

## **BUSINESS EXCELLENCE: The Lord's Business**

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The story is told, perhaps more legend than fact, about the senior executive who messed up. There's nothing noteworthy about that – many senior executives make mistakes and find a way to recover from them. But not many make a mistake of the magnitude that this executive did. By the time the damage to the company was calculated, the cost exceeded a million dollars.

Certain of the outcome, the executive prepared his letter of resignation and set an appointment with the CEO. When the appointed time came he steeled himself for the inevitable news, having already prepared his wife and family for the impending period of belt tightening. To his shock, the CEO waved away the proffered resignation. “Don't compound your mistake by making another one,” the CEO said. “We've just spent a million dollars educating you. This is no time to bail out.”

If the senior executive heeded the advice of the CEO he would have been well on his way to demonstrating a level of excellence in his own performance, and to helping the company exemplify excellence as well.

Many companies pursue the Holy Grail of business excellence; countless employees at all levels of organizations buy in to that pursuit. Annual recognition is given to those companies best exemplifying it. To be selected one of Canada's 50 Best Companies is a major accomplishment to be celebrated by each employee, and for which each employee should be appropriately recognized.

But as any one who has been in the work force for any length of time knows, business excellence is difficult to achieve. At best, it is a comparative thing – excellence compared to (fill in the blank). At worst, it is an impossible challenge, sapping the energy, and the confidence, of staff as they give way in the face of uncontrollable forces.

In today's business environment mistakes are just as likely to be caused by external factors as they are by one's own obstinacy or ignorance.

In a world already considered by medical practitioners as well as business people to be way too stressful, the pursuit of business excellence can simply add to the stress, with little offsetting compensation for the employee. In a rather strange way, it can contribute as much to a fear of success as it can to a fear of failure. "If I help the company achieve business excellence, will they raise the bar even higher? Is it better for my health and well being if we are less, rather than more, successful?"

On the other hand, "What if I fail to help the company achieve business excellence? Will that play into the hands of our competitors and lead to loss of customers, with resultant loss of jobs?"

Either way, achieving business excellence does not come without a cost.

However, for the follower of Jesus Christ there is a different approach to excellence, one that can remove the stress while enabling the individual to still make a substantial contribution to the company. It begins with an attitude, with how one thinks about one's self, one's life, one's job or career, co-workers, clients, customers, family.

The apostle Paul for much of his early adult life had pursued excellence mercilessly through striving to follow the rules. Holding impossibly high standards for himself, he was equally quick to pounce on the shortcomings of others. Then he had a life-transforming experience in which he learned that one's relationship with God, and thus with one's fellow human beings, is not determined by what one does – it is determined by one's acceptance or rejection of a *person*, Jesus Christ. Conversely, one's relationship with one's fellow human beings is not determined by what one does, but by one's relationship with God. Paul could not earn God's favour; he could only accept it as offered to him.

Paul learned through personal experience that excellence is not determined by what one does; rather, it is an expression of how one is, in relationship to God. Excellence flows from one's relationship with God; it is not something one creates by force of effort. How one behaves is an outward expression of how one feels about oneself. And one's feeling about oneself is determined by the nature of one's relationship with God.

In other words, excellence is not something one builds; it is who one is. It begins in the mind and heart and soul. Only then can it be given expression. Paul put it this way: "if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things." Not actions, not deeds, but "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" – these are the things we are to fix our minds on, if excellence is to emanate from us. But he doesn't stop there. He uses himself – this one-time merciless critic – as a role model: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8, 9)

Now Paul of all people understood the limitations of human beings who depend on their own abilities and wisdom and personal characteristics. He understood the folly of trying to produce excellent results without first undergoing inner transformation. For a long period of his life he had behaved that way. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." (Titus 3:3 – 5)

When we understand inner transformation, then we understand how to really exemplify excellence. We don't *achieve* it; we *live* it.

This inner transformation impacts everything we do. It affects how we see other people, and what we believe our purpose in life is. We begin treating customers in the way we ourselves would like to be treated. We honour our commitments, even at the cost of

some personal inconvenience. We praise co-workers and subordinates and superiors, and family members and friends, for things we used to take for granted. We hold ourselves accountable for our thoughts as well as our actions, because excellence begins as an inner state long before it's given expression, and you can't produce quality items directly out of a dump. Processing and refinement are necessary before the quality is evident.

We cut others the same slack we would like to be cut, not making excuses for their (or our) lack of effort, but recognizing that, while excellence is desirable, perfection is virtually impossible. We demonstrate an understanding and an affection for other people because we have come to understand the one looking back at us in the mirror. We can't make it without Jesus Christ in our lives; neither can anyone else. So until they invite Christ into their life and really give him primacy of place, they're going to mess up in a big way, and they'll need some help getting back on track. We understand that, because we live with ourselves every day and we know that we are works in progress.

The apostle Paul put it this way: God "saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." (Titus 3:5 – 8)

To know oneself well is to understand that such inner transformation, the kind that enables us to live excellently, cannot be brought about by an act of will. No amount of self-help philosophy and self-talk will generate it. At the core of ourselves lies rebellion, not servanthood; pettiness, not generosity; resentment, not forgiveness. In ourselves, we are the very opposite of the excellent person we strive to be.

Corporations have difficulty becoming excellent, and if they once become excellent, they have difficulty maintaining it, precisely because the individuals who make up the corporation lack the inner transformation that is necessary to become excellent.

That inner transformation can only come about through accepting Jesus Christ into one's life, and allowing him to be in charge. He puts us in a right relationship with God, and as God's Son he can show us what is required in any given situation. Without "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" we are no different from everyone else who strives for excellence and mostly falls short.

By bringing every decision, every action, every thought, to Christ, we can become excellent people through whom excellence can be expressed in the workplace, as well as everywhere else we go. Without that inner transformation we cannot exemplify excellence.

The Psalmist said of a particular king, "the most excellent of men," that he was to "ride forth victoriously" in behalf of truth, humility and justice. (Psalm 45:4) That's an honourable undertaking, but we know we can do it only in the power of the Holy Spirit completing the good work that has already been started in us.

Business excellence is indeed the Lord's business.