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UNITY IN THE DIASPORA: AN INNOVATIVE APPLICATION OF A VALIDATED INSTRUMENT TO BIBLICAL TEXT AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

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The authors posit that a modern leadership framework can be applied to a biblical and historical leader to discover implications for contemporary leaders serving within an era of diversity. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) was administered for Queen Esther, with observations made directly from the text of the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible. In recent leadership literature, the LPI has been used in quantitative and qualitative studies to validate results. Likewise, the use of the empirical instrument in this study was supported by qualitative research methods to affirm Esther's leadership strengths and weaknesses, as discussed in Kouzes and Posner's (2017) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership ® model. This study showed that the LPI could be utilized as a third-party instrument to assess leadership style based on written text as observer data. Queen Esther served in a time and place of diversity, where cultural unity was lacking; therefore, this research-oriented approach to investigating her leadership style uncovered modern implications for present-day leaders serving in a diverse and post-Christian culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a new generation of Americans is on track to become the most diverse generation yet (Fry & Parker, 2018), practical strategies for leaders are essential for developing the ability to apply knowledge to ever-changing real-life settings (Rausch et al., 2001). But changing demographics are not unique to this time and place. When we

look at the ancient story of Esther, we find her living in a city that underwent a major ethnocultural transformation when it became part of the Persian Empire (Kuhrt, 1982). This was a time when King Ahasuerus reigned over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia following the period when Jews were carried away from Jerusalem by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar (English Standard Version, 2001, Esther 2:6). We find this context apropos to explore the phenomenon of leadership during a time of great cultural diversity, especially when viewed through the lens of a modern leadership framework. Therefore, this study extends research on the well-documented Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® model by applying it to Esther's historical and cultural context to uncover modern implications for contemporary leaders in diverse settings.

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® model is a transformational leadership model focused on the ability to mobilize others (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). The authors studied specific points at which leaders were operating at personal-best capacity and, from their findings, identified five common leadership practices: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). More so than personality, the authors posited that behaviors are at the heart of the model. The following are the authors' descriptions of behaviors that correlate with each practice:

Model the Way	Inspire a Shared Vision	Challenge the Process	Enable Others to Act	Encourage the Heart
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values. • Set the example by aligning actions with shared values. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities. • Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve. • Experiment and take risks by consistently generating small wins and learning from experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships. • Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. • Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

(Kouzes & Posner, 2017)

To further leadership research using a theoretical framework based on the five practices of exemplary leadership, the model authors developed the Leadership

Practices Inventory (LPI), and Posner (2016) investigated the reliability and validity of the instrument. Together, the model and inventory provide a conceptual framework to study the phenomenon of leadership. For each of the five leadership practices, the LPI contains a set of six one-sentence descriptions, each based on a behavior deemed consistent with the leadership model and each evaluated on a ten-point Likert scale (Posner, 2016). With scores consistently in the very good (i.e., above 0.80 for internal reliability) range, the LPI was deemed “robust” (p. 4). The author described results as accurate for a wide variety of respondent categories, population types, geographic locations, and for both the Self and Observer versions of the inventory. The original intent was to create an inventory for leadership development purposes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Zagorsek et al., 2006), but the LPI has also been widely applied in empirical research studies (Bryant, 2017; Diaz et al., 2019; Egan et al., 2020; Emmanuel & Valley, 2021; Tran, 2020).

The LPI has been used as a validated instrument to bring about results in recent leadership research (e.g., Bryant, 2017; Diaz et al., 2019; Egan et al., 2020; Emmanuel & Valley, 2021; Tran, 2020). Bryant (2017) responded to a gap in the literature regarding transformational leadership training, specifically during a time of change. A quantitative ex post facto design was utilized to determine the impact of professional development using the five practices of exemplary leadership behaviors, which were measured using the LPI. Significant before and after results were determined using the LPI as a validated instrument. Diaz et al. (2019) focused on the benefits of having teachers use the LPI to determine practices of exemplary leadership behaviors in students. The authors noted the validity of LPI results considering different countries of origin. Egan et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative research study to determine the efficacy and transfer of leadership learning to work environments. The authors used the LPI to verify if and to what extent the five practices of exemplary leadership behaviors were evident in the workplace. Using Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) leadership model as a framework, Emmanuel and Valley (2021) completed a qualitative case study to explore the leadership qualities of school principal leaders. Tran (2020) looked at leadership practices through the lens of generational preference and determined that there was no significant difference in preference based on the variable of generation. Tran used the LPI as one of two validated instruments to determine that it was the quality of the relationship, not a generational preference, which had the most significant leadership impact. In each study, the LPI was used to bring about valid and reliable research results.

