

The Great Commission: Recognizing the Church as a Decentralized Virtual “Spider-Plant” Propagation of the Gospel

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According to Mark 16:15, Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples and rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who saw Him after He had been resurrected. Fulfilling His mission, Jesus instructed the disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” He told them to set up His kingdom among men by the preaching of the gospel.

These eleven men could not, themselves, preach to all the world, much less to every creature in it, but they and the other disciples, with those who would be added to their ranks, were charged with dispersing themselves, and carrying the gospel along with them wherever they went. The intent of this article is to recognize the concepts of decentralization and virtual teams within the concept of the spider plant metaphor as they relate to the fulfillment of the great commission as described in Mark 16:15.

Defining Decentralization

Decentralization is the process of dispersing and delegating decision-making authority and administration to those individuals closer to the lower levels of the organization away from the mid-level authority. In a more decentralized organization, the leadership delegates much of their decision making authority to broaden the span of control with less rigid policies. One advantage of this structure, if the correct controls are in place, is the bottom-to-top flow of information based on established rule from organizational leadership. Decentralization has typically been applicable within the business and political sector, allowing decisions by officials of the organization to be well informed about the lower tier operations.

Defining Virtual Teams

A virtual team (commonly referred to as a geographically distributed team) is a group of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by communication technology. These teams are “knowledge workers” who work toward a common cause, coordinate their work effectively, and use all methods of communication and technology to achieve their common goal. These virtual teams require new ways of working across boundaries through systems, processes, technology, and people, which require effective leadership. Today’s teams are faced with an environment that requires a dynamic, flexible, and fast response to changing organizational needs (Ahuja, 1999). There are three main aspects to virtual teams: people, purpose, and linkage.

A virtual team is defined as “...a group of people with a unique set of skills, which members often reside in different geographical locations and who need to use different means of information and communication technology in order to span time and space boundaries” (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2004). These team members are equally committed to a common cause.

Defining the Spider-Plant Metaphor

By envisioning a spider-plant, we are able to see the basis for a new organizational design. The role of the “large mother pot” is the basis for all activity such as nutrition, new growth, and flexibility. Organizations grow and the spider plant breaks typical constraints by spinning off tentacles and new offshoots when these extensions grow from the large pot. This extension is the plant’s attempt to find new ground in which to grow (Morgan, 1993). These extensions are recognized as “umbilical cords” to secure integration, sustain self-managing units, and ensure accountability. Most organizations tend to be expensive, slow, and inflexible because the large pot fails to extend new elements to become autonomous units. According to Morgan, successful decentralization depends on the development of good “umbilical cords.”

How These References Affect the Church

How do these references and the spider plant metaphor relate to the Great Commission in Mark 16:15? From my perspective, all three of these elements (decentralization, virtual teams, and spider plant) are reflected in the Biblical reference “to go unto all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” How were the disciples to accomplish such a worthy goal? How is the authority of Christ meshed within this undertaking? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in spreading the gospel and

creating new churches? How should the spider plant offshoots or “umbilical cords” be defined and for what significant purpose are they represented in the decentralization of the church organization? What are the key resources necessary to accomplish this great commission? And, is the concept of virtual teams applicable in preaching the gospel to all of creation?

Today’s organizations are faced with a dynamic and turbulent environment that requires flexible and fast responses to changing business needs. Many organizations have responded by adopting decentralized, team-based, and distributive structures (DeSanctis & Jackson, 1994) described in business literature as virtual, network, and cluster organizations (Beyerlein & Johnson, 1994). Whether to centralize or decentralize an organization becomes a difficult decision, because the outcome of employee cooperation, effectiveness of organizational processes, hierarchical structure, and group commitment are an unknown entity.

The perception of business management techniques has been a progressive re-engineering by management consultants aiming for a renewed emphasis on customer orientation, patterns of internal cooperation, and enhancing a company’s human capital. What is common to nearly all of these concepts is that their design is vague, contradictory and non-operational. They can be characterized as:

- visions of new corporate structures, lacking a theoretical foundation
- conceptual systems of untested hypotheses (Drumm, 1995).

What is common among business strategists is the fact they continue their attempts to redesign the wheel. Literature on virtual teams and other new ways of work is diverse and confusing, indicating a need for a framework to structure these terminologies and determine the best management strategy for success.

Mark 16:15 provides us with a written organizational mandate to spread the gospel to all of creation.

In reference to Mark 16:15, we must recognize the spider plant metaphor as a representative model of Jesus Christ as the head of the church. All power and authority for growth and spreading of the gospel comes from Christ, or in metaphoric terms, the “large pot spider plant.” The church can grow by replication of itself through those who have accepted the responsibility to further scripture and follow the teachings and instruction of Jesus Christ. Growth comes by spin-offs or “umbilical cords”

to establish and nourish a large number of small, highly differentiated pots in different regions and different cultures, or by pursuing some of the other avenues available within a community (Morgan, 1997). As Morgan (1997) states, "We must break the constraints set by large "central pots."

