

# Utilizing Vocational Discernment in a Leadership Development Course

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of a newly created course designed for undergraduate business students to help them explore their vocational calling as they develop as leaders. The foundation of this course, titled “Leadership through the Eyes of Faith,” is a biblical theology of work and vocation which is explored through a variety of discernment exercises designed to increase self-awareness and assist students in determining personal, professional, and spiritual goals. An overview of the course format and assignments along with student reflection on the process are included.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of spirituality and work is increasingly popular as people seek to find meaning not only for their personal lives but for their professional livelihood as well. Popular periodicals (*Fortune*, *Fast Company*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Newsweek*) targeted at business professionals have featured numerous articles on this topic and academic groups are increasingly more open to research and publications in this area as evidenced by the launch of the *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* (Pielstick, 2005). While views on spirituality and religion vary greatly, the reality that faith influences our work enables this topic to be explored in business schools at both secular and faith-based colleges and universities.

## A THEOLOGY OF WORK AND VOCATION

Most authors who attempt to define the concept of Christian vocation do so in the context of a career or job.

After all, the creation story is of God at work and he created humans to share in His creative work (Genesis 1 & 2). While many think that the consequence of Adam and Eve’s sin was making work a curse, in contrast God invites us to join in His work (Gen. 2:5). There are also very clear indications throughout scripture that God continues to work: “Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.’” (John 5:17, NIV, 1985). Work is life and all of the basic theological understandings that interpret and give purpose to life also give purpose to work (Robinson, 2004). The concept of Christian vocation, consequently, extends far beyond career or work to virtually every facet of one’s life. God calls a person with a holy calling according to his purpose (2 Tim. 1:9) as we are his chosen people (1 Peter 2:9). Thus, vocation or one’s calling brings divine meaning and purpose to the life of a Christian. Os Guinness (2000) writes, “By calling [or vocation] I mean that God calls us so decisively in Christ that everything we are, everything we have, and everything we do is invested with the direction and a dynamism because it is

done in response to His summons and His call” (p. 7). The implication for Christians lies in discerning ways in which we can express *through* our life’s work the fruits of the spirit which will demonstrate the character of God in this world (MacKenzie & Kirkland, 2005).

Gordon Smith, in his book *Courage and Calling*, states that there are three forms of vocational calling we should be seeking to fulfill: (1) to love and trust the Lord and to serve our neighbor as spoken in scripture; (2) to use our unique talents and gifts to personally further God’s kingdom on earth; and (3) to seek to live out our vocation in all that we do each day (1999, p. 33-34). Living our vocation is not something we do in just our career, family, or faith community. When we actively seek to fulfill our vocation each day it provides a consistent focus for all aspects of our lives.

### VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Seeking to understand one’s call can be a challenging process in a world filled with many voices. Discerning God’s voice and direction for one’s life is a multifaceted process that involves listening, acting upon what is being heard through service to others, and ensuring vocational integrity in relationship with mentors (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2003). This discernment process is fraught with obstacles that prevent us from knowing how we are being called, but we can employ four strategies to assist us: self-awareness, inner joy, service to others, and community.

A first strategy of vocational discernment is to develop self-awareness. It is implicit in what we read in Romans 12:3: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (NIV, 1985). This may entail making an honest evaluation of oneself: Who am I? What makes me unique? How do I feel God is calling me? It requires truly listening to one’s life (Palmer, 1999). An essential element of self-awareness is appreciating that we are each distinctive in terms of our temperament and personality (Smith, 1999). Inherent in discernment of one’s self is a recognition and affirmation of our spiritual gifts and natural abilities and that we may be called to use them in specific ways (Hardy, 1990; Street, 2003). We are not all equally talented; some are more gifted than others but this does not diminish the significance of each person’s gifts.