The present study considered a theoretical framework based on a transformational leadership model, the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® model, and a conceptual discussion that incorporated the Leadership Practices Inventory as a valid and reliable instrument. The Observer version of the LPI was applied to Esther, and responses were categorized from biblical accounts. The authors of this study capitalized on the reliability and validity of the LPI as a scale that accurately assesses leadership behaviors (Posner, 2016). The authors posited that this conceptual approach would provide an enhanced understanding of leadership behaviors and influence the discussion regarding implications for contemporary leaders.

III. ESTHER

The book of Esther is a ten-chapter book in the Bible's Old Testament, written circa 400 BC. The story was set in Susa, the capital of the vast Persian Empire, which, at the time, included 127 provinces spread from India to Ethiopia (The Lutheran Study Bible, 2009). After the destruction of Jerusalem, Jews had been scattered across many nations, including Persia, living a diasporadic life of tension. The Israelites, once from their own mighty nation, were now the minority living subordinately and precariously under Persian rule (Akinyele, 2009). In addition, Esther was especially vulnerable not only as a minority, but also as a female and an orphan within a landscape of systemic oppression (Akinyele, 2009).

As an orphaned, young Jewish woman living with her elder cousin, Mordecai, the beautiful Esther was brought into the Persian king's harem, wherein she did not disclose her Jewish heritage (Est 2). When it was her turn to come before the king, he loved her more than any other and chose her to be the queen (Est 2). When the king's chief adviser, Haman, issued an edict that all Jews be annihilated, Esther devised a plan to save them, knowing she could be putting her life at risk to do so since no one was permitted to come before the king without invitation (Est 3). Ultimately, the king redrafted the edict, and Esther succeeded in bringing about unity in the region (Est 8).

Esther has been studied across a variety of disciplines, including history, religion, literature, politics, feminism, and leadership. Queen Esther's character has been described as "obedient orphan, beautiful virgin, clever and courageous queen, savior of Diaspora Jews" (Summer, 2006, p. 144). Naturally, Esther has been described as a servant leader (Akinyele, 2009; Friedman & Friedman, 2012) due to her willingness to sacrifice herself for the greater good. What has only been touched on briefly is how Esther fits in Kouzes and Posner's leadership model. In reference to Kouzes and Posner's five exemplary practices, Akinyele (2009) stated,

The literary figure of Esther effectively models the behavior she expects from all the Jews when she initiates the three-day fast (Est 4:16a). She inspires and instills a vision of freedom and salvation in the Jews with her willingness to appeal to Xerxes (Est 4:16b). She ventures out and is willing to challenge existing Persian laws for the greater good of her people in spite of the potential personal danger (Est 5:1). Esther makes it possible for the Jewish people to collaborate and act to defend themselves (Est 8:3) and encourages the hearts of the Jewish people through the generations by instituting the Festival of Purim (Est 9:29), which is still celebrated today (p. 77).

While this succinct exegetical analysis is helpful, it has not been empirically validated. We consider this a call for additional research and seek to provide evidence, through the LPI, to measure the precise nature of Esther's leadership practices and behaviors to discover modern leadership implications.

IV. APPLICATION OF THE LPI TO ESTHER

Methods

The authors of this article purchased the Observer format of the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) fifth edition from Wiley. While the Observer format is most often used in tandem with the Self format in order to compare the variance, thereby identifying areas for professional development in leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), the Observer version retains its merit even as a standalone assessment. Indeed, Posner (2016) examined various aspects of leader effectiveness, "utilizing only the responses from observers. Including only the responses from 'other people' about their managers provided relatively independent assessments and thereby minimized potential self-report bias" (p. 16). In this case, the authors of the present study fall under the category of "other people" as readers who have directly observed [read] Esther's behaviors. While the LPI suggests at least 7-10 observers, this study's limitation is that only one observer instrument was scored, which was the result of the two authors coming to intercoder consensus for categorization of the behavior data.

In order to observe the extent to which Esther engaged in the behaviors related to the practices of exemplary leadership, the authors used the actual scriptural text evidence of the book of Esther from the ESV version of the bible. The ESV was chosen for its word-for-word translation philosophy, making it an "essential literal translation" (Lutheran Study Bible, p. xv). However, the unit of qualitative analysis for this data was at the phrase or statement level or complete idea, not necessarily single words. The authors read the text, line by line, and anytime Esther personally did or said something, that piece of observation text evidence was categorized under the corresponding behavior(s) where applicable. Reliability for this study was enhanced through intercategory agreement due to the stability of responses when more than one categorizer analyzes data sets (Creswell, 2013). The authors independently categorized the text data under the LPI behaviors and then compared and discussed any differences in order to come to a consensus. Using this intercoder agreement provided phenomenological bracketing, a suspending of judgment, which lessens the influence of researcher bias (Creswell, 2013). The table below offers a sample of the bible verses from Esther that were categorized under the specific behaviors assessed on the LPI.

