

Kingdom of God at Work

In 1986, Dave Browne joined LensCrafters. At that time, it was a nascent company focused on becoming the world's largest chain of super-optical retail stores. Shortly after joining the company, Dave was promoted to second in command. Then in 1989, he became CEO when the company had sixty stores.

During the early 1990s, the management style that most CEOs revered was epitomized by "Chain Saw" Al Dunlap. The nickname provides a hint of the management style. Dave characterized the approach as management by "MBA standards". Key characteristics of managers who adopt this style are: hard-driving, aloof, by-the-numbers, rigid accountable, and a long trail of bodies.

The vision of the company was to become the largest retail optical chain in the world. If success is measured by the numbers, Dave's management style was working. The company grew both the top line and bottom line. In the early 90s, LensCrafters reached its goal. It became the largest retail optical chain in the world. This begged the question, what's next? The company had no vision beyond being the biggest. Consequently, the company moved into an internal crisis rooted in a lack of an enduring purpose.

An enduring purpose is an unchanging reason for being that transcends people, products, time, and technology. It is a vision that is so big that it can never be achieved. For example, Merck's enduring purpose is to *eradicate diseases*. As far as we can see, disease will never be eradicated; therefore, as an enduring purpose, *eradicating diseases* will endure. Merck's specific mission at any point in time may change, but Merck's vision or enduring purpose is unchangeable.

LensCrafters did not have an enduring purpose. It only had short term vision and enjoyed, at least outwardly, short-term success. Now Dave led the largest retail optical chain in the world but had no vision for the future other than carry on. But ever worse, he was miserable, and his workers were miserable. His management style was producing good and bad fruit. The numbers were good, but the morale was bad. What was Dave to do with a company that, to the outside world, look like a sterling success, but in reality, was moving toward disaster? It was a company without a solid foundation—a company built on sand not rock. Dave knew that when the storm came, LensCrafters would be blown away.

Dave, a Christian, was a partial dualist.¹ He believed that faith and spiritual issues were personal, family, and church matters. Business and civil government, however, were different, these jurisdictions operated largely by secular principles, at least so he thought. For a partial dualist like Dave, Christianity in business was limited to evangelism and ethics. The management principles for running business were defined by people like "Chain Saw" Al whose management philosophy was characterized as management by intimidation.

During the time of Dave's internal struggle, he forced himself to attend a men's Bible study weekend. Listening to the drone of the teachers nearly put him to sleep as the teacher articulated minute details of the New Testament Greek text. Finally, he went into the woods for a half-day to pray. During this protracted time, he had an epiphany. His Bible fell open to Matthew 20, which reads in part:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right

or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
Matthew 20:20–28 [NIV]

With illumination that only the Holy Spirit can provide, Dave was convicted that his management style had to change. Christianity applied to business was more than evangelism and ethics. For the first time, he realized that the Bible was relevant, indeed normative, to managing business. He could no longer lead his company by intimidation; instead he must lead by serving.

As wonderful as this revelation was, there was more. In the subsequent verses, he found the enduring purpose that his company so desperately needed.

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight." Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.
Matthew 20:29–34 [NIV]

What he saw was that sight was gift. One of the most common maladies that Jesus healed was blindness. What a gift sight was and is to the recipients of his healing grace and mercy. Dave, now full of conviction and joy, knew that LensCrafters must have a higher purpose. That higher purpose was to give people the gift of sight.

The weekend Bible study that he so reluctantly attended, became a turning point in Dave's life. Casting off partial dualism, David embraced the reality that the source for the philosophy, values, and principles that he must embrace in managing LensCrafters must be the Bible. The seminal practice must be servant leadership. And the enduring purpose of the company was serve as God's instrument to mediate the grace of sight.

As good as all of this may sound, there was still a problem. LensCrafters was a public company that didn't look like it was broken, so why make changes, particularly dramatic changes in philosophy, values, and principles? Furthermore, Dave was the CEO who had to report to a board and shareholders. Would the board and the shareholders allow him to make this wholesale change? What would it look like? And he couldn't do it without the support from his management team? How was he to sell them on his radical approach?

Dave knew that there was great risk in seeking to make these changes, but he also knew that he couldn't live anymore the way he lived in the past. He had a new understanding of the relevance of God and the Bible to business. Despite the apparent success of his company, he knew that the foundation was flawed. His old way of doing business was not going to work, long term. Therefore, he determined that he had to change, and the company had to change. This was the right course. If he was going to fail; he would fail by following his convictions.

Dave's experience was similar to Peter walking on water in the following story.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified.

