiah
- Using Nehemiah enabled them to understand that God’s wisdom clearly preceded management theory writings
- Using Nehemiah was helpful in incorporating a Christian worldview into the course.

Some individual student comments included:

- “I enjoyed comparing biblical principles to the world’s principles.”
- “Adding this increased the workload. However, this is why I am going to this college. I want the Christian worldview incorporated into my MBA experience.”
- “Nehemiah really helped out in my understanding of management in the real world.”
- “Using Nehemiah is a very effective means of integrating the Christian worldview into this course.”
- “I would like to see more Bible study implemented into course work.”

Due to the small sample size (19) of the student survey (App. A), reliable generalizations cannot be derived. Further study is needed to determine the effectiveness of this approach to biblical integration in this course. Additional research in incorporating Nehemiah in other courses, such as organizational development, organizational behavior, or strategic management, is encouraged. This study was conducted with non-traditional college students in an accelerated program, but expanding the research to include traditional college students in traditional programs could prove beneficial.

This approach is not exclusively for Christian institutions. For those teaching at non-Christian institutions, Nehemiah could be used as historical or literary confirmation of early management implementation of modern management theory (Rogers, 1929). A case study approach is only one method for utilizing Nehemiah in business related courses, and other approaches should also be studied for effectiveness.

Conclusion

We can find evidence of God’s wisdom throughout good management practices. The Bible contains numerous examples of the organization and management of great projects like the ark, temples, and military campaigns. We should constantly search for ways to integrate the great stories of the power of God with key insights showing the eternal wisdom of God. Intelligent management and a mighty God are not enemies, and students seeing these working hand in hand will grow more confident that God’s ways will work in business and provide avenues for His power to be used through them. Nehemiah is one of limitless examples from Scripture of practical biblical truth. From Isaiah 55:11 “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (New International Version).

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Appendix A

Survey Results

Course Name: Principles of Executive Management

In the course, *Principles of Executive Management*, the book of Nehemiah was used as one of the case studies for the course. This survey is being used to determine the effectiveness of this approach.

About the Course

(1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree)

	1	2	3	4	5
Using Nehemiah as a case study helped to illustrate modern management theory that was presented in the course.	14	4	1	0	0
The four functions of management (planning, organizing, leading, controlling) are clearly evidenced in Nehemiah.	14	4	0	1	0
A case study of a corporation such as General Electric or Wal-Mart would have been a better method of teaching management theory than using the book of Nehemiah.	0	1	10	5	3
Using Nehemiah as a case study enabled me to understand that God's wisdom clearly preceded management theory writings.	15	3	0	1	0
Too much time in this course was spent on Nehemiah.	1	1	1	7	9
Using Nehemiah was helpful in incorporating a Christian worldview into this course.	13	4	1	1	0