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Integrating faith, ethics in business decision-making

Tom Gallagher | Jun. 11, 2010

(Pat Marrin)

The conflicts of interest between Wall Street investment banks and their clients, the unscrupulous mortgage lenders giving large sums of money to borrowers unable to repay the loans, a car company not immediately disclosing serious problems with its vehicles, a coal mine operating under dangerous conditions, and a state attorney general repeatedly misrepresenting the nature of his Vietnam service -- all represent a quick sampling of ethically challenged and sometimes illegal behavior occurring every day in the marketplace.

In recent times venerable companies have vanished overnight due to mysterious accounting ploys and hide-the-risk strategies that cratered balance sheets and company viability, causing immediate unemployment for thousands and a loss of billions of dollars.

Yes, unethical behavior creates serious consequences.

How can ethical decision-making based on the Christian tradition become integrated in the workplace?

One organization is attempting to address this aspiration. The Greenwich, Conn.-based Greenwich Leadership Forum provides a venue for business executives to explore how faith and religious principles can play an important role in their decision-making, while building and leading successful and ethically sound organizations.

?Several of us saw a need in the community and GLF came together almost spontaneously to address that need,? said Dick Murphy, the forum?s board chairman, who has held executive positions with CBS, Texaco and Control Data before starting a management consulting firm.

The Greenwich Leadership Forum was created in 2004 and is open to all. While based on Christian principles and biblical teachings, the forum welcomes those from any and all faith traditions or none at all.

It also helps that today it is led by the affable David Miller, an expert in ethics whose day job is director of Princeton University?s Faith & Work Initiative. He is also an associate research scholar and lecturer at the New Jersey university.

What makes Miller different is that he actually had a successful, international business career. He lived and worked in London for eight years, where he was a partner in a private equity firm that specialized in international investment management, corporate finance, and mergers and acquisitions. Before that Miller held executive positions with HSBC Group and IBM.

After his corporate experience, Miller entered academia, receiving his master of divinity and a doctorate in ethics from Princeton Theological Seminary.

?Faith matters to God and work matters to God,? said Miller. ?GLF is in the trenches helping people to get to a place where faith and ethics are integrated into their work life.?

How does the Greenwich Leadership Forum work?

The forum designs a yearly schedule of 10 gatherings at a local, non-church setting, where some 150 businesspeople gather at 6:30 a.m. for a light breakfast and a rich learning and sharing experience. Attendance is by word-of-mouth. Miller?s broad experience lends itself to landing top-flight speakers.

While not a membership organization, the forum has created a database of over 800 ?friends,? some of whom attend each month, others periodically, and still others are on the e-mail list for updates and news about the organization. Goodwill offerings are accepted at the breakfasts and funds raised from an annual dinner help underwrite the rest of the year?s activities.

Miller creates a hospitable, non-threatening, even fun atmosphere at the breakfasts. An impromptu prayer opens up the morning session. Miller then starts the meeting off by raising a Bible in the air with an issue of The Wall Street Journal folded inside the Bible, emphasizing which ?bible? takes primacy in life and in good business practices.

Prominent CEO-types are featured monthly speakers. Sitting in facing chairs, Miller orchestrates an Oprah Winfrey-style dialogue, probing how a CEO?s own faith journey guides frontline business decision-making. Part interactive seminar, attendees jump in with questions for the guest. Right after the closing prayer of gratitude at 8 a.m., dozens stay around to continue the discussion before heading off into the marketplace.

?Our sessions are uplifting and encouraging for businesspeople,? said Miller.

Some of the Catholic speakers have included Geoffrey Boisi, a former partner and dealmaker extraordinaire at Goldman, Sachs & Co. and underwriter and chairman of the National Leadership Roundtable on [Catholic] Church Management; Charles Millard, former director of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, which protects the retirement incomes of more than 44 million American workers in more than 29,000 private-sector defined benefit pension plans; and John Murphy, chairman and CEO of OppenheimerFunds Inc.

Millard, a father of nine, now runs Cardinal Advisors, a New York City-based consulting company that focuses on the needs of domestic and international pension plans and other financial institutions.

?The Holy Spirit does not just work on Sunday inside a church,? said Millard.

Millard points out that employed people spend a significant portion of their day at work. ?Hard work and faith create an intimate bond which gives glory to God,? he said. ?It is important that one?s work life is imbued with one?s faith.?

Millard is such a believer in the Greenwich Leadership Forum that he joined its board.

Is the forum successful?

Bob Lister, a local construction manager and developer, thinks so. ?The GLF process has been very successful, to the point where I refer to GLF as an ?incubator of introspection.? ?

While robust attendance and the growing database of friends provide an objective metric of success, Miller relies on the personal stories individuals share with him.

?There is a lot of loneliness and pain in the business world, whether it?s being laid off or a feeling of emptiness,? said Miller. ?Our work at GLF allows people to heal some of the pain.?

He added, ?Work is our calling and if it?s approached honorably, it is serving God?s kingdom and the common good.?

[Tom Gallagher writes for *NCR*?s regular Mission Management column. His e-mail address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online resources

Greenwich Leadership Forum

greenwichleadershipforum.org [2]

Faith & Work Initiative

faithandwork.princeton.edu [3]

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