The second focal area entails understanding the role of joy in guiding our behavior and decisions. Often we use happiness, reputation, or monetary gain as the criteria for

measuring success and making career decisions based upon this assumption. We have a misguided belief that if we find superficial happiness, we will be living as God intended. Michael Himes in his book *Doing the Truth in Love* attempts to clarify the distinction between happiness and joy when he states:

Joy is the interior conviction that what one is doing is good even if it does not make one happy or content. Happiness is dependent on a thousand external factors. Being happy cannot co-exist with being frightened or disappointed or lonely or dissatisfied or rejected, but being joyful can. Thus whether or not a particular way of living or working makes you happy is irrelevant. But whether or not it is a source of joy, a profound conviction that it is a good way to live a life and spend one’s energy and talent, is of immense significance.

Himes, 1995, p. 57

Himes goes on to say that joy is cultivated by pushing oneself to grow and further develop gifts and talents. This also includes a willingness to “confront reality” to ensure that a person is not pursuing his own wishes or what makes him feel good, but is sincerely searching for what is a good way to live out his life. This has potential to have implications in the workplace as well. As Dennis Bakke argues, one can experience joy in his work when he has “the knowledge that what you do has real purpose...[and you can] make use of your talents and skills to do something useful, significant and worthwhile” (Bakke, 2005, p. 73).

The third practice of vocational discernment is recognition of the world’s needs and determining how one can serve. Frederick Buechner explains this further when he writes, “Vocation is the work a person is called to by God. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. It is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (Buechner, 1993, p. 27). In Romans 12:6-8 Paul identifies different roles people embrace in responding to the world, whether it is through serving, encouragement, teaching, giving, or leading. We are asked to look for the brokenness in the world and listen for that inner urging of action on our behalf. This may be the best way to use our gifts to further God’s kingdom and experience joy.

Finally, discerning one’s vocation should happen in community. We come to know ourselves not in isolation from others but as part of the body of Christ. Paul’s assumption underlying his words in Romans (12:3-8) is that we will see who we are within the context of the community of which we are a part (Smith, 1999).

Consequently, mentors, friends, family, and trusted colleagues all serve a role in providing feedback and insight as one seeks to discern his vocation. While reflective solitude is valuable, it will also be in seeking the wisdom of others that full understanding will emerge.

### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The four perspectives of vocational discernment also are useful in leadership development. Understanding yourself and how you impact others is an essential step to maximizing your leadership skills in all aspects of one's life: work, home, and community. As Baillie states, "Delving into your personality traits, passions, values, and spiritual gifts can help you build on your strengths, compensate for your weaknesses, make better decisions, and ultimately be a better leader" (2004, p. 107). Training, in particular in the area of self-awareness, is considered a necessary and critical component of leadership growth (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Latty-Mann, 2004; Boyatzis, Goleman & Rhee, 1999). One of the consistent findings in leadership research is that exemplary leaders are people with strong beliefs about issues of principle. People expect their leaders to be advocates on matters of values and conscience (Kouzes & Posner, 2004). Furthermore, leadership is not about serving oneself, but serving others (Bakke, 2005). Finally, leadership is best developed in community through feedback, listening and sharing (Latty-Mann, 2004; Boyatzis, et al, 1999). The discernment process aids in this development and equips people to lead authentically.

### THE COURSE

The "Leadership through the Eyes of Faith" course is designed to address the four areas of vocational discernment within the context of personal and professional leadership development. It is intended for undergraduate students who are seeking to better understand themselves in the context of how they currently lead their lives with faith in who they will become in the future. The framework for the course is based upon the Leadership Assessment and Development (LEAD) curriculum used at Case Western Reserve, Northern Kentucky University, and elsewhere in which students play an active role in developing and directing their learning experience. The LEAD curriculum relies heavily upon the contingency theory of action and job performance developed in 1982 by Boyatzis. The contingency theory seeks to find a "best fit" between: (1) Individual: vision, values, knowledge, abilities, and inter-

ests; (2) Job Demands: the tasks, functions, and roles of a particular position; and (3) Organizational Environment: culture and climate (Boyatzis et al, 1999).

