

Faith & Ethics are a Team (Not Solo) Sport

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Over and over in Genesis 1 – 2, God sees and says that the work he has done is “good” and “very good.” Just one time God says something is “not good” --- for man to dwell alone. So God separates the woman out of the man and they are differentiated, complementary partners, male and female. Of course in the first part of the creation account we are told right out of the gate that God (a plural, trinitarian, “we,” “us”) determines: “Let *us* make mankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness . . . and in the image of God he created *them*, male and female he created *them*” (1:26-27). As Karl Barth put it, “humanity is co-humanity.” It is part of our nature to be in relationships; it is dehumanizing and against the will of God to try to live an isolated life on your own.

This isn’t just a male/female thing. Remember that Jesus sent his disciples out two-by-two, not one-by-one. In an allusion to a Jewish traditional way of describing moral decision-making as “binding and loosing” Jesus made the role of partnership/community in faith and ethics very clear: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:18-20). Of course, this assumes the presence, guidance, and authority of the Word and Spirit of God – it is not an unconditional license to go any direction we choose. But it is a freedom and responsibility to *apply* the unchanging Word of God to changing, specific situations and challenges.

Remember that all the great ethical instruction of the Bible was given to groups: to Israel (not just to Moses walking alone through the desert), to the band of disciples gathered on the mount (not just to Peter or John alone). Remember that Paul, after his call to radical discipleship and transformation in Romans 12:1-2, immediately reminds the readers “not to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think” (Romans 12:3ff). No, you do have a valuable gift and part to play but you need the other members of the body of Christ to take on this challenge with any chance of success.

It’s About Discernment. It’s About Support

We need deep, covenanted (not just casual) relationships with other brothers and sisters for at least two basic reasons: *discernment* and *support*. First we need help in “figuring out” (discerning) the will of God and how to apply it in the nitty-gritty circumstances, in the trenches, of our life and calling. Should I take this job --- or quit this one -- or protest this situation – or keep quiet for now? No one --- and no Bible --- ever said you could do this on your own. It is a *team* “sport” --- not a *solo* “sport.” It’s not golf or marathon running; it’s basketball, soccer, or baseball.

Second, we need support: encouragement, accountability, exhortation, cheering, scolding, and even resources of various kinds (loans, reference letters, etc.) to make it in the challenges of life. “Every David needs a Jonathan” is a title of a talk I often give at men’s retreats. Jonathan encouraged and protected

his buddy David. I actually get emotional sometimes when I think about how, after Jonathan was killed, David messed up with Bathsheba and messed up as a dad (with Absalom). How he missed faithful Jonathan's advice, counsel, challenge, and brotherly love. Remember also that our Lord's first temptation, the temptation of the flesh and its appetites, the temptation to turn stones into bread to satisfy a raging appetite, "just because you can," occurs alone in the desert. First moral of the story: don't give in; second moral of the story: try to avoid being alone in the desert with what will tempt you! Take a friend; stay in close touch with your brother; be accountable; build a support structure.

The Best Business Leaders Understand Teams¹

Out in the wild world of competitive business, there is a lot of macho, individualistic posturing. The false prophet Ayn Rand glorifies self-serving, heartless predators, like her fictional heroes John Galt and Howard Roark, and the morally and intellectually bankrupt women who are enthralled by them, Dagny Taggart and Dominique Francon. Oddly enough, even Rand's heroes can't resist (in *Atlas Shrugged*) gathering into a sort of community in some lost Colorado valley. Can't you just imagine a community of cold-blooded egotists and narcissists like this (I think it is called Hell or Gehenna or something like that)?

Yes, there are Randians out there. There are, of course, times when individuals, unleashed from groups, are the source of incredible creativity, productivity, and accomplishment. Part of great leadership is to liberate and empower individual accomplishment. Part of great leadership is inculcating personal responsibility. Individuals must not make a habit of hiding behind groups or organizations to evade personal responsibility.

But there are plenty of great business voices who are spreading the message about teams: "Teams outperform individuals acting alone . . . especially when performance requires multiple skills, judgments, and experiences" (Jon R. Katzenbach & Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams*, p.9). There are tasks and challenges for which there is no substitute for the wisdom and power of teams. This is certainly true in the business strategy domain but also in major personnel decisions, technology strategy, mergers and acquisitions, and many other areas.

