

Work in a Professional Services Environment. The Specific Contribution of Women

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“A woman with adequate training should find the field of public life open to her [...] it is impossible to point out specific tasks that correspond to women alone [...] what is specific is not the task or position itself, but the way in which it is done. There are values which a woman more readily perceives and her specific contribution will often, therefore, change the whole approach to a problem, and can lead to the discovery of completely new approaches”¹.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá commented on the importance of the contribution women can make to public life due to their special attributes and particularly their sensitivity to perceive issues. Often these relate to the way in which people are treated in the workplace.

In male dominated professional work environments, women have a dual responsibility. Besides sharing with men the responsibility to provide a Christian service to society, due to their special attributes they have a responsibility to make the workplace more human.

¹ *Conversations*, 90.

1. BACKGROUND

For the past 20 years I have worked with PricewaterhouseCoopers, the last eight years as a partner in tax consulting. In the first instance therefore my experience relates to professional services firms which sell time — the time of employees (often referred to as human capital). The ability of the employee to sell time or to ‘charge’ that time to clients is one measure of the employee’s productive capacity. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, in reality profit is often the only measure.

In firms with global reach and global targets set in a relentless quest for ‘growth’ and profit, pressure to meet budgets often leads to — the utilisation of employees as units of productive capacity without due regard to the human and social cost, and an increasing trend to sacrifice quality in favor of quantity.

In the environment described it is important to consider ways in which the primacy of the person can be maintained and the value of work well done appreciated. The teachings of Blessed Josemaría and of the Church have allowed me to focus particularly on the human cost of the business operation. As an owner of the business I have had the opportunity to work with my staff and with others connected with me through other roles (such as personnel partner) to ensure that the persons are given primacy and that their work retains its noble value.

Interestingly, I have observed that businesses that focus beyond profit and take into account the needs of all stakeholder groups, particularly staff, build more successful and sustainable businesses. This observation has been made elsewhere and as Leanne Holdsworth comments in her book *A New Generation of Business Leaders*².

“Business leaders are starting to understand the correlation between the financial success of their business and fundamental respect for the human spirit of staff [...] they are replacing this soullessness with work environments where people can safely take their humanity to the office instead of leaving it at home”.

Most recently I have been appointed to the role of Principal of Kenvale College of Tourism and Hospitality Management (an apostolic enterprise whose formative activity is entrusted to Opus Dei). In this role I have had the opportunity of putting into practice in a different environment the skills that I have devel-

² L. HOLDSWORTH, *A New Generation of Business Leaders*, Holdsworth Press New Zealand, p. xi.

oped from my work in the professional services firm. Kenvale College operates like a small business whose staff are united by an ideal inspired by Blessed Josemaría. The environment of the College has the potential to influence not only the students but also the teachers and people from the Hospitality Industry that come in contact with it. The example given by the College in humanizing the workplace is vital because its influence transcends it.

In both types of business environments justice and charity demand that the first priority be to the welfare of each person within it. This ensures that the overall goals of the business and the day to day concerns of it do not usurp the needs of the person.

Looking back on my career I can see how the teachings of Blessed Josemaría have influenced me and helped me improve my ability to see and deal with human issues.

For example, the news at work of my participation in service projects inspired by Blessed Josemaría in Australia and overseas allowed people to see that I was a person who was willing to express my humanity and show sensitivity to the needs of others. Consequently I was seen as a person who could be approached with confidence to deal with human issues. Staff felt comfortable in raising with me issues impacting on them in the workplace and in their personal life. I was able to strike up friendships with colleagues and encourage them to broaden their horizons beyond the immediacies of the office and to introduce them to a Christian way of life.

From a professional viewpoint I had always attempted to follow the teachings of Blessed Josemaría—to do my work well and to the best of my ability. I was fortunate to be awarded the national title of Young Accountant of the Year, an award made in recognition of my professional achievements and contributions to the community through my profession. This award assisted with enhancing my professional reputation which in turn allowed me to be approached by others and to be entrusted with the responsibility of dealing with many human issues.

My involvement in identifying and resolving these issues gave me the opportunity to attempt to practice virtues and doing so has led to developing strong friendships with staff and Colleagues who appreciate the clear criteria I can contribute to the decision making process.

Sometimes the impact of one's attempts to do what is right and to lead by example goes way beyond what one would expect. For example, I was discussing the acceptance of a financial engagement with some of my partners and I clearly expressed my concern about the acceptance of the engagement due to the immoral activities with which that company was involved. In doing so I used as my basis point 400 from *The Way* which is vivid in its imagery:

“What crimes are committed in the name of justice! If you were a dealer in firearms and someone offered to buy a gun from you, so that he might use the weapon to kill your mother, would you sell it to him? — Yet, wasn’t he ready to pay you a just price for it?”³.

