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CASE STUDY

Running a Business Like a Biblical Prophet: What Would Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, or Ezekiel Do?



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Abstract

This paper contends that a toxic corporate culture is the leading cause of unethical behavior in business, and that biblical values taught by the ancient prophets can help transform a firm's culture, inspire employees, and foster a work environment where the paycheck is not the ultimate goal. Scripture could help employees understand that the organization's purpose is to achieve many positive outcomes, such as delivering value to the customer, making a positive difference in society and the world, alleviating poverty and hunger, providing meaningful work, and encouraging innovation and positive change.

Introduction

Making the world a better place is a key factor for consumers and investors, with 77% of consumers and 73% of investors stating that they prefer dealing with companies that are socially and environmentally responsible. Approximately 90% of S&P 500 companies published a corporate social responsibility (CSR) report in 2019 (only 20% in 2011). Companies that are unethical face a "zero tolerance" policy from 25% of consumers (they are sometimes referred to as "values-driven consumers") and 22% of investors (Stobierski, 2021). However, only 21% of US workers trust that their business or organization is ethical, as revealed by a recent Global Business Ethics Survey (Yaqub, 2023).

A corporate social responsibility strategy may initially appear to be an expensive option. However, research indicates that CSR can improve employee outcomes, such as engagement, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty, resulting in higher employee recruitment, retention, and motivation. This is worthwhile, as replacing employees can be costly for companies. Therefore, CSR can be a beneficial investment for organizations, as it can create long-term advantages in terms of employee engagement. Moreover, as more and more consumers are interested in purchasing from ethical and socially responsible firms, there may be an additional benefit regarding customer loyalty and sales.

Ethisphere's 2023 Ethics Index, the collection of publicly traded companies recognized as recipients of this year's World's Most Ethical Companies designation, outperformed a comparable index of large-cap companies by 13.6 percentage points over a five-year period.

The outperformance, which Ethisphere refers to as the Ethics Premium, has remained consistent since we began tracking the equity performance of honoree companies. This outperformance is the result of the kinds of practices that lead a company to be on our list – investments in their people, culture, and communities (Ethisphere, 2023, paras. 10-11).

There is some evidence that being perceived as an ethical and socially responsible firm can positively impact the stock price. Research by Accenture demonstrated that businesses that performed well on ESG (environmental, social, and governance) measures had operating margins that were 3.7 times higher than those that scored low on ESG (Hagemuller, Jais, & Albert, 2022). The difference between ESG and CSR is that the latter is the company's actions and policies to show that it is socially responsible and ethical. ESG is the metric used by others to evaluate the company in the areas of environmental, social, and governance.

Many firms profess to be ethical, but only a few show it in their policies and actions (Bazerman & Tenbrusel, 2011; Carucci, 2016). It is unclear whether ethics can be taught in a classroom (Friedman, Kleiner, & Lynch, 2022; Hühn, 2014; Parks-Leduc, Mulligan, & Rutherford, 2021; Wang & Calvano, 2015; Ward, 2020). Some researchers maintain that culture is more important than education in shaping ethical behavior. They point out that different cultures have different ethical norms for businesses and nations (Tropez et al., 2017; Scholtens & Dam, 2007; Whipple & Swords, 1992). They also contend that business ethics is influenced by the social and cultural environment, which is determined by various factors, such as norms, values, codes, and laws. Sonenshein (2005) argues that a negative corporate culture is the main reason for unethical conduct in corporations. Saporito (2024) maintains that the problems at Boeing started when the corporate culture that prided itself on safety and engineering was exchanged for one that prioritized earnings over producing exceptional, flawless products.

An important question that every CEO must ask is: what should come first: people, safety, customer satisfaction, or profit? The business model focusing on maximizing shareholder value (MSV) is becoming obsolete. More firms are becoming values-driven and see the profit motive as cheapening the idea of having a higher purpose.

This paper will show how the values of the ancient prophets can be used to create a moral organization with a soul. Scripture can be a valuable tool to change an organization's culture and make it more spiritual and values-driven. A leader could inspire employees to see that the purpose of this organization is to accomplish many positive goals that include adding value for the customer, impacting society positively and making the world a better place, helping eliminate poverty and hunger, providing meaningful work, improving the environment, and inspiring innovation and positive change. As we shall see, a good CEO can be a social justice warrior and still make a healthy profit for their organization.

