



## Fidelis International Institute

### Business Gets Personal

By Reuben Nuxoll

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This is directly addressed to you, the businessman. It is not philosophy. It is not just ethics. It should not leave you indifferent. It is the people you deal with, your business, your family, your happiness.

I hold that business falls into four fields that are plowed by four principles. These four principles point to the only road to goodness and consequently happiness, because they are part of our meaning as human beings. Business is a way to put our talents to the grindstone, enjoy ourselves doing it, and help others in the process. I want to present how to do this effectively.

#### I. Why business ethics?

Happiness. We apply ethics because we want to reach happiness, and business is included. We might try to hide from the fact that we can only reach happiness if we follow guidelines. But it's true, as true as our conscience tells us so. Aristotle did not write his *Nicomachean Ethics* because he felt like making people suffer. Nor did Thomas Aquinas write the second part of his *Summa Theologiae* to cause anguish. Rather, they wanted to provide enough light to decipher the instructions inscribed in our souls and thus discover hope.

Business is a community of people at work. Thus business ethics is merely an application of general ethics. It is not about helping us and not our business, but both us and our business. Business without ethics is like driving a race car on a flatland without a steering wheel. You will certainly get far fast, but you won't end up where you really want to go, and you'll put yourself and others in danger. It's just a matter of time.

At an Acton Institute conference here in Rome, Timothy Busch stated that time shows which businesses are healthy and which are not. Even if there were no rules, only a morally healthy business would remain standing in the end. Why? Because people buy from people<sup>1</sup>, and when there is a trustworthy person to go to, people choose him.

#### II. What are the ingredients of business ethics?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. BECKER, *Can I Have 5 Minutes of Your Time?*, Oakhill Press, Akron and New York 1993

You might have a misunderstanding of ethics in business; many businessmen do, because sometimes ethics is presented in a way that gets in the way. The first step is to clear out your prejudices.

1. Ethics is etched into our human nature. Nature is what we use to act – and we cannot escape it, so we cannot escape ethics. At the same time, God created us free, and we can follow the nature he gave us, or we can go against it. Just as with the race-car, letting go of the steering wheel won't get us there.

Here are some metaphors. Ethics is not a hurdle but a ladder. We don't try to jump over it or get around it, but climb it. It is not – or should not be – a list of what we shouldn't do; rather, it is our foothold, our map, the grease-gun that gets the gears working. It will take us up, if we take the steps.

2. These examples show us that ethics is not ideas but action. I may be open to the truth, but am I open to *living* the truth? This is ethics. In a business world, this is what good and evil and justice refer to. They help us *achieve what we are meant to achieve*. Not to achieve it should be quite dissatisfying, and motivate me to get back on the road. Peter Kreeft writes that “dissatisfaction is the second best thing there is, because it dissolves the glue that entraps us to false satisfactions, and drives us to God, the only true satisfaction. The road home is the next best thing to home. God is home and dissatisfaction is the road, hunger and thirst for God is the road”<sup>2</sup>.

3. God has been mentioned. Most families have a hierarchy, and so do all businesses. Our lives have a moral hierarchy, and God is at the top. He calls the shots when it comes to the last say, just like the CEO in a business. However, unlike in a business, his orders do not come down from above, but from within: free human nature.

This begs the question: Do I act according to my own human nature?

### III. Four Principles

We can use four principles to apply our human nature to business. These principles give spiritual meaning to work, a meaning that goes beyond the belly, booze, or the bank. Victor Frankl said that man's life is fundamentally a search for meaning<sup>3</sup>. If meaning is lost, why live? If meaning in a business is lost, why keep working? If I've lost the steering wheel, where am I going?

1. Natural law is our ethical blueprint. It is the law to happiness based on our human nature as mentioned above. If we reject it on a personal level, we hurt ourselves. If we reject it in our business, though, we don't just hurt ourselves. We hurt our stakeholders too. The upside is that our happiness in following the natural law is also our stakeholders' happiness.

