

## Business Direction: Values

**B**USINESS DIRECTION is defined not only by a clear vision but by a set of core values. If well thought out and effectively communicated, such values are a powerful means of focusing the energies of an organization. They become the channel markers guiding the corporate ship toward the fulfillment of its vision.

The key question before every person in business is “Which values?” Many are searching for answers. Sensing that our culture is losing its moral and ethical bearings, wealthy individuals have been directing some of the largest grants and bequests ever given to colleges and universities to find and impart answers to that question.

### **Values in Academia**

As an outgrowth of the ABC broadcast, I was invited to participate in a symposium on values convened by Harvard University. The

specific goal was to explore ways in which values affect private and public institutions, including government. The day-long gathering brought together some thirty people, including faculty members from Harvard's graduate schools of business, law, government and divinity, as well as leaders from business, the media and the arts.

Peter Jennings was involved, affording the two of us an opportunity to further discuss his broadcast opener, "They are using the Bible as a guide to business." He affirmed how well the news piece had been received and shared his own view that there is a hunger for spiritual content that has been largely ignored by the major media.

Our session began as we were asked to write out and prioritize the values we hold most closely. I suppose I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was. One participant, a professor in the School of Divinity, listed as her second highest priority to be a faithful spouse, raising my opinion of the values held by at least one of this elite university's staff. The euphoria was brief, however, lasting only until she boldly explained that by faithful spouse she meant she had been "married" to the same lesbian partner for eighteen years. How differently we define values! The balance of the day, while interesting, didn't move us an iota closer to identifying just what values are paramount.

### **A Decline in Values?**

Harvard is not alone in harboring, if not encouraging, values which are a radical departure from those traditionally held in our nation. One more example. Some years ago I attended an execu-

tive management course at Stanford University. Included was a lecture on ethics given by a senior faculty member.

In good academic fashion, the floor was opened to comment after his talk. I began my question with a supposition: “Recognizing that there has been a decline in our nation’s moral values . . .”

That was as far as I got before the professor interrupted: “What do you mean, a decline?”

I began citing what, to me, were clear indicators of slippage: increased crime, higher divorce rates, rampant pornography. But he cut me off again.

“Listen,” he said, becoming quite agitated. “I want us to see if there is any consensus on this. How many of you disagree with this gentleman’s premise that values are declining?”

Now, this was not a class of campus radicals. The 120 executives, primarily from the West Coast, ran successful medium to large businesses. I was stunned as about 80 percent of the hands in the room shot up.

“There,” he proudly proclaimed. “This proves that things are not getting worse. I think people are just more open now about what’s already been going on anyway.”

My sole encouragement from that encounter was that some of the minority sought me out and affirmed their own observations and concerns. One, a businessman from Switzerland, said, “John, I only take issue with one thing you said. It’s not just America that is in decline. It’s the entire Western world.”

### **Core Values for Business**

These experiences increased my eagerness to formulate and

communicate a set of “core values” in our company. I felt these values needed to be biblically rooted if they were to have the enduring quality that would set them apart from the moral and ethical ambivalence of our current culture. At the same time, they needed to be simple, understandable and memorable—something we could build on in our education and training efforts. We have identified these three: *integrity, excellence, a profound respect for the individual.*

The third of these, profound respect, is so key that I addressed it in chapter twelve, “Infinite Worth.” (I guess I wasn’t sure how long you’d keep reading. . . .) The key idea is that God attributes infinite worth to the individual, and so each person deserves our profound respect. Let us now look at the first two, especially in regard to the biblical roots of these core values.

### **Integrity**

By definition, *integrity* means adherence to a standard of values. That which is sound, whole, complete has integrity. It can be a bridge structure, a philosophy or a person. The opposite is that which is compromised, fractured, unsound. In the biblical use, the term embraces truthfulness, honesty, uprightness, blamelessness, wholeness.

Psalm 15 describes the man or woman of integrity. The dominant character qualities of such a person are listed: he or she is one who walks uprightly, who stands for righteousness, and who speaks truth inwardly—who “swears to his own hurt and does not change.” I picture someone who agrees on a handshake to sell a piece of property for a certain sum. The next day another

person offers more money. The person of integrity honors the prior commitment, even though backing out would bring greater profit.

