Covenant and Empowerment:
Integrative Themes for Organizational Leadership and Behavior

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Abstract

The fields of organizational development, behavior, culture, and design, as well as leadership studies such as servant leadership and transformational leadership all provide ideas and concepts relevant for improving organizational health, employee relations, and organizational success. Likewise, many organizational processes stemming from the Human Resources movement such as participative decision-making are relevant to the formation of a successful organization. The research reveals that empowerment is a key unifying theme of organizational and leadership best practices across organizational leadership, culture, processes and structure (OLCPS), and that in turn, a covenantal model is a useful approach for operationalizing empowerment in all facets of organizational leadership and behavior in all domains of the organization. This study is only conceptual and is meant to lay the theoretical foundation for the creation of a covenantal-empowerment diagnostic, which can be used to measure for the presence

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of covenantal behavior and practices within an organization. Further research and testing is therefore necessary to assure quantitative rigor in the use of the covenantal-empowerment model and approach. The concepts discussed here provide helpful guidelines for overturning abusive power structures in society, mediating conflict, and deepening personal and professional relationships.

Keywords: leadership, empowerment, covenant, organizational behavior, structure, culture

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In the many attempts to define leadership and healthy organizational behavior, perhaps one of the greatest challenges is the lack of a unifying theme or metaphor or an undergirding principle to embody the incredible scope of research that has accrued over the last several decades. The literature review below reveals one such undergirding principle: *empowerment.* The popular leadership approaches, along with organizational best practices for processes, structure, and culture, all seem to touch upon the importance of empowering employees to grow and develop as human beings in the workplace context, in such a way that benefits the entire organization.

However, to say that empowerment is a key underlying theme is not sufficient. Some conceptual model will be needed to operationalize empowerment across interpersonal, behavioral, cultural, and structural domains. Therefore, after the literature review, a covenantal model for operationalizing empowerment will be discussed. This approach will offer three main reasons: 1) at its heart and core, covenant is about empowerment; 2) further, covenantal relationships are so comprehensive that established agreements touch on interpersonal, behavioral, cultural, and structural processes and norms within an organizational context; and 3) finally, covenant has a rich and positive influence within the history of Western civilization and is moreover a growing research topic in the field of organizational behavior and leadership. Thus, the covenantal model bears further study and examination.

Literature Review

The following provides an overview of empowerment and its relevance to the research of various fields of leadership and organizational behavior and best practices in the domains of organizational leadership, processes, structure and culture (OLPSC), specifically: 1) Transformational and Servant Leadership (leadership); 2) Human Resource Management and Participative Decision-making (process); 3) Decentralization (structure) and 4) spirituality in the workplace (organizational culture). These concepts are being discussed because they represent best practices in the research for organizational leadership and behavior.

Defining Empowerment

Empowerment refers to "employees being more proactive and self-sufficient in assisting an organization to achieve its goals" (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999, p. 373-374). It involves a combination of information sharing, delegation of authority, and increased employee autonomy" (Raub & Robert, 2012); underlying these practices is the informal relationship between the leader and follower, where followers are affirmed and recognized as worthy of being empowered

(2012). Pardo del Val and Lloyd (2003) argued that empowerment, participative management, and participation are synonymous and emphasized allowing followers to participate in the decision-making process. Today, the term invokes a very complex transition of power among all facets of an organization. Empowerment exists both in the organizational context, in which structures and processes align to engender greater employee decision-making and ownership in organizational processes, as well as psychological empowerment, which speaks to the employee's sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction (Edú Valsania, Moriano, & Molero, 2016).

Empowerment should therefore be seen as multi-dimensional construct. While it acknowledges the sharing of power between leaders and followers, it also focuses on the follower's perception of power and use of self-power (Matthews, Diaz, & Cole, 2003). The point then is for leaders to first acknowledge the powers, talents, and gifts that followers have and seek to allow them to use those powers in a collaborative process.

Organizational effectiveness and empowerment. A link between empowerment and organizational effectiveness certainly exists. Schneider, Dowling, and Raghuram (2007) linked empowerment to higher organizational effectiveness and growth; Rezayimanesh, Vaezi, and Alavi (2015)

linked empowerment to enhanced customer service. In that same vein, individual empowerment has been positively linked to team empowerment, both of which in turn enhance organizational citizenship behavior and the relationship between leaders and followers (Zhon, Lam, & Chen, 2011; Daraei, Maymand, & Ekhtari, 2014; Bester, Stander, & Llewellyn, 2015). Dunham and Burt (2011) found significant relationships between organizational memory and requests to share knowledge, empowerment and organizational self-esteem, and on a related note, empowerment has been found to enhance innovation and learning (Chang, 2016).

