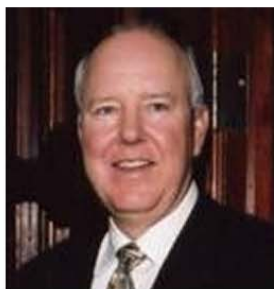


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Gleanings

by Gerald R. Chester, Ph.D.

Is There A Systemic Problem with American Businesses?



Several years ago I played in a charity golf tournament with an ex-professional football player. The gentleman played for the Dallas Cowboys prior to the time when football players got rich playing ball. So now in his fifties, he was hard at work as a vice president of sales and marketing for a chemical company.

As we traversed the golf course spraying golf balls in various directions, as most amateurs do, we discussed a variety of topics. He waxed eloquently about the decline of Christian values in our culture and where that was leading us. He speculated that within a century we would see the return of gladiator fights in which humans would die for sport. Certainly a disturbing thought, but the most interesting discussion centered on a question that I hear frequently. Noting that I was a management consultant, he asked if there was a common problem I see in most companies, and if so, what?

I responded in the affirmative. In every organization, both for-profit and non-profit, I see the same trend—people out of place. In fact, I have developed a standard dialogue that I use with clients. It begins with the question: How many people working for you are working at a high level? Another way to phrase the question is: If you were starting your business and knew that you had to be really good to succeed, what percentage of your current employees would you hire? The typical answer ranges from a few percent to more than 50 percent. This leads to further questions causing clients to think more precisely about their answers. Usually after a few minutes of dialogue, most clients conclude that they would keep approximately 10 percent of their employees. This means that the other 90 percent are mediocre workers at best.

Now the stage is set for more discussion. I ask clients to explain how they expect to deliver outstanding products and services, and all do, when 90 percent of their workers are mediocre or worse in performing their jobs? Usually this results in a moment of pause and reflection. They never have a good answer, which is not surprising. The real surprise, however, is that clients frequently don't want to dialogue further on this subject. Why is this? My sense is that such a discussion would lead clients to undesirable conclusions. Specifically, I find great resistance to the idea that people may be in the wrong positions, perhaps even in the wrong field.

Today in America, there are unspoken presuppositions about employment. First, it is bad to terminate people, except for egregious acts. And second, people are fungible, or interchangeable. Hence, many companies pride themselves on having never laid off anyone.

Both of these presuppositions are corollaries of a more fundamental assumption, namely, that there is no divine design and destiny inherent in people. If there is no divine design in the creation of people, there is no God. Employers are on their own, without divine help, to find the best workers. This presupposition is a common driving assumption for atheists who claim there is no purpose or destiny for human existence other than what each of us defines for ourselves.

For theists, a better assumption is that the God of Creation designed human beings with intent and purpose. A corollary to this presupposition is that our individual God-given talents are clues to our God-intended work assignments.

If this is true, then a better operating practice for managers is to proactively seek to help people find the work God created them to do. In so doing, it seems logical that people in their God-intended roles will perform with excellence because God is excellent and people, according to the Bible, are created in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26). So excellent performance is a way to validate that a person is doing what he or she is divinely called to do.

Interestingly, General Electric under Jack Welch's leadership adopted a practice that reflected a theistic assumption. GE held annual employee reviews and the bottom 10 percent of the workers, as measured by their performance, were dealt with and many times terminated. Jack opined that it would be false kindness to keep people who were not growing and prospering. (Jack Welch with John A. Byrne, *Jack Straight from the Gut*, Warner Business Books, 2001, p. 161.) Employees who were not growing and prospering were not contributing to the company's objective of delivering excellent products and services.

The reality is that Jack was counterculture to most managers. Instead of operating on an atheistic presupposition that there is no divine design in human creation, he adopted a theistic presupposition, though perhaps unwittingly, that valued individual growth, which was reflected by excellent work performance. The results speak for themselves. GE, under Jack's leadership, was a very profitable and highly admired company.

The systemic problem in American organizations today is the prevalence of an atheistic presupposition regarding the nature of people. Instead of seeking to find the people that God created to be part of the organization, most leaders and managers simply look for people to fill jobs. There is little prayer or earnest effort given to finding the right person, that is the God ordained person, for each job in the organization.

What would an organization look like that really embraced the theistic presupposition that God creates every person for a purpose, and that success is helping each worker find his or her God-ordained work? Do you think we might have more success stories like Jack Welch's?

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