

ARROGANCE IN BUSINESS: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Arrogance is an attribute that influences many businesses and the people working in these businesses. It can lead to a plethora of problems in businesses in which it is being practiced. Despite this, arrogance appears to be occurring in many organizations. The Bible in both the Old and New Testaments warns of the dangers of arrogance and arrogant behavior. This paper will examine examples of how arrogance is practiced and negatively affects a number of different businesses and different functional areas within business. It then examines Biblical references and principles concerning arrogance. Recommendations are made to help business practitioners avoid arrogance in their business decision making and create business cultures where arrogance is not practiced.

ARROGANCE

Specific definitions of arrogance are difficult to find in the social sciences literature. When mentioned in the literature references to other concepts such as pride and hubris are also noted. Bible commentaries and concordances also make references to pride when relating to this concept. The only specific definition found of arrogance says it is “feeling or an impression of superiority manifested in an overbearing manner or presumptuous claims” (Merriam-Webster, 2006). Other terms associated with this concept include haughtiness, hauteur, assumption, lordliness, presumption, disdain, insolence and conceit. Secular literature and the Bible both refer to people as being arrogant.

Morrel (2000) makes the argument that arrogance is a mental health issue as well as just a character issue:

...arrogance and ignorance always sit close together. An arrogant person cannot really know a lot, as there is so little room in their mind for ideas—they are so full of self-

admiration. They are basically very selfish and wish to have all the glory. They are focused solely upon themselves to the complete exclusion of others.

ARROGANCE IN BUSINESS

Arrogant Leadership

In the early 21st Century business scandals have become lead stories in the business press and other media. One of the reasons suggested for the illegal behavior in many of these cases was attributed at least in part to the arrogance of the leaders of these organizations (Howes, 2004). The most infamous may be the arrogant behavior exhibited at Enron. Ken Lay and others who worked for him apparently thought they were smart enough to fool other Enron employees, stockholders and government regulators about their illegal activities (McLean & Elkind 2003). The type of arrogance shown by the leaders of Enron and other organizations involved in unethical and illegal activities has been suggest by some (Fine, 2004) to be a type of mental illness.

Other recent corporate leaders who have been involved in scandals include WorldCom's Bernie Ebbers and Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski. Ebbers was convicted of securities fraud, conspiracy and filing false documents with regulators in March of 2005 (Ackman, 2005). Kozlowski was convicted of stealing more than \$600 million while serving as CEO of Tyco (Wong, 2005). Lay and Ebbers both professed to be Christians.

Although it has received more publicity in recent years, arrogant behavior and its negative consequences in business are not new. Charles Ponzi of the Ponzi scheme fame convinced consumers in 1919 that he could provide a 40% return in just 90 days compared to the 5% being paid by bank savings accounts at the time. At the height of the scheme he was taking as much as \$1 million a week. A few of the first investors were paid off to make the scheme look

legitimate. An investigation in 1920 found that Ponzi had only purchased about \$30 worth of the international mail coupons. After two trips to prison Ponzi reportedly still saw himself as being smarter than the average person and died penniless as he was writing his autobiography (SEC, n.d.).

Arrogant leaders can also be successful and not necessarily corrupt. Maccoby (2000) borrowed the Freudian concept of narcissism to describe leaders who appear to enjoy the media attention that can be associated with being the leader of a large organization. Some of Maccoby's examples of successful narcissistic leaders include Jack Welch, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. While these narcissistic traits can be good for companies that need vision and direction, such leaders tend to be sensitive to criticism, poor listeners and lack empathy.

Several signs indicate of arrogance in a CEO. First, when the CEO does what he or she wants because of his or her dominant position. This suggests that the CEO is not paying attention to the market and making moves that in the long-run may be detrimental to the organization. Second, the CEO may disrespect competitors and suppliers. This goes along with the first point that the CEO is making decisions in isolation and not paying attention to what is going on outside the organization. Third, the CEO elevates public relations over strategic concerns. All three of these signs discussed by Finkelstein (2006) are similar to the characteristics of the narcissistic leader described by Maccoby (2000).

Arrogance in Marketing

Most would agree that salespeople need to have a high level of self-confidence to be successful. Salespeople need this self-confidence to overcome rejection. However, that level of confidence can become arrogance. Some top salespeople engage in what customers may see as egotistical or arrogant behavior. Arrogance displayed to customers can lead to a loss of sales

(Cummings, 2004). The question of course is where does self-confidence end and arrogance begin? This is a difficult question to answer (Hackett, 2005).

Many firms today engage in vertical marketing integration systems that consolidate and control distribution channels for products. Stafford (2002) suggests that the merging of these intermediaries and their attempts to control distribution channels is seen as arrogance by current and past members of the distribution channels. Suppliers who work with Wal-Mart may be an example of this perceived arrogance.