2. Human dignity. It gives me a reason to uphold the natural law. Why drive with a steering wheel unless I know where I'm headed and I have a dignity to lose? “The law inscribed in our nature is the true guarantee offered to everyone in order to be

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<sup>2</sup> P. KREEFT, *Back to Virtue*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1992, 163-164

<sup>3</sup> Cf. V. FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Washington Square Press, New York 1963, translated by I. Lasch

able to live in freedom and to be respected in their own dignity”<sup>4</sup>. Dignity is our purpose. Typically, we think: I want my money, I want it my way, and I want it now, so just let me work. Just like everyone else. That’s the spark: Everyone else is looking for the same thing, and they have just as much a right to it as I do. We all have dignity. We can achieve it together, but none of us will achieve it by destroying the others. Not even God will interfere with man and make him a mere tool. A healthy business will seek to promote the human dignity of its workers and its consumers.

3. Marriage and family. Dignity’s first social consequence is marriage, which, lived well, gives birth to a family. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger pointed out more than thirty years ago that “marriage is the form of the mutual relationship between husband and wife that results from the covenant, the fundamental human relationship upon which all human history is based”<sup>5</sup>. If marriage is the fundamental human relationship, and we must treat one other according to our dignity, it is from this first relationship that we learn the other relationships. It teaches us love, which gives meaning to sacrifice, which raises good men. A good man is shown in a good husband and a good father, because his love seeks their dignity, and that gets reflected in society, including business. «Without good men you cannot have a good society»<sup>6</sup>. A business that builds the family builds the very social fabric it depends on for its existence.

4. Common good. This principle should be obvious; it’s already present in marriage and family, and businesses start due to a common good. If they lose it, they fall apart. A business that seeks the common good of the society in which it works and from which it receives infrastructure and manpower will make decisions accordingly. When it comes to firing one third of my employees or else losing one percent of my profits, my employees and business community take priority. If not, time will show that saving one percent means losing my business.

#### IV. Four-piece pie

Business falls into four fields, beyond the triple bottom line. These four fields are like pieces of pie: There is always just one pie, and there are always four pieces, but you can cut them the size you want. We can use the principles above to make our slices.

1. Profit: What first measures a business is its profit. No profit means no business, so it is not a concern in divvying up the pie. It always gets a good chunk.

2. Product: The direct output of work is its product. Do I cut off enough of my business pie to make sure this product is wholesome and marketed as such? If I do, my product won’t include pornography, which contradicts marriage and the family. It won’t include contraceptives or abortion services or cloning or euthanasia, which destroy the dignity of human life. It will not harm the world it comes from but enhance it for further production and the good of all. My product marketing will avoid the hedonistic use of materials whose excess can be harmful, such as alcohol, tobacco and gambling.

3. Concern: How a business treats its employees. Those who work in a business are not machines, nor cattle, but men. Remember our definition of business? We are a community of people at work. How much of the pie can I portion to respecting their

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<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, «Address to International Congress on Natural Law», February 12, 2007

<sup>5</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1983, translated by John McDermott, SJ

<sup>6</sup> C.S. LEWIS, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan, New York, 1966<sup>8</sup>, 72

dignity and helping them reach personal happiness? If I portion an ample amount, it means that I am concerned about their ongoing training, their level of life, a just wage, their rights, genuine respect<sup>7</sup>.

4. Consideration: Not only are my employees human beings. Everyone involved in any way with my company is a human being. They all deserve respect. Do I give my stakeholders consideration? If I slice this piece right, I will be a blessing for the common good. No dubious trafficking in arms. Natural resources from cradle to cradle. No fraud or illegal activities. No legal public activities that imply cooperation with a government injustice. Christian ideals in my investments. I will guard the common good.

Conclusion: Happiness is what I will get by living business ethics. Happiness is “man’s supreme perfection,” as Thomas Aquinas wisely understood. Aristotle himself spent an entire book trying to point this out<sup>8</sup>. By seeking the good of others in our business, we effectively bring both them and ourselves further up the road to happiness.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. S. COVEY, *The Speed of Trust. The One Thing That Changes Everything*, Free Press, New York 2006

<sup>8</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*