

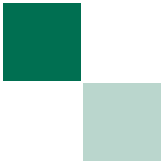


Business Leadership as a Calling

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Business Leadership as a Calling

By Rachel Conerly

*Mid-way in life's journey
I found myself in a dark wood,
Having lost the way.*

~ Dante, *The Inferno*

Dante is 35 years old, midway in his life's journey, and he has lost his way. He became distracted with trivial matters and now faces wild animals that block his path. Aware that he is ruining himself, and falling into a "deep place" where the sun is silent, Dante is at last rescued by Virgil after his love Beatrice intercedes on his behalf. Virgil acts as Dante's guide on a journey to the underworld. During the first part of the journey, Dante discovers the Opportunists – those who in life did nothing, for neither good nor evil. These poor souls are neither in Hell nor out of it. Their punishment is to pursue forever a white banner (meaning no cause) while being continually stung by wasps and hornets. After a long tour of the underworld, Dante emerges from his suffering as a changed man, prepared for a new and expanded journey of life.

Where are you on your life's journey?

In the Bible, Paul writes to Timothy to "take hold of the life that is really life." In modern times, Paul might have told Timothy to go out and discover his "calling." Your calling is unique and personal to

you, and answering your call is perhaps the most profound and productive discovery process in which you can engage. It offers a promising alternative to "life as usual" – our blind groping for more. At some point, we each must face the essential emptiness of a purely opportunistic life. We escape the stinging wasps only by hearing, and following our call.

Unfortunately, most business leaders miss or delay the opportunity to "take hold of the life that is really life." The idea of a calling is not well defined in our culture – especially in business – despite bestselling books that offer to help us find it. Our culture offers plenty of persuasion and advice for how to live the first half of life: conquer the world, claim one's place, go full throttle, and achieve the "good life." This pursuit is a necessary backdrop and foundation upon which the next pursuit – a more fulfilling one – can



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take place. Eventually, what has sustained us no longer does. When this happens, engaging in a conversation with our calling provides a context for the past, and it can guide our future. It puts our past pursuits into perspective and opens the door to meaning in the second half of life.

As a business leader, answering your personal call and embarking on a journey of self-exploration is the most strategic activity you can engage in for both your personal life and your work life. It provides a venue for exploring your unique abilities and talents. It enables you to capture and redeem the experiences from your past. It capitalizes on your God-given talents and gifts. And it will set you on a new course with the winds of the Divine at your back.

What is a **Calling**? What is a **Vocation**?

Calling is defined as, “a claim on a person’s time or life (the call of duty); a summons or invitation; a strong inner urge or prompting (esp. one divinely inspired).” In our work, calling is the divine purpose for which we are made. It is akin to “life purpose” and we use the terms interchangeably. Great leaders follow their call. Martin Luther King, Jr. bravely followed his calling to liberate those who were not free. Mahatma Gandhi followed his calling to free the people of India from British rule. Mother Theresa’s call was to care for the poorest of the poor and to respectfully hospice the dying.

Vocation is defined as “a regular occupation (esp. one a person is particularly suited or qualified for); an inclination; or to undertake a certain kind of work (especially a religious career).” For our pur-

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poses, vocation is the concrete expression of one’s calling. Vocation is how we say “Yes” to our call. A great deal of meaning, value and worth comes from saying yes. “Yes” transports us from a banal existence into the land of high adventure. It puts our mundane and petty concerns into their proper place. Indeed, how we choose to spend our precious life energy determines how real and remarkable our life journey will be. It is the specific work or actions that one’s calling is translated into. Vocation is distinguished from a job in that the latter is what we do to earn money to meet economic demands. Vocation is what we are called to do with our life’s energy. For Martin Luther King, Jr., the expression of his calling was championing civil rights. It was his life’s work. And, as a true vocation does, it continues to outlive him.

This framework of calling and vocation yields a rich tapestry that can restore us to our rightful place within a larger order. I believe that each of us is an expression of the Divine. We stand at the intersection of numerous forces, including our genetic endowments, our family history, the gifts we’ve gleaned from our experiences, and our individual soul’s path. Our calling names what we are here for. Our vocation defines a path for expressing and giving it to the world. Although calling traditionally was associated with religious careers, any career can become spiritual or religious in nature when it is seen as a vocation – the practical application of our calling.