The "Leadership through the Eyes of Faith" course is constructed to add an additional focus on vocational discernment in the context of these other areas while adapting aspects of the curriculum to include a framework for spiritual development. Specific assignments are designed to walk students through the vocational discernment process of self-awareness, inner joy, service to others, and communal relationship. The texts include Kouzes and Posner's (2004) *Christian Reflections on The Leadership Challenge*, Margaret Benefiel's (2005) *Soul at Work: Spiritual Leadership in Organizational Life*, and a course reader comprised of numerous articles on a variety of topics including self-directed learning, emotional intelligence, servant leadership, goal setting, ethics, and Christian morality. The Kouzes and Posner text is an overview of their original book, *The Leadership Challenge*, but includes Christian perspectives from recognized business leaders. The Benefiel text highlights several organizations that embody Christian principles. The class is a seminar format and is limited in size (20-25 students) to facilitate the experiential activities and reflective components. The four areas of vocational discernment (self-awareness, inner joy, service, and discernment in community) overlap throughout the course, however, specific components are designed to align the four and are outlined below.

### Developing Self-Awareness

Before someone can lead others, he must be able to lead himself. Self-awareness can be described as the ability to read one's own emotions, knowing one's strengths and limits, and possessing a strong sense of self-confidence in one's values and beliefs (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002). Furthermore, self-awareness can also include understanding one's personal journey and how he or she has been shaped by life experiences or circumstances. To begin this process the student's opening assignment is to write a reflection paper on their vocational journey in which they articulate who they are, what they believe, how their faith has been formed by their life experiences, and how they feel they are being called to live their lives. At this point the students may or may not have a clear understanding of vocation, but the assignment is designed to spark their thinking and provide a venue for establishing the discernment element of the course. Each student (and the faculty member) is given five minutes to read a portion of his or her paper. The time limit is necessary because of time constraints and the papers can be lengthy, but also allows students the freedom to select

portions of their papers they are comfortable sharing with their peers. This “story telling” time serves as a valuable community-building activity.

Self-assessment is a critical factor for leaders to ensure that they are living authentic lives that reflect the values and expectations they espouse (Bilimoria & Godwin, 2005; Latty-Mann, 2004). Consequently, the students also complete seven assessment tools (Table 1) designed to provide clarity about their personality, strengths and weaknesses, giftedness, and lifestyle needs. Many of the tools are similar to those used in traditional Organizational Behavior and LEAD courses, but this class includes a spiritual gift inventory (and other faith directed activities) to provide a greater focus on faith.

In the second class session the students are divided into feedback groups (4-6 students) that provide a venue for discussion, reflection, and advice. The faculty creates the groups to ensure diversity (e.g. gender, international and domestic students, faith background, major) and tries to split up close friends. These groups are utilized through-

out the class either to be responsible for facilitating the discussion of the readings or participating in a variety of activities designed to provide peer teaching opportunities relevant to the class. The feedback groups are an important vehicle for interpreting the data and determining its relevance in the context of the class. The culmination of this stage of discernment is the first of three extensive papers students write. The first paper is titled “Values, Faith, and Career Vision” and asks students to interpret the results of the assessment tools and make a link to their ideal vision for who they hope to be professionally, personally, and spiritually in 10 years. This forces students to reflect more strategically than in their vocational journey piece, utilizing concepts from class to gain greater understanding of themselves in relation to their future plans and aspirations. For example, students are asked to develop themes from the results of the various assessment tools that might help clarify the depth of their giftedness and explain how they feel they are being called to use these gifts in various life roles. Given that the class is comprised of undergraduate stu-

