



Management Matters

Peter Knott SJ

In the current economic climate, banks and City firms are facing an uncertain future and many employees will be looking to their managers for support and leadership. Peter Knott SJ examines how and why Christian values in the workplace can promote effective management: what makes a good manager?

Introduction

Some years ago I was invited to attend a business management course, the only cleric among a hundred senior executives. I anticipated that I would have to answer a lot of questions, but the first one came sooner than expected. I was in a group of twenty or so, with the Chairman suggesting that we introduced ourselves in turn by saying who we were, what firms we represented; and what exactly our business was. As the various members of the group explained what they did, I became more apprehensive of introducing myself.

There's nothing like a touch of panic as a stimulant to thought. When it came to my turn, towards the end, I found myself saying something like this: "I belong to a world wide organisation with a billion people on the books. The best way to describe my business is to take all that has been said about jobs, and write it down on a sheet of paper. Add in your personal histories, your families, forebears, hopes, fears and ambitions, and then hold that paper up to the light. What I'm in business for is the watermark in the paper."

Christian belief

The 'watermark' woven through life is the spirit of the risen Christ who is true God and truly human. This has to be understood in the context of faith. Most people suppose that it is what you do that really matters and that what you believe is an optional extra. In fact, what we believe is what really matters – what



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we do follows from it. Our belief about the meaning of life is going to affect our response to life. For the Christian, this means responding to Christ who is close to us in everyday life.

Christians believe that God created the world and sustains it, but is never to be confused with that which he has created. While different from his creatures, God is not indifferent to them; he loves what he has made. As far as we human beings are concerned, the created order is imperfect, to be worked on so as to be in harmony with the purpose of the Creator. We believe that this cannot happen unless humanity acknowledges Him; and that God refuses to rest content with this disharmony and separation, and actively seeks to overcome it.

Christians see this as the inner meaning of history. We see the truth as revealed in Christ, not as something alien from the world at work, but just as applicable there as everywhere else. We believe that God revealed himself in history in the person of Christ to show us what is always true in the natural world, if only we had the eyes to see it. There is a meaning in the ordinary events of life, which prompted Christ to take his parables and illustrations from the world of nature and commerce of his day.

The revelation of God in the person of Christ did not finish at the death of Christ. Beyond the horizon of death lay the Resurrection and the giving of his spirit to us. God's life is in all of us through Christ. Complete union with God only comes beyond the

horizon of death. But our union with God beyond death will not be a totally new thing; it will be a continuation of something already begun in this life.

This leads to our understanding of Christian values, which might be summed up as follows:

- God values humanity, and God's love for humanity is active and creative.
- Christian values are not the exclusive preserve of Christians. It is through real acceptance of authentic human values that non-Christians meet their Lord. (Matthew 25)
- Since the Christian's appreciation is based on God's self-revelation in Christ, the relationships between all who respect human dignity should reflect God's relationship to us – gracious, gratuitous, forgiving, reconciling.
- In its faithfulness to Christ, the Church has a privileged role in interpreting the significance of human values and in helping us develop our conscience.

Everyday management

All this holds implications for management, and 'management' is not restricted to the Board Room. Management is 'getting work done through people', and there are all kinds of managers, both men and women. A woman who sees her husband off in the morning to manage his business may have to juggle management of the household with a job outside – and 'getting work done through people' at home has its problems too. The head of department at a school has to manage his or her colleagues. The abbot has to manage his monastery.

We are made in the image and likeness of God. Christ is God with a human face, showing us what God is like and what we can become. So if we want to understand the people we have to manage, we must try to understand God. What does He want? We might explore three ideas – God as Creator, God as Love, God as Truth:

- the Creator must want to create
- the Lover must want to love and admire
- the Truth must want to seek truth.

If human beings are made in this image and likeness, we must want the same things deep down. If we are

working to help him we must be co-operating with God; with the corollary that if we trample on human beings we are defacing the image of God.

God as Creator

The Creator must want to create, so as managers we have to see that unless we are enabling those we are responsible for to be creative, then we are somehow restricting the activity of God. This idea connects with the principle of subsidiarity – all decisions should be made at the appropriate level.

This is simple to state. The implications are complex. We cannot delegate a task to someone who lacks the ability or resources to achieve it. We have to train that person for the tasks we want done. A craftsman takes some years to master skills to the level where he can be left on his own. A business organisation cannot function without a training system, either their own or someone else's.

