

# Virtuous Leadership: Insights from the Example of Joseph

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Received: March 29, 2023    Accepted: April 27, 2023    Online Published: May 30, 2023

doi:10.5430/jbar.v12n1p57

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jbar.v12n1p57>

## Abstract

This paper is a conceptual paper that identifies eight testable propositions about virtuous leadership, incorporating insights from the example of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, as set forth in the Old Testament. Joseph, or Yusuf, is one of the most highly regarded individuals in holy writ and an exemplar of virtuous leadership. We introduce and explain the nature of virtuous leadership and summarize the life of Joseph, as set forth in the Old Testament and the Qur'an. We identify seven key characteristics of virtuous leadership and cite examples from Joseph's life that demonstrate those qualities. We conclude the paper by identifying five contributions of the paper for practitioners and scholars.

**Keywords:** Virtuous leadership, Joseph of the Old Testament, leadership example, virtuousness

## 1. Introduction

Leaders have struggled to earn the followership and commitment of others for decades (Barnard, 1938; Bennis, 1959) and the study of leadership has generated thousands of books and articles – yet according to academic scholars (Harrington, 2017) and researchers (Edelman, 2023; Clifton & Harter, 2019), the ineffectiveness of leaders continues to be a major problem as organizations struggle to compete. The disillusionment with leaders has become so bad that 50% of employees report that they are unwilling to take on the extra responsibilities required for their organizations to excel (Smith, 2022). The decline in commitment of these “quiet quitters” has reached epidemic proportions and the root cause of this attitude has clearly been placed on ineffective organizational leaders (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

The University of Michigan's Kim Cameron (2011) observed that effective leadership and virtuous leadership go hand in hand and noted that his research has confirmed that the modern leader is most successful in earning employee commitment when (s)he models virtues that inspire others (Cameron, 2021). The purpose of this paper is to identify seven characteristics of virtuous leadership, suggest eight related propositions that explain why virtuous leaders are successful, and identify how Joseph – the son of Jacob cited in the Qur'an, the Pentateuch, and the Old Testament – exemplified each of these virtuous leadership characteristics.

We begin by defining virtuous leadership and explaining its importance. We then summarize the life of Joseph, relying heavily on the Old Testament account. We note Joseph's unique ability to exemplify personal virtues, despite facing a constant set of challenging events, and propose eight propositions for leaders to incorporate in their quest to be perceived as virtuous leaders. After identifying five contributions of this paper for interested scholars and practitioners, we conclude the paper with encouragement to those who study leadership or who seek to improve their leadership effectiveness.

## 2. Understanding the Context of Virtuous Leadership

Among the world's most highly respected philosophers and ethicists who wrote about the importance of virtuousness, none is more famous than Aristotle -- considered by many to be the Father of Virtue Ethics (Solomon, 1992). Aristotle proposed that the greatest achievement of man was to achieve *eudaimonia* or to flourish in becoming the best possible version of oneself (Aristotle, 2022). Scholars agree that at the heart of virtuousness is the pursuit of

personal excellence, self-mastery, and the pursuit of a noble purpose (Havard, 2021; Williams, 2022).

The most effective leaders earn the followership and commitment of others by modeling the principles and values that they establish for their organizations (Schein & Schein, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2022). Virtuous leaders are ethical stewards who seek to optimize the long-term creation of value in benefiting the many stakeholders of an organization (Hernandez, 2012). Stewardship is others-directed in the pursuit of a worthy outcome (Hernandez, 2008, pp. 121-123) and honors the sacred trust of contributing to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of others (Peck, 2003).

Virtues reflect normative behaviors that affirm the importance of core values while seeking instrumental outcomes essential for fulfilling an organization's fundamental mission and purpose (Caldwell, Hasan, & Smith, 2015). This two-part nature of virtues acknowledges the responsibilities of leaders to seek the welfare of people within their organizations rather than just achieving the priorities of the organization itself (Burns, 2010). Virtuous leadership recognizes that individuals are valued and important ends, rather than just a means to an organization's mission and purposes (cf. Kant, 2021).

The unfortunate reality is that many 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders lack a sense of personal responsibility to employees – and often fail to honor obligations due to other stakeholders as well (Van Vugt, Johnson, Kaiser & O’Gorman, 2008). Rather than being committed to a mutually beneficial transformational relationship with employees that acknowledges their employees' importance in creating value, organizations have created arms-length *quid pro quo* transactional relationships that treat employees like commodities rather than as valued partners (Pfeffer, 1998). The lack of commitment to the long-term interests of employees is evidenced by the fact that 94% of the new jobs created in the United States between 1995 and 2015 were actually part-time, temporary, contract, or contingent (Katz & Krueger, 2019) as employers have sought to avoid paying for essential employment benefits offered to full-time employees.