Likewise, Patterson, West, and Wall (2004) found that "two components of empowerment, namely job enrichment and skill enhancement, independently predicted subsequent productivity; which in turn accounted for their effects on profit" (p.658). In fact, the use of empowerment as a measurable construct for organizational success has been so useful that Carson and King (2005) argued that empowerment, not leadership, should be viewed as the key emphasis in organizational studies.

Leadership

Transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership (TL) is an outgrowth of the Human Resource emphasis on caring for employees and helping them grow personally and

achieve more for the organization. TL motivates employees to see the vision of the company and stay focused on it (Garcia-Morales, Llorens-Montes, & Verdu-Jover, 2008). Empowerment, therefore, is clearly an important aspect of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are employee-centered and help employees develop their potential (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). Thus, empowerment is a key facet of TL (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009), which is not surprising given that they have been found to possess high emotional intelligence (Matthew & Gupta, 2015). Further, empowerment occurs as leaders create a sense of shared vision with followers and allow them to contribute to that vision (McCaffrey & Reinoso, 2016).

TL has significant impacts on organizational structure, culture, and processes. For instance, decentralization is a key practice associated with transformational leadership (López, Peón, & Ordás, 2006). Transformational leadership has also been found to positively impact various facets of organizational culture. Numerous studies have shown a positive relationship between transformational leadership practices and the stimulation of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which speaks to motivated employees who have taken ownership of their organization and are committed to it (Boerner, Eisenbeiss, & Griesser, 2007) as well as psychological empowerment

(Han, Seo, Yoon, Seung, & Yoon, 2016). Imran, Ilyas, Aslam, Rahman (2016) argued that TL plays a key role in furthering the transition to a learning organization.

Servant Leadership. Very closely related to TL is the idea of Servant Leadership (SL). Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999, p. 49) argued that "servant leaders are in fact transformational leaders" who are motivated from a spiritual base to fulfill values like justice, equality and human rights via empowerment of followers. SL calls for leaders to motivate followers to serve others by demonstrating an example of servanthood and by nurturing those tendencies in followers (Lacroix & Armin, 2017). The servant leader serves subordinates by helping them to discover their full potential and find ways to achieve self-actualization (Burns, 1978); hence empowerment. SL is characterized by leaders who demonstrate "active listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth, and community-building" (McCuddy & Cavin, 2008, p. 107).

Several studies have linked servant leadership to empowerment of followers (Tuan, 2016). Kezar (2002, para. 33) described servant leadership as being "collective, collaborative, equal power relations, non-hierarchical, non-positional, empowerment based, non-directive, process

oriented, facilitative, and team oriented." In turn, SL leads employees to be more engaged with the group and to care for customers because they have been cared for and acknowledged as meaningful contributors to the organization (Ljungholm, 2016). SL is also linked to organizational stewardship (Yigit, 2017).

The notion of empowerment in the servant leadership model impacts a variety of organizational contexts. Feldheim and Johnson (2004, p. 21) spoke of the importance of "participative management" that empowers employees as well as citizens and is built upon feedback and dialogue. For the reasons mentioned above, SL is a rejection of the top-down approach to leadership (Wilson, 1998), and therefore could be related to the Human Resource Management practice of decentralization.

Organizational Processes

Human Resource Management Perspective. Unlike leadership perspectives, the next category of studies focuses on processes and strategies for enhancing organizational performance. The first category is Human Resource Management (HRM) Perspective. HRM is a derivative of the Human Relations movement which first began to emphasize the uniquely human component of organizational behavior. As the name indicates, HRM views human beings as valuable resources whose unique contributions should be allowed to flourish in the organizational setting. The HRM perspective was further encouraged by a rejection of the bureaucratic, overly-rigid, hierarchical organizational approach that embodied the US economy until international competition, particularly from Japanese industries, forced necessary changes (Cappelli & Neumark, 2001). However, much study and research has also been devoted to the study and application of HRM in the international context (Pudelko, Reiche & Carr, 2015).

