

Humanizing Work in a Multinational Corporation

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For most of my career I have worked as an international tax attorney for American multinational corporations. I am currently working for Exxon Mobil Corporation ('ExxonMobil') which was formed in 1999 upon the merger of Exxon Corporation and Mobil Corporation, the two largest U.S. oil companies. ExxonMobil is engaged in the business of exploration, production, refining and marketing of petroleum and petrochemicals worldwide. I am based in the company's headquarters for global refining and marketing operations in Fairfax, Virginia. I have worked with the staffs of local subsidiaries in many of the countries where the ExxonMobil group of companies does business. As an ExxonMobil employee, I have responsibilities to my fellow employees, our shareholders, customers, suppliers and partners, and the communities in which we operate. The following are some aspects of my professional work that reflect the influence of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría.

1. JOB ENRICHMENT

By far the largest portion of my time on the job is spent interacting with my fellow employees. The conviction that we are all children of God, which was instilled in me by Blessed Josemaría, has many applications in the workplace each day.

It is primarily expressed in treating each employee as a *person* worthy of dignity and respect. Given the reality of constant pressure from 'Wall Street' to

produce ever-greater profits, a sense of divine filiation helps one to bear in mind the *human* dimension of each employee, as well as the economic dimension.

Because human work, as Blessed Josemaría taught, is a sharing in God's creative power, man should be the *subject* of his work and not its *object*. A manager puts this principle into practice by insuring that each employee's job benefits the employee and permits him or her to grow as a person. Jobs should be structured so that each employee is a 'maker' (as befits an image of God) and not just an instrument. The tasks and responsibilities of each person should be such that he is in some way 'in charge' of his work and is not treated as a cog in a large machine. For example, I have found that it is better to assign attorneys responsibility for all of the legal work relating to a specific country or geographic area than to assign them individual cases or issues arising anywhere within the affiliated group. Having responsibility for a specific portion of the business provides the employee with a sense of 'ownership'. Ongoing and direct contact with his own 'clients' sparks more creativity and provides more job satisfaction than handling an endless series of cases or issues in 'assembly line' fashion.

A manager's concern for the good of his employees is also manifested by helping them to develop their skills and abilities throughout their careers. This is accomplished, for example, by implementing 'career development' initiatives for them, such as job rotation and participation in professional conferences and other training experiences. Job enrichment should be an ongoing task aimed at helping each employee to realize his full potential and maximize his opportunities for success.

Making work more human in a multinational enterprise must take into account the presence of people from very diverse cultures and backgrounds. Such diversity is essential to the success of a multinational because it provides local knowledge and the breadth of perspective necessary for achieving global business objectives. It is not unusual for me to interact with representatives of the five continents during the course of a business day. It is necessary to insure that the work environment brings out the best in all of the employees. The manager must set an example of patience, understanding and tolerance to prevent cultural differences from impeding the performance of an employee. He must take positive steps to encourage the ideas and talents of all. For example, a manager must be sensitive to different styles of communication. On a business trip to Hong Kong I learned that an ethnic Chinese may be very embarrassed to be asked a question to which he does not know the answer in a business meeting. Thus care should be taken to discuss certain questions with him in advance of a meeting and not put him 'on the spot' in front of his peers.

2. JUSTICE IN THE WORKPLACE

Working with a Christian conscience, as Blessed Josemaría taught us to do, makes one more sensitive to the demands of justice in the workplace. It makes one more aware of the need to treat all employees with fairness. Shortly after the merger of Exxon and Mobil, some 16,500 jobs were eliminated. During this very high-stress period, managers had the moral obligation to insure that competition for jobs was conducted fairly and that each employee was evaluated objectively. Managers were obligated to be truthful with their employees, including giving them frank appraisals of their future prospects. Efforts were made to handle 'job separations' with sensitivity in keeping with the dignity of each person. It was important to affirm the value of each employee whose job was terminated and to help him find a new job. In order to obtain approval for the merger from the U.S. and E.U. antitrust authorities, it was necessary for ExxonMobil to divest a number of large regional businesses. Selling these operations affected an additional 2,500 jobs. It was necessary to protect the rights of these employees, especially rights relating to retirement, health insurance and other employee benefits.

Blessed Josemaría taught the need to follow the principles of ethics in conducting one's professional work. Ethical conduct requires, for example, that a lawyer be honest and forthcoming in dealing with the company's internal and external auditors. An 'in house' attorney is responsible for assuring that his employer is in full compliance with the laws of the jurisdictions in which it operates. A Christian conscience obligates one to observe the highest standards of integrity in advising whether business operations are consistent with local laws. Ethical standards must be observed even when this may result in the loss of business to the company. One must "get used to saying 'no'" to transactions of even questionable propriety.

