

The Eleventh CAFE Paper

HOW TOUGH SHOULD THE CHRISTIAN MANAGER BE?

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June 2006

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The Christian Association of Business Executives - CAFE (www.cafe-online.org)

CAFE is a fellowship of Christians in business life who share common concerns, offer mutual support and seek to promote the application of Christian principles in the working environment. CAFE aims to support Christians who work in business and commerce by exploring the relationship between the faith they profess and the world in which they work.

In 2006 CAFE launched a set of 'Principles for those in Business' that "provide a sound and robust framework within which business can be conducted honourably and responsibly whilst at the same time developing personal values and standards which lie at the core of our mutual respect for one another." (Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury). For copies of the Principles contact jackiemcmillan@onetel.com or visit the Principles website on www.principlesforbusiness.com.

“HOW TOUGH SHOULD THE CHRISTIAN MANAGER BE?”

Toughness: good or bad

Is describing somebody as tough a compliment or a criticism? The word tough has in it the hint of being a bit on the negative side. Major Bagstock in Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* comments, “He’s tough, Ma’am, tough, is J.B.D. tough and devilishly sly.”

When we hear somebody say that George is tough on his wife that sounds to be a bad sort of toughness. If we hear that George is tough on his children that may be good or it may be bad. If we hear that George is tough in his training schedule in preparation for running the Marathon, well that sounds like a good sort of toughness.

Looking at my concordance there was no reference to toughness. The word is in common usage today in phrases where toughness has a good side to it. The Labour Party built a lot of credit by using the phrase, “Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime”. “Tough love” is advocated as a quality to aspire to for both managers and parents. To be regarded as, “tough but tender” is a positive attribute.

For the Christian the word toughness may have too much of a ring of macho-ness to be immediately attractive. My thesis is that the Christian manager needs to be tough but to know the boundaries of that toughness and to see that toughness very much in the context of the individual within the community in which they work.

Can I go straight to a dilemma to illustrate how important the question of toughness is. If you have somebody working for you who is letting his colleagues and his staff down, the first reaction is to support and help this individual and to nurture this person back into effectiveness. But what if the risks are there that this person could be doing damage to other people during this intervening period. To be fair to one person and give them the opportunity to improve might be being grossly unfair to others who are suffering because of this individual’s inadequate leadership. This illustration is at the heart of the dilemma of how tough should the Christian manager be.

We are enjoined to love our neighbours as ourselves. But loving one neighbour could appear to another neighbour that we are completely failing in living out this principle of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

Lessons from the life of Jesus

I will come back to this type of illustration but first what lessons can we draw from the life of Jesus about how tough the Christian manager should be:

- **Jesus was tough on himself.** He had a rigorous travelling schedule, he withdrew to the desert, he fasted, he was willing to sacrifice his life on the Cross. But while being tough on himself he also allowed the woman to pour expensive perfume on his legs, he enjoyed the hospitality of many different people and ensured that there was plenty of wine to drink at the wedding feast.
- **He was very tough on his disciples.** He expected them to leave their homes and follow him. They put up with an itinerant life style. He sent them out two by two on training exercises. He trained them hard. He sometimes let them know when they had not come up to his expectations.
- **He often appeared tough on his family.** He was not at home much. He put his family into the wider context of God's love for everyone. But at critical moments he was there for his mother, asking his disciple John to look after her when he was on the Cross and then coming to her in the garden outside the tomb. He seemed quite limited in the amount of time he gave to his mother, but it was focused quality time that he gave.
- **He was tough with the individuals with whom he debated faith and life.** He expected individual leaders who came to him like Nicodemus to be willing to change their approach. He listened to the Pharisees and scribes, he debated with them and said when he disagreed.
- **He was tough in his use of time.** Reading the Gospels you sense there was something deliberate in the way he used his time. He gave a lot of time to his

disciples, there was time for the crowds but there was also time set aside to be alone, and to be with the small group of Peter, James and John. Jesus would deliberately move away from people who needed his healing and wanted to hear his words in order to be alone or with a small group of disciples. He was making tough decisions on how he used his time and prioritising in a clear way even though it will have meant disappointing some people.

What are the parallels for us as managers? If Jesus was tough on himself perhaps we should be too. His was not a 9 to 5 vocation. He put demanding expectations upon himself but he ensured there was withdrawal to the desert. Toughness for us can involve a rigorous travelling schedule, living with demanding expectations and ensuring there are moments when we withdraw to the desert. It is sometimes too easy as Christians just to assume that if we pray it will be alright on the night. The Christian manager is likely to be tough on themselves but within the context that work is only one part of life and is not the be all and end all.