Servant/Spiritual Leadership

Lynch and Friedman (2013) maintain that the ideal leader must be both a servant and a spiritual leader; caring only about employees is insufficient. Beyond being a servant leader, a biblical concept, the Bible demands that the ideal leader inspire followers to build an organization grounded in ethical and spiritual values (Friedman & Fischer, 2021). They should not be conceited or self-centered; instead, they should be compassionate and

concerned with social justice and the betterment of the world. The following are just a few examples of verses that stress what leadership is truly about.

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon: ‘Rule over us, you, your son, and your grandson, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.’ But Gideon said to them: ‘I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you’ (Judges 8:22-23).

How the faithful city has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness lodged in her— but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine diluted with water. Your rulers are rebellious and partners with thieves; they all love bribes and pursue gifts. They do not render justice to the fatherless; the grievance of the widow does not come before them (Isaiah 1: 21-23).

Kindness and truth preserve a king; and by kindness, he upholds his throne (Proverbs 20:28).

Woe unto the shepherds of Israel that have tended themselves [and not tended their flock]! Should not the shepherds tend the sheep? You eat their fat and you wear their wool; you slaughter the healthy ones; but you tend not the sheep. The frail you have not strengthened; neither have you healed that which was sick; neither have you bound up those who were broken; neither have you brought back those who strayed or searched for those that were lost; instead, you ruled over them with force and rigor (Ezekiel 34: 2-4).

Listen to my message, you leaders of the House of Jacob, you chiefs of the House of Israel, who abhor justice and who twist all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Her leaders judge for bribes, her priests give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay... Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed over as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of rubble and the Temple Mount will become like a stone heap in the forest (Micah 3: 9-12).

Helping the Needy

Mizrachi and Friedman (2021) posit that the goal of “raising the needy from the dust” is the responsibility of society and business. This phrase appears two times in the Bible (Psalm 113:7 and I Samuel 2:8) and demonstrates how crucial it is to show concern for the helpless members of society. In Samuel, it is part of Hannah’s poetic expression of thankfulness to God for granting her a child and demonstrates the power of the Lord to change the world, uplift the downtrodden (and the infertile), and raise them up. It also hints at the obligation of society to emulate God (Imitatio Dei) and do the same.

According to the World Bank (2023), about 700 million people live in extreme poverty today (the world population is 8.1 billion). Historically, this is probably the lowest it has ever been, and one reason (not the only one) is capitalism and free markets. The Conscious Capitalism Organization is a network of corporate leaders committed to the idea that business is about more than just making money. The philosophy of conscious capitalists is on their website, where the “Four Tenets of Conscious Capitalism” are stated (*Conscious Capitalism*, 2024):

Elevating humanity through business begins with knowing WHY your company exists. Without this, you have no compass to find and stay focused on your True North.

Businesses should exist for reasons beyond just making a profit. We see profit as a necessary means to achieving your purpose—not as an end in and of itself (Para. 1).

Many CEOs believe a corporation must have a higher purpose and strive to improve the world. They also feel that societal impact is more crucial than shareholder value when evaluating performance (Friedman & Pham, 2023). Organizations can use their economic clout to train employees from poor homes and prepare them for successful careers.

Economist Milton Friedman's view is that corporations exist to maximize shareholders' wealth, and if they do anything else, there will be a financial cost (Friedman, M., 1960). Pava and Krausz, on the other hand, find in empirical studies and in surveys of the literature, that firms meeting Social Responsibility criteria and goals will not be precluded from performing well financially. Those Socially Responsible corporations were found to perform as well or better than comparison firms that are not necessarily Socially Responsible. This "Paradox of Social Cost" may be explained by the phrase "doing good means doing well" (Pava, M. & Krausz, J., 1995, p. 13-39).

There is a substantial gap between education and employability in the United States, as employers rely on universities and colleges to supply qualified workers. Yet, these institutions are not focusing on job skills and career preparation. Many firms go directly to high schools and provide internships and training to prepare them for the job market (Hansen, 2021). Unsurprisingly, 40% of employers find that college graduates lack the skills to succeed in entry-level positions (AAC&U survey cited by Flaherty, 2021). Going to high schools and working with students from impoverished backgrounds is a way of helping those in need and, at the same time, finding qualified, productive employees.

Woe to those who make unjust laws and who issue oppressive documents, to deprive the destitute of their rights and to rob of their rights the needy of My people, making widows their prey and orphans their booty. What will you do on the day of reckoning when the calamity comes from afar? To whom will you flee for help? Where will you leave your wealth? [There will be nothing to do] except cringe among the captives or fall among the slain (Isaiah 10: 1-4).

