

Tolstoy's Professional Conscience: The Business Model in Anna Karenina

Rebekah L. Dyer

President and CEO

Global Language Strategies LLC

Woman-Owned Small Business

In Gallup's 2013 State of the American Workplace Report, a staggering 70 percent of American workers expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs, which respondents' primarily contributed to issues with poor managers who did not foster their talents, growth or creativity (Grant 1). This massive number of disgruntled employees has far reaching effects beyond the psychological wellbeing of individual American workers; it is a systemic problem resulting in the United States' annual loss of \$550 billion in productivity (Grant 1). Given the serious fiscal ramifications, it is no surprise that companies like Google have focused on creating a more "fun" work environment; Google is notorious for its free lavish snacks and drinks, nap pods, subsidized massages, free yoga and Pilates classes, etc. In the near term, these types of inducements may elevate employee morale; however, even Google has realized that long-term increased productivity lies in more intangible, fundamental values within organizations. Instead of turning to *Harvard Business Review* or popular business authors like Jim Collins, however, I would suggest that business executives examine the works of Leo Tolstoy who was prescient in his development of an organizational theory predicated on a moral approach to one's work and a bottom-up management approach that fosters *esprit de corps* in the workforce. Tolstoy's business model, reflected in Levin's transformative estate management in *Anna Karenina*, illustrates how to build and sustain a healthy company with employees who are invested in the work, thus contributing to the overall likelihood for success of the business.

Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* during an era of liberal reforms under the Russian Emperor Alexander II. Although Tolstoy was paradoxically part of the nobility that he saw as oppressing lower-class workers (i.e. peasants), he recognized that the Emperor's reforms, like the "Emancipation Reform of 1861," did not achieve the alleged intent of liberating the peasants since they were still tied to the land and had also been allotted insufficient amounts of property to render them financially independent from the state. Tolstoy was vehemently opposed, especially in his later life, to the centralized governments' oppression of the peoples' will. Tolstoy's political anarchy reflects his philosophy that individuals should have freedom of conscience and equal opportunities. One reform that Tolstoy considered paramount to facilitating such freedom of conscience and improving the lives of peasants was education, but not like the compulsory and hierarchical educational models he had observed in France, Switzerland and Germany. When he opened a school on his Yasnaya Polyana estate in 1860, Tolstoy applied some rather unorthodox approaches to education that were controversial. Tolstoy and the other teachers on the estate were lax in traditional discipline (not requiring attendance) and focused more on encouraging students to think independently and creatively. Although traditional curricula was also taught, the overall emphasis of Tolstoy's educational model was on equipping students with the tools to learn and grow intellectually (Souder). As a moralist influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau and principles derived from Christianity, Tolstoy believed in living an authentic, purpose-driven life guided by a social contract of responsible freedom, meaning that one's work should have individual existential value while providing genuine service to the greater community in which one exists.

Work and community are inextricably linked in Tolstoy's work, which highlights the author's emphasis on the synergetic relationship between the individual and his or her society (or the requisite interdependency between individuals and groups). A house, or a business, divided against itself cannot stand. Tolstoy illustrates this concept on the very first page of *Anna Karenina* when there is chaos in the Oblonsky home due to Stiva's extra-marital affair. Without the father at home (as the symbolic patriarchal leader), the household is out of control. Through the mediation of Anna and Dolly's forgiveness of her husband's shortcomings, however, order is restored to the home when husband and wife, as partners, reconcile. Tolstoy imbues Dolly with heroic qualities for keeping her home unified, which underscores the importance he places on traditional values that reify social solidarity.

Juxtaposed to Dolly's selfless decision for the greater good of her family is Anna's decision to defy her social context in pursuit of an idealized (and selfish) romantic love, which destroys her family and contributes to her death. Tolstoy's message is clear in this regard; individuals must uphold their portion of the social contract, which includes denying selfish interests, in order to maintain society. The representative functional family in *Anna Karenina* is found in Levin's and Kitty's relationship. Levin and Kitty each cultivate authentic individual identities and also achieve healthy boundaries between self and Other through reciprocal love and respect, which is demonstrated through continuous corroboration and individual compromise in their marriage. Happy families in *Anna Karenina* share a common set of core values based on mutual love and respect. These same values of genuine care and reciprocal respect are also integral to healthy employer-employee relationships.

