

## The Corporate Counselor

**T**HIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE VALUES, the principles, the habits that bring success in business. But it's not just about generic values. It centers not on a list but on a Person—one who wants more of a place in our lives. God wants a greater role not only with individuals, not just in church, but also in our families, our schools, in government, *and* in commerce and industry. He has a purpose for us and for our work and a dynamic role to play.

For God to have greater access, we must open spiritual doors—doors that invite and encourage his presence. We open those doors through personal faith and prayer.

I see indications around the globe that business people are coming to see this important truth: “When we work, we work; when we pray, God works.”

My first understanding of the role of prayer for my work came early in my career at the Beckett Corporation. Dad had worn most

of the hats in our small business, and after his passing I quickly realized I couldn't begin to fill all his varied roles. We had fine products, but to strengthen the company and grow, we would have to increase sales and broaden our customer base. I needed to hire a capable person, ideally someone with marketing ability.

I did what I knew to do. I sought out former college classmates and contacted people in our industry. Each was polite, but all firmly responded that they were not available. I can't blame them. We were a risky prospect.

I was only beginning to understand prayer, but the urgency of our need compelled me to reach earnestly toward God. My appeal was simple but sincere. I asked if he would please send someone to help us. The answer came remarkably soon, and in a way I didn't expect.

### **A Key Answer to Prayer**

The Standard Oil Company of Ohio (Sohio) had recently become a customer of ours, and Bob Cook, one of their marketing execs, was asked to evaluate a company in Georgia from whom Sohio wanted to buy warm-air furnaces. He asked that I travel with him to assist in the evaluation. As we flew home following a successful visit, Bob tactfully but directly raised the subject.

"John," I recall Bob saying, "would you be open to discussing my coming to work for you? I like what I'm doing at Sohio, but I've just finished my MBA, and I believe I'm ready for a new challenge. I think I could bring some skills that would help your company move forward." I replied that I would be glad to pursue this, and over the next few weeks we worked out the details. Soon

Bob and I were working together, with Bob focusing on our marketing needs.

It didn't take me long to affirm that Bob was God's answer to prayer. In the ensuing years, his skills and personality have been an ideal complement to mine, and he has been singularly committed to our success. We have now worked in an extraordinary relationship for over three decades.

This early experience in prayer taught me an important lesson. I had exhausted my own ideas and best efforts on how to solve the problem, and only then turned to God in prayer. Even though it was clear God came to my rescue in response to that prayer, what I realized, after seeing his provision, was that I could have sought his help at the beginning.

But why pray if God already knew what our company needed? I began to see that he has designed it so that dialogue is important. And that's really what prayer is—talking with God. He wants hearts that are tender and open to his instruction—eager to know what *he* wants—not presumptuous or hard. Prayer softens the heart, attunes our hearing and affirms our dependence on God.

### **A Significant Factor**

Prayer is not often listed in books on how to run a business. But prayer has been a significant factor in our business, not only in the crisis, but as an ongoing process. For over twenty-five years I have met every Thursday morning with a small group of men, including Bob. During these times we read Scripture, pray together and have breakfast. The prayer time often focuses on our work, including employee needs, wisdom in hiring decisions,

insights into problems we are encountering, and the need for clarity on important business issues—as well as family needs and other matters that spontaneously emerge as topics for prayer.

It is especially rewarding to see answers to prayer. I recall that following the oil embargo of 1979, this group sought direction from God on what our company's response should be. Against compelling evidence that we were in for a tough time, we felt he was showing us to take one day at a time, keep our focus on him and watch for his provision. With this insight we avoided overreacting and kept a very steady course until the storm passed. This strategy proved tremendously effective, and our company actually emerged stronger after this severe challenge.

### **Prayer and Work**

Here are some other ways prayer and our corporate life intersect:

- Not infrequently, an employee makes known a personal difficulty, for example with a health or family issue. Not once have I been declined when I've asked, "Would you mind if I prayed for you and your situation?"
- We like to begin company events such as dinners and special gatherings with prayer. Our employees appreciate the tone this approach sets and are glad to participate.
- A number of years ago, we were having an unexplained rash of fires in the company. I extended an open invitation to employees to gather for prayer following work. About one-quarter of our workforce joined in petition to God for his provision and protection. Remarkably, that was the last of the fire incidents! As a friend reminded me at the time, "When we pray, coincidences

happen; when we don't pray, the coincidences stop happening.”

□ On occasion a simple grace at the beginning of a business meal is appropriate. Such prayer can change the direction of the conversation, as happened with a prominent businessman who unexpectedly opened up right after a prayer of thanks for the food, revealing a family problem and his need for help.

□ Groups of our employees gather on a completely voluntary basis to study the Bible and to pray. We make facilities available for this purpose, and occasionally we receive comments on how valuable these times of fellowship are. No pressure is ever put on folks who are not interested in participating.

I am humbled to realize there are people not associated with our company who regularly pray for us. One, an elderly man named Endel, lives in Estonia. He was imprisoned in the Soviet Gulag for ten years, but in that desperate situation he became a believer in Jesus Christ. That experience transformed his life, and ever since he arises early each morning to spend several hours in prayer. We met a few years back, and when Endel learned about our business, he told us he wanted to include us in his times of prayer. I can't help but believe this selfless commitment has contributed significantly to the blessings we see day by day.

### **Taking Faith Seriously**

The ABC News piece featuring our company also showed the breadth of people's efforts across our nation to integrate their spiritual lives with their work. Peggy Wehmeyer and her crew visited groups of business men and women meeting in various cities for Bible study and prayer. They looked in on a group of

Jewish businessmen on Wall Street who gather weekly to read the Torah and to pray. They reported on the impact of business groups, including the Christian Business Men's Committee and the Fellowship of Companies for Christ. Thousands meet regularly in these and other organizations to explore the relationship of their faith to their work and to pray together.

I'm finding networks of senior business leaders, including heads of some of America's largest companies, who take their faith seriously. In fact, I am a member of one group which meets periodically and follows up with telephone conference calls, keeping each other in touch, praying for one another.

There is a similar emphasis internationally. The Full Gospel Business Men's Committee has chapters in every corner of the globe, and the International Christian Chamber of Commerce, based in Sweden, holds seminars and sponsors trade shows around the world for Christian business people.

As Peter Jennings said as he introduced the story on our company, there is a "growing tendency of business leaders in America to have their personal faith make an impact in their companies."

I'm convinced this trend is intimately linked with prayer, the prayer of sincere people who have a genuine desire to see business, commerce, the professions—every aspect of our work lives—come into alignment with God and his ultimate purposes.