It may seem simplistic to draw a comparison between Jesus and his disciples, and us and our staff. But there are relevant principles. It is perfectly consistent with a picture of Jesus as manager to expect staff to work hard, to encourage them to grow and develop, to expect them to take on new experiences. The balance of challenge and encouragement is so important for the Christian manager as is that sense of forgiveness if our staff don't get it right first time.

In terms of our families perhaps we take comfort from the fact that Jesus was pretty tough on his family in terms of the amount of time he spent with them. But there was quality time at key moments. It is all too obvious to see the ill effects of when a Christian manager who is also a church leader leaves too little time for their family: therein lie the roots of teenage rebellion.

The Christian can easily be viewed as a soft touch when it comes to negotiation or building partnerships. Toughness in negotiation is no less important for the Christian leader as for other leaders. Effective negotiation which is based on clarity and trust can be done just as well by a Christian as anyone else. On some occasions it can be easier because of the importance the Christian attaches to building a strong basis for

trust. Perhaps for any manager the toughest thing to do is to admit when you are wrong and change your mind: the apostle Paul is a perfect example of someone who was willing to listen and then changed direction.

Maybe the toughest thing for any manager is how they use their time. Reflecting Jesus' priorities puts an emphasis on time for your direct reports, time for wider visibility and communication and also time to be alone. The impression is of Jesus using his time well; a robust challenge to us to use our time in a tough and effective way.

So what is the relevance of all of this to life as a Christian manager in a busy world be it in a hospital, a school or an office? Toughness is not macho but it is disciplined, purposeful, listening and based on clarity. Can I use some examples of Christian managers in sensitive positions?

John was in a senior position in a security firm. As demands for their work went up or down he was expected to recruit or dismiss. He accepted that this was an inevitable part of the job. He approached the task by finding the time to talk one-to-one in a private space when an individual's contract needed to come to an end. It was never dismissal through a text message: it was a constructive discussion about what might be somebody's best next steps.

James as a naval officer knew he had to have different relationships with people at different points of time. When he was on the bridge at 4am there could be philosophical conversations when he would talk about what mattered to him in his life, including his faith. At other moments it would be more command and control. Both aspects of the relationship were important to him. The fact that there were moments when it was right to talk about his faith did not dilute from the importance of toughness when that was necessary to do the job effectively.

For Sophie as an HR Manager her toughness came from believing strongly in the messages from the Parable of the Talents. The employee who just wanted to hide their talent away was not going to be Employee of the Month. The thrust for her as a

Christian HR Manager was in a tough way to expect each individual to be developing their talents well.

The Christian manager is being tough and fair in their leadership of their staff, but is also clear where the boundaries are. Each member of staff has a life beyond the workplace. The Christian manager is wanting to ensure that the individual's energy is not so sapped that they cannot enjoy this life outside the workplace. Putting so much pressure on an individual that their energy is sucked dry is not acceptable in the long term and even in the short term is only tolerable in exceptional circumstances.

Sometimes the Christian manager will be saying to HR or their senior managers that certain practices need to be altered because of unfairness. Tough feedback is a reasonable expectation. Gus O'Donnell, the Head of the Civil Service, talks of feedback as the most precious gift you can give anyone. The Christian manager should not be afraid of feedback that is thoughtful, measured and purposeful.

Where does forgiveness fit in?

Jesus said to his disciples that they should forgive not 7 times but 7x70 times. What is the relevance of this to a manager with a remit to deliver. Do you forgive the police sergeant who is not doing his job effectively and not getting a grip on crime locally. Forgiving the police sergeant may mean an old lady in his patch is mugged: if he had done his job properly then she might not have been mugged.

Forgiveness as a manager is important. Individuals need the opportunity to test out different approaches. They must be allowed to fail in order to succeed later. But forgiveness as a manager does depend on a willingness to improve performance. I would not be 'loving my neighbour' if I kept forgiving the police sergeant, who showed no will to improve his performance. In my view forgiveness as a manager is vital but needs to be matched by a willingness to improve performance. Or am I wrong in this perspective? Balancing 'forgiveness' and 'loving my neighbour' is one of the delightful challenges Jesus gave his followers.

Where does fairness fit in?

Can I return to the illustration I gave earlier on about the balance of fairness? We can be so preoccupied with one individual that we fail to see the knock-on effects on others. The decisions are not straightforward:

- Is it fairer to promote a loyal employee when going to the market may produce someone who will do a better quality job?
- Is it fairer to invest in the new recruit with a long career ahead, or someone close to retirement who needs to be encouraged?
- Do we sense that sometimes we will be more tough on some people than others because we are influenced by how much we like them?