Verse	Behavior (Practice)
Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him (Est 2:20).	Follows through on promises and commitments (Model the Way)
Then Esther called for Hathach and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was (Est 4:5).	Actively searches for innovative ways to improve what we do (Challenge the Process)

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (Est 4:15-16).	Sets a personal example of what is expected (Model the Way)
Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said" (Est 5:7-8).	Treats people with dignity and respect (Enable Others to Act)
When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her (Est 2:15).	Develops cooperative relationships (Enable Others to Act)

Following the categorization of data, the authors were then able to score the 30 behavior statements. The scoring of 1-10 from "almost never" to "almost always" was conducted by the actual count of instances of observation text evidence. That is, if a behavior had three scriptural instances filed under it, it was scored as three. Behaviors with 10 or more pieces of evidence were scored as 10. Once the scores were filled in, the authors were able to tabulate the five practices per the LPI instructions. According to the instrument, the total responses for each of the five exemplary practices range from 6 to 60, which is the total resulting from adding the score for each of the behaviors related to that practice.

Results

As a result of the observer inventory completed with intercoder agreement of the categorization of text-based evidence, Esther's highest-rated practice on the scale of 6-60 was Challenge the Process (39), followed by Model the Way (36), Enable Others to Act (35), Inspire a Shared Vision (24), and lastly, Encourage the Heart (22).

Individually, Esther's highest-rated behaviors (score of 10) were as follows: Sets a personal example of what is expected (model); Develops cooperative relationships (enable); Follows through on promises and commitments (model); Treats people with dignity and respect (enable).

Esther's lowest-rated behaviors (score of 2) were as follows: Talks about future trends influencing our work (inspire); Expresses confidence in people's abilities (encourage); Asks "What can we learn?" (challenge); Tells stories of encouragement about the good work of others (encourage).

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While none of the practices approached the top possible score of 60, indicating room for growth in all areas, Esther's strengths as a "Challenge the Process" leader are supported by existing literature. Research has shown that people with both a high propensity to trust and a weak quid-pro-quo conceptualization of interpersonal exchanges will engage in more "taking charge" behaviors (Chiaburu & Baker, 2006).

Likewise, how a person perceives exchanges is important for their subsequent engagement in taking charge behaviors (Chiaburu & Baker, 2006). This was clearly seen in Esther, who repeatedly took charge to ask the king for favors without offering anything in return (e.g., Est 8:5; Est 9:13). Consistently, she took charge to tell the Jews to fast and pray (e.g., Est 4:15; Est 9:31), and instructed or assigned Mordecai in his doings (e.g., Est 4:15; Est 8:2). In addition, research has indicated that people who internalize external socio-political events are more likely to take charge in challenging the status quo (Curtin et al., 2015). The impending demise of the Jews by the Haman-initiated edict was felt personally by Esther (Est 8:3). Though Haman's edict might not have affected her personally since her heritage was kept secret (Est 2:20), she still took it personally and was motivated to take action toward change.

Ironically, even though Esther ranked highest on the "Challenge the Process" practice overall, her four highest-scoring behaviors (10) did not include any "Challenge the Process" behaviors. This signals the importance of a balanced approach in working toward unity in diverse or underserved contexts. That is, Esther set a personal example (model), treated others with dignity and respect (enable), developed cooperative relationships (enable), and followed through on promises (model).

It is essential to note that Esther "treat[ed] others with dignity and respect" regardless of whether they were Jews or Persians, as all are created in the image of God. Moreover, she did not ask the Jews to assimilate into Persian culture but advocated for their Jewish religion and identity and even initiated a festival during which they could celebrate their newfound freedom (Est 9:29). Likewise, she did not force Persians to conform to Jewish culture. Recent counseling literature affirms the practice of treating others with dignity and respect by advocating for multicultural or religious identity (Mintert et al., 2020). Correspondingly, pedagogical studies have shown that the ability to understand and respect the values of others allows a leader to develop congruence with and engage successfully with diverse populations (Milner, 2011). Similarly, a leader with this kind of competence is able to validate individuals and lead in a respectful and non-threatening manner (University of Kansas, 2021). Esther modeled the way regarding this practice as she was immersed in the culture in which she was living, and therefore knew the risks and benefits of approaching the king, as well as the appropriate way in which to do so (e.g., Est 5:2).