Although there are outstanding companies with leaders that treat their employees as valued assets, an overwhelming majority of companies and their leaders currently fail to demonstrate their commitment to employee development or personal growth (McLean & Company, 2023). As a consequence of limited employer commitment to their employees, research by Gallup found that a large percentage of employees worldwide are not engaged at work (Gleeson, 2017). That study, and others like it, revealed that the primary source of worker dissatisfaction was with their organizations' leadership (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

Rather than investing in employee development, employee engagement, or empowering employees, the trend in many organizations has been to cut back on training and development, to centralize decision making, and to downsize their organizations in an attempt to cut costs (Thompson, 2003). For many companies, that downsizing has been based upon copying what other companies in their industry are doing, rather than being a decision based upon what internal performance indicators suggest (Pfeffer, 2023). Employees have increasingly responded to being treated as commodities by looking for opportunities with other employers and a 2021 study revealed that 65% of employees reported that they were actively looking for a new job (Liu, 2021).

In contrast with the apparent lack of commitment to their employees demonstrated by many leaders, virtuous leaders are highly ethical and their commitment to others transcends simply doing that which generates short-term profitability (Havard, 2021). While ethical behavior is often defined as meeting the requirements of the law, virtuous behavior honors the higher purposes of human relationships by seeking to optimally add value rather than simply by complying with rules (Cameron, 2003). Distinguishing that which is virtuous and that which is moral, amoral, or immoral, the continuum of virtuousness in leadership is clarified in Diagram 1 below.

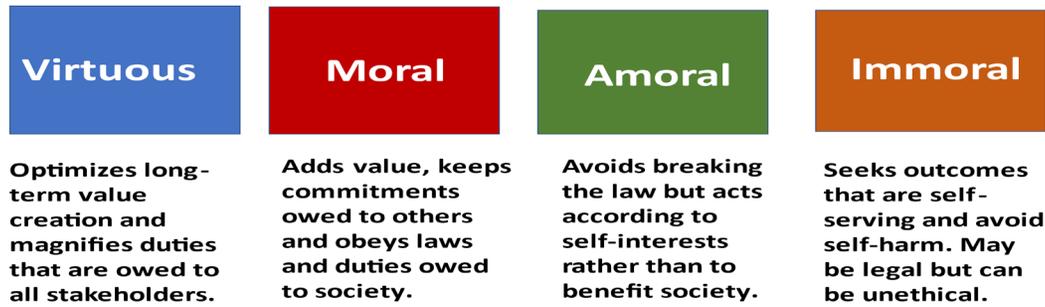


Diagram 1. Virtuous Continuum (Caldwell, Hasan & Smith, 2015)

As noted by this continuum, virtuous conduct includes more than simply honoring obligations and complying with societal duties. Virtuousness rises to a higher standard that extends substantially beyond those expectations and seeks to magnify the duties owed by organizational leaders to all of an organization’s stakeholders (Caldwell, Hayes & Long, 2010). Virtuous actions also focus on pursuing big picture and long-term priorities, rather than the more common pursuit of short-term profit taking that characterizes the practices of many leaders and organizations, Table 1 provides more detailed information about each of the perspectives of this continuum and identifies the distinctions that clarify the importance of why a virtuous perspective is so significant (Caldwell, Hasan, & Smith, 2015).

Table 1. The Virtuous Continuum and Its Four Perspectives

Factor	Virtuous Perspective	Moral Perspective	Amoral Perspective	Immoral Perspective
<b>The Individual’s Primary Role</b>	Optimize long-term wealth creation and enhance commitment and followership.	Create value short-term and long-term and maintain stakeholder support.	Create personal benefit without violating the law but ambivalent about stakeholders.	Create personal gain by whatever means works and demonstrates concern for others based primarily on self-interest
<b>Communication with Others</b>	Ensure that others understand issues to seek their welfare and that of the organization	Keep others informed and generally honor commitments	Provide information on a “Need to Know” basis – but decide what others need to know.	Share information when doing so is perceived as beneficial to self. Communicate to achieve what best serves oneself.
<b>Moral Duty</b>	Make the best world possible and treat others as ends, not means.	Treat others with respect and create value while doing no harm.	Pursue personal welfare and avoid doing that which is illegal.	Pursue self-interest with guile and take advantage of opportunities.
<b>Leadership Style</b>	Empower others and view them as keys to achieving greatness	Make decisions that best serve the organization and its members	Serve personal interests and influence others	Control others and protect one’s self-interest
<b>Procedural Fairness</b>	Give others input and establish fair rules. Keep others informed. Follow rules established.	Honor obligations and follow established rules.	Create and follow rules that serve self-interest and avoid violating the law.	Optimize results being sought and establish rules which serve one’s best self-interest.
<b>Driving Motivations</b>	Service, excellence, and responsibility	Quality, fairness, and accountability	Efficiency, profitability, and legality	Self-interest, avoiding punishment, pursuit of personal wealth.
<b>View of the Future</b>	Protect the future and make it better for all	Be mindful of possible future consequences	Avoid future liability	Enjoy the future by creating personal wealth