U.S. companies and their global brands (i.e., Nike, McDonald's, Microsoft) are seen as arrogant, especially since the start of the Iraq war. The U.S. government's involvement in the Middle East has also contributed to this perception. "People felt exploited by global expansion, inundated by our entertainment products, and put off by our arrogance" (Tischler, 2004, p. 33).

Other Areas of Business Arrogance

Hadaway (2003) discusses the issue of U.S. businesses being arrogant by comparing them the mainstream American media. He states that most consumers see both of those institutions as being arrogant and losing credibility because of their arrogant behavior. The difference between the behavior of younger and older employees' levels of arrogance has been examined. Generally, younger employees see themselves as being more innovative; older colleagues of these same younger employees disagree that they are any more innovative and see these younger people as being not more innovative but just more arrogant (Berry, 2004).

ARROGANCE IN THE BIBLE

As one might expect from the descriptions of arrogance above, the Bible has nothing good to say about arrogance and those who practice it. The Bible also makes numerous references to pride and uses it in ways that are very similar if not exactly synonymous with

arrogance. Weinberg (n.d.) makes the distinction between pride and pleasure taken in things given from God. “Pride means: ‘I did it. This makes me better than other people.’ Pleasure means: ‘Thank God I was given this opportunity to enjoy and to accomplish. I am not better, just fortunate.’”

The term arrogance is used 15 times in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament of the New International Version (BibleGateway.com). In addition to the term arrogance, the form arrogant occurs 37 times. Arrogance first appears in Deuteronomy 1:43 where Moses refers to arrogance as one of the reasons for the Israelites ignoring God’s command not to attack the Amorites in a failed attempt to recover their land.

The next reference occurs when Samuel is correcting King Saul, who God rejects as king, “For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry” (1 Samuel 15:23a). Samuel compares arrogance to idolatry. Idolatry replaces the true God with a false god, and arrogance replaces the worship of God with the worship of self.

Psalms makes 15 references to arrogance and arrogant. Psalm 5:4-6 (New International Version) states rather clearly God’s abhorrence of the arrogant:

You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.

In Psalm 73, the Psalmist connects arrogance to the prosperity of the wicked, using both terms in his description:

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from the burdens common to people; they are not plagued by human ills.

Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.

From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.

They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression (Psalm 73:2-8, New International Version).

The Psalmist sees that the arrogant avoid struggles due to their wealth, just as today many arrogant people avoid consequences due to their positions of power. He goes on to say that in their arrogance they threaten oppression, they have power over others and can exert control that affects those under them.

Jeremiah refers to the fate of those who are arrogant:

Therefore, her young men will fall in the streets; all her soldiers will be silenced in that day,” declares the LORD. “See, I am against you, O arrogant one,” declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty, “for your day has come, the time for you to be punished. The arrogant one will stumble and fall and no one will help her up; I will kindle a fire in her towns that will consume all who are around her” (Jeremiah 50:30-32, New International Version).

God clearly has judgment planned for the arrogant, who have replaced God with their own image. An example of this is in Daniel 5:20, referring to King Nebuchadnezzar. At first the king acknowledged God’s sovereignty after seeing Daniel’s example. Then one day he stated that his power was all in himself, giving no credit to God. God drove him out of his palace as a wild animal until he came to his senses and gave God full praise. After being restored to sanity and power, Nebuchadnezzar states, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who

walk in pride he is able to humble” (Daniel 4:37, New International Version). He had experienced first hand God’s ability to humble the proud and arrogant.

Jesus Christ refers to arrogance only once in Mark 7:21-23 (New International Version) where he is discussing living a pure life: “For from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a person ‘unclean.’” Some versions of the Scriptures use the term pride instead of arrogance in this verse.

In these words of Jesus notice the group of issues that accompany arrogance, flaws like malice and deceit, clearly manifest in recent corrupt executives. Paul makes a similar list in Romans 1:29-31 (New International Version):

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Again, this list contains common characteristics of arrogant executives, including being heartless and ruthless, insolent and boastful, inventing ways of doing evil. Paul mentions disobeying parents, tracing the beginning of arrogant behavior.

On the other hand, Paul describes what will happen to the arrogant in Corinth when he arrives:

Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant

people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power (1 Corinthians 4:18-20, New International Version).

Paul reminds us that true power is not in the world, or in arrogance, and certainly not in talk, but the power of God over sin. When Paul comes with godly power, the arrogant will be put in their place.

Paul's instructions to Timothy certainly resonate with modern struggles:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share (1 Timothy 6:17-18, New International Version).

