Business Leadership and the Relevance of the Tenth Commandment:

Management May Not Really Exist!

Jason Goltz

Steven Maranville

Westminster College

Jason Goltz, PhD
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
College of Arts and Sciences
Westminster College
1840 South 1300 East
Salt Lake City, UT 84105
801.832.2300
jgoltz@westminstercollege.edu

Steven Maranville, PhD
Associate Professor of Management
Gore School of Business
Westminster College
1840 South 1300 East
Salt Lake City, UT 84105
801.832.2641
smaranville@westminstercollege.edu
Abstract

In this paper, we attempt to analyze the meaning of the Tenth Commandment in Exodus 20 of the Old Testament and apply its wisdom to the management of business. In analyzing the meaning of the Tenth Commandment and its prohibition on coveting, we draw on the diverse resources of Asian Buddhism and Ancient Greek Stoicism. As with the Tenth Commandment, each of these ancient worldviews also thought there was cause for moral concern when it comes to our desiring. At the heart of this moral concern, generally speaking, we find advice that we not attach ourselves to impermanent things as if they are permanent and that the control we think we have over our lives is an illusion. From this, we conclude that an altered or more “postmodern” approach to business and management may be warranted.
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The last of the Ten Commandments reads “You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour” (Exodus 20:17, NRSV). John Wesley, in his commentary, explains that this final commandment forbidding us to covet our neighbor’s belongings “forbids all inordinate desire of having that which will be a gratification to ourselves.” He elaborates some on this: “O that such a man’s house were mine! Such a man’s wife mine! Such a man’s estate mine! This is certainly the language of discontent at our own lot, and envy at our neighbour’s, and these are the sins principally forbidden here” (Wesley, 1754-1765). In other words, according to Wesley at least, the Tenth Commandment of Exodus chapter 20 prohibits us from having, or at least nurturing, a certain kind of desire, specifically it seems, a desire for anything outside of “our own lot.” But since it seems awkward to even talk of desire for something that we already have, we might plausibly conclude that Wesley is making some kind of claim about the danger of desire in general. But this seems odd because, as Cyrus Gordon (1963) points out, the desire for our neighbor’s belongings is “something which is neither criminal nor punishable in any society.” In fact, “coveting is recognized as necessary for success in modern society” (p. 208). For capitalism to work, we actually need to pursue our desires, not turn away from them. To quote Gordon Gecko, “greed is good” (Pressman, 1987). Equating coveting with greed may be a little premature, but it makes the point. Any application of this commandment to business is at least initially suspect.

We aim in this paper to take on the challenge posed by this tension between the prohibition on coveting and the goals and practices of modern business. Specifically, we think
there are very definite ways in which this sage Old Testament advice is still relevant today. However, we first need to understand what that advice is. Toward this end, we will begin by providing a very brief ethical and historical context for this concern over “inordinate desire.” In constructing this context, it will be important to notice that we assume from the start a stance which minimizes the role of Judeo-Christian theology. We tend to believe that, if the Tenth Commandment has relevance, it is a relevance that will be evident just as easily to the natural reason possessed by other cultures, places, and times. In fact, given the diverse nature of the global workplace, we think it’s actually advantageous to draw on other sources that transcend both time and geography. For example, Buddhists in Asia as well as the Stoics of Ancient Greece each in their own way identified our coveting nature as a source of moral concern. The hope will be that coming to understand the perspectives of the Buddhists and Stoics will aid in the understanding of the Tenth Commandment. We will conclude by connecting this back to business through the eventual development of a “postmodern approach to business.” While we acknowledge that our claims about business are merely provisional, we think they are nonetheless interesting enough to merit serious consideration and discussion.