Many people pursue their vocation outside their job or workplace. This is understandable. We prepared for our work lives without any framework for calling or vocation. For many (perhaps most) people, their workplace can't sustain their calling. This is a shame. Businesses capture much more potency and productivity from workers who are engaged in their calling. Imagine a workplace in which every employee is fully engaged because their job is a place in which they can pursue their call. It is difficult to imagine because there are so few examples. Companies such as Patagonia, Interface Carpets, and the Men's Wearhouse come to mind. At these companies, employees are thrilled to come to work, and there is a waiting line at the Human Resources office.

If you are over forty years old, you may have already begun feeling the effect of ignoring your calling. Forty is when our calling really starts calling. It may start as curiosity, a wondering, or an inkling that there is some way of living that would be more interesting, more satisfying, or afford more meaning. Most of us squelch those early perceptions and are slow to perceive their meaning. This incipient "itch" feels like a threat to the status quo, and it is. Instead of inclining toward our call, we often bend away from it, working harder at the path we're already on.

Yet no matter how adamantly we cling to our path and its accompanying beliefs, our call continues. In fact, it increases in intensity. Eventually the pain becomes consuming. We drink too much, we eat too much, we take drugs we shouldn't need; anything to disengage. None of these compensations work to relieve the pain of living a life apart from our calling: *Serving one's call is a require-*

ment for a fulfilling life. If we are to live, we must grow, and if we are to grow, then our work must grow. Author and Episcopal priest Grey Temple writes in *The Molten Soul* that "...our challenge is to stay molten so that God can continuously form and shape us." We must develop hearty discipline and an abundance of trust for this shaping process. During the process, we will be led more deeply into our calling, into our vocation, and into a more expansive vision of life.

Living Apart From Our Calling

It is possible to spend one's whole life resisting the call. Separation from our calling can manifest as symptoms of boredom, depression, anxiety, or illness, lack of energy or diminished vitality. These symptoms could be our initial summons. The number of people taking antidepressants is an indicator of the scale of the attempt to ignore one's call. As our calling goes unanswered, the nagging and grinding within becomes painfully annoying, and more formidable. The old patterns and ways of operating don't work as well as they used to. It becomes difficult to produce the same results, or the effort feels less worthwhile. Our experience of work and life is no longer satisfying, and becomes less so with time.

This grinding is the sound of a corrective mechanism. Our soul is expressing a greater, unfulfilled purpose that the ego alone cannot achieve. In order to do so, the soul erodes the supreme power held by the ego which holds tightly to its ideas of "Who I am" and "What my life is



"Neurosis is the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning." ~ Carl Jung

about.” I explain it this way to my clients: “The train you are on is slowing down because it is approaching the end of the line. There will be a station where you will need to disembark and board another train. You cannot get to your destination on this train. You have to switch tracks to get to your destiny.”

A business leader whom I will call “Frank” owns and operates a manufacturing plant. When he learns of a breakdown in the line, it is common for him to go out onto the plant floor and yell at the top of his lungs at whomever he believes is responsible. Many of the issues that frustrate him and give rise to his outbursts are inadvertently created by his management style. His workers are neither encouraged nor permitted (let alone rewarded) to structure their own work in a way that would resolve the recurring problems. Frank reaps a great deal of financial reward from his plant. He is a religious man, and is regarded as upstanding in his community. Yet on many days, he can be found horribly mistreating the people who are beholden to him for their wages. Is he living apart from his calling? Of course. Is he in pain because of it? No doubt.

Author James Hollis asserts, “The nature of our humanity obliges each of us to move toward a larger and larger role in the great drama.” In that case, our separation from our calling will inevitably create dissonance and pain. Any split between what we are and what we are meant to be creates a spiritual crisis. Frank’s experience is one of meaninglessness and irrelevance because he doesn’t understand what his life is for. His life is padded with luxuries designed to softly deter him from acknowledging the truth. He is living an empty life of contrived values while his soul longs for real ones.

Much of what passes for depression is actually rooted in a crisis of calling. The vast majority of employees are not fully engaged at work, and this is a symptom of the same disease. But a cure is possible. Even a small dose of clarity as to one’s calling, when combined with action, kick-starts the process of addressing a spiritual crisis.

Our calling and vocation leads to a different kind and quality of pain – that of becoming authentic and whole. But because we are being pulled deeply into our own life, and we are in service to a mighty purpose, the pain is bearable -- even sublimely satisfying. This is the pain that transforms us, and transforms our ability to make a difference in the world.

The soul is relentless in its urge to get through to us. There comes a time when the invitation to find our passion and true calling becomes a constant drumbeat to live this present life more fully. It will whisper in our ear, or stop us dead in our tracks – whatever it takes to have us recognize that this is the time to engage in our life’s work.

