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BORROWING FROM BUSINESS: WHY BUSINESS THINKING IS NOT THE ANSWER



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

We must reject the idea that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become more like a business. Most businesses fall somewhere between mediocre and good. But there is a lot we can learn from business leaders about what it looks like to pursue greatness, to serve with excellence. We don't learn principles of organizational development and leadership from corporate circles so we can become more like businesses. We learn from these sources to pursue greatness, to do kingdom work with excellence so with God's help we can accelerate the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Few business authors have earned a wider audience among church and mission leaders than Jim Collins. His book *Good to Great* has generated thousands of conversations about the hedgehog and liberated leaders who will never light up a room with their personality but can focus with passion and energy on the unique combination of personal humility and professional will that mark Level 5 leadership. Given the platform for influence Jim Collins carved out in ministry circles, it is interesting that the subtitle to the monograph for the social sectors, written as a companion to *Good to Great*, is: *Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*.



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Here are a few sentences from the opening chapter of that monograph: “We must reject the idea—well intentioned but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become ‘more like a business.’ Most businesses...fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great. When you compare great companies with good ones, many widely practiced business norms turn out to correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, then, why would we want to import the practices of mediocrity into the social sectors?”²⁶

I find this perspective from one of the most widely quoted business authors in the ministry world very helpful. I’m passionate about organizational development and that produces a self-directed motivation to learn more about it. Though I don’t have hard data on this, I suspect there are probably 100 books written about organizational development by business leaders for every one written by a ministry leader. So it is inevitable as I follow my passion I’m going to read more management books than ministry books about organizational development. But not because I want ministries to become more like businesses. I want them to pursue greatness, to do kingdom work better and with excellence so that with God’s help we can accelerate the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

In the words of Jim Collins, business thinking is not the answer, but there is a lot we can learn from business leaders about what it looks like to pursue greatness, to serve with excellence. Then why are some church and mission leaders reluctant to engage with business and management literature? I’m sure there are a number of reasons but I want to highlight two and they sound more pejorative than I mean for them to be: arrogance and ignorance.

To reject an idea, principle or practice simply because it originated in the world of business is the same as saying, “You don’t have anything to teach me or I’m not willing to learn from you.” That’s arrogant. It is like placing a bouncer at the doorway of your mind checking the status and credentials of people with ideas saying, “I’ll learn from you and you but not you.” Pride draws artificial circles around opportunities to learn and unnecessarily limits growth.

On the other side of arrogance is ignorance, where we don't completely reject ideas based on where they originated but refuse to consider them because we simply don't know how to eat the proverbial fish and spit out the bones. Few leaders would ever admit to this lack of knowledge or understanding (the definition of ignorance) but functionally that's where you are if you don't have the maturity to find principles of greatness in the world of business that can help you grow personally and professionally.

Four Questions that Filter our Learning

I read widely and engage with ideas from a variety of sources, including business and management, not because I want to turn our ministry into a business but because I want to discipline myself and the organization I lead to do everything better next time, which is at the heart of greatness. But I recognize not every principle or practice I encounter can be ported into our context "as is" and some won't work at all. While there is nothing all that special about the questions I use to filter what I'm learning I'm sharing them here for illustrative purposes. You may have a list of your own, but never moved it from the level of intuition to something you could readily articulate, which by itself would be a good exercise.

Is This Principle or Practice Unbiblical?

As Christ-followers the Bible is the obvious and unchanging benchmark. But I want to make two important follow-up comments. First, there is an important distinction between unbiblical and extra-biblical. The fact something is not in the Bible doesn't make it unbiblical. That may seem obvious but the push back I hear from some church and mission leaders is often rooted in confusion over this important point. I wrote the vlog script that has morphed into this chapter less than a month after Christmas. I suspect most of the people reading this annually display a Christmas tree in your home; many of you expect to have one in your church as part of the festivities of the holiday season. We all know the Christmas tree is entirely extra-biblical. And yet we have found ways to integrate it into our celebration, hopefully without undermining our focus on the advent of Jesus. I've learned how to do the same thing with principles of leadership and organizational development.

