

A Worldview Perspective on Organizational Behavior

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WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

For starters, it's important to recognize that our view on organizational behavior, and indeed on life itself, is influenced by our **worldview**. A worldview is an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual framework by which every person views reality, makes sense of life, and applies meaning to every area of life.

Everyone has a worldview, but the sad fact is that most people don't really know that they have one, or how their unspoken assumptions about truth, meaning, values, and humanity influence every decision they make and every perception they have. As a result, **most people's worldviews are undeveloped**, which means that most people are making decisions based not upon a coherent view of reality and life, but more likely an unclear, hodge-podge collection of vaguely defined and unverified assumptions about life. If we want to be effective leaders and managers in our organizations, and even more importantly, if we want to be successful human beings, shouldn't we know what we believe and why we believe it?

WORLDVIEW AS A HOME

One way of better understanding one's worldview and what it is made up of is to compare it the **home** in which we live. Consider your home—what characteristics do you ascribe to it? Do you think of it in terms of how many rooms it has, what type of furnishings it possesses, how big the yard is, etc.? Those are indeed relevant descriptors, but what about the foundation and framework of your home? When was the last time you thought about those two very important features of your home? Most of us give very little thought to those components because they are not visible. And yet, if either of those are structurally lacking, the house will fall, no matter how nice the yard, how many rooms the house has or how beautifully decorated the home is. It's the same with our worldview perspectives—we rarely if ever give any thought to the foundational or framework assumptions associated with our worldviews. So let's take a look at each of these vital components.

The **foundation** of your worldview is what you believe about God. Do you believe in a personal, intelligent Creator-being who is eternal and created the universe, or do you believe that life evolved from nothing, by pure chance? You might even believe in some sort of nebulous God-like being who is out there but doesn't do much to communicate with the rest of

us. Perhaps you view Nature as some sort of spiritual entity to which we are all attached in some cosmic sort of way. If so, your worldview likely has more in common with an atheistic worldview foundation than a Christian-theistic one, because in both cases there is no personal, intelligent Creator being who interacts meaningfully and intelligently with His creation. The **framework assumptions** are based upon this foundation, just like the framework of any home is built upon the foundation. What one believes about God will determine what one believes about truth and meaning (**epistemology**), values (**axiology**), and who we are as human beings (**ontology**).

WHAT IS YOUR WORLDVIEW?

A good leader or manager, and indeed, a successful organization, is able to evaluate internal strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots, so take a moment to evaluate any potential weaknesses or inconsistencies in your worldview.

For starters, what do **you believe about God**? In the previous section, some basic options were presented with regards to who this God might be (or might not be). But now consider the implications of each choice, because your belief about God will greatly impact your perspective upon meaning, values, and humanity.

For instance, **epistemology** is the study of how we arrive at truth and meaning. If you believe in a personal creator-being, it is possible to believe in absolute truth and meaning, because that God-being could communicate with us in meaningful and intelligent ways. But if you believe in random chance as the foundation for life, or in some sort of impersonal, spiritual “force” from which we all sprang, it should be no surprise if you’re a bit ambiguous in what you believe about truth. You might be more inclined to believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth or meaning, and that instead, everyone just sort of figures things out and makes sense of life on their own. However, if that is really true, then why do we all appeal to an inherent standard of right reasoning as we communicate with one another? Why do we make logical appeals as we seek to persuade one another? It seems like this use of logic is more in keeping with an intelligent Creator-being than with starting point of random chance or a vague, impersonal, spiritual “other”.

Likewise, **axiology** is the study of what we believe about values. If you believe in a personal Creator being, you are more likely to believe in eternal timeless values like love, justice, goodness and evil. If you’re not really sure what you believe about God, you might also find that you’re not really sure about the notion of eternal, timeless values. Perhaps you see concepts such as “love” as being more about what we do to protect ourselves—we “love” others because those people add some sort of value to our lives. And yet, the very fact that we understand the notion of altruistic, unconditional love and critique people who are not being pure in their alleged love of others suggests that there is an eternal Creator-being who has implanted in us an understanding of these eternal, timeless values. The same is true with the

fact that we all seem to appeal to an inherent sense of justice and fairness as we interact with one another.

Ontology is the study of who we are as human beings. If you are not sure what you believe about God, it could be that you are likewise not very sure about what you think about your existence as a human. If there is only a physical universe and no God that created it, then logically, it follows that we humans are nothing more than complex blobs of chemicals, atoms, and physical matter. If that is true, then why are we so interested in meaning and truth? Such yearnings and aspirations are far more consistent with the notion of a personal Creator-being who has made us in His image.

DEFINING THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

So what IS a Christian worldview all about? Obviously the starting point for the Christian worldview—i.e., its foundational presupposition—is that there is in fact a personal, intelligent Creator being who is timeless and all-knowing. He created the universe and is separate from it, even though He is intimately involved in and with His creation. This is contrast to more Eastern mystical perspectives which deify nature or view God as part of nature.