As spider plants begin to spin off tentacles and new offshoots, they will continue to outgrow their pots, which ultimately, is an attempt to find new ground in which to grow. Thus, churches, due to growth, will sponsor new churches (or missions) to preach the gospel unto all creation. But how are the new offshoots fed? The new tentacles and offshoots are fed by the Holy Spirit through the large pot umbilical cords used to nourish and feed new churches. When necessary, the spider plant will develop a hybrid extension (or cords) for managing different situations. Thus, depending on the need, a new church may be planted in the inner city or the rural countryside. The new church may place an emphasis on ministering to the poor or homeless, deaf or sick, orphaned or victims of AIDS. Or, a church may be planted in a foreign country where the gospel has never been shared before. The hybrid spider plant is a powerful image for capturing the need for organizational differentiation (Morgan, 1997).

Decentralization and the Church

It is significant to recognize that most organizations have an over-controlling corporate headquarters that requires too much bureaucracy and imposes too many requirements. In church growth, each church is an autonomous extension of Christ, fed by the Holy Spirit, and given only two ordinances to follow: Baptism and the Lords Supper. The Bible is a book of order whereby proper controls, financial accountability, moral behavior, and a free will are already in place to bring order to the structure of the local church.

Yet, decentralization is basically an umbilical cord activity (Morgan, 1997). Why would it be advantageous for the church to be decentralized to fulfill the scriptural order to "preach the gospel unto all creation?" Because the church wants to establish a local presence giving the local churches the power of discernment, order, and autonomy that will allow them to flourish in their local community and meet the physical, as well as spiritual needs of the environment. The church should be a self-organizing activity fed through the Holy Spirit (umbilical cords) working in the lives of people with a common cause.

The primary thrust behind decentralization is to create local activity that can flourish by using the resources of the membership (tithes and offerings), meeting the needs of people in the community, and preaching the gospel to the whole of creation. By establishing roots, the church can become self-sustaining, energized by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Communication, Trust, and the Virtual Team

Behavior control within any organization is a challenge, yet it is enhanced within the virtual team when individuals are dispersed around the world. The challenge in developing innovative self-organizing units (new churches) is to have minimal, yet highly effective boundaries, to give as much physical space as possible; harmony without control. How will the virtual teams be harmonious in spreading the gospel correctly? It is the responsibility of the large “spider plant pot” to communicate the same story to every believer and provide a consistent set of instructions and perimeters to each church to protect the integrity of scripture and provide early warning signals on what activities and decisions are contrary to the word of God. This communication tool is passed to all believers through the Holy Scriptures written in the Bible as God’s love letter to his children. Consistent, harmonious, and sufficient to effectively establish the church.

What is it about a virtual team that makes trust especially problematic? Ethics based trust within an organization depends on the view that trust is an element of moral character. Trust may be sociological, psychological, or even genetic in origin. However, trust is one of the virtues that guide human beings in their normative judgments - judgments as to what is right (or wrong), or what a person ought to (or ought not) do. One of the challenges of the virtual team working to establish new churches is the challenge of creating and maintaining trust in a global virtual team whose members transcend time, space, and culture.

Can trust exist in global virtual teams? Cummings and Bromiley (1996) assert that a person trusts a group when that person believes the group “(a) makes a good-faith effort to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit or implicit, (b) is honest in whatever negotiations precede such commitments, and (c) does not take excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available. Several factors, such as shared social norms, repeated interactions, and shared experiences have been suggested to facilitate the development of trust (Bradach & Eccles, 1988). Trust leads to relationships and relationships lead to sharing of the gospel in people groups around the world.

And so goes the church, a disbursement of believers throughout the world, autonomous, working across time, space, and organizational boundaries, with a common goal to preach the gospel to all creation. Decentralization, virtual teams, and the spider plant concepts are not new. They are all a part of the organizational structure spoken by Jesus to spread the gospel to all creation.

Organizational Design Affects Employee Behavior

Organizations are never changed just by changing structures. They are changed by changing thinking (Morgan, 1997). It is time for employees to open their thinking to the decentralized spider plant imagery that will lend itself to more innovative, flexible, and productive modes of productivity. Such thinking provides a way of reshaping (and accepting) the management techniques of education, and training, and to improve effectiveness in the way decisions are driven at the local, as well as global basis.

By applying an image or metaphor, the employee will develop new insights that can help organize work flow, improve work-site relations, strengthen a common cause, and improve cohesion. Such spider-plant metaphors create a visual image of an organizational structure using “tentacles” and “umbilical cords” as an illustration of cooperation and strength from the management and leadership of the organization. Such a process allows employees to break free from old constraints and understand new images that will allow them to perceive how new actions and behaviors are crucial to establishing change. Such change can define how a large organization can still keep in touch with the demands of the local environment.

The virtual team concept, if implemented properly, can determine what communication tools are used, the importance of face-to-face time, and the significance of a clear team structure. The technical expertise of the team seems to have a positive effect on team performance and enhances the satisfaction of belonging to a team. Such virtual teams focus more on relationship building than actual business. Cohesion is a must for team success and trust is noted as a crucial element for successful teams. A team that trusts one another has predictable communication, timely responses, positive relationships, a cooperative spirit for the other team members, and the ability to move from social communication to tasked-focused, member supported, common cause communication.

Finally, by following Biblical concepts, as displayed and exercised by Christ, employees will focus more on relationship building than on just having a job.

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