<b>Perceptions from Others</b>	Personifies trustworthiness and recognizes the value of creating high trust relationships	Generally viewed as trustworthy and perceived as generally efficient.	Perceived as concerned with maximizing self-interest and treating people as a means to that end. Predictable but not fully trusted.	Trusted to do that in his/her self-interest and to benefit others only when that self-interest is achieved.
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As reflected by this continuum, the virtuous perspective seeks to create the greatest good for individuals and organizations while also achieving the optimal benefit for stakeholders and society. Covey, (1992) suggested that this virtuous commitment involves a sense of being accountable to a higher standard than oneself and is consistent with the moral and ethical calling implicit in the leadership role. Virtuous leadership distinguishes itself by its commitment to personal actions and behaviors that earn the respect, trust, and willing effort of others (Pearce, et al., 2006; Wang & Hackett, 2020). The virtuous leader demonstrates to others a genuine interest in them and in their welfare (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010).

We define virtuous leadership as the actions of a leader that strive to achieve the optimal long-term benefits of those to whom obligations are owed, including the responsibility of an organization to pursue the welfare, growth, and wholeness of individual members of an organization in addition to the fulfilment of the organization's highest and best purposes. It is by modeling the values of an organization by personal example that a virtuous leader is able to earn and retain the confidence, trust, support, and extra-mile commitment of the employees and other stakeholders whom a leader serves.

### 3.The Story of Joseph

Joseph, or Yusuf, the son of Jacob or Yocub, is a central character in the Qur'an, the Pentateuch, and the Old Testament. The regard in which Joseph is held by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike document his importance as one of the holiest and most virtuous men of holy writ. Although Surah 12 of the Qur'an is the primary reference of Joseph in sacred Islamic literature, the complete story of his life is well documented by numerous other Islamic scholars in the Talsir (Brinner, 1986; Wheeler, 2002; Keller, 2009) and the story of Joseph was well established in Siriac literature as well (Heat, 2002).

The Book of Genesis and the Pentateuch offer a far more detailed record of the life of Joseph. Both confirm that it was through Jacob and his lineage that God's covenant with the prophet Abraham was to be fulfilled and that Abraham's descendants were to be God's chosen people. Joseph was the long-awaited son of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, and the son of his old age (Genesis 37: 1-3). Because Joseph was the favorite of his father, Joseph's ten older brothers "saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him" (Genesis 37:4).

When Joseph shared with his brothers two dreams which suggested that Joseph would someday become a ruler over them, scripture records that his brothers "hated him yet more for his dreams, and for his words" (Genesis 37:8). Sent by Jacob to check on his brothers, Joseph was seen coming by his brothers who plotted first to kill him – but then decided to sell him as a slave to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt (Genesis 37: 18-30). Dipping Joseph's coat into goat's blood, the brothers returned to their father, alleging that Joseph had been killed (Genesis 37: 31-34).

Carried by the caravan to Egypt, Joseph was purchased as a slave by Potiphar, the captain of the guard for the Egyptian Pharaoh. Undaunted by his role as a slave to Potiphar, Joseph was "favored by God," Joseph served Potiphar so well that Potiphar "made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand and . . . the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake" (Genesis 39:4-5).

Though only seventeen years old, Joseph was repeatedly approached by Potiphar's wife who made repeated attempts to seduce him. Joseph consistently resisted – at one point leaving his garment in her hand when she attempted to seduce him (Genesis 39:7-15). Spurned and angry, Potiphar's wife claimed Joseph had been the one who had approached her -- resulting in Joseph being put into the prison where the Pharaoh's prisoners were kept (Genesis 39: 16-20). Despite being imprisoned, Joseph was again blessed by the Lord and the keeper of the jail made Joseph responsible for all of the other prisoners "and that which he did the Lord made it to prosper" (Genesis 39: 20-23).