Corporate ethics benefits from a team approach and suffers from individualism. Virtually all of the compliance and ethics programs being sold to today's companies indoctrinate employees into an individualistic approach to ethics. The creation of the ethics and values program does not involve the practitioners but is imposed from outside; the training itself amounts to little more than an individual sitting down in front of a computer and punching their way through a few scenarios with prefabricated outcomes. "Bingo! You are trained for this year. Hit print and get your certificate."

Ethical dilemmas and quandaries are often complex. We are muddling our way through to the wisest possible decision. We are walking through grey areas and having to choose the least bad or most good option. It's not black and white. Resolving ethical conflicts takes tremendous creativity and imagination, seeking win-win solutions that are not apparent on first glance. Multiple perspectives help us see issues more accurately. Multiple brainstorming minds can uncover or invent options unseen by individuals. It is a recipe for ethical weakness for organizations to fall into the individualism trap.

To begin with, the code of ethics (and the organization's core values) will be vastly improved if the practitioners are involved in writing it. No one knows the ethical challenges and temptations of being a sales representative like the sales representatives, for example. They should be brought together as a team to write or rewrite the guidelines for getting it right in their domain. And when an important specific challenge comes up on the job, the habit should be to put your head together with a teammate or two to

figure out the best way to apply the company guidelines. Figuring out the standards, and figuring out how to apply them in specific cases: these are best viewed as team things.

But employees are unlikely to call on a colleague if they have been trained to sit alone in front of a computer when doing ethics. Company ethics training is something that really should occur primarily in group contexts. Even one annual two-hour ethics and values group training session can contribute significantly to organizational ethical health. At Harris & Associates (Concord CA), company leaders urge all employees to attend one two-hour session per year. Two of the organization's six core values are discussed each year: what do these concepts mean? How can we live them out? What are our challenges to living out these values? What ethical dilemmas related to these two core values might arise in our company? How could we analyze and resolve these dilemmas? An online version of the annual company ethics and values training is available late in the year to those who missed out on the face to face, group training, or who wish to review the concepts. But it is definitely Plan B. Plan A is to learn how to work together on our ethics and values.

Corporate ethics is not just about teams "figuring it out" together; it is also about "carrying it out" together. It isn't enough for a team (informal or otherwise) to help figure out what someone should do---and then cut them loose to live or die on their own. The team thing means standing by, supporting, encouraging, checking up, sometimes even accompanying the teammate. Our diversity of perspectives and experiences enriches the moral discernment, "figure it out" process. And our diversity of abilities and strengths empowers the "carry it out" process in ethics.

So forget that Lone Ranger ethics approach. It is just setting up your employees for frustration, struggle, and disappointment. Organizational ethics is a team thing, start to finish.

Implications for Pastors and for Workplace Disciples

Isn't it interesting how the biblical message actually provides a rich and strong foundation for thinking about the business applications in part two of this essay? The business applications regarding teams are not just a passing management fad or a pragmatic choice for improving the bottom line. No, this is about truth, about doing what's right, about reality, about honoring our Creator and Redeemer. Christians have something to say, something to share to salt and light the workplace and this theme is one of the essentials.

So Pastor: would you please preach and teach on these themes when they arise in Scripture? Would you help your people say a loud "No" to the individualism of our culture? Would you challenge your people to build covenanted friendships and prayer partnerships, starting in their school days? Would you gently call them to pursue something relationally richer than FaceBook and social media (alone)? And Pastor, would you be sure that *you* are in a small covenanted group of three or four folks who will be your own faithful, praying, caring, exhorting, encouraging friends? If you aren't in such a group you are not only being a bad example, you are leaving yourself extremely vulnerable.

And Workplace Disciple: it's often exciting and rewarding out in the marketplace. That's where the action is. You will likely be challenged to the max in all different kinds of ways. But please dear brother or sister: make it a top priority to get into a covenanted (start with a commitment to meet weekly or biweekly for four months, then extend if you find a workable routine) friendship/support group with two or three others (more than three others and you will always lack time for sharing and prayer; less than two and you will falter when one goes away on the road). Make it a priority: meet for an hour over coffee in a location where you can freely share and pray. Talk about your challenges, raise your questions, report on

your successes. Be transparent, share yourself, probe the life of the other. Maintain confidentiality, build trust, reach out and care. Follow up with calls and texts of encouragement.

Pastor: this will be one of your most important gifts to your workplace disciples and your whole congregation.

Workplace disciples: this will be one of the most gratifying and revolutionary moves you ever make in your life. Make a move this week. Reach out. Suggest a meeting with a good prospective business/workplace friend.

¹ Much of this middle section overlaps a couple of my *EthixBizine* columns published 2007-10 at www.ethixbiz.com.