Effective toughness as a manager involves clarity and compassion in equal measure. Clarity is about utter objectivity in the way we view people and situations. Compassion is about being able to sit inside somebody else's shoes and see issues from their perspective.

Managing necessary staff reductions

How would you face a situation where you are asked to reduce the number of your staff by 20%? Running a mile is not an acceptable answer! One approach to your management responsibilities in this situation would be:

- to be clear what the reasons for the decision are;
- to know what help is going to be available to those people being made redundant;
- to be clear what the next steps are;
- to communicate the decision and next steps in an open, honest and fair way;
- to provide time to have conversations with affected people;
- to listen but not to be unduly swayed by special pleading as this will then be unfair to other people;
- to maintain strict objectivity in the taking forward of the decision;

- to be compassionate and caring for those directly affected shown in the time and support you are able to provide for them;
- to balance your responsibilities effectively to both the people who are staying and those who are going.

Being part of any organisation and having an important influence within it demands a toughness of mind and action. We cannot avoid tough decisions. What is crucial is how we take them forward and whether we are able to do so in a way that sits easily with our faith and perspective. Loving our neighbour as ourselves demands a personal toughness in relationship to ourselves before we can legitimately be tough in relation to others. But we should not shy away from being tough. We are not called to court popularity but to bring the love and values of Jesus into all our dealings as a manager.

There is a marked difference in how tough we can be working with volunteers as with employees. The volunteer can just walk away. With the employee there is more of a mutual obligation and a financial accountability. But a lot of the same principles apply about the need for clarity and compassion.

Drawing on our personal experience

Can I draw on two strands of my own personal experience? Firstly from my work as a Director General within Government and secondly as an executive coach. In a succession of different jobs within Government I think that I was tough on myself, pretty tough in relation to the people with whom I dealt, variable in terms of toughness in my use of time, but I was not always as tough as I should have been in relation to some of the people who worked for me. I deliberately gave people the benefit of the doubt sometimes, but, in retrospect, that was not always in their interest or my interest. I should sometimes have been harder for people's own good.

As an executive coach I find that one of the key things I am doing is encouraging individuals to have the courage of their convictions in order to be able to make tough decisions. I see some situations where an individual's first inclination is to move away from a tough decision when it needs to be tackled. It is much easier for the

independent observer to see the importance of clear action. To someone participating in the drama as a key player toughness may not come as easily. Hence for me the value of the executive coach, but I would say that because of my profession! However for any Christian in a tough management situation, having somebody to talk to outside that situation be it a mentor, a coach, a friend or a spiritual director can help bring that objectivity which will enable tough decisions to be taken in a way that is in everyone's best interests.

Walking humbly

Can I bring another dimension into this discussion, with thanks to my colleague Robin Linnecar who prompted this line of thought. We are encouraged in the biblical text to, 'seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God'. 'Seek justice' (i.e. being tough) sits alongside 'loving mercy' (i.e. forgiveness). But it also sits alongside 'walking humbly with your God' (i.e. humility).

As Christians we are under God's authority. God is tough on us his children. He purifies with fire (I Peter) but he will not test us beyond whatever we are able to bear (I Corinthians). God gives us hope where there is darkness. There are parallels here, as a Christian manager we may sometimes need to purify with fire but never to the point where our staff are tested beyond where they are able to bear. We can only do this in an understanding and compassionate way if we know our staff's skills, abilities and emotional make up well.

Conclusion

Toughness is not of itself a good or an evil. It is how it is used and the context in which it is applied. Toughness is normally going to be a virtue and only occasionally a vice. If toughness borders on the foolhardy it may be time to think again. But toughness can sometimes be unpopular but influential nonetheless.

Can I conclude with some practical questions for you to reflect on:

1. In what ways was Jesus a tough manager: how did he balance clarity and compassion?
2. What two lessons do you draw from the experience of Jesus as a tough manager that are relevant for you?
3. Where does forgiveness fit in? How often should you forgive someone who is letting themselves and their colleagues down?
4. How does fairness apply in the way you make tough decisions?
5. What tough decisions do you have to make: how are you going to tackle them?
6. Can you be tough and tender, clear and compassionate at the same time?
7. What is the relevance for you of the injunction as a manager to, 'seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God'?

I hope these thoughts will enable your reflection on how best to make tough decisions and not to shy away from tough circumstances. I hope it also demonstrates that the example of Jesus is highly relevant. 'Loving our neighbour as ourselves' is a powerful commandment resonating through what we do as leaders.

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June 2006