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## Infinite Worth

**W**E LEFT THE NARRATIVE at the end of the first section of this book in the mid-seventies. Back then, the Beckett Corporation was small but gaining momentum. I trust you kept your seat belt fastened during the turbulence of Part Two, “The Big Picture,” and came through without too many bumps or bruises. In a moment, I want to fast-forward to the mid-nineties, picking up on the visit by Peggy Wehmeyer and the ABC News team to our company. But first, a quick recap of the twenty years in between.

During those two decades, our business experienced enormous changes. Our sales multiplied over twelve times, and our employment quadrupled. We saw our industry consolidate, with fewer remaining competitors. We encountered a variety of new challenges that tested us severely, including two huge international energy crises. Nonetheless, by the mid-eighties our company had emerged as the world’s largest producer of oil burners

for residential heating. In addition, we were able to diversify successfully by starting two significant new businesses in related product areas, such that at this writing, the combined companies employ well over 500 people and generate about \$100 million in annual sales.

We've chosen to stay private, and we are now seeing the next generation of family members come into positions of leadership, including Kevin, our eldest son, and Morrison Carter, our son-in-law, married to Kirsten, our eldest daughter. On the home front, two sons, Jonathan and Joel, had been born by the mid-seventies, increasing our family to six children, three sons and three daughters. More recently, we've had the special blessing of grandchildren added to the family.

### **What Makes You Different?**

By the time Peggy arrived to do her story in the summer of 1995, it was obvious she had done her homework. She was aware that the R. W. Beckett Corporation had become a market leader in the heating industry. She knew that the company had achieved a fine reputation in the community and that we were sought after as a place to work. But as a reporter on a mission, she was interested in news—especially the type that would support her inquiry into the relationship of our faith to our work.

She promptly got down to business, probing, digging, wanting to know what made the Beckett Corporation distinctive.

“John, how is your business different as a result of trying to apply biblical principles?”

I knew that what set us apart went beyond the fundamental

success factors that characterize many other fine businesses—good products, high quality, careful attention to customer service. It was a different quality, one that is often missing in today's workplaces.

“Peggy,” I said, “it’s probably in how we regard our people.”

“Can you be more specific?” she replied. “Every business I know talks about the importance of people, but there are a lot of employees out there who have really been burned. They feel their companies care about everything else more than them. I hear it all the time—the bottom line, shareholder value, return on investment . . .”

“I know,” I said. “I see it firsthand. I personally interview final candidates for every job in the company, and I hear some very sad stories of how people have been mistreated in previous jobs.”

“You interview them all? That’s pretty unusual. Why do you do that?”

“I began doing it many years ago when I realized how much it built understanding and trust with a new employee. Of course, they’re usually pretty nervous, having to meet the boss. But I try to put them at ease. I get them talking about themselves, their interests and hobbies, what they’ve done and what they’d like to do. It’s amazing how valuable those fifteen or twenty minutes are. After all, it’s the beginning of a relationship that may last for decades.”

“I can see the value,” said Peggy, “but is there a biblical principle involved here?”

### **Gatekeepers**

“I noticed in the Old Testament that ancient walled cities had

gates, and elders would sit by them, determining who came in and went out. I saw a parallel. Those who come through our ‘gates’ as employees will have a profound impact on the success of our company. I try to assess character issues like a willingness to work, respect for authority, basic temperament. Will this person fit in well with our other employees? Basically, is he or she right for us? I even try to meet the spouses of candidates for senior-level positions, helping them understand our company.”

“And the track record?” asked Peggy.

“Certainly we make mistakes,” I said. “But I believe the thoroughness has resulted in an exceptional workforce. Many have made the company their career, and we find a consistently high level of morale and pride. A good indication is how positively they speak about their work with friends in the community.”

### **Individual Worth**

“I’m not sure we’ve touched on the key issue yet, John. Just *why* the emphasis on individual worth?”