**World Philosophy and the Meaning of the Tenth Commandment**

Let us begin then with Buddhism. The Buddhist religion traces its origins to the sixth century BCE and is today popularly presented as being, at least at its inception, a practical approach to dealing with human suffering. The Four Noble Truths of Siddhartha Gautama’s first sermon read like a diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription for the ills of human existence. According to the Buddha, the problem all of us face in common is that life is “dukkha.” Like with all cross-cultural analysis, the meaning of this term is somewhat hard to pin down, but there is general consensus that, in a Buddhist context, what’s implied is a kind of unease, anxiety,
disappointment, or disquietude (Smith, 1991, p. 101). Buddhists are indeed concerned with lessening the world’s pain, but the pain that they have in mind is not best interpreted as physical but mental. The pain or suffering that is “dukkha” is emotional pain, unhappiness, or sorrow, and for Buddhists it is an essential feature of the natural human condition. No doubt this unhappiness comes in many forms and degrees, but according to the Buddha, it has one common cause, viz. our desires. To give a simple example, we fear death because of a particular desire for life. Therefore, getting rid of the desire would seem to get rid of the problem. The logic of this is easy enough to follow, but the implication is dramatic. The fear and unhappiness that characterize much of life can end for us, say Buddhists. But getting rid of the desire for life is not the same as giving up on life itself. Rather, what we have here is basic practical advice. Our emotions can be controlled by molding our wants and expectations in accordance with reality. If death is a necessary and inevitable part of life, then it would just be foolish of us to desire that it not be so. It would be needlessly causing us the unhappiness of unfulfilled desire. One classic Buddhist writing puts it this way: “Harassed by craving, people scurry about like a hunted hare. Bound by clinging and attachment, they experience pain again and again for a long time” (The Dhammapada, 2007, p. 341). Therefore, if we want to be rid of the unhappiness, and everyone does, the most rational course of action is to get rid of the “clinging.” The prescription is not a hatred of life but a reassessment and reorientation toward it. We should refrain from attaching ourselves to impermanent things as if they were permanent. Of course, there’s no presumption that this is something that’s as easy to do as it is to say. But that’s why Buddhism is a spiritual discipline. We can eliminate suffering from our lives, but only if we choose to work at it.

Greek Stoics like Epictetus have a similar approach. As with Buddhism, the overall Stoic concern is also practical. Philosophical questions, insofar as they have no bearing on how I live
my life, hold little interest. What’s important is leading a good life, and clearly part of what this involves is freedom from anguish and pain. The goal is peace of mind. But while the goal is practical, this doesn’t mean that metaphysics is irrelevant. Specifically, the Stoic worldview of the Common Era’s first two centuries was one which included the notion that life has a unifying principle to it. The world is not chaos, despite its occasional appearance to the contrary. The Stoics referred to this underlying logic as “logos.” As at least one author has written, the traditional “orthodox” core of Stoicism includes the belief that:

The oneness of the cosmos is the foundation of all understanding of reality and of everything in it. Order is its keynote, and the harmony resounding in all things is brought about by the active presence of a power – God, logos, world soul, law of nature – so that God and the universe are effectively one . . . . all change is “within,” immanent, natural; and if to humans things appear as crooked, straight, or chaotic, to the Eternal, things are totally otherwise. (Hakim, 1997, pp. 154-155)

That there is this underlying order and principle behind reality naturally has, for the Stoics, implications for our beliefs, desires, and behavior. In this way, the Stoic advice about life mirrors the clear, simple logic of the Buddhists before them. “Don’t demand or expect that events happen as you would wish them to. Accept events as they actually happen. That way peace is possible” (Epictetus, 1995, p. 15). Again, the goal is to harmonize one’s desires with reality, rather than the other way around, so that disappointment is minimized. And it’s important to understand how all-pervading this advice is meant to be. It’s not just what happens to us, but our very possessions, that are affected by this altered perspective.
Think of your life as if it were a banquet where you would behave graciously. When dishes are passed to you, extend your hand and help yourself to a moderate portion. If a dish should pass you by, enjoy what is already on your plate. Or if the dish hasn’t been passed to you yet, patiently wait your turn. Carry over this same attitude of polite restraint and gratitude to your children, spouse, career, and finances. There is no need to yearn, envy, and grab. You will get your rightful portion when it is your time. (Epictetus, 1995, p. 22)

In this passage, the Stoic wisdom is applied specifically to our possessions. The implication is that it is fate or “logos” that truly controls what we get and don’t get, and so peace is best achieved by resigning ourselves to it. In practice, this implies polite restraint, gratitude, and a lack of yearning, envy, or “grabbing.”

