

Extracts from 9th CAGE Paper: Business Leadership Today – a Christian Perspective

by Mark McAllister - Managing Director, Acorn Oil & Gas Limited

...I have worked in the international oil and gas industry for a little over 25 years and for the last 4 of those I have been Managing Director of Acorn Oil & Gas, a company that I set up with some colleagues in 2001. Acorn initiated the first ever redevelopment of an abandoned North Sea oil field and has gone on to develop a niche for itself in the North Sea by making commercial oil and gas reserves that have been abandoned or neglected by other companies. In such a capital intensive industry we are a David among Goliaths. The responsibility of running a start-up company, in which the emotional and financial investment of my colleagues is so great, has caused me to think long and hard on the responsibilities of leadership and continually to refine my views on what makes an effective leader.

...Whatever aspect of our lives we look at from a Christian perspective, the answer is always Jesus. As Christians, we have not only the most amazing body of teaching in the history of the world to draw on but we also have a living example on whom we can model our lives. As Christians in leadership roles we have a responsibility to live out the example of Jesus as a model to those we lead. The apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to imitate him as he in turn imitated Christ.

But what is the relevance of the example of Jesus in the context of business leadership in the 21st century? How do we take that life lived 2,000 years ago in rural Palestine and apply it the City of London in the age of the internet?

The first of these characteristics that I would like us to consider is **integrity**. While Christianity may not be the only source of a system of values which has integrity at its heart, it does have the tremendous advantage of a living, breathing example of integrity in action in the person of Jesus. At the very start of his ministry, Jesus was tempted after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. ...He resisted the temptations, each time responding with the words of scripture to underpin his decision. I believe that it is vital for all Christian business leaders, as with Christians in all walks of life, to have a living knowledge of the Bible that gives them a sure footing when the difficult decisions need to be made. Time after time, the Pharisees attempted to catch Jesus out with their questions, hoping to find or to provoke an inconsistency in his life or in his message. Every time they failed because of the absolute consistency of his words and his actions. Through prayer, he was always ready to respond to the challenge. We too, should be prayerful in the workplace so that our moral compass remains pointed in the right direction.

In the modern business world, there is a greater need than ever for leaders of integrity. The pressures to compromise are all around. It may be the temptation to cut quality, or to stint on safety or environmental standards in order to remain price competitive. In so much of the developing world, payments are needed to agents and others in order to access projects and to overcome regulatory hurdles. Often there is a very fine line between genuine payment for services and bribery. ...The leader who can maintain integrity under pressure stands like a beacon and is an asset to his or her organisation, someone that other companies want to do business with and that people want to work for. Among the factors that people regularly list among the top ingredients in a satisfying job is having a boss who they can respect. When we behave with integrity others respond not only with respect but also with trust, and that is a

priceless commodity in any business. ...Trust does not appear as if by magic because of an outward bound course or raft building exercise. It is built brick by brick with each right choice that we make. It is reinforced every time our words and our actions align.

...At the heart of our lives, including our working lives is interaction with other people. Others created in the image of God. When we have **compassion**, we see everyone we deal with in our lives both inside and outside the workplace as whole human beings. ...The Christian in the workplace should be notable for his or her genuine concern for the wellbeing not only of their colleagues but also of their competitors. Some would argue that it is not possible to exercise compassion and yet be truly competitive in the marketplace. I have had the privilege for the last 16 years of being involved with an organisation called Christians in Sport. For many of those years, I travelled with the Great Britain Athletics team, leading Bible studies and providing pastoral support to the team... In sport, the cauldron of competition is even fiercer than in business. The difference between success and failure is more immediate and obvious. The emotional highs and lows are intense. Within this environment, I have encouraged Christian athletes like Jonathan Edwards as they have found a way of achieving their full potential in their event while being true to their faith. The answer that they have found comes in seeing their sport as the exercising of God-given abilities which sit alongside the requirement for demonstrating compassion not only for one's team mates but also for one's competitors. In Jonathan's case, this meant posting one of the greatest world records in the history of athletics whilst also finding the time to support and encourage younger rivals who might one day claim that world record themselves. This attitude is just as applicable if we are to realise our full potential as business leaders. If we can only climb the slippery pole of advancement by standing on the heads of those we pass on the way up, then no matter how high we climb we shall never know the satisfaction of being everything we were meant to be in Christ.

.Jesus turned the very concept of leadership on its head. He demonstrated his revolutionary attitude to leadership graphically by washing his disciples' feet. But this was no empty gesture. The whole of his ministry was defined by leadership through service. In his own words: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve". Paul wrote to the Philippians that "our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who...took the very form of a servant". It is so easy to become seduced by the trappings of success as we progress in the world of business. In some organisations, joining the Executive management team or the Board of Directors or becoming a partner can feel like being a minor member of the royal family with all the accompanying perks and privileges. It is easy to be fooled into thinking that we are somehow better and more deserving people than those below us in the organisation. Often it seems that more time, effort and creativity goes to into designing the Executive long-term incentive plan than in building the business. When we read of yet another controversy over Executive pay, the words of the Jesus that "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them" seem to have an oddly familiar ring. And yet true leadership brings more responsibilities than rights.

But what is **servant leadership**? It was the American management consultant, Robert K Greenleaf, who brought the expression Servant Leadership to popularity in the modern business world in 1970...Greenleaf's description of servant leaders are those who:

- devote themselves to serving the needs of organisation members.
- focus on meeting the needs of those they lead.

- develop employees to bring out the best in them.
- coach others and encourage their self expression.
- facilitate personal growth in all who work with them.
- listen and build a sense of community.

I think this description is good as far as it goes, but does it represent the full picture of leadership as personified by Jesus? ...One recent critic of the Servant Leadership model wrote that, rather than follow Greenleaf's template, leaders ought to:

- stand out from the crowd
- do the unexpected
- challenge the status quo - strive to find new directions, popular or otherwise
- focus on achievement - getting somewhere new first
- are self-absorbed in their dedication to achievement
- make others uncomfortable by rejecting the familiar

...This brings us to the final characteristic of Jesus' ministry that I would like us to consider, which is his **clarity of purpose**. There is an episode recorded in Mark's gospel in which Jesus had made great impact teaching and healing in Capernaum. Very early the next morning he went off alone to pray. The disciples came to find him in the hope that he would stay in the town and continue to do more of the same. Yet Jesus knew that he had to move on to other towns and villages. His clear sense of purpose, based on his knowledge of scripture and fine tuned by hours of prayer kept him focussed on his long term aim. It is often the small, intermediate successes that we have along the way that stop us from pressing on to achieve all that we are able. Jesus knew what he was on earth for and was unswerving in his commitment to fulfil his mission completely...

...As Christians, if we are to lead an organisation that is successful in a global market place then we must go at it wholeheartedly clear in the knowledge that what we are doing is a positive contribution to the world in which we live....

We have looked at just a few of the elements that characterised the leadership model of Jesus: **integrity, compassion, servant leadership and clarity of purpose**. There are many others that we could add to the list. I believe that the more we consider the model of Jesus in leadership, the more we can find to help us establish a leadership style for ourselves that not only delivers results but also is beneficial to those we lead and enables us to develop as people. As we have noted, we have tremendous resources in the Bible and in prayer to keep us on track in a world of shifting values and changing fashions. We have another resource to – the Holy Spirit. We do not leave him behind in the company car park or on the 7:58 to Waterloo. He can be with us throughout the working day and he is not subject to the European Working Time Directive. We need to continually watchful if we are always to lead with integrity and compassion and it is the Holy Spirit who prompts us and leads us closer to the example of Jesus.

...