The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of His people: "It is you who have ravaged the vineyard; the spoils of the poor are in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people, by grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, God of Hosts (Isaiah 3:14-15).

Please help the king to be honest and fair, just like you, our God. Let him be honest and fair with all Your people, especially the poor. Let peace and justice rule every mountain and hill. Let the king defend the poor, rescue the homeless, and crush everyone who hurts them... All the kings will prostrate themselves before him; all the nations will serve him. For he will rescue the destitute person when he cries out and the poor one who has none to help him. He will have pity on the poor and destitute and save the souls of the needy (Psalm 72: 1-4; 11-13).

Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, plenty of bread, and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy (Ezekiel 16: 49).

Job was a successful businessperson with a significant amount of property, similar to many wealthy CEOs today. This verse highlights Job's behavior when he was still prosperous.

Never did I deny the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary. Never have I kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the orphan. But from my youth, I cared for them as would a father, and from my birth, I guided the widow. Did I ever see a forlorn person perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, and his loins did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep (Job 31:13-20)?

Encouraging Inclusion: Respect for the “Stranger”

DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is a topic of heated debate and is facing criticism nationwide. Research increasingly suggests diversity's value for organizations concerned with long-term growth. It is correlated with financial performance, customer and employee satisfaction, and creativity. Unsurprisingly, immigrants accounted for 23% of U.S. patents between 1990 and 2016 (Friedman & Vlady, 2023). However, diversity without inclusion and equity can be counterproductive and even exacerbate issues. The solution lies in fostering a respectful environment where differing viewpoints are not only tolerated but encouraged, and individuals are not belittled for their perspectives (Elkins, Frei, & Morriss, 2024).

Furthermore, individuals who refrain from disparaging a particular ethnic group but engage in mockery of the elderly, obese, disabled, intellectually disabled, stutterers, unattractive individuals, or people with cerebral palsy (CP) ultimately cause more harm than good. The recurring statement of fictional detective Harry Bosch in Michael Connelly's novels, “Everybody counts or nobody counts,” is relevant to the issue of bigotry and prejudice. The appropriate approach to educating about DEI is to emphasize various forms of bias and hatred and demonstrate why they are all ethically and religiously wrong (Friedman, Vlady, & Friedman, 2023).

To accurately measure DEI, some researchers have been analyzing the attitudes of the firm's employees and managers. One way to do this is to examine the proprietary data from the Trust Index, used in the Great Places to Work (GPTW) scale, to measure the true DEI. The Trust Index includes questions that tap into the equity and inclusion dimensions of DEI, such as “I can be myself around here,” “Managers avoid playing favorites,” and “This is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work.” This provides an accurate measure of DEI and correlates with performance (Friedman & Vlady, 2023).

Sadly, in many organizations, DEI is more about optics, often reduced to displaying individuals of varying skin colors. Organizations are now being told to be cautious about hiring that shows a preference for a particular group. For example, the following choices would be legally risky today:

- Hiring quotas (“Make sure at least 45% of our incoming associates are women”)
- Tiebreaker decision-making (“If you're choosing between two similarly strong candidates and one is white and the other is a person of color, pick the person of color”)
- Group-specific internships and fellowships (“Let's create an internship that limits eligibility to Black and Latino talent”)
- Tying manager compensation to diversity goals (“You will get a bonus if you hire more women and people of color on your team”) (Yoshino & Glasgow, 2024, paras. 11-14).

OneTen, a nonprofit organization once dedicated to advocating Black-only hiring programs (that sometimes unfairly exclude Asian and white people), has repositioned itself and is now pushing skills-based hiring practices. They encourage firms and the government to remove unnecessary college degree requirements and focus on the needed skills to do the jobs. According to one study, about 30 million workers have the skills to succeed at many higher-paying jobs but only lack a college degree – 60% of workers (a large percent of them minorities) lack college degrees. More companies are supporting skills-based hiring instead of degree-based, but it has been difficult to change corporate behavior. According to a OneTen survey of 500 hiring managers, only 31% practice it, even though 56% believe it would be beneficial. Skills-based hiring helps everyone and is consistent with the view of “equity for all” (Lohr, 2024).