While Joseph was in prison, two of Pharaoh's servants, a butler and a baker, were also imprisoned with him (Genesis

40: 1-4). Both men dreamed dreams and asked Joseph to interpret them. Joseph foretold the meaning of both dreams, with the butler being restored to his position of favor and the baker losing his life (Genesis 40: 5-13). Although Joseph had asked the butler to remember him, the man immediately forgot his promise and Joseph remained in prison two more full years (Genesis 40:23).

At the end of the two years, the Pharaoh also had dreams that troubled him, but that his wise men were unable to interpret (Genesis 41: 1-8). Only then did the Pharaoh's butler remember Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams. Joseph was called out of the prison and asked to interpret Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41: 9-14). Joseph told the Pharaoh that the dreams meant that there would be seven years of plenty –followed by seven years of devastating famine. Joseph told Pharaoh that the dreams foretold what God would shortly bring to pass – counseling Pharaoh to “look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt” and set aside a reserve during the seven years of plenty to prepare for the years of famine (Genesis 41: 21-33).

The Pharaoh responded to Joseph, “Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou” (Genesis 41: 39-40). So Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh in Egypt and took responsibility for preparing Egypt during the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine (Genesis 41: 41-57).

Because the famine affected the entire region, Joseph's father, Jacob, directed his sons to go to Egypt in an effort to purchase grain. Joseph's ten older brothers came to Egypt and bowed down before Joseph, fulfilling the dream which Joseph had shared with his brothers when Joseph was a young boy (Genesis 42: 1-6). Joseph recognized his brothers when they appeared before him, but they did not recognize him. After obtaining information about his family, Joseph sold his brothers grain but pretended to accuse them of being spies and required them to go back to their home and return with their youngest brother, Benjamin – keeping their brother, Simeon, hostage until they returned with Benjamin (Genesis 42: 19-24).

The nine remaining brothers returned to Canaan, reported back to Jacob, and told their father what had happened and of the requirement for Benjamin to come to Egypt. Jacob was distraught, fearing that he had not only previously lost Joseph, but had probably lost Simeon as well, and was unwilling to also lose his youngest son, Benjamin (Genesis 42: 36-38). The famine continued as predicted, however, and after the food that his family had purchased ran out, Jacob reluctantly directed his sons to return to Egypt to purchase more grain (Genesis 43: 1-2). The sons, together with Benjamin, returned to Egypt, bringing gifts for Joseph in homage (Genesis 43: 11-15).

After meeting again with Joseph but again not recognizing him, the brothers obtained more grain and prepared to return to Canaan. However, Joseph had his steward put his silver cup in Benjamin's sack (Genesis 44: 1-2). Joseph's steward overtook the brothers, accusing them of stealing the silver cup, which the brothers denied (Genesis 44: 3-34). When the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers were brought back to Joseph who continued the ruse. Finally, Joseph down and admitted his identity to his brothers, falling on their necks in tears, and telling them that God had guided his path so that he could preserve their lives (Genesis 45: 1-15).

Joseph then sent his brothers back to Canaan to bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt – rejoicing in his reunion with his beloved father. Acknowledging Joseph's important role in Egypt, Pharaoh gave Joseph's brothers choice property to tend their flocks and cattle (Genesis 47:1-6). As the five remaining years of the famine continued, Joseph administered wisely and served the Pharaoh and the people of Egypt with integrity and honor (Genesis 47: 7-26). After living in Egypt for another seventeen years, Jacob blessed his progeny before he died and his body was returned to Canaan for burial (Genesis 47: 28 to Genesis 50:10).

#### **4. Characteristics of Virtuous Leadership**

The story of Joseph is frequently cited as an example of his great character and integrity and Joseph is widely regarded as a man of heroic proportion in emulating personal virtues (Beekun & Badawik 1999). Islam regards Joseph as a holy prophet and Jewish and Christian writers have repeatedly examined his story as a man of many virtues (Mann & Woods, 2005). Combining wisdom, charisma, forgiveness, and character, Joseph has been revered as a model of heroic leadership for nearly three millennia (Swindoll, 1998).

Effective leaders create organizational trust by a combination of qualities. Earning that trust is largely based upon the ability of leaders to model the values that they seek to establish as the foundation of their organizations (Schein & Schein, 2016). As leaders emulate the values and ideals which they espouse, they confirm to their associates that those elements are more than lip service. Joseph's leadership virtues earned the support and trust of those with whom he associated and serve as a model of virtuous leadership.