Tolstoy viewed an employment contract as a social contract. Work, in Tolstoyan terms, should be meaningful for the employee as well as serve a genuine purpose for the greater good. Placing work in such a positive context challenged historic beliefs that related man's labor to the original sin curse when God said to Adam in Genesis 3:17: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life." It was not until the Protestant Reformation when Calvinists claimed that man's work brought glory to God that work was ascribed with intrinsic value. Yet, Protestant work ethic failed to encompass work's intrinsic value *for man* in relation to his community. As a psychological construct, Tolstoy's theory regarding the purpose of work is more akin to Freud's theory, as explained in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that work in a modern civilized society (evolved from more aggressive hunting and gathering societies) requires sublimation of egocentric pleasure principles in order to build stable civilizations where people can live and work together in harmony. According to Freud, love and work form the foundation of human happiness. Tolstoy's concept of work ethic is primarily focused on an individual's development of an authentic sense of identity that, in turn, works to improve the human condition. In this sense, work ethic has nothing to do with individuals keeping busy or working longer hours to bolster the bottom line of the company. Tolstoy's idea of elevating professional conscience, in fact, rejects modern capitalistic notions of work ethic that have become synonymous with personal ambition or individuals setting their work as priority over family and the community.

As reflected in the character of Levin (the fictional representative of Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*), working in a job with purpose, such as cooperative farming in Levin's case, is good for the soul. "For Konstantin Levin," Tolstoy notes, "the country was a place of life, that is, of joy, suffering, labour; . . . the country was good in that it presented a field for labour that was unquestionably useful" (AK 237). Levin is mindful that his work is about more than the intrinsic energy and clarity of mind that he derives from cultivating the land on his estate; he is also driven by a moral imperative to improve the farming methods on his estate in order to afford better living conditions for the peasants. Contrary to several Russian nobles' stereotypes of peasants as drunken and lazy people, Levin worked alongside the peasants on his estate, often "breaking bread" with them, as "chief partner[s] in the common labour" (Tolstoy, AK 237). Thus, Levin exhibits a highly developed professional conscience grounded in personal integrity that is characterized by the sublimation of his self-interests to engender community. Although Levin's work played a major role in shaping his moral character, his work does not entirely define his identity. Levin realizes that love is a necessary balance to work (the Freudian ideal of happiness), which he discovers in his marriage to Kitty. In all aspects of his life, Levin consistently questions his motivations and behaviors and is constantly aware of the impact his actions have on those around him. Levin's character illustrates the interdependency of humanity and the need to strike a healthy balance between self and Other, whether in work or love.

Conversely, Tolstoy classifies work driven solely by one's ego, or work that serves no purpose in society, as immoral. The hedonistic character of Stiva in *Anna Karenina*, juxtaposed to Levin, works on inane projects as a government functionary. Tolstoy questions the legitimacy of Stiva's job when Levin, with a "mocking look of attention on his face," says to Stiva: "I don't understand what you do, Levin said with a shrug. How can you do it seriously?" (Tolstoy, AK 20). In this exchange between Levin and Stiva, Tolstoy delineates the *real work* that Levin performs on his estate from Stiva's bureaucratic job where he serves as a "paper pusher." Therefore, Tolstoy implies that Stiva's work lacks value. Stiva's cavalier attitude toward work infiltrates every aspect of his life. As a philandering husband who is fiscally irresponsible, he fails his family and burdens society by living beyond his means. Toward the end of the novel, Stiva is working another job, but his entire focus had been on how much this new position paid.

The nature or importance of the work itself is irrelevant for Stiva; he lives superficially without sincere regard for others. Tolstoy suggests that Stiva lacks the integrity and moral character crucial for living a meaningful life, which is demonstrated by his professional complacency and volatile family life.