A second crucial concept to consider is that Esther "develop[ed] cooperative relationships." She cooperated with Hegai, Mordecai, the Jews both in Susa and rural places, the king, and others (e.g., Est 2:15; Est 2:20, Est 5:2). These relationships allowed for a discursive and constructive space in which to listen, learn, and influence. Offering underrepresented populations access to these spaces and relationships invites them to define any issues that need to be addressed (DeLaRosa & Jun, 2019).

Thirdly, it is significant that one of Esther's four highest-scoring practices was "follows through on promises." Research has shown that those who mobilize Christians to action often have better success at the local or individual level, wherein participants are more likely to see timely and tangible changes than they might at a structural level (Todd & Rufa, 2013; Vondey, 2015). Where better to identify follow-through than in proximate contexts? For leaders desiring to bring about unity in diverse settings, it can be helpful to do so in the immediate context before working toward broader systemic changes.

Finally, Esther was a leader who "sets a personal example." Esther did not wait for someone else to do the work, she led by personal example. While some of her behaviors were simple and others were daring, she was consistent in modeling the way with integrity. Indeed, research shows that setting the example moves beyond any professional context and "into how one behaves and interacts in and outside the [workplace]" (Critchfield, 2018, p. 50), delivering on a biblical imperative to support the needs of others.

In light of these four most practiced behaviors, we have uncovered that the application of the LPI to Esther offers four valuable and practical insights for contemporary leaders serving and challenging the process in a time of diversity: (1) understand and affirm others' identity; (2) invite others into the conversation; (3) start proximately and follow through; and (4) lead by everyday example. These approaches span centuries and generations and give heed to the importance of leadership behaviors found to be effective in a time of diversity and when unity is lacking in the culture.

Leaders today should consider how exemplary practices of leadership serve as practical tools in bringing about both change and unity, as evidenced by Queen Esther. It is important for leaders to align actions with shared values and create a spirit of community and collaboration (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Christian leaders today are serving in a culture that is markedly post-Christian, almost a diaspora of sorts, in a similar way to how Esther was living in Persia. Christian leaders should be especially encouraged by the story of Esther and seek to emulate her leadership practices.

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study focused on the similarities between Esther's context and a 21st-century context, there are also recognized differences. Future researchers could investigate this for a more effective and practical application for leaders. For example, one could observe how a 21st-century leader can be a principled person who is able to articulate their values and make decisions based on those values like Esther did, while at the same time adhering to the ethical codes or standards of their respective environments. This could be important in present-day situations, such as in interfaith forums that often lend toward pluralism, relativism or secularism (Vukic, 2018).

An important consideration for future research is that a larger scale third-party observer panel be administered again for Esther to meet the recommended minimum of 7-10 observers for the LPI. While the book of Esther was chosen, in part, due to its parsimony, the LPI may offer further implications by the study of biblical figures for which there exists a greater body of text to observe. For example, it may be enlightening to apply a longitudinal assessment on King David from his early years as a shepherd to his days as a mighty warrior, to his ultimate duration as a king. There are countless possibilities as to what we may learn from biblical and historical characters by applying any number of modern frameworks, whether related to leadership or even to other disciplines. For instance, researchers may want to investigate how the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) framework (Sue et al., 1992), or later iterations thereof, could be applied to Esther, or other biblical characters, in order to offer implications for contemporary counselors. Likewise, a conceptual framework for

culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) could be applied to the apostle Paul or other biblical figures, whereby teachers might learn faith-based strategies on which to build cultural competence in diverse settings. However, considering the number of leadership models that exist in the literature today (e.g., team, shared, virtual, servant, transformational, integrative), researchers might consider using other validated instruments or models to assess the leadership styles and behaviors of biblical leaders to determine if and how they can offer contemporary insights. There is no shortage of what can be learned from the bible.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Leadership during a time of cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon, and the pursuit for exemplary practices can be enhanced by purposeful gleaning that draws from biblical and historical figures. This mindset gave rise to a methodical study of the book of Esther using a modern leadership approach involving Kouzes and Posner's (2017) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership® Model, along with their validated instrument, the Leadership Practices Inventory. With the intent to discover implications for contemporary leaders, the behaviors of Queen Esther, a biblical leader whose words and actions brought about unity in a divided culture, were categorized using qualitative and empirical methods. This application of a modern leadership framework generated discussion and direct implications for contemporary leaders, including four pivotal leadership practices that served the context well. As leaders in America embrace what it means to lead the most diverse generation in the nation's history (Fry & Parker, 2018), exemplars from the past can be studied using contemporary methods to bring about results that allow for modern application. The goal need not be the determination of one leader as best or ideal; rather, it is the careful study of practices that produce exemplary outcomes. Esther was a "Challenge the Process" leader who successfully sought unity during a time of diversity and thus, her behaviors translate into practical and insightful leadership practices for contemporary leaders to incorporate.

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