From my experience, a business person's integrity is tested regularly. We encountered such a challenge early in my career with a customer in Japan. That company's buying agent asked us for a "commission" paid to him personally on sales of our products to their company. While this was clearly a bribe in our view, we learned the practice is not uncommon in Asia. We decided to be governed by our ethical standards and refused the payment of this "commission," realizing it could cost us this badly needed business. Fortunately, it didn't. The agent's response when we refused to pay was, "Fine. I just thought I'd ask!"

Imagine what a large transfusion of integrity could do to transform the badly tarnished image of modern business. The handshake might return, replacing tortuous legal contracts. There would be no news reports on business scandals and corruption like those which have recently sent prominent business leaders to prison and rocked the foundations of some of the world's largest and most prestigious companies. Time-tested absolutes would return to replace the moral relativism which has spawned so much confusion about how to think and how to act. Employees would not be caught in the dilemma of when to and when not to lie!

### **Excellence**

Like integrity, *excellence* is a concept rooted in the Bible. (But don't tell Tom Peters—the royalties are still pouring in from his

landmark study and book, *In Search of Excellence*.)

In a little seminar we had with some sixty managers in our companies, I gave them an assignment to see how excellence is evident in the opening pages of the Bible, the first chapter of Genesis. Each one in the group was able to count seven times that God considered different aspects of what he had created—and saw that it was good. In fact, on the final day God looked at everything he had made and said it was *very good*. It was excellent!

That's important: *Everything God has created is excellent!*

While Genesis provides the first look into the nature of God, the Scriptures that follow unfold a wonder and awesomeness of God beyond description. He dwells in a realm that defies our imagination—one that is totally pure, completely free from defilement and sin, perfectly ordered and intensely beautiful.

The bottom line is that this excellence, so descriptive of God's nature and the realm in which he dwells, is to be somehow integrated into the earthly time-space realm in which we live. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Whenever something bears the mark of God's kingdom, it will be excellent. We will never fully duplicate the perfection of the heavenly realm, but by aligning ourselves with God's ambassador to earth, Jesus Christ, we can certainly emulate it. The apostle Paul expresses this idea when he says, "Whether you eat or drink, *or whatever you do*, do all to the glory of God." This is a call to excellence.

Michael J. Fox, the talented movie actor, makes an important distinction: “I am careful to not confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence I can reach for; perfection is God’s business.”

A way in which we have tried to encourage the concept of excellence is to seek “continuous improvement” in all we do in our company. It’s the opposite concept to “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The continuous improvement way is, “Even if it ain’t broke, find a way to make it better.”

Recently the team that paints our products accepted this challenge after doing things virtually the same way for years. Working with our engineers, they developed system improvements that increased productivity by over 40 percent. Now they’re at it again, finding ways to improve paint quality while reducing emissions going into the atmosphere. Tomorrow we trust they’ll have some additional new ideas.

Excellence. Ultimately it is defined not by a product or a process but by a person.

### **Jesus the Carpenter**

Have you ever thought about the way Jesus began his professional career? He was a small businessman, a carpenter. Let’s think of him that way for a moment, not as a religious leader. I have a large contemporary charcoal drawing of Jesus, the carpenter, over the old roll-top desk in my office. He has a simple box plane in his rugged, powerful hand, his exacting eye looking over the work he is doing. As I look at that drawing, I think about what must have been the extraordinary quality of his craftsmanship—even with the ungainly tools of that day.

I sometimes imagine him putting the finishing touches on a cabinet he has made for an elderly widow who lives down the street from his modest shop. He will deliver it to her this afternoon. She invites him in for a visit; they chat, and she is quite amazed at the breadth of his knowledge and his fine manner. This is not an ordinary carpenter, she thinks, as he goes on his way.

She walks over to the cabinet. It is very reasonably priced, she concludes, especially for such an outstanding piece. Though her eyesight is failing, she examines it closely, running her hand back and forth, up and down. It is as close to perfect as anything she has ever owned. The joints, the fit, the finish are exquisite. She can't wait to show it to her neighbors. She concludes, "The work of this carpenter, this neighbor of mine, is truly excellent."

Jesus represents excellence—his craftsmanship while here on earth merely a reflection of his enduring, impeccable character, his nature, his life and mission.