The Torah emphasizes love for strangers. This principle extends to treating strangers as equals under the law, as seen in the repeated statement of having “one law and one ordinance” for the indigenous and the stranger in various scriptures (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14; Numbers 15:15; 15:16). Hertz (1959) underscores the importance of caring for the stranger:

No command is repeated as often as the law not to oppress the stranger; not to injure, annoy or grieve him. These commands are without parallel in the legislation of any ancient people; and in the practice of modern peoples, the duty of loving the alien is almost universally unheeded... The alien was to be protected not because he was a member of one's clan, community or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, man discovered the idea of humanity (Hertz, 1959, 90-91).

To truly understand the biblical emphasis on the well-being of strangers, it's crucial to contrast it with the viewpoints of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The Greeks labeled the entire non-Greek world as “barbaroi,” translating to stranger or foreigner, which is the root of the term “barbarian.” They held the conviction that non-Greeks were lesser beings who deserved to be conquered and enslaved. Similarly, the Romans harbored a dismissive and contemptuous outlook towards non-Romans. Polytheistic religions likely intensified these sentiments, as each nation worshipped its own gods, leading to an inherent inclination for each country to consider its deities superior to those of others.

Despite the Bible's advocacy for the stranger and God declaring that he takes a personal interest in their welfare (also the welfare of the widow, orphan, and other disadvantaged members of society), this ancient disdain has endured throughout history and into the present day, as illustrated by the Nazis' cruelty towards foreign races. The Nazis asserted that German Aryans were a superior “master race” and that all non-Aryans were substandard. They exterminated millions of men, women, and children solely because they belonged to a different and, therefore, inferior race, derogatorily referred to as “*untermenschen*” or sub-humans.

In our society, “stranger” might denote a foreigner, an individual of a different race, someone dressed in non-traditional attire, someone who is obese, or a person with a disability. The prosperity of a society hinges on its ability to accept and welcome these so-called strangers. The United States has exemplified this by historically welcoming immigrants from diverse nations, contributing to its stature. Sacks (2010, pp. 183–4) highlights that the Torah took xenophobia seriously. God effectively tells the Israelites: “I made you into the world's archetypal strangers so that you would fight for the rights of strangers – for your own and

those of others, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever the color of their skin or the nature of their culture – because though they are not in your image, says God, they are nonetheless in Mine.”

French philosopher Emanuel Levinas offered a distinctive viewpoint on the treatment of “the Other,” emphasizing the significance of acknowledging and connecting with others as a foundation of ethics. His philosophy has its roots in the Abrahamic values of how to treat the stranger. This challenges the self-centeredness of Western thought and the need to change those who are different, an idea that resulted in colonialism, slavery, war, and oppression. Instead, it promotes the idea that we must treat others ethically and with compassion (Bergo, 2019).

When a stranger dwells among you in your land, you are not to maltreat him. The stranger who dwells with you shall be like a native among you; you shall love him like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Love the resident foreigner because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Thus said the Lord: Perform justice and righteousness and rescue the robbed from the hand of the oppressor; and to a stranger, orphan, and widow, do not maltreat, do not cheat; and do not shed innocent blood in this place (Jeremiah 22:3).

Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor, and do not think in your hearts of doing evil to another (Zechariah 7:10).

The Lord protects strangers, the orphan and the widow He upholds, but the way of the wicked He makes tortuous (Psalms 146: 9).

Honesty in Business and Charging Fair Prices

Amos, a prophet, expressed concern over various business tactics employed by the wealthy to increase their wealth, often to the detriment of the poor. These unscrupulous practices included inflating prices, hoarding goods, and utilizing fraudulent weights and measures.

Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his upper rooms without justice; who uses his neighbor's services without payment and does not give him his wages (Jeremiah 22:13) ... If one does justice to the poor and needy then it is good; Is that not what it means to know Me?" declares the Lord (Jeremiah 22: 16).

Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying when will the month pass, so that we can sell grain; the Sabbatical year, so that we can open the stores of grain; using an ephah that is too small and a shekel that is too large, and distorting dishonest scales. That we may purchase the poor for silver and the destitute for shoes and selling the refuse of grain as grain. The Lord swears that He will never forget their deeds (Amos 8: 5-7).

And you shall return by your God; observe loving-kindness and justice, and always hope to your God. [But instead you are] A trader who has false scales in his hand; who loves to cheat. And Ephraim said: Surely, I have become rich; I have gotten power! In all my labors they cannot find in me iniquity or sin (Hosea 12:7-9).

Nehemiah came from Persia to act as governor and help the people. Nehemiah had to deal

with a serious problem when he arrived to help the Israelites, who were trying to rebuild the destroyed city of Jerusalem. He was concerned with the exploitation of the poor Jews by the wealthy in the Jewish country he was desperately trying to rebuild.