**Table 1: Assessment Tool Descriptions**

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Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)	Builds on a Jungian theoretical foundation it measures personality and temperament: extroversion and introversion, sensing and intuition, thinking and feeling, judging and perceiving.
Learning Style Inventory (LSI)	Kolb's Learning Style Inventory is a simple self-description test, based on experiential learning theory and is designed to measure strengths and weaknesses as a learner in the four stages of the learning process. The stages are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.
Motivational Gifts Inventory	The Motivational Gifts Inventory was designed by scholars at Regent University and measures seven areas of spiritual giftedness and the respondent's score in each area. The areas include the perceiver, server, teacher, encourager, giver, ruler, and showing mercy.
Envisioning the Future	This exercise asks the student to look ahead 10 years and complete several statements about his or her life at that time. For example, “I will be living with ...” and “My faith will be described as ...”.
Career Anchor	Edward Schein's Career Anchors is an inventory designed to help students identify the one element in a person's self-concept that he or she will not give up, even in the face of difficult choices. There are eight career anchor categories: technical competence, managerial competence, autonomy, stability, entrepreneurial creativity, service, pure challenge, and lifestyle.
Values Clarification	The values clarification exercise assists students in identifying their five core values from a list of 100 (they are encouraged to add other values to the list if they feel spiritual values are missing). After identifying the five, they are asked to rank them in order of importance.
Philosophical Orientation Questionnaire	The questionnaire was designed by Richard Boyatzis and assists students in exploring their preferences regarding three basic value orientations involved in management: pragmatic value, intellectual value, and human value.

dents, a significant thread throughout the class is a revised concept of Boyatzis' "best fit" to include personal calling and giftedness in the context of career aspirations, not current job placement. The following is an excerpt from a student paper reflecting the significance of this assignment:

The assessment tools helped define my personality traits, my values, and the management skills I possess. The information is invaluable because it has helped me set a tangible benchmark for effective leadership. Before working through these assessment tools I did not understand my behavior and motivations clearly and I struggled to articulate personal actions and goals. In short, I feel more self-aware and understand areas that I need to work on to become well rounded.

Junior student

### Identifying Inner Joy

Many of the class discussions and course readings address joy, but it is insightful to have the students learn from others about the role joy plays in their vocational discernment. Consequently, the class also includes a speaker series of several business and non-profit leaders whose careers have been shaped by their faith. Each speaker shares his or her understanding of vocation and what key factors or situations in their lives helped them to discern their calling. They are also asked to discuss what role joy had in serving as an inner compass in their discernment process. Students write critiques of each speaker and contemplate the implications for their own lives. As the students reflect in writing and within their feedback groups, they are asked to articulate what types of careers they are feeling called to pursue that may also bring them joy according to Hime's (1995) definition. They are then required to conduct an informational interview with someone in a career they are interested in and seek to identify further characteristics of the position and the necessary skills and knowledge.

The culmination from what has transpired at this point in the class (readings, discussions, writings, and speakers) is a list of behavioral traits and skills consistently identified by people who appeared to have found a "best fit" between personal, professional, and spiritual goals. Examples of such traits include goal and action management, self-control, people management skills, optimism, oral and written communication skills, and integrity. Each trait or skill is defined based upon our interpretation of the course readings. For example, Boyatzis defines the behavioral trait of goal and action management to include goal setting, planning, initiative, and attention to detail (Boyatzis et al, 1999). Kouzes and Posner define integrity

as personal credibility which is demonstrated when a person does what he says he will do (2004). These traits are used to construct an online assessment tool that measures the frequency of each behavioral trait using a Likert scale. Students are then required to identify a minimum of 15 individuals including family, pastors, friends, faculty, and mentors to serve as "external reviewers" who will complete the online instrument providing their perspective of the student. The students also complete a self-assessment using the same instrument. The results are downloaded into an Excel file and tabulated for frequency enabling the students to assess their self-awareness (by comparing their scores to their external reviewers), behavioral variations, and abilities. The extensive feedback coupled with thoughtful reflection on the outcome is a critical component of the leadership development aspect of the course. This information is used by the students to write their second major paper entitled "Real vs. Ideal: Values, Faith, Career, and Abilities." This paper builds upon the first by asking the students to integrate what they learned from their career interviews, the external reviewer's feedback, and guest speakers, to examine the realities of their lives in comparison with the ideal professional and spiritual goals they established in their first paper. The paper also asks students to comment on a time they experienced joy and what they learned from that experience to guide them in the future. It is at this stage of the course that the students seem to become more aware of how the different components of the class come together. The following quote from a student's "Real vs. Ideal" paper reflects an increased awareness as she begins to integrate what she has learned from the speakers and assessment tools:

