“Calling and Duty in the Management Profession”

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PROFESSORS STUART BUNDERSON AND Jeffery Thompson were inspired by the recent criticism and mistrust of the management profession, fueled by the mortgage crisis and other Wall Street scandals, to investigate whether managers have a sense of calling and personal meaning in relation to their careers.

They began by surveying 64 management professionals, currently working in a variety of different fields, at least five years after completing their MBA. Professionals were asked open-ended questions about whether they saw management as a calling, and if so, which specific aspects of their jobs felt like a calling to them.

Eighty-three percent of the management professionals in the study agreed that management can be a calling and two-thirds indicated that aspects of their work in management felt like a calling. Respondents differed, however, in how they characterized their calling as management professionals, i.e., what exactly it is that they felt called to do. Moreover, their responses differed along two dimensions.

These two dimensions—economic/social and internal/external—combine to suggest four different ways that the individuals in the study characterized their calling as management professionals: capitalist, agent, crusader, and leader.

A capitalist calling combines a concern for economic value creation with an external focus. Management professionals who embrace a capitalist calling view their role as driving economic growth, wealth creation, and economic prosperity for the broader society and not just for their firm.

The agent calling combines a concern for economic value creation with an internal focus. Management professionals who embrace an agent calling see their role as protecting and promoting the economic interests of their firms’ owners and employees.

The crusader calling combines a concern for social value creation with an external focus. Management professionals who adopt a crusader calling focus on the social mission of their firms and on ways in which the products, services, or outreach activities of their firm help to improve human lives, reduce human suffering, or make the world a cleaner or safer place.

Finally, the leader calling combines a concern for social value creation with an internal focus. Management professionals who embrace a leader calling see their role as helping the people within their firm to learn, grow, prosper, take greater responsibility, and contribute to the success of a team. This was the most common calling mentioned in the study.

Bunderson and Thompson were curious as to whether these differences in the way management professionals thought about their calling might have implications for their sense of professional duty and responsibility as managers.

In a larger survey of Olin Business School graduates from 1970 to 2007, the research team found that those professionals who embraced social value callings (crusader and leader) had a greater sense of professional duty and placed greater emphasis on the ethical obligations of their firm than those who embraced economic value callings (capitalist and agent).

To say that one’s work is a calling is really to say that one feels obligated to use his or her specialized skills and abilities to serve some purpose in society,” says Bunderson. “Our study provided important insights into the callings that different management professionals embrace, and suggests that how you conceptualize your calling will affect how you manage and to whom you feel responsible.”

Key Takeaways for Managers

• Many management professionals view their work as a calling to use their skills to benefit others.

• Management professionals’ callings differ on goals to create economic or social value, inside or outside the firm.

• Management professionals with stronger social value callings tend to place greater emphasis on moral and ethical responsibilities.

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