A Time to Change

The herald of change – an awakening to new possibilities – comes differently to each of us. It often comes in the form of a single, stunning event – such as a serious accident, illness, or death of a loved one. We may feel that a seismic shift has taken place, rendering us somehow different from what we previously knew ourselves to be. The game we have been playing no longer seems to be the right game. The old familiar path becomes unfamiliar, like clothes that no longer fit.

Events of this type summon us to correct our course. Their function is to make painfully evident that our current world-view and level of consciousness are no longer adequate. “Any useful crisis brings the limitations of our current life to the surface and reveals the need for enlargement,” writes Hollis.

Most of us need to hit a wall before we can radically question the life we’ve chosen and the person we’ve become. The density of the wall we need to hit is directionally proportional to the ego defenses that we have constructed for ourselves. Big defenses require a big wall. We finally get the message: “It is time to migrate, to grow, to create a new life.”

One of my clients, a woman in her mid 40’s, was on the management team of a large international company. In our first meeting I sensed that it was time for her to make contact with her calling. This is frequently the point in life when someone becomes my client. Her role and the way she was working had become progressively less satisfying. The years were passing quickly with all the jet-setting and 60-hour work weeks. Two years earlier, she had been involved in a serious accident that had permanently impacted her health. More recently, one of her children was diagnosed with a life threatening illness. Here were two significant, high-impact events inside of two years.

A month later she called to say she was leaving her job. “I’ve given some great years to this company and I can’t do it anymore,” she said. I spoke to her gently, aiming at the part of her that was not yet awake. “Rather than reactively jumping to the next job, you might consider taking stock, listening to your deepest voice, and discerning some meaning from

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what has happened. What has life actually prepared you for? Use that understanding to guide your next steps.” These words instructed her to slow down, listen, and go inward. By engaging *The Purposeful Leader*[™] process she was able to hear her calling and restructure her work so that she could begin to live a purposeful life.

In my work, I have found that leaders rarely adopt a purposeful approach to leading and managing without processing their calling through such major life events. Internal processing of the event is key to moving forward. Unfortunately, many people endure one traumatic event after another without slowing down enough to make the critical change that would shift things. They just get up every day and run without stopping, afraid to pause and reflect. It keeps them from living a purposeful life.

Slowing down and taking time to answer big questions is difficult in our busy lives. Yet until we do, our ego will continue to unilaterally run the show. We need to utilize a process that allows the soul to provide some input, answering the important questions such as, “How should my life’s energy be spent?”

At some point, we have the opportunity to bravely face our summons, to recognize that we have a choice: either stand up and live into our true values, or buckle under the weight of petty, contrived beliefs

and concerns. This is not a one-time event. We are called to that choice each and every day.

Finding Our Calling

Seasoned executives know that reflection is critical to sustainability. They accept it and build it into their routine.

When that time arrives, when you recognize that you can no longer endure “life as usual,” it is important to allocate time for exploration and new learning. Listening for our calling is not a part of any university curriculum and thus requires additional training and practice. It involves learning to listen to soul instead of just ego. This can be scary because it often requires working through our deepest fears. Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, founder of the Center for Attitudinal Healing, says that at any given moment, we are living out of either fear or love. Fear is generated by the ego. The soul generates love.

A life that is guided by calling is a life of deep listening and careful responding. It requires time for quiet reflection. Your quiet mind can hear the guidance that has always been present, but which you’ve been too preoccupied to notice. Busy executives are constantly pushing, driving and striving, leaving no time for the reflective listening and responding needed to carry out life’s true work. Seasoned executives know that reflection is critical to sustainability – both in

their own life and in that of the organization they lead – and they build this time into their routines.

In reflective space, we can do the important work of contemplating our truest selves and our life’s work, asking important questions: “Where has my life provided the greatest reward? What are my unique endowments, gifts and abilities? What has the pain and tragedy of my life uniquely prepared me to do?” The answers we receive are the beginning of living authentically. When we listen with a quiet mind and an open heart, our soul can reveal who we really are and what we are really meant to be.

Once we’ve heard our calling, we can then begin the process of discerning vocation. What is the expression of my calling? What work have I been given to do? What is unique to me that can make a characteristic difference in the world? These are some of the questions that support this work. A vocation can start with a single mission – a project of sorts. And over a lifetime, a life’s work may be formed by a string of projects. Yet it is our calling that meaningfully and sensibly ties together a string of missions into a vocation.