Besides suggesting a parallel to the earlier Buddhist reference to “clinging,” this last term also suggests a return at this point to the original context of the Tenth Commandment. In the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament, there are a variety of terms used to refer to our possessions. One of these is “nachalah,” which means “something inherited . . . generally an estate, patrimony or portion” (Strong, 1890, #5159). In other words, a possession or piece of property in this sense has a communal element to it. When referring to land, for instance, the term tends to refer to that possessed by tribes or nations, not individuals. In contrast, “achuzzah,” as another term for possessions or property, is “something seized,” held, grabbed, or grasped (Strong, 1890, #272). When this term refers to land, the inference is that the land is possessed by an individual. To claim personal ownership of something is, in this sense, to seize or grab at it. Some have argued that what is being forbidden in the Tenth Commandment is precisely a concept of ownership that reflects “achuzzah” and neglects God’s and the
community’s prior authority. John A. Battle writes that “property rights and responsibilities are viewed as inseparable from the Hebrew’s dignity as a human created in God’s image and as a member of God’s chosen nation” (Battle, 2008, p. 13). This is an important parallel between the Old Testament and ancient Greek Stoicism. What we are cautioned against, from both, is an approach to life that asserts a kind of control and authority over our world and possessions that we clearly don’t have. Likewise, it’s hard to resist noticing similar parallels with Buddhist thought. Just as the Buddhists counseled one to conform one’s will to the world rather than insisting that the world conform to our will, so the First Commandment and its assertion of God’s authority suggests a similar reading of the Tenth. That is, we shouldn’t desire the things that our neighbors have because that would be to trust in the world instead of trusting in God – in whom all power and authority resides. Trust, and therefore expectation and desire, should be conformed to God’s will; God’s will does not conform to our desire. To desire that which was given to your neighbor instead of you is like questioning the judgment of the sovereign Lord, which is surely a futile endeavor.

From the preceding analysis, we derive a few pivotal conclusions about the embedded meaning of the Tenth Commandment. The plainest inference is that we should refrain from attaching our desires to impermanent things as if they were permanent, since unhappiness is the result. Hence, our desires often interfere in very foundational ways with the goal of peace. This interference can take several forms: 1) our tendency to demand that reality conform to our desires, instead of the other way around; 2) our efforts to arrange our own reality – our life and resources; 3) the self-deception with which we audaciously claim to know, predict, and change our reality; and 4) the arrogant pretension that we are in control. By drawing on the wisdom of ancient Buddhist and Stoic thought, as well as drawing some parallels with the embedded
context of the Tenth Commandment within the Old Testament, we think that these are reasonable conclusions to draw about the practical advice being offered by the prohibition on coveting.

These conclusions have particular implications for the behavior of organizations and the practice of management within those organizations. Most notably, these conclusions appeal to the natural systems perspective of organizations. In such a system, organizations are in harmony with their environments. Adaptation and coordination come about naturally and organically through inherent organization-environment interfaces. The natural systems perspective, then, not only challenges the prevailing assumptions about organizations but also the prevailing beliefs about the role of management practice. For example, perhaps our organizations would be improved with regards to experience and outcomes if we were to reconsider our prevailing suppositions and conventions in favor of a freer and less managed organization. These implications are best observed when viewed through the lenses of the four functions of management. Those functions are commonly demarcated as:

1) leading – influencing others to achieve goals

2) organizing – arranging people and activities towards productive outcomes

3) planning – formulating ideas and designs that guide behavior

4) controlling – regulating the actions that determine results.

In what follows, we submit a series of propositions and brief explanations corresponding to each of the four functions. We take these as provocative hypotheses that are suggested by our above discussion.
Proposition #1: Leading – Management Is a Facade.

The predominant – even seemingly unchallengeable – conviction about organizations is that they are directed by human thoughts and efforts. Certain members are labeled as “managers.” These members are required and permitted to give purpose, shape, and direction to the organization. These members are described as organizational leaders. They wear the titles, occupy the offices, and chair the meetings that reinforce their central and essential leadership function. However, in our above examination of the Tenth Commandment, we draw the conclusion that we deceive ourselves when we try to act as if we can actually discern our circumstances, not to mention that we can purposefully act on those circumstances with willful intent. This conclusion suggests that management may not really exist. To clarify, management certainly exists in the form of managers who occupy an organizational position, but the existence of the function of management as leading is suspect.