Second, very little of what is being taught in business schools or written about in management literature is patently unbiblical. And there is an obvious reason. Principles and practices that violate scripture don't work over the long haul. Even business leaders who have no room for God are a very pragmatic breed and if something doesn't work they stop doing it. Of course there are lots of examples of greed, deception and self-aggrandizement in the world of business. But those ERON like examples eventually become case studies reinforcing what we already know: you can't violate God's principles indefinitely without paying a hefty price.

Will This Principle or Practice Contradict My Values?

The values I'm referencing here are not primarily the core values of the church or organization that are listed on your web site or printed in your brochure. I'm more focused on the personal values that shape an individual leader's philosophy of ministry. Every leader is guided by some set of values at this level but very few can readily articulate them, which means you can't use them on purpose as a learning filter. The more ambiguity a leader has about the core values that serve as a foundation for his or her philosophy of ministry the more uncertainty that leader will have in applying principles or practices that come from outside sources.

There are three fundamental value questions that every leader needs to explicitly answer before you can readily filter what you are learning from outside sources. What values guide you in the process of gaining and using influence? What values guide you in making decisions? What values guide you in evaluating progress or measuring success? Leaders who know the answer to these critical value questions that shape our philosophy of leadership and ministry will find it much easier to sort through the principles and practices they glean from business and management thought leaders.

Does This Principle or Practice Fit Within Our Context and Culture?

Some ideas, though not unbiblical or contradictory to core values, may be difficult to implement because they are dissonant with the culture of the organization or the context for ministry. Wise leaders recognize a good idea at the wrong time or place is a bad idea. Some aspects of your organizational

culture, “how we do things around here,” could make it difficult to implement an otherwise good idea. It might be necessary to work on reshaping the culture before implementing the new practice.

Can We Implement This Principle Or Practice With Excellence?

If the underlying desire driving our learning journey is to pursue “greatness” by doing whatever we do even better next time, it doesn’t make any sense to import a new idea, regardless of the source, that you can’t deliver with excellence. One leader put it like this, “Never settle for virtuous mediocrity.”²⁷

Development Verses Dependency

The most legitimate concern I hear raised about leaders who passionately chase greatness by trying to pursue excellence in ministry, is the emphasis on development will somehow undermine our sense of dependence on God. The fear is we’ll try to do good works with human effort, embracing the powerboat metaphor over the sailboat.²⁸ I readily admit that’s a legitimate concern and we need to guard against it. What I reject is the unstated assumption that people who aren’t passionate about planning and strategy are somehow insulated from this temptation. In my experience, leaders with big dreams are actually more inclined to recognize the foolishness of attempting to pursue them without God’s help and people who never attempt great things for God are perhaps even more vulnerable to relying on earthly resources. After all, you don’t need a miracle to paint the church bathroom.

I believe what we need is a fresh dose of humbition. While that word might be new to you, I think you can guess it is the combination of humility and ambition. Humbitious leaders want to do something significant for a great God; they are committed to a lifetime of learning and growing without limiting the sources of information. But they readily acknowledge whatever fruit comes from their service is the result of the power of God and the help of others. In the words of Jane Harper, “We notice that by far the lion’s share of world-changing luminaries are humble people. They focus on the work, not themselves. They seek success—they are ambitious—but they are humbled when it arrives...So be ambitious. Be a leader. But do not belittle others in [the] pursuit of your ambitions. Raise them up instead. The biggest leader is the one washing the feet of others.”²⁹

I think Jane got it right. And by the way, she is a thirty-year veteran of IBM, who borrowed the term humbition from researchers at Bell Labs. I think it's a biblical concept, one that resonates with my core values and should fit in any organizational culture. So I'm going to work on implementing it with excellence. Maybe you should too.

In conclusion, here are a few questions worth considering. Is your organizational culture more vulnerable to the limiting factors of arrogance or ignorance when it comes to borrowing from business? Which of the three value questions most needs an explicit response? What questions do you use to filter outside ideas?

NOTES

²⁶ Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (Harper Collins, 2005), page 1

²⁷ I first heard this phrase from Scott Fehrenbacher at a CEO Dialogue.

²⁸ I was introduced to this helpful metaphor by Alex Arejo, who has written at least one article fleshing out his ideas.

²⁹ William C. Taylor, *Practically Radical* (HarperCollins e-books, 2011), Kindle location 3451

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