

Dialogue III

Reply to Seibert's "Learning the Ropes Without Getting Strangled: The Believer and Socialization in Business"

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This article warns the newly-minted Christian graduate that there are sheep and then there are wolves (Matt. 10:16). The trick is to remain a sheep and live to tell about it. I have wondered for a long time just how one can manage the tension between sheep and wolves in order to stay alive, balancing obedience to God's will with worldly demands. After reading Seibert's insightful and instructive article, I can see that it may not always be possible, but more so than I had previously thought. Yet I am still not convinced of one assumption Seibert puts forth—that "most Christian business graduates are seriously committed to living their faith in all areas of their life ...". I accept this as our ultimate objective. The appeal to Daniel in this article has more clearly shown me something. Christians can creatively manage those worldly demands and still remain faithful. I am encouraged.

Seibert provides a useful message for faculty as we send the sheep out to meet the wolves. The sheep must know there are wolves out there, and they must also be realistically prepared. Humanistic culture in business desires to shape us into its own image, as Seibert aptly points out, and this poses ethical questions of individuality and human dignity. The question is: How does the Christian balance these two obligations of allegiance to the company as well as to God? For example, Janis and Mann (1977)¹ have shown in their classic studies that group pressure can be a bad influence under certain conditions. This is true—organizational socialization can become imbalanced to the point of coercion. Of course, human individuality and dignity are more important than a firm's socialization program, whether it is implicit or explicit. Jesus certainly socialized His original

disciples, but He did it in a balanced fashion which honored individuality and dignity. He also maintained this ethical stance under immense pressure from His opponents.

But socialization could also be viewed from the perspective of contingency theory. Contingency theory could say that socialization serves to either “tighten” or “loosen-up” employees. This describes an effective socialization strategy. For example, when the external environment is quickly changing, *less* formal socialization is appropriate, not more. Individual degrees of freedom are at a premium when the environment is uncertain. Socialization should not always be construed to mean more is better. Sometimes less is better. It should be thought of as dynamic. The organization may need added degrees of freedom to stimulate the individual thinking characteristic of innovation. In contrast, as the external environment becomes stable, *more* socialization is appropriate, restricting individual degrees of freedom. Greater uniformity promotes organizational efficiency. Although Seibert rightly warns us that too much worldly socialization is a threat to a right relationship with God,

socialization in itself is necessary to varying degrees.

As I read the article I began to leap beyond it to the mechanisms of socialization. How does socialization get accomplished? Daniel and his three friends were resourceful when challenged to eat certain food, as Seibert implies. They made a verbal contract with the king, which ultimately showed they were capable of resisting and managing social pressure. Their verbal contract was enacted by speech. As Seibert might agree, their efforts balanced the pressure of organizational socialization against that of their individuality and dignity. For Daniel and friends, speech was therefore used to balance socialization pressures, thus honoring their human dignity. Speech got things done for them. Why not think of language as the primary socializing mechanism in all organizations? It is written, spoken, and demonstrated behaviorally. New hires become socialized through the speech of others as well as through observation of body language. This seems so obvious that it is usually overlooked, but it is central to all socialization.

Anthropologists have long maintained that culture is encapsulated in language; understand the implicit use of language, and you understand the culture. Human speech is rarely literal. Reading between the lines is not just nice. It is *always* necessary. Through language, socialization creates and reinforces organizational culture. Therefore, language can be studied and used as a socialization tool. Jargon is the language of professional socialization. Christian-based socialization comes from the language of the special text we call the Bible. Jargon use is common, but why not use biblical language, too? Why can't we be socializing agents on Christ's behalf?

The usual socializing agents in business organizations—one's supervisor, manager, or other colleagues, for example—should be aware of how their speech implements socialization in new hires as well as reinforces role expectations in existing employees. Socializing agents should be aware of linguistic tools such as metaphor, metonymy, simile, and hyperbole, to mention a few. These figures of speech, if used carefully by the skilled professional, can convey

role expectations most effectively. If it were not so, Jesus would not have made such heavy use of these kinds of tools. For example, we see Him use metaphorical expression when He said, “You are the salt of the Earth” (Matt. 5:13) and “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). Of course, nobody is literally salt and light. He used hyperbole when he announced, “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (Matt. 5:30). He did not mean to literally have one's hand amputated. He also frequently used the parable and simile. For example, we find parable and simile in the stories about the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31), hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44), and yeast (Matt. 13: 33). These tools are effective, at least in part, because they facilitate the development of vivid mental images, making it easier for new recruits to understand and remember. All this underscores the point that in order to socialize new employees, we can follow the model of Jesus by intelligently using language in creative and potent ways to communicate role expectations most clearly. Seibert's read on “how” organizations socialize appeals to a series of dichotomies which,

while useful, seems static. I believe socialization processes are much more dynamic.

There are also ways to verify the efficacy of language as a socializing tool.² An empirical study might be to look at secular vs. Christian socialization methods, comparing these methods with organizational outcomes such as present and subsequent job performance, retention, and turnover.

To accomplish this end, for example, one might examine the use of Christian linguistic tools in one group vs. humanistic linguistic tools in another group of socializing employees.

For example, the supervisor at a working lunch could invoke the Christian metaphor of the vine (John 15:1-8). The text of the Bible is rich with such language. The humanist supervisor, in contrast, might invoke jargon such as a network. At the end of a pre-specified socialization period, perhaps one year, we might expect higher turnover among the employees socialized through the use of humanistic linguistic tools and lower turnover among those socialized in Christian linguistic tools. One danger in this method is that these structures could become meaningless if used habitually. We must not overlook

the important role of the dynamic, indwelling Holy Spirit. This danger would have to be balanced with the potential benefits.

The implications for teaching are at least two. One, we can use the method of “unpacking” metaphors to teach students to better solve problems. This means we peel away one by one the assumptions upon which various propositions are based in order to get to the core meaning of a problem. We might spend time in class teaching students to analyze all the various dimensions and implications of the vine metaphor as an organizational structure, for example. I use this metaphor in my international business course. Two, by teaching and thereby sensitizing students to the utility of linguistic tools such as the metaphor, they will be better able to understand the meaning of others’ use of language in the workplace. This would help students to socialize other students and eventually other employees and colleagues further down the career road. The importance of subtlety, for example, increases as one scales the career ladder. Better interpretive abilities will help students to more clearly *see* the “ropes” others may be subtly pointing out to them.

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ENDNOTES

¹I.L. Janis, & L. Mann, *Decision making: A philosophical analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 1977).

²See M.K. Moch & W.C. Fields, Developing a content analysis for interpreting language use in organizations. In Bacharach and Mitchell’s *Research in the Sociology of Organizations (Vol. 4)*, (New York, NY: JAI Press, 1985).