Much of the literature on HRM practices over the years reveals that those practices have a positive impact upon organizational performance (Kaifeng, Lepak, Jia & Baer, 2012). And not surprisingly, HRM is related to empowerment. Cappelli and Neumark (2001) discuss the importance of self-managed teams, teamwork, job rotation, cross-training, pay-for-skill programs, profit-sharing, benchmarking, and the use of computer technology. Likewise, Paillé, Chen, Boiral and Jin (2014) linked HRM to enhanced organizational citizenship behavior as well as decreased employee turnover (Alfes, Shantz, Truss & Soane, 2013).

Participative Decision-Making (PDM). Though related to HRM, Participative Decision-Making (PDM) has garnered much research and practice in its own right and will therefore be discussed separately here. According to Yeung (2004), PDM

is a "bottoms-up" approach that "works to empower employees by sharing information with them and delegating responsibilities to frontline positions so that employees can use their own ingenuity to make timely and tailor-made decisions" (p. 114). Reeves, Walsh, Tuller and Magley (2012) argue that PDM is related to both perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support.

In general, PDM practices have been found to increase organizational performance and job satisfaction (Grissom, 2011; Pacheco & Webber, 2016) and employee retention (Long & Spurlock, 2008). Harris and Kacmar (2005) argued that PDM can reduce the strain caused by organizational politics, making the workplace "seem less political as well as minimizing the job strains that result from any politics that are perceived" (p. 349). Likewise, Sarin and O'Connor (2009) suggested that leaders who practice participative management and "initiation of goal structure" positively impact internal team dynamics in terms of "functional conflict resolution, collaboration, and communication quality…while discouraging dysfunctional conflict resolution and formal communications" (p. 188).

Organizational Structure: The Conundrum of Decentralization

Decentralization has been found to enhance empowerment, provided that decision-making is passed down to lower levels within the organization (Hempel, Zhang, & Han, 2009). Decentralization is linked to flatter, less hierarchical structures (Ching, 2001) and increased communication along organizational and departmental boundaries (Tannenbaum & Dupuree-Bruno, 1994) as well as enhanced commitment, flexibility, and intrinsic motivation of middle and lower managers (Wynen, Verhoest, & Rübecksen, 2014). One of the main reasons for the trend in decentralization is due to increased competition in an increasingly global marketplace (Echevarria & Val Nunez, 1999). Decentralization has been linked to participative decision making (Russell & Russell, 1992; Wynen, Verhoest, & Rübecksen, 2014), employee self-management (Shipper & Manz, 1992) and self-managed teams (Hassan, Hagen & Daigs, 2006). These are all based on the notion that empowered employees can be more productive and effective. This is perhaps why empowerment would be so important in any type of structural reorganization. On that point, Spreitzer, (1995b) found that empowerment tends to mediate the relationship between organizational and social structures and behavioral outcomes. If empowerment is genuine and mutually established through shared visions, organizational structures must be modified to meet future organizational demands.

Though decentralization is viewed today as an organizational best practice and perhaps even

a necessity, the notion is not without its critics. Some managers are affected negatively through decentralization—saying it actually hinders their ability to make decisions and solve problems because the act of decentralization has fragmented power to lower levels where an over-arching problem cannot be addressed in a comprehensive fashion (Esmail, Cohen-Koehler, & Djibuti, 2007). Decentralization can also lead to a waste of resources due to duplicated efforts and processes (Donnellan, 1996). If done poorly, decentralization can lead to "confused lines of reporting" as well as insufficient authority to go with new responsibilities (Esmail, Cohen-Koehler, & Djibuti, 2007, p. 27). Likewise, Bannink and Osserwaarde (2011) argue that decentralization can be a problem when decision-making and authority roles are not properly clarified.

Organizational Culture—Spirituality in the Workplace

Definition. Organizational culture "is the collective beliefs and values shared by all members of an organization" (Wang, Shieh, & Wang, 2008, p. 1013). This created culture in turn "shapes the values and beliefs of the members" (Farooq & Sethi, 2008, p. 41). One increasingly popular manifestation of the idea of empowerment in an organization's culture is that of spirituality in the workplace (SIW) (Gockel, 2004; Groen, 2008). SIW generally describes a culture where employees feel valued and respected (Batcheller, Davis, & Yoder-Wise, 2013) and are able to find fulfillment through their work (Groen, 2008), all in the context of a workplace which experience engenders a sense of community, interconnectedness, and care and in which employees can truly make a difference—both within their organization and the larger community (Bygrave & Macmillan, 2008).