Each of the following seven leadership characteristics that Joseph possessed is an important element of virtuous

leadership. After explaining each of these leadership characteristics in the following paragraphs, we cite examples of how Joseph demonstrated each of these qualities and offer a proposition about the importance of each characteristic for effective leadership.

#### 4.1 Patience

The ability to be patient, especially in the face of what seems to be unfair treatment or interminable delays, is the capacity to endure difficult circumstances and maintain a long-term perspective when outcomes are disappointing (Vigani, 2017). Patience implies the ability to suffer while retaining hope for a future outcome and is a form of temporal intelligence (Roberts, 2013). Patience is a requirement when a person lacks the ability to control factors that are outside of her/his immediate direct influence. To be patient requires an inherent belief that what is desired is ultimately attainable and hope frequently accompanies patience (Quotemaster, n. d.).

Ryan (2021) affirms that being patient is ultimately an individual choice. Choosing to be patient is an affirmative decision that enables an individual to reduce personal stress, improve performance, and maintain perspective. The British writer and politicians, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, explained that being patient is not a passive quality but is an active skill and a concentrated strength (Goodreads, 2023). The capacity to trust – whether that trust be directed toward divine assistance or natural laws – demands an understanding of one’s faith in “true principles” that are believed to govern oneself and one’s situation (Caldwell & Anderson, 2019).

Courtney Ackerman (2021, p. 3) described patience as “the ability to stay mindful, calm, and collected through any circumstance.” Rossy, (2018) explained that a major element of patience includes the capacity to “let go” and to allow circumstances to evolve in their appropriate time. Possessing that capacity makes it possible to retain hope, to be at peace, and to enjoy what is good in the here and now – rather than dwelling on what is not currently available (Meurisse, 2018). Perhaps, Thomas Edison has exemplified best the virtue of patience in commenting that he had not failed 10,000 times in identifying the filament needed to successfully create the electric light bulb. Rather than being disappointed and discouraged Edison responded, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work” (AZ Quotes, n. d.).

Joseph’s unique ability to maintain a patient perspective allowed him to endure disappointments that were the result of circumstances totally out of his control. Sold by his brother to an Ishmaelite caravan and being unfairly accused of adulterous conduct by Potiphar’s wife did not dissuade Joseph from continuing to rely upon God and to rise to positions of major responsibility in Potiphar’s household and in the Egyptian prison. Even after having to wait two years after interpreting the dream of the Pharaoh’s butler, Joseph remained steadfast and positive.

Consistent with Joseph’s demonstration of patience, despite a series of disappointing events, we propose our first proposition.

**Proposition 1: Leaders who maintain a patient perspective allow themselves to overcome obstacles that impatient individuals often give up on too quickly.**

#### 4.2 Caring

Caring, or beneficence is a fundamental prerequisite of trustworthiness (Mayer, *et al.*, 1995). Carol Gilligan (2016), the individual credited for identifying the importance of the Feminine Ethical Perspective, explained that caring and taking responsibility for others in relationships is a morally virtuous perspective. Caring transcends empathy and becomes compassion when action is taken that alleviates others’ misfortunes or trials (Worline & Dutton, 2017).

John Ruskin, the English writer, explained that caring is the demonstrated willingness to be kind, to reach out to another person, and to take the opportunity to assist them to achieve their desired outcome (AZ Quotes, n.d.). Jean Watson’s (2023) highly regarded theories about caring emphasize that authentic caring affirms the value of another person and is a moral responsibility of those who serve. Leadership is first and foremost about service and caring about others’ welfare, according to advocates of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). In writing about servant leadership’s commitment to caring, Spears (2010) explained that effective leaders seek to make others whole by understanding and then meeting their unique individual needs. Such leaders see the intrinsic value in other people and view them as valued and unique “Yous” rather than as commodities or impersonal and interchangeable “Its” (Buber, 2021).

To care is to be committed to others’ welfare, growth, and wholeness (Peck, 2003). Leaders who care about others willingly give of themselves, knowing that by giving of themselves they also benefit in the process (Younger, 2021). In writing about the actions most important to effective leadership, James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2017) emphasize the importance of leaders caring enough to connect with others on a personal level – encouraging their

hearts and demonstrating that leadership is truly a relationship.

Joseph's capacity for caring was demonstrated most by his love for his ten brothers – despite the fact that they literally sold him into slavery and separated him from his parents. Joseph's love was manifest by his willingness to forgive them without rancor and to go the extra mile on their behalf. Joseph's caring about others' welfare enabled him to immediately earn the trust of Potiphar, the jailer at prison, and the Pharaoh, but his consistency in treating others with a commitment to their welfare enabled him to retain that trust.

