

Christian Hope

Christians are familiar with the concept of hope as it is one of the theological virtues listed in 1 Corinthians 13, climaxing in verse 13 with the declaration, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” A clear definition of hope is not presented in the Bible, but hope is generally understood to be an expectation of a better future which can only come from God through Christ. Hope is also a gift from God which we readily recognize when we possess it and miss it when we do not have it. Lack of hope creates a state of despair and grieving. In addition to our own intuitive and empirical understanding of what it is like to be without hope, 1 Thessalonians 4:13 gives a definition of being without hope: “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” Although this passage specifically addresses lack of hope in the face of death, the corollary relationship between grief and lack of hope holds true in all situations.

Unfortunately the explanation of what hope is not appears to be more valuable than our own intuitive definition of hope. Our intuitive definition of hope often is little more than optimism. Although optimism is not a bad attribute, and is certainly related to hope, there are differences between hope and optimism.

Since true hope comes from Christ, through Christ, involves our salvation and the expectation of spending eternity with Christ, we may not associate our own actions with the creation of hope. However, since we are to model our lives and our leadership after

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Christ, then would it not be appropriate to become a source of hope to others as Christ is a source of hope? Understanding that we cannot actually become the source of eternal hope—Christ alone can be that—is there not something we can do to model Christ’s example of hope while becoming better leaders and stewards of God’s provisions? To answer these questions we look to some recent research on hope and some more

precise definitions of what hope entails.

Research on Hope

Hope is new to the arena of academic research as the concept of hope was deemed too abstract to measure and define until recently. However, recent work on hope theory and emerging leadership theories enhance our understanding of how hope is an integral part of leadership, how it can be developed in leaders and how it increases organizational effectiveness. Unfortunately, hope is not directly part of the measurements taken in the Best Christian Workplace Survey and thus no new research particular to Christian organizations will be addressed in this paper.

Defining Hope

Claibourne (2003) defines hope as the expectation of a better personal and professional future. This definition may seem somewhat trivial, however, according to Veninga (2007) the number one issue for employees is their future and career progression. Moreover, 90% of successful leaders placed equal or more emphasis on the successful careers of their subordinates as they placed on their own careers. From this we can see that the importance of employees’ careers relative to the issue of hope should not be underestimated.

Although the above definition is consistent with the intuitive sense

of hope, hope theory provides a more in-depth definition which is observable and measurable. Hope theory defines hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, p. 287). Thus hope has two components: 1) a goal with motivation to accomplish the goal, and 2) a way to achieve the goal. Comparing this with the hope Christ gave us we can see the truth of this definition. That is, Christ gave us more than just the expectation of a better future and our eternal salvation, He gave us a plan and a way to attain that salvation.

Norman, Luthans and Luthans (2005) present a similar definition of hope and state that it contains both a positive motivation and outlook but also the means to accomplish a positive outcome. In other words hope is more than an optimism which believes that an outcome will somehow be positive. Hope includes a route and plan to achieve the desired outcome.

Helland and Winston (2005) further define hope, asserting that it only exists in relation to others, is driven by the belief people can change the future, is structured with high ideals and pushes for action. In addition to pushing for action, Helland and Winston state that hope must have a plan for action.

From this enhanced definition we can see its consistency with hope theory and we can also see where hope is nearly interchangeable with a definition of leadership. In fact Helland and Winston show how hope is an implicit component in Transformational Leadership theory, the recognized premier leadership theory of our time. Moreover, hope is an explicit main

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component of three emergent leadership theories: Spiritual Leadership Theory, Authentic Leadership Theory and Positive Leadership Theory.

Hope and Leadership

The essence of leadership is influence over others. As such, all workers in an organization hold some responsibility for leadership as everyone has some capacity to influence others. According to Bass (1990):

Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change, persons whose acts affect other people more than other people's acts affect them.

Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group ... any member of the group can exhibit some amount of leadership and the members will vary in the extent to which they do so. (p.20)

This definition of leadership, although counterintuitive to the perception of good leadership by many Christian managers, aligns very well with Christian theology and spreads the responsibility for leadership to the "priesthood of believers." Moreover, all Christians are eligible to receive hope, direction, faith and love from God. These gifts from God, along with our ability to influence others, awards all Christians with the mantle of leadership.

Helland and Winston (2005) contend that Spiritual Leadership Theory addresses more than leading people spiritually, it involves leading people in the physical dimension through spiritual means. Spiritual leadership can be summarized as a symbiotic relationship between follower and leader in which the fundamental needs of the leader and follower are combined to create higher organizational commitment and goal achievement. Hope is the main component in Spiritual Leadership with faith acting as an enforcing element. Hope and faith are combined to motivate towards a vision while creating a sense of

calling which results in meaning and organizational success. Keep in mind that Spiritual Leadership Theory is not the exclusive domain of Christian organizations or even religious organizations. Spiritual Leadership is a theory applicable to all types of leadership.