“I think the important thing is to view people the way God does. We see that view initially in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. There, in describing creation, it says God formed men and women in his own image and likeness. That’s really quite remarkable. Attributes unique to human beings—the capacity to think, reason, worship, understand joy and sorrow, use language—all spring from God’s own nature.

“When I saw this, it really changed the way I viewed not only myself but other people. I concluded I must place a high value

on each person and never look down on another, regardless of their station or situation in life. Peggy, there's something sacred about every individual. Since God attributes unique and infinite worth to the individual, each one deserves our profound respect."

Peggy continued her questioning. "Is this view expressed in any of your statements of corporate philosophy?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "We have established three 'Enduring Values' which are to be embraced and applied throughout our companies. One of these is *profound respect for the individual*. We say that we want our work and work relationships to be dignified, challenging, rewarding and enjoyable. We make the well-being and continuous individual growth of our employees high priorities."

### **Capturing the Concept on Camera**

"John, I'd like to keep talking," Peggy said, "but we've got a camera crew ready to start shooting. We need to see some visible evidence of how things are different at your company."

I had to stop and think. How might our emphasis on individual worth best be portrayed? After all, policies and practices, by their nature, become ingrained in a company—part of the culture, often unseen.

As we talked about the company's distinctives, Peggy picked up on our policy for parents of newborns. I explained that in studying this topic, our management team learned that the first three years of a child's life are critical in establishing a close bond between mother and child—a bond that can produce lifelong benefits. Once the mother is away for more than twenty hours a

week or so, that bond is noticeably weakened.

As a result, we established a policy giving employees the choice to stay home up to twenty-six weeks. During this period we maintain their income at one-quarter the normal level and will loan them an additional one-quarter, providing a total of up to half of their normal wages. Then they can return to work part-time, sharing their job with another or doing work at home (both depending on availability), for up to three years after the birth of their child.

Peggy got excited about capturing this benefit on video and set out with the film crew to the home of Nancy Borer. On their front porch, Nancy and her husband (over the objections of their infant in arms) explained how much it meant to them that Nancy could be at home with their child.

The camera crew then visited another home where Chuck and Patty Visocky proudly presented the children they had recently adopted from Colombia, South America—four orphans from the same family. To help in the adoption, the company provided paid time off for the Visockys to travel to Colombia. We currently have a policy of providing parents \$1000 for each adopted child. I explained to Peggy that in a day when the value of children seems to be diminishing, we want to take a different direction, emphasizing their value.

The ABC team then delved into our educational policies, talking with several employees who were taking courses to advance their skills. They chose Eric Hess for their interview. Eric's father had worked at the company as our director of quality. When Eric graduated from high school, his dad recommended

that he apply. Eric began on the plant floor and showed very good work habits and attitudes. In time, an opportunity opened for him to become a lab technician. But after several months in that position, he concluded it was not right for him.

Some companies consider it the end of the road for an employee when a promotion is turned down, but we encouraged Eric to return to a job in the plant similar to the one he'd left. He simply hadn't found his niche yet—and that process would take some time. Later, Eric expressed interest in supervision. He was tested, confirming his aptitude for leading others. He entered an educational program for supervisors, paid for by the company, and in a short time he became one of our most able people in that key role.

### **Profound Respect**

So Nancy, Chuck, Eric and others told their “sound bite” stories, each capturing a dimension too often missing from the workplace—genuine care and regard for the individual.

In a masterful way, Peggy and the camera crew portrayed our view of the value of the person, and ABC's viewers were able to see another side to business—a human side, one based on dignity and intrinsic worth. As I pointed out to Peggy, the human side and the economic side aren't mutually exclusive. “We've also been able to produce above-average profits and excellent returns to the shareholders,” I said.

I'm convinced most employees want to see their companies prosper. They know their success depends on their employer's success, and they will work hard to contribute. But they must be

provided a dignified and supportive work environment. They must be viewed as valued, important, worthy. They bear God's own image. If they are of infinite worth in his eyes, they certainly deserve no less from us than our profound respect.