There are many practical implications for a company that embraces SIW. Since one of the chief aims of SIW is to value the employee as a real human being (Batcheller, Davis, & Yoder-Wise, 2013), the idea has been linked to the notion of empowerment and participative decision-making (Gockel, 2004). If leaders are truly committed to SIW and related concepts like empowerment and participative decision-making, organizational structures must move away from the traditional command-and-control approach (Ashar & Lane-Maher, 2004). Gockel (2004) argued that companies seeking to embrace SIW should embrace key ideas from the Human Resource Perspective, implementing work/life balance initiatives such as "flexible work hours, on-site child care, workout facilities, rooms for meditation and napping, yoga, *tai chi*, and massage"—all potential ways of "revitalizing the soul at work" (p. 158). Gatling, Kim, and Milliman (2016) found that the three components of SIW—a sense of fulfilment in

work, organizational commitment, community, and support of organizational values—lead to a decrease in employee turnover and an increase in organizational commitment.

Kolodinsky, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz (2008) and Marques (2008) argued that SIW practices will lead to increased employee loyalty towards the organization. In turn, these SIW-related ideas have been linked to increased profitability, productivity, and long-term success for the organization (Khasawneh, 2011; Wang & Han, 2016). Since SIW is about empowering people, and part of empowering them is allowing them to do good things and making the world a better place in which to live.

Empowerment Summary

The above literature review has revealed the

Figure 1. Empowerment Linkages across OLPSC
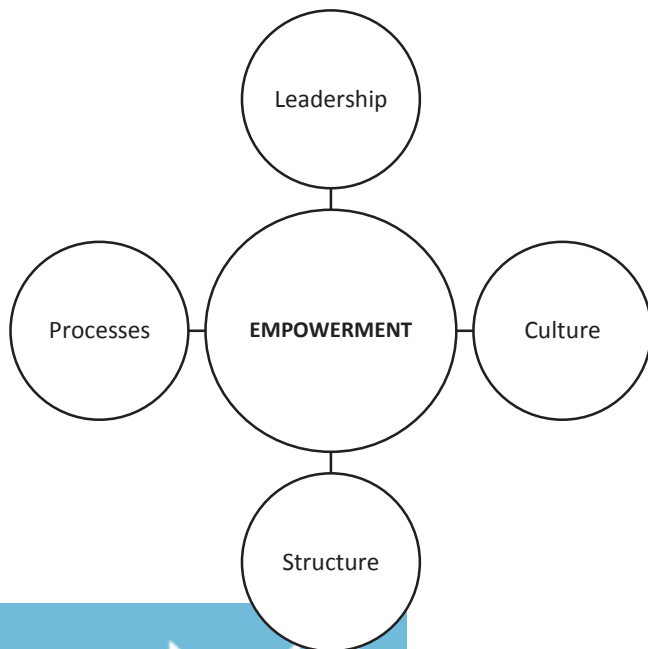
following patterns: 1) many of these "best practices" of organizational leadership, structure, processes, and culture—all of which have been linked to organizational success—overlap in terms of ideas and principles; and 2) empowerment is a key theme undergirding all of them, as Figure 1 indicates.

As has been seen throughout the discussion, empowerment continues to show up in the research literature as key facet of all of these leadership best practices. Transformational leadership empower followers by inspiring them with a shared vision and affirming that they are uniquely gifted to help carry out the vision. Servant leaders empower followers by caring for them and supporting them so that they can achieve goals. Organizational processes like HRM and PDM both affirm the importance of followers and gives them a greater say in decisions.

Decentralization (structure) can be empowering as well, if the change in structure gives lower level decision-makers greater authority. Finally, the culture established by SIW is based upon empowerment insofar as it seeks to create a culture where employees find personal meaning and fulfillment in their work and feel like a valued member of the team. Nevertheless, it can be difficult for any organization or leadership team to embrace all of these approaches at the same time in a way that leads to focus training and change. What follows is a discussion of a unifying metaphor and

approach which will hopefully lead to further study and application of these OLPSC best practices.

Covenant as A Model for Empowerment

The fact that there is so much overlap among these leadership and organizational best practices with one another and with the concept of empowerment should provide a better understanding of some of the core tenets of organizational behavior that lead to success. These findings lead to the next question: *what organizational model/approach might be used to best ensure that empowerment is indeed implemented in organizational leadership, processes, culture, and structure?* Ideally, this model should have some root in historical precedence, to ensure it has lasting use. For this reason, a covenantal model will be introduced as a means of ensuring that empowerment is indeed

carried out in organizational leadership, process, structure and culture (OLPSC).