Our second proposition emphasizes the importance of caring a virtue of enduring leadership.

**Proposition2: The ability to care genuinely about others differentiates the most successful leaders from those who are far less effective.**

#### *4.3 Resilience*

Resilience is the capacity to regain balance following exposure to an adverse situation. It is not an end state but a process of adaptation and growth within an uncertain or volatile world (Southwick, Charni & DePierro, 2023). The great power of resilience lies in its ability to set aside discouragement and disappointment and to be unflinching in the pursuit of a worthy objective. In writing about the importance of a leader's resilience, Collins (2001) described the fierce resolve which is as a defining characteristic of Level 5 leaders who enable their organizations to make the transition from "good" to "great."

Resilience integrates the qualities of passion and perseverance and is fundamental to achieving world class outcomes (Duckworth, 2018). Resilience persistently and consistently pursues an objective or purpose, regardless of the obstacles that an individual must face (Morris, 2004). Being resilient includes the ability to understand why failure has occurred and the wisdom to then use that information to craft a more effective approach to accomplishing an objective (Miles, 2022).

Resilience requires drawing upon both psychological and spiritual resources to overcome past failures (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2015). Those who are resilient are unwilling to accept defeat or failure as a permanent condition. Examples of individuals who have demonstrated the moral strength to succeed, despite initial failures, are an inspiration to others. Resilience demands the psychological hardiness to get over and heal from a disappointment and to recover and bounce back with renewed effort (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2016).

Although Joseph was constantly buffeted by challenges and disappointments, he maintained the resilience necessary to overcome every adversity that he faced and to somehow transform those adversities into opportunities. Despite being sold into slavery, he became overseer of his entire household. Although thrown into prison, Joseph earned the jailer's trust and became responsible for all of the jail's prisoners. Throughout his life, Joseph believed in himself and trusted in God – and his efforts were consistently rewarded.

Our third proposition addresses the importance of resilience as a leadership virtue.

**Proposition3: A leader's capacity to persevere despite discouragement and disappointments enables that leader to be resilient and succeed, despite temporary failures.**

#### *4.4 Competence*

Competence is well established as a critical factor of leadership success and is the ability to understand the key factors essential to achieve an objective combined with the capacity to convert that understanding into action (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Competence demands a comprehensive understanding of key information required to achieve a desired result, but that knowledge is insufficient without the knowhow to incorporate the resources necessary to achieve sought-after outcomes (Zagotta & Robinson, 2002).

Competence demands technical knowledge, expertise, and the ability to translate ideas into results. Competence includes understanding how systems work and are created. Competence demands the ability to recognize and resolve problems. It requires the capacity to learn constantly and continuously. But competence also requires an understanding of people and how they need to cooperate to achieve shared goals. Each of these sub-elements of competence are necessary and none of them alone is sufficient (Scholtes, 1999).

Competence must also be shared with others and correctly applied to have organizational value. In writing about the effectiveness of leaders and organizations, Nobel Laureate, Herbert Simon (1997), emphasized that a leader's knowledge had no value to an organization if the leader was unable or unwilling to share that information with others. Similarly, Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer (1998) noted that strategic plans were easy to develop but the key to success was always in their execution.

Joseph had the unfailing ability to demonstrate leadership competence in a multitude of contexts. Whether as overseer of Potiphar's house, as the person responsible for the prisoners in jail, or as the Pharaoh's administrator, Joseph's leadership effectiveness resulted in outstanding results. The record reports that his efforts were blessed by divine assistance, but Joseph's outcomes were consistently superb.

In addressing the importance of leadership competence as a virtue, we offer our fourth proposition.

**Proposition 4: The competence of a leader in the pursuit of an important objective is a critical factor in determining an organization's ability to achieve its objectives.**

#### *4.5 Self-Discipline*

Self-discipline begins with the mastery of one's thoughts and the inability to control one's thoughts makes it difficult for an individual to control one's actions (Hill, 2017). Controlling one's thoughts is the entry way to controlling one's responses in the face of challenging situations and empowers a person to be able to remain constant and consistent (Reynolds, 2022). Ultimately, the power of self-discipline lies in the degree of a person's commitment to her/his purpose and ideals (Walter, 2020).

The decision to take action that is attractive in the short-term but in conflict with long-term self-interest can be seductive but self-destructive (Cherry, 2022). Self-discipline requires a commitment to principles and values, regardless of conflicting pressures that arise (Christensen, Allworth & Dillon, 2012). The ability to discipline oneself in the face of external pressures has long been considered a fundamental element of personal empowerment and is critically important in leading others (Manz & Neck, 1999). Although self-discipline demands the ability to make a short-term sacrifice of a personal benefit, that sacrifice enables an individual to obtain a greater long-term goal (Gustafson, 2020).

