

Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership (Part 1)

Each year, Faith in Business (FiB) engages with a theme that reflects the contemporary world of work. It does so by drawing on biblical insight and wisdom to offer fresh and creative perspectives. The aim is to stimulate positive practical change in the sphere of work and in the church contexts to which working Christians belong. The theme for the academic year 2025-26 is Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership. In this article, FiB's director, Peter Heslam, provides an introduction.

Power and influence are in rapid flux in the world of work. Patterns in which they operate that have been familiar for generations are being dismantled. What is replacing them and what are the consequences for the way in we organise, plan and strategise our work if it is to remain relevant and impactful?

Only a few decades ago, a great deal of attention was given in the working environments and in organisational studies to 'management'. At that time, many educational establishments now called business schools were 'institutes of management' (including the business school at Cambridge University).

Due in part to the intervening entrepreneurial revolution and digital revolution, and the ongoing impact of the COVID19 pandemic, the situation today is quite different. Younger workers (especially Gen Z and Millennials) tend to be less interested in management than they are in influence.

Keen to develop their expertise to 'make a difference', rather than acquire management skills to climb the corporate ladder, younger workers tend to perceive power in decentralised – rather than hierarchical – terms. They often associate power structures, and the formal role titles they accrue, with outdated and bureaucratic management models.

Through their affinity with social media and digital platforms, such workers find they can build networks, and influence thinking and action

using their own expertise, insight and initiative, rather than their position in structures of management, which they perceive of as too restrictive and inefficient to be impactful.

As viral content is now often regarded as having greater impact than in-person discussion, influence is seen as a more dynamic and effective way to drive change than seeking to navigate rigid structures within organisations.

None of this amounts to a rejection of leadership as such. It is, rather, a push for new forms of leadership to emerge organically through the exercise of insight, imagination, expertise, entrepreneurship, experimentation, and collaboration.

Some business commentators refer to this new approach, in which younger workers lead through their ideas more than through their accumulation of formal positions of power within hierarchical bureaucracies, as 'conscious unbossing'. The term is designed to express how leadership and influence are becoming increasingly intertwined, with digital influence, rather than middle management, being a more effective way to demonstrate and exert leadership in today's working world.¹

With this shift, 'middle management' tends to be associated with stress, limited autonomy, inflexibility, and poor work-life balance. The tendency is to avoid leadership opportunities that involve the complexities of bureaucracy and the intricacies of

people management. There is a growing reluctance to engage in the associated management meetings and performance reviews, and to invest any more than the minimum amount of time in developing team dynamics.

Faith in Business aims to explore this theme during the 2025-26 academic year through its output and events, most notably through *Faith in Business Quarterly*, our Faith in Business Monthly lunchtime webinars, and our annual Faith in Business Cambridge Leadership Retreat in April 2026.

Each year at this retreat, a diverse cross-section of business leaders (including early-stage entrepreneurs) gather for two days of inspirational input, discussion, gathered worship, reflection, prayer and ministry. The aim is to leverage biblical and practical wisdom to stimulate personal and organisational transformation. We believe that, however 'secular' the context, such transformation glorifies God.

Perhaps the best place to start our biblical engagement with this theme is with the story of creation. The Bible's opening sentence speaks of a power so immense that it has creative energy operating on a cosmic scale: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1.1).

Imagining the power involved in that happening could lead someone, even without any scientific knowledge, to surmise that this could have been



some kind of big bang. A bang caused, perhaps, by the word of God, given that the writer of Genesis states that each element of the cosmos came about in response to God's words.

This idea that God's word has immense generative power inspires other biblical writers. The Psalmist declares, 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made' (Psalm 33.6a); the prophet Jeremiah professes 'Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power' (Jeremiah 32.17a); the writer of Hebrews asserts 'the universe was formed at God's command' (Hebrews 11.3); and the writer of John's Gospel proclaims, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made' (John 1.1–3a).

That word of power 'became flesh' (John 1.14) in Jesus, who is recorded as having maintained that 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matthew 28.18). The gospels record many instances in which that authority

is displayed in Jesus' ministry: curing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, calming the storm.

That power and authority is recognized most fully by someone involved in a sphere of work in which power and authority play an explicitly pervasive roll. A military commander wants Jesus to heal his servant, who is gravely ill. But he does not think it necessary for Jesus to do so by visiting his servant; if Jesus was just to 'say the word', his servant 'would be healed' (Luke 7.7b). He provides this explanation:

I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it (Luke 7.8).

Perhaps it is not surprising that Jesus was, in response, 'amazed at him'. Here is a Gentile who, in recognizing Jesus' authority, demonstrates greater faith than any of his Jewish contemporaries (Luke 7.9). On the other hand, this recognition seems to have stemmed from the fact that the centurion's work directly depended on

the mutual recognition of authority between him and his colleagues.

All this suggests that power and authority, although they are often (understandably) treated with suspicion today, are right and good in themselves. The God who is all good, is also all powerful. And Jesus would not be God if all authority had not been given to him. With the same power and authority that he used to create the universe, he cured the centurion's servant.

Power and authority are not the same, however, as influence and leadership. These distinctions will become clear as this series unfolds. We shall be introduced, for instance, to someone whose influence may account for significant portions of the Bible to have been written, even though that person held relatively little formal power and authority and none of their own words have ever been recorded.

Their example will help us, in a working world that is in rapid flux, to exemplify power and influence in responsible leadership. 🇬🇧

1. Dan Pontefract, 'Conscious Unbossing: Why Gen Z is Steering Clear of Middle Management', Forbes, 28 Sept 2024; and Jennifer Areola-Estudillo, 'Conscious Unbossing: Why Gen Z is Saying "No Thanks" to Leadership Roles, Civility Partners, 23 July 2025.



Dr Peter S Heslam is Director of Faith in Business and a Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Cambridge (peter.heslam@cantab.net)