3. CHARITY WITH ONE'S CO-WORKERS

Blessed Josemaría taught that a Christian must be a sower of peace and joy. One way of doing this is to contribute to a climate of charity in the workplace. As indicated above, the period following the announcement of the merger of Exxon and Mobil was particularly stressful, especially for the Mobil employees since our company was the one being taken over. It was necessary to make an effort to be optimistic and cheerful and to be forgiving when tempers flared or when someone was 'having a bad day.' Living the virtue of charity in such 'little things,' as Blessed Josemaría taught, can have a very positive impact on one's work environment.

Ways of living charity in dealing with one's co-workers also include providing coaching and mentoring, sharing experiences that can lighten their workload, and providing encouragement in the face of disappointments and failures. One should also frequently express appreciation for the good work of peers, direct reports, and especially secretaries and administrative personnel. At the same time, managers should not tolerate any form of intimidation, harassment or discrimination in the workplace.

Loneliness can exist in large organizations, and this can be a major source of dehumanization. Over 3,000 employees work in my headquarters building. There are always many people who can be seen eating alone in the cafeteria, and many more have lunch alone at their desks. Bringing people together and multiplying friendships, as Blessed Josemaría taught, is an important way of practicing charity in the workplace. Sometimes it takes an effort to gather a group together for lunch or to meet with one person in order to have an opportunity to talk on a personal basis. Managers of large departments can organize periodic gatherings with refreshments, for example, to recognize birthdays and employment anniversaries and to introduce new employees, especially those from foreign countries. This can be a helpful 'ice breaker' that can pave the way for greater interaction among employees on an ongoing basis.

Contributing to an atmosphere of charity is perhaps the most important way of making life in the workplace more human for all concerned.

4. SPIRIT OF SERVICE

A potential obstacle to charity in the workplace is 'competitiveness'. A person can be tempted to look upon his co-workers as competitors or 'stepping stones' on the road to a prestigious, high-paying position. A number of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría can help a person to avoid this. He taught that the value of work should be measured by the amount of love of God that is put into it, rather than how prestigious it is in the eyes of the world. Therefore, the proper 'measure of success' is not how high up one is on the corporate ladder, but rather whether one is using the talents God gave him and whether one is filling his work with love of God and love of neighbor. Blessed Josemaría taught that prestige has value to the extent that it permits one to be of greater service to society. By measuring success in accordance with a personal standard of excellence rather than by how one's job compares with those of others, one can avoid the negative aspects of 'competitiveness.'

5. HUMAN AND SUPERNATURAL PERFECTION

As Blessed Josemaría said, it is not proper to offer to God work which is not done with human, as well as supernatural, perfection. Human perfection is facilitated, for example, by undertaking the most difficult tasks at the beginning of each day. Creative work, including developing tax-efficient cross-border financings, is best done when one is most alert. Procrastination will not only limit creativity and waste one's own time, it will likely result in team members wasting their time because completion of a critical path item of a project will be delayed.

Undertaking one's job with a 'lay mentality' as taught by Blessed Josemaría requires one to accept personal responsibility for one's actions and decisions. Given the complexity of the laws, especially the tax laws, applicable to international oil companies, their proper interpretation is not always readily apparent. In major transactions involving acquisitions or dispositions of assets or businesses, the company may become liable for millions of dollars of taxes if an error is made in the legal analysis. Blessed Josemaría helped me to understand that, when I sign my name to a legal opinion or memorandum, I accept full responsibility for its contents and am accountable not only for its legal accuracy but also for its ethical implications.

Blessed Josemaría taught us to work like the medieval craftsmen whose beautiful stonework atop cathedrals could be seen only by God. Employees of modern corporations have many opportunities to do something 'extra' to perfect their work that will not necessarily be noticed by others or for which they may not 'get credit' from their bosses. Examples include doing an extra draft to polish a memorandum or email, using one's time well on business trips and putting order into one's office or filing system. Such work is done for God alone.

In the Information Age it is possible for highly paid professionals to feel enslaved to their jobs like the factory workers of the Industrial Revolution. One means of preventing this is to set limits on one's work so that it does not become all encompassing. Today one frequently hears about '24/7' jobs which require a person always to be on call through access to one's cellular phone, pager, laptop computer, etc. Limiting the time one spends on professional work will permit one to attain a healthy 'work/life balance' which is necessary to fulfill all of one's needs and obligations, especially one's family obligations. For example, one should set definite times to arrive at and leave the office each day. If one subjects himself to such limits, he is likely to work more efficiently within the time available and perhaps accomplish more than he would have by working overtime or on weekends.

6. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A multinational corporation can have a major impact on the communities in which it operates. Managers must insure that the company contributes to the improvement of the quality of life wherever it does business. One way to do this is by hiring and training local nationals. On a business trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, one of my colleagues introduced me to a young woman who was working on an accounting software program at a desktop computer. My colleague told me that, some 10 years previously, he had admitted her to a company training program in Sumatra. She had come from a local rural village and had not had any previous formal education. By providing such training, multinationals advance the human development of the local population.

In summary, the teachings of Blessed Josemaría have many applications to the work of a lawyer employed by a multinational corporation.