And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brothers the Jews. For there were those that said: 'We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we must buy grain for them, that we may eat, and live.' And there were those that said: 'We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy grain, because of the famine.' And there were those that said: 'We have borrowed money for the king's taxes, and that on our fields and vineyards.' Now, our flesh is as worthy as the flesh of our brothers, our children as worthy as their children: yet, see, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants! Some of our daughters are brought to servitude already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our fields and vineyards (Nehemiah 5:1-5).

Human Dignity

A foundational value of the Bible is human dignity. All people have inherent worth and dignity because they were created in the image and likeness of God (Imago Dei) (Genesis 1:26-27). Employers must treat workers well and ensure they find purpose and meaning in their jobs. One who respects the value of human life will do their utmost to improve product safety and workplace safety. Friedman and Clark (2022) demonstrate how corporate greed and emphasizing profits over human life have resulted in the deaths of millions.

One survey found that 90% of respondents believed that work should be meaningful and provide them with a sense of purpose, not just a paycheck. In addition, according to another survey, 52% of jobseekers claim they would reject a job offer if they were unaware of or disagreed with the company's values and purpose (Santos, 2022).

Have we not all one Father? Has not one G-d created us? (Malachi 2: 10).

Yet you have made him slightly less than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor (Psalm 8:6).

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have observed the task which God has appointed for humans with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything beautiful in its time, and has put eternity in their hearts, without humans ever discovering the work which God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. Indeed every human who eats and drinks and finds satisfaction in all his labor this is a gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:9-13).

Second Chance

The act of giving individuals a second chance if they show remorse for a misdeed is a principle rooted in the Bible. In the Torah, God makes it clear that He forgives iniquity if an individual shows remorse (e.g., Genesis 4:6–8, Exodus 34:7, Deuteronomy 30). Indeed, Scripture portrays a God of second chances who is always prepared to forgive and reinstate those who repent and seek Him. Furthermore, God urges humankind to extend grace and mercy to others, particularly to those who have made errors or wronged them.

True love for humanity cannot be shown unless one is willing to recognize that people make mistakes and is willing to forgive them if they demonstrate genuine remorse. Teshuva (repentance or return) is a central theme of the Bible; people are not “canceled” regardless

of the seriousness of the crime if they repent. The theme of Psalm 51 is the greatness of teshuvah (repentance). King David recognizes that he has sinned and shows that he is forgiven.

Companies should be willing to hire ex-convicts who show remorse for past crimes. They should also consider second chances for people who have made errors in judgment.

Let the wicked forsake their ways and the iniquitous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them; And to our God, for He is abundantly forgiving (Isaiah 55:7).

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy (Micah 7:18).

Cleanse me thoroughly from my iniquity, and from my sin purify me. For my transgressions I acknowledge, and my sin is always before me (Psalm 51:4-5) [David informs God that if God forgives him, he will serve as an example to others of the power of repentance]. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You (verse 15).

Conclusion

Milton Friedman's (1962, p. 133) assertion that a business's sole responsibility is to increase profits while adhering to the rules of fair and honest competition is not widely accepted today. Instead, the public seems to align more with the views of another Nobel laureate in economics, Robert Fogel. Fogel (2000) emphasized the role of spirituality in the evolving economy. He outlined 15 essential spiritual resources, encompassing elements like a sense of purpose, opportunity, community, a robust family ethic, a strong work ethic, and high self-esteem. His perspective suggests that for capitalism to thrive, it must consider spiritual values. This paper posits that biblical values espoused by the prophets may be used as a tool to change a firm's culture, motivate employees, and create a climate where work can have a higher purpose than receiving a paycheck.

Friedman and Pham (2023) contend that a more inclusive and robust United States is possible when business leaders collaborate to ensure the well-being of all, not just the privileged few, the so-called top 1%. CEOs face a vital choice between two contrasting approaches to business. One prioritizes shareholder returns and concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a few. The other approach is inspired by the Bible and values human dignity, compassion, equity, and social justice for the marginalized and oppressed. This human-centered capitalism can foster a "Messianic" society where everyone has enough to live with dignity while still generating profits. But this vision requires leaders who recognize the potential of capitalism to uplift all people, not just to enrich themselves. The fact that there are more than 8,100 certified B corporations — for-profit companies with high standards in areas including social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency — in 95 countries demonstrates that this goal is feasible (B Lab, 2024). Boards should only appoint leaders committed to this human-centered philosophy, which should be the ultimate leadership criterion.

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