Discerning one’s vocation is an iterative process. Practicing out in the world provides us with the feedback and education we need to refine our journey so that it lines up most directly with our calling. The more we practice our calling, the more new elements get defined and the more concentrated it becomes. It may require some experimentation and time before we arrive at a vocation that clarifies and renews us, that gives access to our depths, summons our joy and ignites our passion. When we do find our vocation, our soul and ego can finally dance together toward a

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common goal. This creates great potency of action. Our presence becomes the foundation of a formidable power.

The Calling of Business Leadership

No doubt many business leaders are already in the right line of work. They may even be in an ideal role or job. But if the job isn't set against the backdrop of calling, it won't matter – it won't fulfill. The all-important context will be missing, and along with it, the inner criteria that guides our best decisions and allows us to solve the deepest problems – something for which we humans were made.

Business leaders who find their calling often find that their role is very close to the one to which they are called. For this reason, much about your current path may feel right. There is also an abundance of

worldly affirmation for the path of leadership – in the forms of power, prestige, and profit. It can feel as though we're already doing our life's work.

But without an undiminished clarity about our calling, we will never fully be able to perform our vocation. Only against the backdrop of our true calling will our work ever make sense, and hit that oh-so-fulfilling sweet spot. Building a vocation on the foundation of calling makes it count and gives it meaning.

I've come to this understanding through my own personal journey. For many years I consulted to leaders and management. I did excellent work for my clients, who expressed appreciation and paid me well. One day, I begin to feel a nagging voice saying, "There must be a better way. At this rate, the changes they desire will take years – perhaps a lifetime!" Despite our good work and the desires of our clients, the changes were rarely sustained. Before long, individual managers were back to business as usual – working independently in their departments and silos, frustrated, angry, back-biting, and uncommunicative.

Our strategic goal was to help management groups work better. We were always effective by some measures, but these wins, as good as they felt, did not result in a significant sustainable increase in the group's ability to work together. This is what drove me to my calling. I did not want my life to be con-

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sumed with producing inconsequential results. The day I began searching I recall uttering these words to myself, “I need a new theology for my work.”

My divine journey started on that day.

Midway Along Life’s Journey

When we reach the mid-point in life, as Dante did, we are in need of a journey through our “under-world,” and in need of guidance. We require a new context for the confluence of our experiences, the roles we’ve played, our endowments and gifts, and the previous constructs we’ve used to navigate the world. We can feel that time is running out – the alarm is sounded by our own body, aging parents, and the illnesses or deaths of friends. We need a process that will enable us to take stock and render a clearer path forward; one that capitalizes on the entirety of our history and captures the essence of who we are.

When we begin to live our calling and enact our vocation, we respond to the deepest wisdom and guidance available to us. We are presented with tremendous opportunities for accomplishment, meaning and satisfaction. We gain an understanding of ourselves that we can bring toward whatever we are called to do. We recognize that we are one piece of a larger whole – something unique and important that we bring to the world. There is some unique gift that must be lived through me. It offers a constant and abiding backdrop to life, instilling congruence to an otherwise fragmented existence. No other context is rich enough to account for the magnificence of our lives. This is your connection to the Divine.

As you undertake your calling and pursue a vocation, you will be allowing the Divine to be lived through you.

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Whatever the Divine means for you, answering your call brings about a great and profound blessing – equal in stature to a satisfying marriage and raising healthy children. You will emerge, as Dante did, a changed person, prepared for a new and expanded journey of life. You will have greater strength to confront the fears, disappointments, and even tragedies we all must face. And you will seize the opportunities to live life in the largest, grandest context imaginable.

The journey toward your calling impacts the quality of every single moment that follows. As you undertake your calling and pursue your vocation, you allow the Divine to live through you.

This is truly “the life that is really life.”



About Collaborative Leaders, Inc.

We coach and train leaders in the fundamentals of collaboration so they can achieve better and sustainable business results and solve even the most complex business problems.

Our vision is to develop a critical mass of leaders who use collaboration as their primary way of leading and solving problems. We believe that increased collaboration can bring dramatic improvement to key social problems prevalent globally, both within and beyond the world of business.

For more details visit www.collaborativeleaders.us, and download the report, *The Collaborative Organization*, under “What is Collaboration?”

About The Author

Rachel Conerly is a principal of Collaborative Leaders, Inc. Her expertise is the development of collaborative organizations and collaborative leaders through executive coaching and training.



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