Tolstoy draws an even more distinct correlation between meaningful work and a meaningful life in the character of Ivan Ilyich (in the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*) who has an epiphany that he has wasted his life only hours before his impending death. Ivan's professional life was fixated on climbing the career ladder, increasing the amount of his salary and improving his social standing through acquiring more prominent court appointments. His image as a judge becomes a substitute for the identity he fails to cultivate. Having a father who did not demonstrate ethics in his professional life, Ivan turned to social status for a borrowed identity, thus failing to internalize the morality necessary to develop a superego or, in this case, a professional conscience. As Tolstoy indicates in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*:

But what mattered most was that Ivan Ilyich had his work. His entire interest in life was centered in the world of official duties and that interest totally absorbed him. The awareness of his power, the chance to ruin whomever he chose, the importance attached even to his entry into the courtroom and the manner of conferring with his subordinates, the success he enjoyed both with them and his superiors, and, above all, his own recognition of the skill with which he handled cases—all this gave him cause for rejoicing and, together with chats with his colleagues, dinner invitations, and whist, made his life full. (52)

Ivan's failure to develop a professional conscience leads to his inability to recognize the moral obligations inherent to his work. Instead, he works primarily for the pleasure that the prestige associated with his position provides him. As a judge, he is clearly more concerned with his professional veneer and courtroom ceremony than he is with rendering sound legal decisions. Further, when Ivan moves to St. Petersburg for a prominent judgeship toward the end of the novel, he becomes so consumed with decorating his new apartment that he actually stops listening to legal proceedings while on the bench because he is distracted with thoughts about new draperies and antiques that he wants to purchase (Tolstoy, *The Death* 56). Just like his professional propriety and marriage, Ivan Ilyich's decorating project is a façade because his house results in looking identical to the countless other houses that have been decorated by their owners to appear that they belong to a higher class than they actually do (Tolstoy, *The Death* 57-58). In his article "Work and the Most Terrible Life," Christopher Michaelson concludes that Ivan Ilyich is primarily a failure to himself, which impedes his capacity for establishing authentic work and love relationships. "What makes his [Ivan Ilyich's] life so despicable," says Michaelson, "is his lack of passion to make something of it, the sense that he is squandering opportunity and ability for blind compliance with convention. . . . We are led by Tolstoy, and by Ivan Ilyich himself, to condemn his life as terrible because he failed to care enough about the moral value of meaningful work to a meaningful life" (339).

Tolstoy's polemic against greed and abuse of power has timeless and universal implications. In his Freudian analysis of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Steven Feldman posits that Tolstoy presents an endemic issue, embodied in Ivan Ilyich's character, which is prevalent in corporate America today. By comparing the distorted value system and tragic life of Ivan Ilyich to predatory executives at companies like Enron, Feldman infers that narcissism, especially in corporate leaders, precludes the proper self-regulation and self-criticism essential to adopting moral principles that underpin ethical corporations (319). Unlike Ivan Ilyich, however, American executives, such as the extremely affluent bankers whose greed nearly caused a global economic collapse in 2008, did not confess or suffer punitive consequences for their privation of professional ethics. In this sense, America's capitalist culture seems to allow for a market freer than its citizens who are often subjugated to the moral ineptitude of executives who establish corporate cultures predicated on cut-throat competition and irresponsible risks. In his book *Real Leadership: How Spiritual Leadership Gives Leadership Meaning*, Gilbert Fairholm comments, "The fact is that American workers and their bosses are in a moral crisis. Employees have shared in the recent moral quandary in which corporate America finds itself and have suffered from financial accounting scandals in companies like Adelphia Communications, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom, Tyco Industries, and Enron, all seemingly done to concurrently both increase and hide the bottom line" (44). In order to address this moral crisis, Fairholm and other business experts urge executive managers to relinquish draconian, top-down management approaches that have corrupted the global marketplace and, instead, facilitate leadership principles focused on creating cultures of care that permit employees to develop a sense of intrinsic value in their work, which will improve overall productivity (45). This aligns with Tolstoy's democratic conception of leadership and his belief that ". . . power must flow upwards rather than downwards, that is, be granted by the masses" (Kassem 11, 15).