Serving others effectively requires the insight to recognize the complex nature of a situation, the wisdom to identify the most effective response, and the self-mastery to use that information to take the most appropriate action (Goleman, 2005). All three elements are required for self-discipline to be optimally effective in helping others (Anderson, 2023). The ability to monitor and control responses to external situations is a fundamental quality of great leaders and enables those individuals to distinguish themselves from others who lack that capacity (Covey, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Despite the many challenges that Joseph faced, his ability to be self-disciplined in managing his responses enabled him to succeed despite the difficulties that he faced. Though a slave to Potiphar, he dedicated himself to serving him loyally. Although seduced by Potiphar's wife repeatedly, he refused her advances. Although imprisoned in jail, he maintained the ability to earn the jailer's respect and complete trust. His response to Pharaoh's dreams led to Joseph's appointment to a position second only in power to the Pharaoh himself. In every instance, Joseph understood who he was, how he should respond, and acted in a manner consistent with that identity.

Aligned with this review of the importance of self-discipline, we present our fifth proposition.

**Proposition 5: The self-discipline of a leader in being able to recognize the demands of a situation, determine the most effective response, and take appropriate action distinguishes effective leaders from those who are far less successful.**

#### *4.6 Humility*

In writing about humility as a virtue, Aristotle observed that humility was the appropriate mid-point between the extremes of thinking too highly of oneself and viewing oneself negatively (Haggard, 2019). Incorporating that wisdom, Charles Spurgeon (2018) defined humility as making a correct estimate of oneself. The capacity to demonstrate this correct understanding of oneself and one's identity is widely acknowledged as a fundamental element of humility in leadership (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Owens, 2009).

Ethics scholar, Bradley Owens and his colleagues have written extensively about humility and have suggested that it incorporates three important perspectives: 1) a full appreciation of oneself and one's worth; 2) a similar valuing of others and their importance; and 3) incorporating that self-understanding and the appreciation of others' value, the commitment to constantly learning and growing in the quest to make a better world (Owens & Hekman, 2016; Owens, *et al.* 2013).

The ability to value oneself while valuing others and being committed to others' welfare also enables a leader to be motivated to devote herself or himself to a lifetime of service and self-improvement (Caldwell, Ichiko & Anderson, 2017; Okpala & Caldwell, 2019). Recognizing the link between humility and service, C. S. Lewis (AZ Quotes, n. d.) observed that humility was not thinking less of oneself but involved thinking of oneself less. In describing the

qualities of outstanding leaders, Collins (2001) explained that those organizations were inevitably led by leaders who possessed both personal humility and a fierce commitment to achieving excellence.

In demonstrating his own personal humility, Joseph was the consummate servant-leader, whether as a slave to Potiphar's household, a prisoner in the Pharaoh's jail, or the person responsible for guiding Egypt during his seven years of famine. He patiently served in prison for two years after correctly interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh's butler and baker. Despite being sold into slavery, Joseph retained a love for his brothers and viewed his opportunity to serve them as a fulfillment of God's divine purpose. Joseph's humility and his correct understanding of himself enabled him to endure great difficulties while maintaining the commitment to constantly serve others.

Consistent with this review of the importance of the virtue of humility, we offer our sixth proposition.

**Proposition 6: Leaders who are perceived as possessing humility are also perceived as being more deeply committed to others' welfare than leaders who are not so perceived.**

#### *4.7 Integrity*

The leadership quality that individuals cite as most essential to an effective leader is personal character or integrity (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Keeping promises and honoring commitments are part of this quality, but a leader's integrity is more far reaching and comprehensive than simply doing what one has already committed to do (Bauman, 2013). Virtuous leadership requires that a leader create relationships at a personal level—demonstrating that the leader not only understands the needs and expectations of employees but that (s)he willingly treats them as individually important (Nisar et al., 2021).

A leader with integrity willingly empowers others to not only enable those employees perform their roles effectively but assists them to achieve their individual priorities and grow personally along the way (Saleem et al., 2019). As Max DePree (2004) has explained, the leader's responsibilities rise to the level of a sacred commitment to each employee's welfare. In honoring that obligation, the leader takes on the responsibility to treat employees as "owners and partners" in the pursuit of organization goals (Block, 2013).