Through the online assessments, I found that I don't always live up to all of my ideals. I claim to value faith, love, achievement, health, and wisdom. I can write sentence upon sentence about why I value those things, but could I write paragraphs about the actions I take to live those out? ... This truth was revealed to me more and more as I heard the speakers talk about their leadership as a CEO, lawyer, executive — these people have a leadership model that illuminates the word of the Gospel. They are wise people and not because they have read all the right books but because they live their lives intentionally each day.

Senior student

### Service to Others

A reoccurring theme that emerges in the class is that to lead by faith one must serve others. Robert Greenleaf

(1982), who coined the term “servant leadership,” stated that the best leaders are seen as servants first and leaders second. However, there is no better model of servant leadership than Jesus who did more than serve, but sacrificed his life. Kouzes and Posner (2004) state that “leaders are selfless. Leaders sacrifice, and by sacrificing they demonstrate that they’re not in it for themselves; instead, they have the interests of others at heart. Leaders must give something up in order to get something more significant” (p. 124). The concept of servant leadership is a prevailing theme that is reinforced by the articles and guest speakers, but extends beyond the business context to also include family, church, and community.

The last four weeks of the course include a small service-learning project with a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity that enables the students to examine a faith-based ecumenical organization. Habitat was selected because it provides an interesting case study of a spiritual organization according to the criteria in Benefiel’s (2005) text. To prepare, the class learns about the organization, the severe housing need in our area, and the backgrounds of the families who receive the Habitat homes. Students meet with the staff, board of directors, and key volunteers to understand how their faith-based mission impacts the practices of Habitat and spend a day working on a job site with the Habitat families. The project culminates with the class presenting what they learned from their meetings and time spent with the families to assess the spiritual climate of the organization. They also recommend strategies for staff development and training that may assist in strengthening the spiritual commitment of the organization. Among the strategies provided the students used several of the assessment tools and activities from class to create a format for a retreat for the staff and board of directors. In preparation for the retreat, the staff and board would complete a few of the assessment tools (Motivational Gifts Inventory, Values Clarification, and Career Anchor) and write a personal faith journey reflection paper. The students recommended that an outside facilitator be used to walk the staff through the assessment tools and engage them in team building exercises and goal setting. The students identified qualified facilitators who could be utilized and provided a reading list that would be instructional for the organization. While the outcome of the retreat is unknown, the service-learning experience briefly highlights how students use their knowledge and skills to serve others in an organization. However, the greatest impact is the time the students spend with the Habitat families themselves. The students return to campus committed to continuing their relationship with the people Habitat serves,

which has turned into a significant, continuing service-learning initiative in partnership with Habitat. As the students consider their personal and spiritual goals, the disciplines of service and sacrifice take on new dimensions as they think about the stewardship required if they are to live their lives vocationally focused. This realization is captured in the words from a student’s paper:

I believe that our entire class became more self-aware of our goals associated with our personal lives. We not only discovered personal leadership habits, but also felt the weight of the poor and the dispossessed on our shoulders. The concepts and principles learned in this class provided everyone with a context in which to work toward a vocation and a life of purpose in service to others.