The financial engagement was refused and many years later one of my partners cited in a public forum the influence that the discussion had had on him.

2. EXAMPLES TO BE DISCUSSED IN WORKSHOP

Through my experience I have pinpointed a number of practical ways in which the primacy of the person can be achieved. For the purposes of this workshop I will focus on three points :

- the specific contribution of women — their impact on humanizing the workplace and creating an environment conducive to human development;
- the woman’s contribution in the personal and professional development of people, and
- work well done.

3. THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN — HUMANIZING THE WORKPLACE TO FACILITATE DEVELOPMENT

As a generalization we could say that until relatively recently businesses used pyramid structures for the organization and management of people. The term intellectual capital was often used to describe the resources available to a business. Knowledge supposedly resided in management.

Due to the enhanced qualifications and increased specialization of labour (as occurs in a very pronounced way in a professional services firm) there has been a need to recognize that the creative and productive output of an organization could best be harnessed using the talents of many rather than the few who held key positions and others who were hired to be managed to produce. The pyramid structure has been increasingly made redundant in favor of a team based approach. The ‘pyramid’ has given way to the ‘pancake’. Information retained for power has given way to ‘knowledge sharing’. ‘Managers’ have given way to ‘leaders’, and ‘human capital’ has become the term more commonly used now to

³ *The Way*, 400.

describe an organization's resources. It reflects an increasing recognition of the worth of people to an organization and in many cases an attempt to recognize that there is a human side to the workforce that needs to be nurtured.

In this newer team based environment women can play many unique roles. To be a leader you must be able to express your humanity, for example, your vulnerability, contradictions in life, what makes you happy⁴. "Leadership is a force which persists in honouring the sacredness of a person in all ways — and it uses faith, hope and love as its strategies and tools"⁵. Women have a natural ability to express their humanity and to contribute to an atmosphere that allows others to do so. A woman is particularly adept at using her heart as well as her head and in doing so will take into account the needs of the people around her when making demands in the workplace.

In my own experience, I can recall an example where my staff were assisting me with meeting an important deadline which required them to work at a clients premises for long hours for an extended time. At one point seeing how tired they were I sent them all home — and risked missing the deadline. However, the staff returned refreshed the next day and would do anything I asked of them because I had showed that I respected them and that I cared. The work was completed on time.

Women have natural tendencies arising from their feminine qualities (gentleness, warmth, intuition) enabling them to focus on the general well being of employees and to attend to their needs. This is very important as people need to feel that they are treated as human beings, that they are appreciated and cared for. People need to feel not only that their efforts are recognized but that their personal concerns are taken into account. People who are well treated feel part of the organisation and contribute to overall goals. "If an individual's needs are being met to a higher level, then the performance of the organization increases"⁶.

People operate at their best when they are communicated with — feel informed and listened to. Women are particularly good at communication and ensuring that contributions from staff members are welcomed. With intuition and their deeper emotional lives women listen well to the spoken and unspoken word and can read the feelings and emotions of people from their expressions and behaviour. Good listening and information and knowledge sharing encourages people to feel that they belong to a fair and proactive workplace where they can give of their best. The opposite is also true— those who do not feel treated

⁴ Melissa Clark-Reynolds, consultant Southern Cross Healthcare.

⁵ G. JACKSON, The Divine spark inside each of us, *A New Generation of Business Leaders*, p. 49.

⁶ Greg Bourne, Regional president, BP Amoco, Australia and New Zealand.

fairly (by not being listened to or communicated with) tend to keep the best ideas to themselves. Often these ideas go with those employees when they leave disheartened.

A woman's 'softer' manner can be valuable in the workplace. In fact the mere presence of women has a positive influence in the language and behaviour at the workplace. Furthermore, decisions that need to be made out of justice end up being solved with the required charity where women are involved. Women will more frequently be assigned to soften relations when tensions develop, and who would deny the positive influence of women in the improvement of manners, décor and general tone of the work place.

In this regard, through my role at Kenvale College I have learned to appreciate the contribution that hospitality plays in the workplace. It makes it simply more hospitable. Students at Kenvale are taught to identify the needs of people around them and to give of themselves generously to meet those needs — to offer a small service, to provide a meal or a celebration, to smile. Our classroom teaching is reinforced by the way the staff live the same spirit of generosity in the College when they deal with students and each other on a day to day basis.

These skills of genuine service are not uniquely confined to hospitality establishments and can and should be used in any environment including the family home and in particular in the workplace. Blessed Josemaría often said that hospitality is a way of making society more human and business is a large part of that society.