While compiled in a comical manner, “The Dilbert Principle” (Adams, 1997) portrays managers as clueless frauds. Scott Adams argues that incompetent organizational members are promoted to positions of management because, once in these positions, the managers are away from the real work of the organization and can therefore do little damage. We laugh at the Dilbert comic strip because it resonates with a sense of what is real to our experience. But the implication is that managers do not in fact lead. Any sign to the contrary is either supernatural or merely coincidental.
Proposition #2: Organizing – The Real Work of an Organization Is Performed Below the Surface.

The dominant view of organizations is that they can be represented on organizational charts. Boxes and arrows form a hierarchal structure of titles and reports and, in turn, proclaim the existence of the formal organization. The chart maps and rationalizes the organization’s work flow through divisions and levels such that a quick glance might easily tell the observer the relative importance, accessibility, and power of organizational members. However, the preceding analysis of the Tenth Commandment suggests the possibility of a different story. We may conclude, for instance, that our efforts to organize are ultimately in vain. Instead, our primary needs are met through extant processes. It’s true that formal organizational structures are designed and pay scales are correlated to our locations on the organizational chart. However, anyone who has newly joined an organization is quickly confronted with a distinction between the formal and informal organizations. You arrive at work on the first day and subconsciously begin the process of finding out who’s really in charge here. The organizational chart doesn’t give you that information. The formal organization depicted by managers (see Proposition #1) is purely a front for the informal organization where the real work is undertaken.


Much of the energy spent in organizations involves planning. In fact, most of the curriculum in business schools is devoted to helping students learn how to do this very thing. Planning is a cognitive exercise through which we prepare for changing circumstances, and it’s thought to be vitally important to business practice. After all, the governing principle of the
scientifically-managed organization is that “failing to plan is planning to fail.” The payoff for all of this planning is presumably a feeling of security, a satisfaction that the opportunities and risks associated with a venture have been accounted for. However, our examination of the Tenth Commandment concludes that the production of plans may actually be providing a false sense of security. Our ability to know, predict, and affect change is exaggerated. Rather than resulting from the insightful plans of managers (see Proposition #1), organizational successes are the consequence of fortunate timing. Everything has its season. When organizations are in the right place at the right time, providence arrives.

**Proposition #4: Controlling – Regulation Is an Illusion.**

Although the phrase “command and control” is often used pejoratively to describe the harsh and unrelenting character of modern organizations, these qualities nevertheless continue to represent organizational practice. In its classic meaning, bureaucracy – an organization operated by rules – is the hallmark of a scientifically-managed organization. Controls are applied in many forms ranging from human resource management to operations management. Control of the organization and its assets provides objective, reliable, and valid means by which conformity and uniformity are ensured. The Tenth Commandment, though, appears to counsel us that the desire for control brings with it damaging consequences and moreover that the act of control itself is only imagined and therefore futile. Although managers may exert effort on methods of control, the appearance – if even that – that anything or anyone is actually being controlled is pure fantasy. Managers who lack the ability to command (see Proposition #1) would also lack the ability to control.
Conclusions and Discussion

In the end, perhaps what all of this leads up to is something that might be called a “postmodern approach to business.” Not unlike Thomas Kuhn’s groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) suggested that the nature and practice of science was actually something very different from what we had thought it was, so we are making the suggestion that the practice of business and business leadership may also work very differently from what we normally think. Rationality, progress, and control are perhaps no more present in business than they are in any other area of human experience (which is not to say that they are never present). And there is ancient wisdom to be found in this. Maybe it restores to its proper balance a kind of humility and perspective that has been sorely lacking in the business world as of late. As stated above, this could in practice lead to an enhanced state of polite restraint and gratitude, and a diminished sense of envy. Living as we do in the wake of 2008’s global financial crisis, we think these sound like good ideas.
References