Defining Covenant

Elazar (1995) defined covenant as:

> A morally informed agreement or pact based upon voluntary consent, established by mutual oaths or promises, involving or witnessed by some transcendent higher authority, between peoples or parties having independent status…for joint action or obligation to achieve defined ends (limited or comprehensive) under conditions of mutual respect, which protect the individual integrity of all the parties to it. (p. 22-23)

Pava (2001) emphasized the fact that equal yet independent agents come together to create a "shared community." All parties to a covenant do not only

Table 1
Covenant, OLPSC Best Practices

	LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR	**PROCESSES**	**STRUCTURE**	**CULTURE**
Transformational Leadership	Vision-casting, empowering employees			
Servant Leadership	Serving, empowering employees			
Participative Decision-Making		Increased decision-making to employees		
Decentralization			Sharing power with employees	
Spirituality in the Workplace				Supportive, empowering atmosphere
Covenant	empowerment (*ḥesed*)	Mutual accountability	Non-centralization	Mutual care and support (*ḥesed*)

carry out certain agreed upon duties, but to also care for one another and to encourage meaningful relationships. Covenant relationships emphasizes trust, mutuality, and shared values (Neuman and Kickul, 1998); therefore, covenant relationships are based upon and require a deep sense of trust among all engaged parties (Arjoon, 2006). And as will be discussed below, covenant can provide that unifying approach to OLPSC.

Across every construct of the literature considers to be organizational leadership, processes, structure, and culture best practices, covenant provides essential facets that link these constructs together. At the root of covenant is an interpersonal dimension between and among leaders and followers. This relationship is based upon mutual empowerment and care *(hesed)*, as will be discussed below.

Key Covenantal Attributes

A covenantal relationship embodies three key attributes, which conveniently mirror OLPSC: a) *hesed,* b) mutual accountability, and c) non-centralization. Each one of these will be discussed in greater detail below, including their link to the idea of empowerment.

The attitude of covenant: *Hesed*. The term *hesed* is a Hebrew term which means loving fulfillment of covenant obligations (Elazar, 1995). It is, essentially, covenant love (Anderson, 2012).

It plays an essential role in explaining the Biblical idea of covenant, and has garnered extensive study as a key tenet of the covenantal approach (Clark, 1993). Elazar (1995) noted that it requires both parties to go "beyond the letter of the law" (p. 71). The idea of "going the extra mile" to serve external and internal stakeholders and followers as well as carrying out legal mandates and environmental imperatives is a vital tent for organizational success and it can be equated with "extraordinary kindness" (Ramon, 2005). This is what the idea of *hesed* is all about. *Hesed* in turn plays a key role in covenantal leadership, particularly when it comes to central role of leaders valuing and honoring followers (Caldwell & Hasan, 2016). Practically speaking, the idea of *hesed* combines mutual care and concern with duty—these should not be mutually exclusive. Often in practical discussions of empowerment, individuals focus on their own empowerment needs and not those of others, whereas covenant seeks to affirm the empowerment of everyone, and *hesed* is the operative mechanism for doing so.

The process of covenant: mutual accountability. Related to the notion of covenantal love and care *(hesed)* is that of mutual accountability. In order to truly care for one another, members of the community must be accountable and committed to one another (Twigg, 2008). Kincaid argued, "Covenant love…may also curb the emergence of

autocratic structures and narrow legalisms because, as trust and affection decline, people tend to retreat into stronger, more elaborate, protective structures" (1980, p. 45). Caldwell, Clapham, and Davis (2007) linked rights and responsibilities together—the rights that individuals have in a covenantal relationship exist because of the obligations that the members have to one another. Likewise, Caldwell and Dixon (2009) spoke of the interest in the welfare of others that comes with a covenant relationship as being about "ethical stewardship." Mutual accountability therefore furthers empowerment by way of collaboration and support. To that point, Twigg (2008) argued: "in a covenantal relationship, each party considers it normal and acceptable to sacrifice one's self-interests for a common goal or purpose." On a related note, Caldwell and Hayes (2016) speak to the importance of covenantal stewardship as a means of explaining the obligations leaders have to followers and other stakeholders. In turn, it is easy to see how mutual accountability supports best practices such as HRM, participative decision-making, empowered teams, and active dialogue among and between leaders, followers, and various departments and units within an organization.

