



The case for developing virtues in organizations: From philosophy to practice

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THE CASE FOR DEVELOPING VIRTUES IN ORGANIZATIONS: FROM PHILOSOPHY TO PRACTICE

The idea:

Not so long ago, life and work were different. Most of us lived much more connected lives; in our churches, town squares, and interdependent communities we found meaning and purpose. We were *known*. What we did, where we went, who we were – our communities knew us and cared for us; and us them. We belonged. Back then, work was more often a means, rather than an end. But things have changed. Where our communities, community groups, extended families, *tribes* used to provide moral direction and meaning to our lives, today that is becoming more and more the domain of the workplace.

Today, we work longer hours and have more complex e- and i-interfaces with our jobs. The boundaries and expectations of healthy work-life balance are far passed blurred. Many of us have moved away from our village centres and into sprawling suburbia; we have sacrificed our clubs and churches for longer hours and work trips; our identities are derived not by who we are and what tribe we come from, but by ‘what we do’ and which organization we work for. In many ways, our workplaces have replaced our communities. Our workplaces have become our contexts for identity construction (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), our frameworks for moral and ethical conduct (Fehr, Kai Chi, & Dang, 2015), and where we look for meaning, belonging, and opportunities to flourish (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014). But while we *look* for meaning, purpose and the conditions for flourishing in our organizations, all too often we do not find them.

Subfields of management and organizational scholarship outline common shortcomings of modern organizations: leadership literature attempts to answers the pitfalls of ineffective, unethical leadership (e.g. Fehr et al., 2015; Manz, 2015; Northouse, 2013; Stahl & De Luque, 2014; Wart, 2014); ethics literature ponders frameworks and philosophies to address the frequent misconducts and unethical actions that plague organizations (e.g. Barker, 2002; Solomon, 1992), and; organizational psychology literature explores psychological issues that factor into individual and collective performance (e.g. de Jonge, Spoor, Sonnentag, Dormann, & van den Tooren, 2012; Luthans, 2002; Nicholson, 2008; Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015; Weyhrauch & Culbertson, 2010). Most organizations seem to fall short in the duty they have inherited to provide the meaning, purpose, and conditions for flourishing that members desire.

In this article, we propose that there is one concept at the heart of this disconnect between the communities we crave and the workplaces we have; that concept is virtue. Virtues, as the elemental building blocks of positive character (Aristotle, 350BCE/1962; MacIntyre, 1999), and the essential ingredients to sustained human community (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Solomon, 1992), are what hold the greatest potential to enable our organizations to more competently provide the meaning, purpose, and conditions for flourishing that we so badly desire. The idea put forward in this article is that developing virtues is the most effective way to make our modern organizations *better*.

Current empirical and theoretical evidence is emerging that highlights the benefits of higher levels of virtues in organizations. For instance, higher levels of virtues in organizations have been found to mitigate negative consequences cascading from occurrences such as downsizing and tragedy (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006; Cameron, Quinn, & Dutton, 2003).

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3 The pursuit of virtue underpins higher-level self-leadership (Manz, 2015), and higher levels
4 of leader virtues are associated with more ethical behaviour, happiness, life satisfaction, and
5 effectiveness (Hackett & Wang, 2012). Virtuousness in organizations amplifies positive
6 constructs such as thriving (Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012), positive identity construction
7 (Dutton et al., 2010), citizenship behaviour (Rego, Ribeiro, & Cunha, 2010), wellbeing
8 (Wärnå-Furu, Sääksjärvi, & Santavirta, 2010), ethical behaviour and decision making
9 (Crossan, Seijts, & Mazutis, 2013), and flourishing (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2015; Sison,
10 Hartman, & Fontrodona, 2012).
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12 The idea of developing virtues in organizations is important because it promises to enable
13 positive outcomes such as the above. The idea is also innovative. Our proposed article
14 highlights the innovation of the idea in three main ways. First, by applying the deep ontology
15 of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2014; Edwards, O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014), we provide
16 definitional and contextual clarity to often blurred concepts of virtue, *virtues*, *virtuous*, and
17 *virtuousness* – which are distinct, yet interrelated notions. Second, we propose a simple
18 framework to guide the operationalization of virtue into situationally appropriate virtues by
19 providing a set of inclusion criteria for determining what is virtuous in which contexts. Third,
20 the overarching innovation of our article is its translation of ancient philosophy into
21 contemporary practice. We synthesize the philosophy of virtue ethics and integrate it with the
22 more modern academic field of positive organizational studies, to generate clear and
23 promising avenues for future theoretical and empirical work that might illuminate how to
24 develop virtues in organizations and realize the positive outcomes associated therewith.
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29 To whom the article is speaking:
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31 This article speaks to management and organizational scholars and practitioners, and
32 particularly those interested in improving the organizations we study. A more specific
33 audience would be scholars and practitioners in the areas of organizational wellbeing
34 interventions, positive organizational scholarship, positive organizational behaviour, and
35 virtue ethics, as well as those interested in strengths-based development, positive change,
36 thriving and flourishing. Leadership scholars may also take interest in this article as the virtue
37 ethics tradition (e.g. Aristotle, 350BCE/1962) and the organizational wellbeing intervention
38 literature (e.g. Nielsen, 2013) that we draw on both point to the important role leaders play in
39 creating and sustaining better organizations.
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43 How we will communicate our idea:
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45 We will communicate our idea by first clarifying the notions of virtue, *virtues*, *virtuous*, and
46 *virtuousness*, and then discussing some key features of virtue, including how virtues are
47 different from similar terms such as values, corporate social responsibility, or citizenship
48 behaviours; the learnability of virtues; and the universality of virtues. Following which, we
49 will propose our inclusion criteria; a simple framework for determining what is virtuous in
50 which contexts. From here our idea will be fleshed out by exploring in more depth the rich
51 tradition of virtue ethics, and the modern positive organizational paradigms which explicitly
52 and implicitly draw on the virtue ethics tradition. By integrating the philosophy of virtue
53 ethics with the modern theories and current empirical findings of positive organizational
54 studies, we generate a forward-looking article designed to provoke thought about how
55 developing virtues might be the most effective way to create better organizations.
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3 The importance of our idea:
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5 It is important that we focus attention on why and how to develop virtues in organizations
6 because this line of inquiry holds vast potential for enabling the wellbeing of individual
7 organizational members, as well as the sustained thriving of the teams and organizations they
8 compose. Higher levels of specific virtues are associated with myriad positive outcomes, for
9 example: forgiveness leads organizational members to respond to conflict prosocially (Fehr
10 & Gelfand, 2012); kindness facilitates humanity, interpersonal connectedness, and belonging
11 (Bright et al., 2006); and humility has been linked to higher levels of organizational learning,
12 higher quality internal and external customer service, greater organizational resilience,
13 increased prosocial behaviours, and better team and leader performance (Owens & Hekman,
14 2012; Owens, Rowatt, & Wilkins, 2012). When we consider that these outcomes are
15 associated with only a few specific virtues, it is easy to speculate the vast potential benefits of
16 a holistic approach to developing a variety of virtues in organizations and investigating causal
17 processes that may underpin positive outcomes such as those described above.
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20 However, any academic and theoretical importance of our idea is eclipsed by the practical
21 implications. At its core, our idea is a bid to make the organizations we study *better*, to help
22 worksites become places of belonging and meaning; to help organizations thrive in the duty
23 they have inherited to create the conditions for human flourishing that members so badly
24 desire.
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