Business executives have put their hope in wealth despite its uncertainty, rather than trusting God's direct provision. Paul instead recommends that wealth should come from doing good deeds, being generous and willing to share. This has not been the dominant behavior of the arrogant executive.

What is the corrective to arrogance? One of the best guides is in Galatians 6:3-4:

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else (New International Version).

Common understanding often suggests that the Bible totally dismisses any form of pride as sinful. In these verses, Paul explains the possibility of healthy pride when the person regards their own potential and their progress in relation to that. Arrogance and sinful pride come from comparison to others, an unstable standard. Avoiding comparison can regulate the tendency toward arrogance.

Living as God would choose can include Paul's suggestion in Colossians 3:12 (The Message):

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

It can be argued that many of the examples of business people who have been caught up in arrogance exhibit behavior not unlike what Moses is describing in Deuteronomy, the Psalmist is explaining or to which Jesus is referring in Mark or Paul in his writings that refer to arrogance.

OTHER WRITINGS ON ARROGANCE

In addition to what the Bible says others have commented on how it can affect Christians and the Christian Church. The church like any other organization has members who get caught up in their own importance within the institution:

There are those who have been raised in the church, served in the church, and given to the church, but somewhere in the process have developed the arrogant spirit of the elder brother instead of the heart of the loving father. The arrogant spirit of the elder brother doesn't want to go to the party. Instead, they want a somber place of artificial religiosity where their arrogance can be covered up with a pretense of righteousness. Religion is a great place to cover arrogance (Venturella, n.d.).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Two leadership theories can be applied in an effort to help people obey what the Bible says about not engaging in arrogant behavior. Goleman's (2004) work in Emotional Intelligence could be applied for those who are trying to avoid arrogance. Emotional Intelligence is made up of five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Becoming aware of how those apply to one's life could be a first step in analyzing and correcting any arrogant behavior in which an individual is engaging. A number of tools for self assessing one's abilities and for having others assess one's skills in each of the five components are available online.

Collins' (2001) work on Level Five Leadership also can be a start for analyzing arrogant behavior. In contrast to the successful narcissistic leaders described by Maccoby (2000), Collins argues that the leaders of the most successful organizations he has studied possess the traits of humility, strong will, ferocious resolve and will as well as the ability to give credit to others while assigning blame to themselves.

Are there real life examples of business executives without arrogance? Max De Pree shines as such an example. De Pree served as longtime chairman and CEO of Herman Miller, a company regularly included among the top 25 firms on *Fortune's* list of the most admired companies in the United States. While in this position, De Pree pioneered the use of profit sharing, gain sharing, work teams, and other participatory management practices. His philosophy focused on giving away power, instead of amassing it. His writings include *Leadership is an Art* (2004), *Leadership Jazz* (1992) and *Leading Without Power* (2003) and offer concrete and sage advice on healthy non-arrogant leadership.

In an interview with Frances Hesselbein, De Pree answers the question, “If you are my leader and I am your follower, what do you owe me?” De Pree stated:

As a leader, to start with, I owe you a respect and an understanding that you’re legitimate in that relationship, that I cannot do very much without you. I also owe you a perceivable level of fairness. I’m going to make promises over time. You as a follower have to see those promises kept. The leader owes the follower productive conversations about the gifts that the follower brings to the organization and the kinds of contributions the follower wishes to make—so that tasks can be designed that give that person hope. In organizations that work, hope is a very functional force, and understanding the function of hope in an organization is essential. (1997)

De Pree’s suggestion that leaders owe followers respect and fairness differs from the attitude of the controlling arrogant executive. De Pree warns of the dangers of success:

Success can expose us to dangerous consequences. A kind of paradoxical claim to make about something we all reach for, yet it’s true. Everybody battles for success; too few people are aware of its profound impact. Success tends to breed arrogance, complacency, and isolation. Success can close a mind faster than prejudice. Success is fragile, like a butterfly. We usually crush the life out of it in our efforts to possess it. (De Pree 1992)

De Pree (2003) warns of the very crisis of current business, success that breeds arrogance. The example of De Pree as a participatory leader, the warning of Jesus of the accompanying character flaws, the encouragement of Paul to put on love, all serve as correctives to the pitfalls of arrogance in business and life.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is clear that for both spiritually and non-spiritually it makes sense for those in and out of business to avoid arrogant behavior. The problem of course is trying to determine when someone has crossed the line of engaging in behavior that indicates a healthy self-esteem into the realm of arrogance. The lack of social science research in this area suggests opportunities exist in the spiritual and non-spiritual areas for more work to be done on how arrogant behavior can affect individuals and organizations.

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