Levin, as the fictional representative of Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, becomes an example of effective leadership in transitioning from a failed authoritarian management approach to a cooperative (i.e. bottom-up) leadership approach, which generates a more collaborative agrarian culture as well as increased profits for Levin and his manual workers. At first, Levin is highly frustrated with many of the peasants who work on his estate. Although Levin expresses remorse for the class inequity between him and the peasants who work for him, he is often provoked by their underperformance. For instance, upon returning from a rare trip away from his estate, Levin comes back to a broken kiln and a burnt crop of buckwheat. Furthermore, a peasant whom he had given money to purchase a horse within his absence had squandered the money on getting inebriated and proceeded to beat his wife, almost to death, when drunk (Tolstoy, AK94-95). Despite the number of careless and costly mistakes that continuously occurred on his estate due to the peasants' negligence or resistance to change their obsolete agrarian methods, Levin realizes that yelling at or degrading the peasants will not resolve his issues with slovenly farm hands. He then resorts to trying to do most of the work by himself and tells the workers, like Vassily, "No discussion, please" . . . "just do as you've been told" (Tolstoy, AK157). As a reflective thinker, Levin soon realizes that it is counterproductive for him to oversee as well as perform all of the work himself and that he must improve the management of his estate.

After extensive research and several heated debates with other estate owners, Levin decides to implement an unconventional method of estate management that resembles, in today's terms, an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). Levin's new agrarian strategy entailed leasing plots of his land to peasants; in turn, he would prorate their salaries based on their appropriate share of the estate's profits. For the first time, peasants were provided a truly vested interest (both financial and emotional) in the work they performed on the estate. However, eliciting the trust necessary to engage the peasants in this partnership was no easy accomplishment due to their general, and understandable, distrust of the nobility. Consequently, Levin's first task was to garner the trust of the peasants necessary to acquire their buy-in as stakeholders, which he achieved by proving his sincerity to them. Levin exhibits a great deal of insight as a leader in realizing he cannot simply adopt a one-size-fits-all management approach; for instance, the Westernized approach to farming would have failed miserably if superimposed onto the Russian peasantry (Tolstoy, AK342). This realization is a critical turning point for Levin from an authoritarian manager to a mature leader who considers the employee as a whole person instead of as a means to an end—in context of Martin Buber's philosophy, Levin progresses from an "I-It" work relationship to an "I-Thou" relationship with the peasantry. As more peasants participate in Levin's new cooperative management approach, his estate flourishes and yields increased profits. As a result, Levin is able to enjoy a more balanced life since he no longer micromanages the peasants or suffers from the frustrations that his former authoritarian role had imposed. Although Levin realizes some general professional policies are still required to establish healthy boundaries on the estate, his business transformation is largely successful due to his empowerment of the peasants. Through Levin's successful transformation, Tolstoy demonstrates that while corporate cultures may be created in a top-down fashion, professional success is best attained through a bottom-up leadership approach.

In contrast to Levin, who improves the community through his work, is the character of Count Vronsky. The limited glimpses that Tolstoy provides into Vronsky's military life are primarily through scenes of spirited revelry with his comrades where Vronsky is preoccupied with the importance of his reputation, meaning his social standing. Vronsky does not seem at all focused, however, on his reputation as a military officer, which would ideally include attributes like valor or honorable service. In this respect, Vronsky has a similar attitude toward his career as the character of Ivan Ilyich in that he is concerned with the esteem that his position provides rather than the moral obligation associated with his duties. As Tolstoy points out: "Regimental interests occupied an important place in Vronsky's life, because he loved his regiment and still more because he was loved by his regiment" (AK173). Thus, Vronsky principally values his military colleagues because they serve as a mirror for his perceived success. Consequently, his sense of duty is essentially bound to "maintain[ing] the established view of himself" as an accomplished, wealthy and educated man (Tolstoy, AK173). Despite the fact that he is not introspective, Vronsky is extremely self-conscious and carefully monitors his behavior in public. For instance, he is always mindful of how much alcohol he has consumed at parties because he wants to maintain decorum and self-control in the presence of his peers. At the beginning of his affair with Anna, he also anticipates how others, especially his military peers, will consider the affair. What Vronsky fails to contemplate, however, is the destructive impact the affair will have on him, Anna and the community to which they belong.

