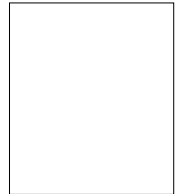


# Discerning Justice in the Workplace

*How We Need to Establish  
Caring Systems on the Job*

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*“People enter business as bright, well-educated, high energy people, full of expectations and a desire to make a difference. By the time they are 30, a few are on the fast track and the rest put in their time to do what matters to them on the weekend. They lose the commitment, the sense of mission, and the excitement with which they started their careers. We get...little of their energy and almost none of their spirit.”*

—Bill O'Brien, CEO, Hanover Insurance.

It would be wrong to totally blame the work environment when once passionate employees become passive ones. However, we can all think of exam-

It was Solomon's request for and reception of “discernment in administering justice” that catalyzed his prosperity (I Kings 3:11-13). Surely the people were motivated by seeing justice served and increased their productivity, which resulted in riches far beyond imagination for the entire kingdom. Conversely, selfishness and injustice by leadership can result in real poverty of all kinds.

Every worker begins a job with an expectation to succeed, but often over time loses the passion for the job. Yet it is seldom about why the employee changed, but rather, why the organization changed. The employee who started out with a sense of mission still has

months—that follow, the worker either finds the truth in the promise or, instead, finds disrespect, discouragement or favoritism.

## **God's People Must Reflect His Image**

The Bible emphasizes that God is love and just. Those who call themselves by his name must pursue his likeness enough to establish systems of justice and love in their workplace.

Injustice can be demonstrated in two ways: personnel action (reward or discipline) based on subjective feelings, and lack of action when an employee intentionally does wrong. On the other hand, some show their lack of esteem for others by demoting or removing someone without cause. Two examples come to my mind.

The president of a foundation that sends medical teams around the world stated he didn't have interest in examining documentation of illegal activities by his executive officers. Elsewhere, an emergency relief organization's president responded with disinterest to two concurring reports regarding a co-laborer's questionable activities.

Most would agree with the view of Albert Camus that Christianity has neglected fair treatment of its people in anticipation of happiness in the next world. If justice is so lacking in

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ples of managers who create clock-watchers from fast-trackers. Whether employees are inspired or discouraged by management depends to a large degree on whether they feel they're being treated justly. God pointed out to Abraham the correlation of just leadership and the attitude of his followers.

it, but now devotes the zeal elsewhere. It is not that the worker lost enthusiasm, it's that the organization lost its claim to it.

When the employee was hired, there was an implicit promise that the worker would be respected, encouraged and treated with justice. In the years—or

Christian ministry, consider how obedience in this area would benefit the kingdom of God.

### **Expectation of Justice**

If we teach the Biblical values of deference to authority, our employees have a strong expectation that submission will be handled responsibly. Research confirms that if the people in our organizations have conservative social attitudes and hold to the Protestant work ethic, their expectations are even stronger that management will administer justice. Thus, in order to retain key people, it's even more important for organizations to develop a response system that's just. Perhaps that's why God spoke to Moses so firmly about this issue and states that whoever withholds justice (at least to the foreigner, orphan and widow) is cursed.

Some Christian organizations appear to lack established strategies to ensure equity and demonstrated love. Furthermore, little has been published on the subject. We are called to begin the discussion of discerning justice in our workplace.

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### **Attrition of Valuable Laborers**

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). The point the Lord seems to be making here is the priceless nature of the workers. Today's materialism battles powerfully for our hearts through media and entertainment. Many workers come to our organizations willing to sacrifice for the mission but are deeply disappointed when they experience behavior not befitting a workplace that calls itself Christian.

"Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers . . ." (Matthew 9:39). Our employees were given to us as a gift from God by the prayers of faithful saints who hold our arms up in prayer. It's a great disservice to the Lord to take his blessings lightly or use them in indiscriminate ways that do not reflect his love and care.

A highly motivated employee has considerable emotional and physical investments in the organization, and the tasks to which he or she has been assigned. We must not change the status of our relationship based on something over which they have no control (e.g., your feelings). Otherwise, we will adversely affect their professionalism, as well as personally hurt them and their families.

A manager's moral compass will not direct his organization until it travels from concept to words of love and enforcement. When employees see the words of management actually enforced with equity, three things will occur: employees become encouraged, decreasing burnout and depression; ethical behavior is reinforced, improving the corporate witness to the community, and executives regain respect in the organization, decreasing moral issues and harmful turnover.

The cures provided by a functional justice system are not instantaneous, but develop gradually. Wounded employees must be given time to gain confidence in the system before they start acting more professionally.

### **Devaluation of the Laborer**

When we don't administer justice in love, we convey to God, board members, donors and others that we do not value the workers God has entrusted to

us. In Genesis 39 we find the story of Joseph and Potiphar. Joseph was accused of a crime and put in prison without a thorough investigation. Justice was not served. Potiphar could have saved himself and the country considerable struggles if he had handled the accusations correctly. Investigation could have ensured that Joseph's defense was heard, possibly preventing the imprisonment of an innocent man and forestalling the temporary loss of a valuable employee.

Often management too quickly puts credence in unfounded accusations by board members and/or other administrators, resulting in demoralizing a valuable employee. When management takes action before investigating thoroughly, it devalues the worker and true justice is not served in love. Conversely, the internal justice system of the United States military increases loyalty and integrity.

Lack of appreciation can also be conveyed in our selfishness or preoccupation with our daily responsibilities, while forgetting, at least momentarily, the value of our employees.

The Bible continually commands us to love one another as ourselves. Could we possibly do any better than this in demonstrating our love for our faithful employees? L'Etoile gives us good advice: "Justice forbids us to use slander or libel. Charity goes still further: it orders us to defend absent persons against slander or libel."

Coworkers expect us to create a safe environment that permits risk-taking and occasional errors but controls intentional misconduct. No amount of inspirational speeches will take the place of treating each and every employee with love as well as justice. The behavior you reward is the behavior you will receive.

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