Epistemologically, God does communicate with intelligence and meaning, and obviously through the use of words. Importantly, Jesus Christ came to this earth as the living “**Word of God**” (see John 1).

Axiologically, we see the God of the Bible balancing both **love** and **justice** through Jesus Christ and His work on the cross. Since God is perfectly good, He can’t tolerate any evil. Therefore, man, being less than perfect and bound by sin, needed to be punished. But since God is also perfectly loving, He can’t eliminate mankind, or else His perfect love would be compromised. The solution—Jesus Christ coming to earth and taking on flesh, and dying on the cross for our sins. As a man, He fulfilled God’s sense of absolute justice by ensuring that man was in fact punished for his sins. But since He was also God, He was perfect and therefore able to be the perfect sacrifice for us, thereby ensuring that God’s love was fulfilled on the cross and subsequent resurrection of Christ.

Finally, **ontologically**, we know that we humans have value, not just because of what Christ did for us on the cross but also due to the very fact that Christ came into this world not just as God but as man, experiencing the same pain that we experienced in this dreary and difficult world. We do not have a God who cannot relate to our pains and struggles; on the contrary, we have a God who is intimately familiar with who we are and how we struggle.

APPLICATION TO ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

So how does this Christian worldview impact organizational behavior? First of all, since all truth is God's truth, we can confidently study and research organizational behavior issues and concepts and at the same time apply Biblical truths to the field—the two are not mutually exclusive but rather **complimentary**.

Secondly, we should discuss organizational behavior in terms of **absolute truth and values**. Moral relativism is not an option for us as we pursue a greater understanding of organizational behavior.

Finally, we can be encouraged that **everything we do** within an organizational context—indeed in life itself—has **eternal meaning and consequence**. That is because we are valued in the eyes of our loving Creator and we know that He is intimately involved in everything we do. We should therefore act accordingly.

THE BIBLICAL IDEA OF COVENANT

Beyond these general worldview guidelines, there are some more specific Biblical applications to the field of organizational behavior. It will be argued here and throughout the rest of the lessons that the Biblical idea of **covenant** provides not only a unifying theme for understanding organizational behavior, but also a guiding normative framework for doing so.

A covenant is a morally informed agreement among various parties to ratify and establish a long-term, mutually-affirming relationship. This idea is largely a Biblical one. In Scripture, God covenants with man, and in so doing, affirms the dignity of man. The result is that humans not only have free will and importance, but also responsibility to choose wisely.

Furthermore, a covenant protects the right of all members by protecting the rights of every individual. Mutual accountability and affirmation are key aspects of any covenantal agreement and relationship.

IMPORTANT COVENANTAL TERMS

There are three key terms associated with the notion of covenant and covenantal behavior. The first is the Hebrew term **hesed**, which means "loving fulfillment of covenant obligation." In Scripture, love and duty are intertwined and it is related to what Christ said when He told His followers to "go the extra mile" in serving one another. We see in Scripture that not only did God keep His promises to His people, but He went above and beyond His stated duties in

showing mercy, forgiving, and caring for His people. We are required to do the same. We shouldn't view our relationships with others as merely contractual obligations, but rather we should see our obligations as opportunities to truly love and care for one another. The implications for this interlinking of love and duty in an organization are significant. We all know leaders who have abused their powers and treated employees poorly, and we all know employees who have done the bare minimum (or worse) to collect a paycheck.

Mutual accountability describes the process of interaction in a covenant in which everyone is accountable to everyone else. Not only are followers accountable to leaders, but leaders are also accountable to followers. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, be it peer to peer or leader to subordinate, mutual accountability is a requirement. This because in a covenant, no one enters into the covenantal agreement without first securing this obligation. Because no one can be coerced into such a relationship, the only reason for doing so is to create a binding relationship that assures everyone's mutual benefit. An organization that applies this will have greater integrity, teamwork, and decision-making because everyone is committed to serving and caring for everyone else, and leaders, as a general rule, cannot act arbitrarily and in a manner that mistreats employees.

Federalism is a specific term in the field of covenantal theology that describes the sharing of power among all members of the covenant. It is therefore related to the notion of mutual accountability and is embodied on the organizational level by the ideas of empowerment, participatory decision making and decentralization (or more accurately, non-centralization, which signifies a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility regardless of organizational structure and departmental guidelines).

HISTORY OF COVENANT

Having laid that conceptual foundation, it is helpful to look at how the covenantal idea has influenced the history of mankind by ensuring greater freedom of common people and limiting the excesses of arbitrary leadership. In the **Old Testament**, the covenant idea was introduced by God to man. As mentioned earlier, by entering into a covenant with mere mortals, God affirmed their dignity and gave them both the freedom to choose to enter into the covenant and the responsibility to act within the moral terms of the covenant. It is no surprise, then, that even in Old Testament Israel, during the time of the judges and kings, that no one ruler had all the power nor was free from the accountability of the people and the prophets. Power was further shared among the twelve tribes, and the prophets criticized not only the king but also the people when they forgot the terms of the covenant, became greedy, pursued idols, and stopped caring for one another and for the poor. In the New Testament, the covenant idea is affirmed and expanded upon by Christ, who ushered in a new covenant with God that was now available to all of mankind, and not just the Jews. As the Gospel message spread throughout the world, so did the notion of covenant.