Staff at Kenvale include a small group of full time staff and a much larger group of staff who work in the Hospitality industry and teach at the College part time. The environment at the College which is inspired by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, attempts to be very human and reflects in practice the theory that is taught in the classroom. This has a positive impact on the teaching staff.

For example, one teacher recently lost her father and that teacher was impressed by the support offered to her at that difficult time. Another teacher has been exposed to an attitude to life not seen elsewhere after coming into contact with a staff member with a large family. That staff member now has an openness to life not previously considered.

The impact of the College is keenly felt when it is apparent that the teachings of the College and in particular the Christian virtues are lived openly by its staff. This encourages the teachers to live a 'unity of life' by making an effort to put into practice themselves what they teach in the classroom — knowing that personal example has the greatest impact. Many of our students train in workplaces that have staff who put into practice the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. These students see straight away that what they are taught in the classroom is put into practice in the workplace. This encourages the students to exercise virtues in

the workplace and more importantly to want to take them into any environment they move into whether this be the family home or other business.

4. THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN — DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF THE PERSON

“By helping their people develop, organizations can become not just better places to work, but more profitable and efficient too [...] confident and committed workers, all displaying leadership are what makes companies thrive”.
Meredith Osmond, Director Tall Poppies Consulting.

In the professional services firm the majority of the employees have similar levels and types of tertiary qualifications and there is a very clear and defined career development path. But the tendency of the organization to focus on profitability in preference to other goals may mean that the needs of the person are not met making the employees feel used.

Dedication to the needs of the person from the outset can effect the performance and the overall development of a person. The need of induction of new employees is undeniable. Yet, I know of a case where the staff were too busy to answer questions and the pile of questions became too big for anyone to afford the time needed by a new employee. In the alternative situation a new employee was given a very intensive and personal induction. The person commenced happy and satisfied and with continual personal coaching gradually developed the capacities for the job. The employees development continues on an inclined plane.

In regard to this point of personal development, I find that a woman’s contribution is invaluable in:

- targeting people’s strengths and building on those strengths
- discovering the best roles for persons in teams
- facing personal issues and circumstances surrounding or affecting someone’s professional output

Women are particularly adept at goal settings and performance reviews that take into account the full human needs. There are so many things that affect people’s lives and these can be discussed in an informal way. Women are particularly good at personal conversation and have the capacity to bring out details that may help with solving personal problems that affect performance.

Goals set within this background can ensure that the person is developed to their full potential. Staff retention also increases where assistance is given with resolving personal issues that might otherwise severely disrupt an employee's work and development. Such disruption often causes employees to either leave voluntarily (for example, because of perceived embarrassment or shame if the issue is raised in the workplace) or be forced to leave because of unexplained poor performance.

Through direct coaching and by example, people learn the qualities needed to sanctify one's work: to work with order and to use time well, to plan one's days, to do those things that must be done first and, last but not least, to leave adequate time for family and social matters, study and rest.

However, personal coaching takes generosity on the part of coaches to give of their time to train others — and through planning structured development by attendance at courses or through arranging work experience to suit development needs. Again this takes generosity and fortitude as it requires others' needs to be put first — for them to be given time away from 'productive work' to study, for them to be given the opportunity to work on client engagements in preference to yourself and others so that their development needs can be met.

At Kenvale College in particular the development of students is facilitated through a one on one tutorial program. The program is unique in Hospitality schools in Australia because it is seen as expensive and requires the tutors' generosity. Students are coached on their academic studies, their workplace training, social and family environment issues and College life. The program facilitates continuous and immediate feedback for the students. Workplace supervisors also perform quarterly appraisals of students training and these are used to provide the students with feedback. Both processes allow staff to follow closely the progress of students to monitor performance, to foresee needs and to challenge them along their career path.

5. WORK WELL DONE

The teachings of Blessed Josemaría reinforce the redemptive nature of work and its transcendental value. In an environment where pressure is just to 'get the work out the door' this teaching when adopted makes the workplace more human and changes the attitude with which work is done. Staff follow example given in care for details and appreciation of the effort to do the work to the best of one's ability despite the temptation to do otherwise. Ultimately there is not a need to work more, as economic rationalism seems to demand, but to work better.

Where care is taken of the person, the person works well. In the field of hospitality for example we must insist that care be taken of the ‘back of the house’. It is common that, regarding ‘rank’, housekeeping and housekeepers are often perceived as the lowest in a hotel. However, without this backbone there would be no accommodation, in fact no Hotel — merely a restaurant. A prosperous business is one where the staff are taken care of, their role in the business truly valued and all facets — including the hotel’s housekeeping department — respected.