Delegation does not stop at training. To enable someone to be creative means giving them a clear aim, as well as the standard of performance required, and the resources in materials, money and time necessary for the job. This makes good business sense, but it means something more. In helping people to be more creative, the manager is cooperating with God in whose image and likeness human beings are created.

Doing things, making things, can make for growth in relationships, and therefore growth as a person. The idea of growth has many aspects. God has not provided us with a finished creation like some huge cosmic boiler which we are to stoke and maintain. We are part of evolution, and human beings have arisen within a creative process of which they are part. They are to be co-creators, to add beauty and order to an unfinished world through building and agriculture. They are co-creators to develop and embellish the planet – and grow in stature in the process.

The Christian idea of redemption is not restricted to an individual moralistic concept. God's plan is for the universe. If the Word was made flesh, all matter is capable of the highest use possible, being both redeemed and a means to redeeming. Following from that, work in commerce and industry is just as honourable as agriculture, as literature and art and

medicine. Commerce and industry can equally serve the needs of humanity: the provision of goods and services may be wrongly directed, but is good in itself. So management should be directed to making situations better, not just management of what is.

God as love

The lover must want to love and admire. There are many aspects of love. Looked at in one mood, love appears to be pure emotion. At the cool end of the spectrum, we have the scholastic definition of love as “willing the good of the other”. In between, for everyday use as it were, we might say that love means “taking everyone’s interests seriously”, in management for example, offering a fair wage.

Best of all perhaps is St Paul's definition. “Love,” he says, “is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

A manager is fortunate if he or she takes on an organisation in which charity is real and apparent. S/he will have to work hard to maintain it, and even harder if there is little evidence of it. But if God refuses to rest content with our separation from him and actively seeks to overcome this separation, the manager cannot afford to relax his or her efforts to reconcile differences and resolve conflicts – quite apart from the fact that it is good for business.

Note here the complexity of relationships. The individual has needs that require satisfaction, but this must be seen in relation to the needs of the group he or she works with and the requirements of the task they are to achieve; in relation, too, to the frequently conflicting legitimate claims of all those affected by the business operation: not only the shareholder, as company law would have it, but equally the employee, the supplier, the sub-contractor, the customer, the environment and the state. It is in reconciling such conflicts that management’s highest skills are deployed.

The human being is made in the image of One who wants to love and admire. So the manager might reflect on the negative aspects of his or her organisation, because if there is nothing to admire about the organisation we belong to, we are somehow defacing the image of God. This kind of reflection could help us in a search for the right priorities, and the kind of business we ought to be in.

God as truth

Loving is not so much looking at each other as both looking in the same direction. Love is looking for truth. The Truth must want to seek the truth. Truth without love is cold and intolerant: love without truth is blind and cannot last. How can we understand the idea of God as Truth; and therefore how must we seek the truth? How can we apply this to human beings who are made in his image? What is truth?

In the Bible, ‘truth’ is generally truth as distinct from lying. It is a moral quality and is found in everything we do, and takes on different names accordingly. So in education, for example, truth is called self-knowledge and learning. In speech it’s called veracity; in conduct, openness. In conversation, truth is called sincerity; in actions, fairness; in business, honesty. Truth in giving advice is called freedom from prejudice and manipulation. In keeping promises it is called fidelity; in the law courts, justice. ‘The spirit of Truth will lead you into all truth’, said Jesus.

Some would object that this is all very fine in theory, but we have to deal with the world as it is, and work with the cussedness of human nature as we find it. Even when we put all we have into management, we can still be misunderstood and our best actions misinterpreted, sometimes deliberately for personal or political ends. ‘You have to be tough to survive.’ This sort of response supposes that we are taking the ideals of Truth and Love into the situation only to find them burnt up like a delicate flower withered in the heat of the day. The effect is to lose heart and become tired of trying. This kind of outlook wrongly assumes that God is not already present in these everyday, real-world situations, as if God were only ‘on duty’ on Sundays.

Management matters

Although there may be a huge gap between the ideal and the situation as it is, Christians see this gap as growing-space in which the situation and oneself can develop. We see that success lies more in reaching out than in arriving. We trust that having done all we can with the situation, God will bring good out of it, the sum of goodness in the world is increased, and we grow in stature as persons in the process. Far from restricting God to 'Sundays only', we find God in everything, and see the worship we offer to God on

Sunday as a privileged opportunity of thanking Him for all that is good, through which we also become better able to recognise Him 'at work' during the rest of the week.

Good managers, then, are not just doing a job; they are not only promoting productivity, profitability and growth: they are co-operating with God in the divine work of creation, love and truth.

Peter Knott SJ is Chaplain to Barlborough Hall School.