Despite being a foreigner and a slave, Joseph's personal integrity quickly earned the trust of Potiphar, the prison jailer, and Pharaoh. Potiphar quickly recognized that Joseph was blessed by God and all that Joseph sought to do benefited his household (Genesis 39: 2-6). Cast into prison unfairly, Joseph was made responsible for the welfare of all of its prisoners – and again all that Joseph sought to do flourished and prospered (Genesis 39: 21-23).

Although brought from jail to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph garnered the respect of the Pharaoh and his entire household, was "given responsibility for managing the seven years of plenty and seven years of famine and then given Pharaoh's daughter to marry and was given responsibility by the Pharaoh to rule over all of Egypt (Genesis 41). Rather than abusing his power as the Pharaoh's designated administrator, Joseph consistently treated others fairly as the seven-year famine ran its course.

Despite the roller coaster trials of his life, Joseph never lost perspective but consistently demonstrated his personal integrity (Swindoll, 1998). We offer our seventh proposition about the importance of integrity in virtuous leadership.

**P7: Leaders who are deemed as virtuous must constantly and consistently demonstrate integrity in dealing with others in order to earn and retain others' trust.**

In their extensive research about leadership, James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2017) have observed that leadership qualities overlap and often reinforce each other. As leaders integrate all seven of these leadership virtues, we suggest that they reinforce one another and strengthen the leader's effectiveness. Accordingly, we offer our eighth proposition.

**P8: Leaders who demonstrate characteristics of all seven leadership virtues are more successful in earning and retaining the trust, commitment, and followership of those whom they lead.**

Each of these virtues demonstrates the importance of personal character and the eight propositions combined offer insights into the vital role of virtuousness for individuals who seek to understand the contribution of virtuousness in earning the trust and followership of others.

### **5. Contributions of the Paper**

In presenting this summary of virtuous leadership and recounting the actions of Joseph as an exemplar of the leadership virtues identified herein, we have sought to focus on the importance of those virtues as important characteristics for practitioners who lead and for scholars that study leadership theory. We suggest that this paper

makes five important contributions to the leadership literature.

- 1) **We reaffirm the importance of virtuous leadership and seven virtues upon which it is based.** In summarizing the nature of virtuous leadership, we cite well-regarded scholars who have written extensively about the practical application of these leadership characteristics.
- 2) **We offer eight propositions about leadership that are important elements of virtuous leaders.** These propositions are of potential value to academic scholars interested in testing their conceptual value as well as having practical value for current and would-be organizational leaders.
- 3) **We review the account of Joseph and emphasize the virtuous characteristics that Joseph emulates as an effective leader and exemplar of virtuous leadership.** As a central figure of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religions, Joseph's life serves as a role model for a huge percentage of the world population and is an individual worthy of thoughtful study.
- 4) **We provide information about the nature of virtuous leadership for leadership scholars and practitioners to consider as they assess the qualities of effective leadership and its practical application.** Understanding the seven characteristics of virtuous leadership addressed herein has scholarly value for academicians and is vitally important for leaders who seek to improve their effectiveness.
- 5) **We offer a model for ineffective leaders and organizations to consider as they reflect on the qualities necessary for competitive success in today's global economy.** The clear evidence that so many leaders and organizations are struggling to earn the commitment, trust, and followership of today's employees merits thoughtful consideration in a world where leaders have often been criticized.

As current day scholars and leaders reflect on the importance of leadership, the important role of virtuousness bears thoughtful consideration and the example of Joseph or Yusuf is an inspiring example of the virtues cited herein.

## 6. Conclusion

Joseph serves as a remarkable example to those who have studied his life. Joseph's ability to maintain perspective, despite deeply perplexing and largely undeserved personal disappointments is an inspiration to every person who has ever felt mistreated, misjudged, or misrepresented. Yet Joseph endured gracefully – seeking to make the best of every situation and use his talents to serve others rather than to allow external factors to inhibit his response. Joseph's example of patience and faith in the future is truly a motivation to every person who has felt wrongly treated and his ability to retain a long-term outlook and prepare himself to be ready to serve others is astounding and personally inspiring to men and women of faith, as well as to non-believers.

Men and women of all faiths and creeds – as well as those who hold no strong religious beliefs – can benefit as they reflect on the importance of dealing with life's challenges with courage, wisdom, and perspective. The virtues exemplified by Joseph or Yusuf serve as a reminder to would-be leaders that they need not view themselves as victims if they maintain their perspective and strive to look for opportunities to flourish, despite the conditions that appear to limit them. The great example of Joseph affirms that the challenges and struggles of life need not define a person, nor do they limit one's ability to become a great leader.

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