Senior student

### **Discernment in Community**

Since the students represent a variety of faith perspectives and few may know one another well, it is important to be strategic in developing an environment of trust and openness so the students can become a community. To do this, each student is assigned to lead a five-minute devotional or meditation at the beginning of each class session, which establishes a common frame of reference for the class. The feedback groups serve to further this purpose, but relationships are also developed through establishment of group norms for the class discussions and activities that ensure all voices are heard. To help with this process students read articles on how to facilitate a discussion (as opposed to give a presentation), how to coach and actively listen. When the feedback groups are asked to give responses to one another, they have instructions for this process that ensure the sessions do not become thoughtless affirmations but instead focused, constructive comments. At various times the class has plenary sessions where representatives from the feedback groups share themes of what they have discussed on a given topic, but most of the reflective dialogue happens within the groups.

Consequently, the faculty member does not hear much of what is discussed, but creates ownership by the students for the process. The following comment by a student reflects the worth of the group process in personal development and reflection:

It was nice to receive honest feedback from people I grew to trust greatly. They expressed their reaction to my thoughts and feelings, letting me know if they were consistent with other thoughts and words I shared at different times in the semester. We all came from different backgrounds and had very different outlooks and

ideas, but it was through disagreeing opinions that we grew individually. I see the value in creating a means for getting feedback from people other than my friends who might tell me what I want to hear.

Junior student

The student's third and final paper is titled "Life and Learning Plan" and asks them to draw upon all that they have learned in the semester to establish personal, professional/academic and spiritual goals, and a strategy for achieving their goals. Leadership is not something you put on when you step into a particular role, but is how you lead your life on a daily basis regardless of position. The paper instructs students to explore in greater detail how they will further develop themselves in all areas of their lives by outlining a plan using S.M.A.R.T goal criteria (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and tangible). The paper also includes a personal mission statement and the student's leadership philosophy. Students share this paper with their feedback group whose role is to advise and encourage each other in regards to the cohesiveness and viability of their plan. At our final class session, each student is assigned to create "a tangible blessing" to give to each of his or her feedback group members. The items have to be "home made" by the student and supplies cannot exceed \$2 per item. Examples of "tangible blessings" include CD's of worship music, photographs with scripture or a quote, personal letters, and bookmarks. The final class session is held at the professor's home where the class shares a meal together and then gives their blessings to one another. One of our last scenes of Jesus in scripture is him preparing breakfast for his disciples (John 21:10-14) and so it is fitting to end this class with a meal together and a charge to continue God's work sacrificially. The culmination of the class is best exemplified in the words from a student in her final paper:

The papers in this class were the most difficult papers I ever had to write. I say this because these papers are about me. It was no mere research paper that I could

just throw together at the last minute. This is my life and I had to be willing to look at it in a constructively critical way. For the first time I recognize that I may not know concretely what my specific calling is in life and what the Lord wants for me to accomplish, but I can say with certainty that I know enough to do something right now. I wasn't able to say this before I took this course.

Junior student

## CONCLUSION

The development of this course is still in its infancy having only been taught two semesters. Since it is grounded in biblical scripture, leadership theory, and recognized pedagogical practice, it has the potential to be a course adaptable to both secular and faith-based institutions. The curriculum is flexible and allows for the individual faculty member to place emphasis according to his or her design.

Our students are God's creation, each born with unique talents and abilities. As we seek to help our students further understand who they are and how they can best work with others in this world, we cannot do so without considering how God desires for them to join in His work. An underlying objective of this course is to help the students recognize, regardless if they are Christians or not, that the equipping they've received through their education and opportunities in life are limited if they only use it to further their career or self-interests. Indeed, most people have the capacity to serve the soup at the local soup kitchen, but not everyone can help the organization be managed efficiently, or be financially solvent, or promote to potential donors so that it can serve more people. Business students are educated to address these issues and more: The underlying social structures, organizational challenges, and ethical conflicts that contribute to the problems in our society. As students practice this philosophy, many experience profound joy and suddenly find they are also experiencing God and their life's work takes on a new dimension.

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