The structure of covenant: Non-Centralization. When members to a covenant agree to care for one another and respect one another's rights, an organizational structure that is built upon

empowerment ensues. To describe this covenant structure, the term *non-centralization*—rather than decentralization—is used. Non-centralization speaks to a structure in which the distribution of real power among several centers must negotiate cooperative arrangements with one another in order achieve common goals: "This arrangement is often mislabeled *decentralization,* but should more appropriately be called *noncentralization*" (Elazar, 1984).

Decentralization can be decreed from the top down but non-centralization on the other hand results from all members to the covenant engaging one another and negotiating successful paths of cooperation. The parties to the covenant are autonomous both before *and* after ratifying the agreement, so they continue to interact with one another within the covenant structure. Therefore, they can better respond to environmental feedback, while at the same time retaining their autonomy. The leadership that is established within a covenantal framework works more closely with subordinates and is more apt to receive feedback from both the environment and subordinates. Thus, covenantal leadership can lead to a learning culture, with an emphasis on creativity and innovation (Xu, Caldwell, Glasper & Leiry, 2015).

Link to Empowerment

In committing to the covenant relationship,

each member is afforded certain rights and responsibilities. As Christensen (2009) argued, covenant protects human uniqueness even as it demands that these same unique individuals commit to serving one another. It is this emphasis upon relationships and empowerment that distinguishes the idea of covenant from other political ideas, which generally emphasize just structure (Elazar, 1980). The covenant emphasis upon both relationships *and* empowerment comes in the form of autonomous members freely choosing to come together to enter an agreement. Leaders accept the importance of covenantal duties to empower, care for, and collaborate with followers (Caldwell & Hasan, 2016). Pava (2001) built upon this by pointing out that though the covenant relationship affirms the rights of all engaged parties, it also locks those same parties into a long term relationship based upon mutual accountability and care; in a covenant relationship, one does not need to choose between freedom (empowerment) and order; both can be achieved: "it makes sense to say that we are simultaneously both free agents and members of a living community" (p. 86). In turn, it is not surprising that covenantal relationships have been found to support organizational citizenship behavior (Matherne, 2015).

The Historical Validity of the Covenant Idea

Though largely a religious idea initially, the notion of covenant and its emphasis on a "human community based upon love and faith" (Kincaid, 1978, p. 70), challenged social and political hierarchies in the West, especially during the Protestant Reformation as Reformers embraced the Biblical idea of covenant as a means of articulating their protest against the tyrannical power structure and the corrupt Church-State hegemony (Elazar, 1979). The non-centralized nature of covenants led many reformers to challenge political authority (Reid, 1981; Walzer, 1985). Rulers had an obligation to protect the people, and could be overthrown if they broke such a covenantal bond. This belief developed into the idea of civil resistance (Reid, 1981). Indeed, the covenantal idea, and the freedoms that came with it, spread not only throughout much of Europe by way of the Protestant Reformation (McCoy, 1980; Moots, 2010) but also into America leading to the formation of a social, political covenant among citizens (Vesely-Flad, 2011). In fact, many colonies adopted covenantal ideas in their founding documents, a practice which continued on in the era of statehood (Lutz, 1988).

Conclusion and Further Research

The question, then, is whether an idea that has had such a strong historical, political, and social impact might also be relevant to the organizational context. The challenge identified at the outset of this paper is trying to reconcile and unify numerous

organizational leadership best practices in a way that is simple but not reductionist both for the scientist and the practitioner. As discussed above, the covenantal model has been introduced because it embodies the idea of empowerment, not just in terms of interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers, but also in terms of organizational processes, structure, and culture. The prior table listed represented that linkage and will be posted here again for review.

Therefore, it is argued here that the covenantal model has the potential to offer an integrative approach to understanding and measuring organizational leadership and behavior, because it embodies empowerment and innovation (Fischer and Schultz, 2010), and is both comprehensive and simple enough to use for practice and research.

A diagnostic that will in fact seek to measure every component of OLPSC by focusing on the link between covenant and empowerment in each of these key areas has been developed and will be used by the authors in subsequent research. Specifically, the diagnostic tool will identify the existing OLPSC of management and subordinate roles within a given organization as it relates to empowerment and a covenantal leadership perspective. The broader qualitative and quantitative effects of using the diagnostic may also provide strategic opportunities for competitive advantage through the structural realignment of resources and processes within the organization, innovative leadership focused on the interrelationship of empowerment and culture, and increased profitability due to the efficiencies of covenantal principles throughout the organization.

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