Vronsky is defined by his egocentric desires and extrinsic values (based on how he appears to others) instead of guided by an internalized moral code.

After resigning from the military, Vronsky is consumed with avoiding boredom and filling excessive amounts of leisure time. Though Vronsky is extremely ambitious and goal-oriented (even considering Anna a “goal” at first), Tolstoy implies that he is often wasting time on self-indulgent activities that do not contribute to his personal growth or to the greater good. As an example, when Vronsky arbitrarily takes up painting in Italy, he spends countless days essentially mimicking others’ artwork (what Tolstoy would classify as *counterfeit art*) instead of producing *real art* like Mikhailov. Vronsky’s art displays his ability to apply artistic technique, but it lacks a spiritual quality, perhaps indicative of his regimented nature. Through this analogy, Tolstoy implies that Vronsky, just like his mechanically produced artwork, lacks the ability to think creatively or produce art that fosters a sense of humanity. Vronsky is frequently detached in his encounters with others and only operates effectively within his own class structure or in familiar venues where he is the center of gravity. His constant proclivity to boredom, even tiring quickly of Anna whom he loves, is an additional sign of his lack of emotional capacity. At one point, Tolstoy shows how Vronsky looks at a fellow passenger on the train going to St. Petersburg “like a lamppost,” and his deadening stare disturbs the man so much that he cannot not fall asleep on the overnight train (AK104).

As a military officer in 19th century Russia, Vronsky would have possessed all the power as a leader, and his troops would have submitted to his will without question or discussion. Since Vronsky never evolves in his thinking or matures as an individual, he attempts to apply this same militaristic, top-down management approach in his civilian life. In doing so, Vronsky designs and builds an impractical hospital for the peasants. Although the project is supposed to be a philanthropic effort, the hospital essentially serves as an ostentatious venue for Vronsky to showcase his wealth and elaborate decorating tastes. There are marble walls, parquet floors, extravagant plate-glass windows and high ceilings, but (as Dolly pointed out) there was no maternity ward, which was desperately needed for the peasants. Moreover, when Sviyazhsky expresses surprise that Vronsky did not build a school instead of a hospital, Vronsky replies that it’s because schools were so common and that he “just got carried away” (Tolstoy, AK624). Vronsky was always “carried away” by his grandiose sense of self that permeated his decisions and directed the tragic course of his life. No matter if there was any logic to his ideas, Vronsky felt entitled to execute his plans at all costs. In addition to building a hospital in such a disorderly fashion with an entire building “thought of later and begun without a plan” (Tolstoy, AK 623), Vronsky treated the peasants who were building the hospital like tools or means to an end. Vronsky was such a stingy “master” that he would not even offer the laborers’ horses reasonable portions of food. Instead, Vronsky only allowed snack-size portions to be given to the horses compared to peasants who always gave visitors’ horses as much as they could eat (Tolstoy, AK 642).