During the **Middle Ages**, the covenantal idea was largely overlooked because Catholic theology emphasized a more hierarchical worldview in which Popes had absolute control and kings were not accountable to the people because they were viewed as being appointed by God. But during the **Protestant Reformation**, Reformers reclaimed the covenantal idea as they articulated the notion of the "Priesthood of all believers." Protestants argued that the only priest believers needed was Christ, and therefore they could have a personal relationship with God through Christ. This principle once again affirmed the value and dignity of each individual, and many have argued that it played a key role in not only developing the notion of capitalism in the West, but also contributed greatly to the notion that kings are accountable to the people and that Popes should not try to control political affairs. In fact, John Calvin, John Locke, John Knox, among others argued that when leaders significantly abuse their power, a material breach of the covenant has occurred, meaning that the people are no longer under the king's authority because the very covenant has been absolved through the tyrannical behavior.

This theory of civil resistance and covenantal principles in general were carried into the **American Founding Era**. In an effort to flee religious and political persecution in Europe, many Protestants fled to the New World and brought their ideas with them. Research reveals that many of the colonies were further influenced by covenantal pacts and agreements. Often, church covenants made by various groups of Protestants as they came to the New World became the foundation for local governments and state constitutions. As the colonies became more established, the American colonists continued to base their notion of political freedom upon covenantal ideas by providing a rationale for breaking away from Great Britain based upon covenantal principles. Furthermore the very nature of American federalism, in which the national government shares power with the states, is a covenantal notion, as already mentioned. In fact, the word *foedus* is the Latin word for covenant. So America, with all of its political freedoms, has been greatly influenced by the notion of covenant.

The question that we ask here is, given this impressive track record in political development, can the covenantal ideas and principles be **applied to the field of organizational behavior in some way**? Certainly, there is a difference between the relationship of ruler with citizens and business leaders with employees, but it will be demonstrated in this lesson and throughout subsequent lessons that there are indeed many points of application. This is due in large part because God has commanded all of us to love one another. Covenant is the means by which we do so.

A COVENANTAL MODEL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

The covenantal idea provides a unifying theme for organizational behavior. First of all, the idea of **hesed** provides the **attitude** necessary for healthy organizational behavior. This attitude embodies notions such as servant leadership, mutual affirmation and care, teamwork, shared vision, “big picture” thinking, and customer care and community service. Big picture thinking is defined as organizational self-awareness, where employees understand the organization-wide goals, constraints, and strategies and where employees furthermore see how their job as well as their department fits into all of that.

The principle of **mutual accountability** provides the foundation for organizational **processes**, and includes notions such as conflict resolution, participatory decision-making, empowerment, and an active process of dialogue between leaders and employees.

The notion of **federalism** provides a **structure** for healthy organizations, and relates to ideas such as noncentralization, “boundaryless organizations”, organic structures.

Clearly, all of these concepts are related to one another, and this division of covenantal principles into attitudes, processes, and structures therefore allows for a lot of overlap. The goal of any organization should be to create a self-sustaining, healthy culture where employees have taken ownership of organizational processes and goals and are working together to get things done and care for one another. In the next lesson, further application of covenantal principles to the field of organizational behavior will be demonstrated.

OB/COVENANT MATRIX

	ATTITUDE <i>Hesed</i>	PROCESS <i>Mutual Accountability</i>	STRUCTURE <i>Federalism</i>
INDIVIDUAL	Personality & Emotions Values & Attitudes Perception Individual Learning	Ability Individual Decision-making	
GROUP		Communication Group Decision-making	Group Structure Work Teams
ORGANIZATION	Organizational Culture	Leadership & Trust Power & Politics Human Resource Policies & Practices	Organizational Structure & Design

Another way to look at this covenantal model is to apply those concepts in a matrix with the levels of any organization—**individual, group, and organization**—combined with the various OB concepts we will be discussing in this course. The above diagram shows how the covenantal concepts are related to the general concepts of OB by organizational level. Throughout the rest of these lessons, we'll be discussing each of these concepts in some form or another.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a major theme of this first lesson is the assertion that the **Biblical worldview** provides the most **comprehensive approach** for making sense of life as well as organizational behavior. Students do not have to embrace this worldview, but they should be prepared to gain a deeper understanding of its implications in the workplace. Secondly, the Biblical idea of **covenant** will serve as a unifying theme and foundation for understanding organizational behavior. It is offered as a normative guideline for organizational "**best practices**" and will be further applied in subsequent lessons.