Authentic Leadership according to Norman, Luthans and Luthans (2005) is a process where organizational context is combined with and increases self awareness to translate self regulated positive behaviors and highly effective self development. It is a merging of the Learning Organizational theories and the Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) theories. An Authentic Leader possess confidence, hope, resilience and moral/ethical transparency. Positive Leadership Theory is similar to Authentic Leadership but it comes exclusively from the POB theory. Positive Leadership focuses on the possibilities and not the problems. Leadership which focuses on solving problems, correcting behaviors and other negative actions are unlikely to create hope.

Hope of Followers and Resiliency

Recent research shows a correlation between hope in leaders and hope in followers. Norman, Luthans and Luthans (2005) and Helland and Winston (2005) show a relationship between leaders who rate high in hope and high hope in followers suggesting that a leader's hope is contagious. Leaders with

high hope create hopeful thinking by modeling their hope in the workplace. Leaders generate and assist the development of hope in others through providing future goals, modeling the motivation to achieve the goals, encouraging confidence that those they influence can achieve the goals and providing the framework for the detailed planning necessary to achieve those goals.

A leader's hope is contagious.

In addition to the contagion of hope from leaders to followers, hope creates an environment of resilience. Norman, Luthans and Luthans, Helland and Winston and Peterson and Luthans (2003) all show a direct relationship between hope and resiliency. Resiliency is defined as a situation which presents risk or a threat to an individual followed by a positive response. People with high hope have high resilience. The same goes for organizations, those organizations with a culture of high hope are more resilient. Organizational or personal resilience is highly correlated with successfully achieving the stated goals and are more likely to survive in adverse times according to Helland and Winston.

Developing Hope in the

Workplace.

In the recent past the economic downturn has created adverse situations for many ministry organizations. Even those not affected by layoffs and cutbacks do not escape the negative psychological impact of the present recession. Surveys show that as many as 80% of the workers who still have jobs have been negatively affected by the downturn. Leaders need to develop a sense of hope in their workplace to counter the negative impact of the present economy as well as to get their organization to excel. Below are a few suggestions for developing hope in the workplace.

Claibourne (2003) asserts there are five steps to increasing hope in the workplace. Although these five steps are based upon an incomplete and intuitive definition of hope, they appear to have merit in that they would create a positive environment. The five steps include:

1. Employee health – if employees are not healthy they are preoccupied with their own condition and have difficulty becoming hopeful for the organizational goals.
2. Respect employees - employees seldom treat customers better than they are treated. Additionally, without respect it is difficult to create the POB in people to develop a hope filled environment.

3. Create an energetic workplace that people want to come to; expand awards and recognition program and the learning environment.
4. Ask employees for input on important issues as well as small issues.
5. Management training. Only 4 of 10 new managers succeed, therefore you must train them before making them managers.

Peterson and Luthans (2003) developed three guidelines from the definition of hope which includes a goal, motivation and a way to achieve the goal.

1. Use a participative process to develop stretch goals.
2. Create contingency plans and action plans for attaining goals.
3. Break down goals into manageable steps and be flexible enough to re-goal when blocked.

These three steps may appear to be too simple to encompass a complex and abstract concept such as hope. However, sometimes the tried and true from the past provides the best guidance for the future. Moreover, these steps are in line with the example Christ gave us for hope.

Item 1, which calls for “a participative process to develop stretch goals” is played out in Christ’s model to us in that His standards cut to the heart. Take for

example the sermon on the Mount in which Jesus explains the depth of the ten commandments, such as the sin of murder goes so far as to include hating someone in your heart. In this sense, God’s standard for us is stretching! And yet there is a slight difference in that God sets the standards, rather than it being a mutual activity. However,

People with high hope have high resilience.

I would suggest that many times the application of God’s law is left to the conviction of our own hearts and is thus has a participatory/relational aspect. In other words, being a Christian is more than just following a set of laws, but is rather about a relationship, which is in line with Peterson and Luthans’ guideline

Step two, contingency plans and action plans for attaining goals is simply good planning. Indeed the Bible warns that our plans may come to naught if they are not the Lord’s plans (Psalm 19:21), but this in no way negates the need to plan. We glorify God by imitating Him in making good plans, even if He is gracious enough to overturn those plans at times.

The first part of step three, “Break down goals into manageable steps,” is also a part of good planning. However, the second part of step

three, “be flexible enough to re-goal when your goal is blocked,” is not something we see Christ doing because He is never mistaken nor thwarted. Yet, as finite men, God will block our plans from time to time, most likely because they were not God’s plans in the first place. Re-goaling then can be a technique to keep us listening to God and humble in regards to our own plans.

Conclusion

Although the attribute of hope is new to the field of research, evidence exists that leaders with high hope spread the hope to the rest of the organization. When hope is spread throughout the organization and infiltrates the culture, the organization becomes more resilient. A resilient organization is more effective and is better at achieving their goals. In addition, a resilient organization is more likely to survive in adverse conditions. This research, indeed most modern organizational research, supports and verifies the truths we as Christians already know. In addition, the research seems to bring us back to some biblical truths we have missed, ignored or misinterpreted.

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