"It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Matthew 14:25–33 (NIV)

Jesus identified himself to the disciples during a storm. Peter decided to put out a fleece. He asked the Lord to command him to walk on the water knowing that if the Lord commands it, there would be provision. Imagine Peter's courage to take that first step. The boat offered apparent safety. Most of us will take apparent safety over trying to do what looks impossible—walking on water in the midst of a storm. Indeed, such a step would be fool hearty except that Peter was commanded to do it.

Just like Peter, Dave Browne received a command from the Lord that day in the woods. He was given an enduring purpose for the company and a directive to operate by Biblical principles. He had to take a risk and step out of the boat. Dave courageously embraced the reality of bringing his company into alignment with the Bible. Like Peter, he didn't know if he would succeed, but he knew that if God commanded it, there would be provision. This did not guarantee success as we define success. There was no way to know if his senior management would buy-in to operating by Biblical principles much less the company's employees, board, and shareholders. By human standards, Dave took a big risk. But in reality, his ship (i.e., company) was sinking, just like the disciples' boat. Like Peter, Dave reached for the life raft, that is, the Lord. There was really no choice, but seldom do we see that reality.

Dave knew that his best strategy for making the changes was to sell senior management on his approach. The shareholders and board were only concerned with results. Means and methods were not their purview; hence, Dave knew the key was senior management and then the employees.

The metamorphosis of LensCrafters began by Dave calling a strategic planning meeting with his senior leaders. During this time, he articulated his new enduring purpose, namely, *vision is a gift of God, not just a pair of glasses*. This launched a prolonged discussion that ultimately led to the management team adopting Dave's new enduring purpose. He then shared his conviction that the Bible was to be the handbook for management of the company. However, the company would still be run as a meritocracy, and religion was not going to be forced on anyone. The management team embraced the new philosophy, values, and principles based on the Bible.

Next the management team had to sell the employees on the value of the new philosophy, values, and principles. The team had to wrestle with what servant leadership looked like in practice. It was clear to Dave that work should be a place of enjoyment, not drudgery. So, he and his team sought input from the workers as to how to make work more enjoyable. Surprisingly, they discovered the key to a new and better culture was clearly defined boundaries—expectations and operating practices. In this environment, everyone would know what to expect and feel free to execute. The environment of Dave's prior management style was poorly defined and therefore whimsical and capricious making workers scared to step-out for fear of losing their jobs or being reprimanded. But now the management team would layout clear expectations and encourage the team to go for it. In fact, the workers were encouraged to view the company guidelines as minimum standards and to look for ways to exceed these standards.

To accomplish this, three biblically based practices were adopted:

clear agreements;
performance based compensation, and
emotional ownership.

A clear agreement was an issue of integrity. Policies, procedures, and expectations were clearly articulated in writing. Company guidelines were viewed as a minimum statement of best practices. Employees were expected to creatively exceed the minimums.

By directly tying compensation to performance, every employee could calculate his or her bonus at any time. There was no mystery or subjective component to the compensation plans. In truth, this was simply a corollary of the policy of clear agreements.

Dave used the principle *it is better to give than receive*² to inspire emotional ownership—the sense that each worker has a stake in helping the business be the best. This means going beyond just running a business to a perspective of helping society. Work was a place of worship. One of the best ways to worship was to give to others.³ Workers were encouraged to look for ways to give the gift of sight beyond what was done in the stores. Giving back to society created a sense of personal satisfaction—a healthy emotional response from workers that builds a bond with the company.

Dave stepped out of the boat and into the storm. Did it work? Yes, it worked very well. The company continued to grow and prosper. Its success drew the attention of a suitor that bought the company in 1995.

So, what does this mean for you? Are you willing to get out of the boat of dualism and embrace your destiny doing kingdom work in your work? It's a risk. God gave us a command to rule his physical creation.⁴ Will you embrace that command and manage your business to glorify God? Will you step out of the boat? Will you take a risk? Will you trust God to provide you a way as He did Dave Browne?

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, near the end of the movie Indy's father was shot. There was healing if Indy could get to the Holy Grail, but to do so he had to get through a series of obstacles. The last obstacle was a step of faith that looked like he was stepping into an abyss. He had to trust that, though he couldn't see how, that there will be a way to make it across. But he had to act on his faith and take the step.

This is what we must all do. Will we take that step of faith and believe that God values our work and wants us to glorify him by aligning our work with His philosophy, values, and principles? Will we submit to the authority of the Bible to define the norms of work? We will walk by faith at work? May the story of Dave Browne inspire us all to so live.

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July 2004

Information for this article came from "The Holy See", Business Reform Magazine, vol 3, no 4, pgs 20-23.

¹ Gerald R. Chester. Beyond Babel - with toc (Kindle Location 764). Kindle Edition.

² Acts 20:35

³ II Corinthians 8.

⁴ Genesis 1:26-28