It was only after Vronsky lost everything that had filled his life with pleasure that he was forced to see that his life had no intrinsic value. As his mouth fills with poison from an abscessed tooth at the end of the novel, Tolstoy suggests that Vronsky’s life, likewise, has been poisoned by his selfish actions at the expense of others. While he no longer projects a pretense of confidence to his military colleagues, there is a sense that Vronsky experiences his losses as anger for the narcissistic injury inflicted on him by Anna’s death. Anna’s death ultimately threatened him with the *feeling* of regret. In the last scene where Vronsky is present, his conversation with Sergei is the first time, albeit too late, that Vronsky engages in authentic dialogue. When Sergei extends his hand to Vronsky and wishes him “outward success” (i.e., in the Serbian war effort) and “inner peace,” Vronsky replies: “Yes, as a tool I may prove good for something. But as a human being, I am a wreck” (Tolstoy, AK 780). Having served as a military officer in the Crimean war, Tolstoy recognized the rare necessity for such an institution in times of war, but believed the subjection of individuals to such authoritarian, top-down structures, and the inhumane violence of war in general, endangered man’s moral conscience. In his book *Resurrection*, Tolstoy succinctly describes these inherent dangers, which echo factors that contributed to Vronsky’s demise:

Military life in general depraves men. It places them in conditions of complete idleness, that is, the absence of all rational and useful work; frees them from their common human duties, which it replaces merely by conventional duties to the honor of the regiment, the uniform, the flag; and while giving them on the one hand absolute power over other men, also puts them in conditions of servile obedience to those of higher ranks than themselves. (“Chapter XIII”)

Vronsky comes to represent an authoritative institution of aggression that can only lead to destructive ends, not only for himself but to those around him. Through showing Vronsky as a shattered, impotent figure at the end of the novel, Tolstoy reveals that an effective leader should not use power as a weapon of oppression, rather as a catalyst to inspire collective action toward a shared goal.

In context of the military, Tolstoy held that it was the ground troops who were actually the commanding majority, making decisions in the trenches that could render the commanding few impotent, even without an overt coup. “Tolstoy makes no distinction between power and authority,” says Kassem. “He defines power as the collective will of the people transferred conditionally by their expressed or tacit consent to their chosen leader” (15).

Tolstoy’s business case is clear: in order to realize long-term success, corporate leaders must avoid exerting a self-interested *will to power* and, instead, engender *a will to empower* their employees. Professional conscience, which was desperately lacking in the institutions responsible for the 2008 financial crisis, can be achieved without additional monetary costs to business owners. In fact, as noted earlier, there is a direct correlation between workers’ engagement (corporate morale) and productivity, which means happier employees actually increase the company’s bottom line. Of course, the social contract that underlies professional conscience demands reciprocity, meaning that employees must also possess work ethic (i.e., in the Tolstoyan sense) and partake in the collaborative professional community without being spiteful to colleagues or undercutting others’ work efforts. While no company is perfect because human beings are not perfect, the idea of creating a successful company with satisfied employees is feasible, even in a capitalist culture like America that thrives on often unfair competition instead of inclusive community. A good example is Google that has ranked number one on the list of best places to work in America more consistently than any other company, yet also has impressive profits. According to a 2013 investor report, for instance, Google reported consolidated revenues of \$16.86 billion for just the fourth quarter of 2013, an increase of 17% compared to the fourth quarter of 2012 (Google Investor Relations). In a book co-authored by Google’s former CEO Eric Schmidt, entitled *How Google Works*, Schmidt points to the dynamics of Google’s culture as paramount to its success. Google’s work environment is centered on authentic collaboration of “smart creatives” realized, in short, through small teams (managers with no more than 7 direct reports), honest communications, flexible work schedules with less restrictive top-down policies governing vacation time and days off, and most importantly, engaging employees at all levels of the organization in making decisions.

Thus, companies built to last, first and foremost, have corporate cultures inclusive of every employee—from entry-level to the top executive. Company owners and executive managers must be genuinely mindful of employees and the needs requisite to their basic humanity. Art reflects life in Tolstoy’s characters in showing how our individual actions, especially those of leaders, impact the society and determine our own and others’ quality of life. The professional conscience of America, and our world, must be raised so that the workplace does not become so toxic that it ruins peoples’ lives. As Tolstoy’s paradigm shows us, that kind of transformation begins with becoming a sincere person with internalized moral values and reflecting those values in the workplace. If more companies would implement Tolstoy’s universally flexible theories and increase the humanity in the workplace, then a sense of community that is severely lacking in our present culture could be achieved.

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