



Recently I was asked as Director of Centrecare to present a paper at the national conference of Catholic Health Australia in Perth. The theme I was asked to address was "Leading Staff to Embrace Gospel Values." Please find following the paper I presented which I

believe provides some insights into our work at Centrecare and ideas on how the Gospel's values can be expressed in today's Catholic and other "religious based" workplaces. Given the audience, most of whom were mission Directors or Chief Executive Officers of a variety of Catholic organisations, you will see that I've addressed the issue using a number of biblical references. The essential message in text is that we can create a highly spiritual, healthy and inclusive environment by using love as the language and the guide for organisational leadership. The intent of the paper was not to provide an "out to do it manual", but rather to encourage people to look beyond words and routine actions to the spirit that needs to inspire and underlie our behaviours

The Common Language of Love

Presented by Tony Pietropiccolo AM

Director, Centrecare Inc.

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Introduction

The majority of people that want to work within the health and community sectors are driven by a belief in the importance of personal and societal values. How these values are described, understood and practiced is the challenge that face many organisations especially those that have a Christian foundation.

A specific challenge for the latter is how to remain true to their tradition, encapsulated in the concept of Gospel values, while creating an inclusive atmosphere for those that are from different religious traditions or that have no religious beliefs.

It seems to me that in today's work environment, a leader's task may not be simply how to bring people to embrace Gospel values but how to create the conditions under which "shared values" are more fully understood, respected and practiced. Fundamentally, the job is to bring "people of goodwill" together in a common endeavour that is both spiritual and practical in nature. "Love" is the common language that all "people of goodwill" can understand, accept and practice.

Gospel Values

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might."

Book of Deuteronomy 6:4-5

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"

Mk 12:29-31

In my view, the foundation stone of gospel values is love. Love is their bedrock, their inspiration and their endpoint. This is not the romantic love that is often spoken of but the love that St Paul refers to in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:1-8). He describes the qualities of love as being, among others, those of patience, kindness, humility and goodness. Paul is very clear when he states that if love is not the driving force of what we do and how we do it then we are no better "than echoing bronze and the clash of cymbals." The ongoing references and entreaty to love in the Old and New Testament lead us to a fundamental and awe inspiring challenge. The challenge is how do we move beyond ourselves, our fears and anxieties so that we can truly express God's love in what we do.

In my opinion, the question before leaders of religious based organisations is not so much how do we lead our staff to embrace gospel values but rather how do we create those organisations that live and breathe love? Such environments will necessarily inspire those who work within them to act lovingly. In such a setting staff members will come to embrace Gospel values not through intellectual exercises or through routine actions but because they cannot escape it, they are enveloped in it. The following entreaty is attributed to St Francis of Assisi:

"Preach the Gospel always; sometimes use words."

Attributed to St Francis of Assisi

Creating an Environment of Love

Creating such an organisational environment requires us to let go of an overemphasis on form and the anxieties that are often associated with them. Christ was very clear about this:

"Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life...Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

Matthew 6:25

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that managing an organisation today does not require due diligence in regards to the many regulatory systems and other obligations

that exist. What is being referred to here is the spirit that is brought to bear on management. As leaders we need to help minimise the level of angst that may exist within our organisations. Such anxiety can be created by the way that organisational policy is developed, implemented and regulated. It can be communicated through the manner of our responses to financial and service concerns. Leaders need to ensure that honesty and openness is at the heart of what we do and how we do it. Justice and compassion need to coexist when dealing with difficult industrial matters and clients. We have to be clear that our competitive spirit is driven by a desire to be excellent rather than a need to simply beat the opposition. We need to believe that laughter and amusement plays an important role in our workplaces and is not the enemy to serious work. It's important not to take ourselves too seriously.

In a world that still extols heroic leadership and individual success one of the greatest challenges to leaders is how to avoid self-importance. In order to be models of loving action, managers need to retain a sense of humility and accept that whatever is achieved is the result of a team effort. It is rarely due just to individual endeavours. We need to ensure that our anxieties do not become organisational ones and that our need for achievement does not become the main driver of organisational functioning. It is not unusual to hear of company practices that have nothing to do with the long term viability of the group but rather with individual aggrandisement, often of the leader. In an age of individualism that is often focused on singular success it is difficult to keep believing that the group is greater than the individual. It is often even harder to keep believing that achievements are the result of a highly complex web of conscious and unconscious processes as well as visible and invisible dynamics. In other words, keeping our feet on the ground and maintaining a sense of realism about our personal achievements is essential to creating a loving environment. Modern thinking on leadership highlights that the best leaders are not the *"follow me over the hill type"* but

"...rather, they're the people who lead from the heart as well as the head, and whose leadership style springs from their fundamental character and values."

Prof. B George, Harvard Business School, 2003

In other words, leaders can no longer simply rely on intellectual rigor, strength and risk taking. They also need to have well developed emotional and spiritual dispositions. This requires openness to the ongoing development of one's emotional and spiritual state. It seems that fearless self-awareness is fundamental to excellent leadership.

"Integrating their lives is one of the greatest challenges leaders face...being authentic means maintaining a sense of self no matter where you are."

Prof. B George et al. "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership", Harvard Business Review, 2007

Staff are likely to feel at ease if they are working within an open and mutually supportive system. They will feel cared for if they see leaders being less concerned with themselves than with the wellbeing of the group. They will feel accepted if they are able to choose when and if to participate in things they struggle to understand and believe. Staff will experience a greater sense of self-esteem if they are seen as having integral worth and not treated as mere functionaries. They are likely to see themselves as valued if their beliefs and/or cultures are respected and taken seriously. Workers will possibly feel a sense of freedom and inspiration if they are allowed to openly and honestly express their views and discuss their experiences and lifestyles. They will believe they are part of something special if the organisation they work for courageously lives out what it stands for. Such experiences teach Gospel values without a word being spoken. They envelop the individual and takes her/him into a world they may have never known before. It is a world where the heart and mind meet and where each is given equal value. It is a place where human interaction is primarily a spiritual exchange drawn from the Divine.

“It is characteristic of mature love that it calls into play all man's potentialities; it engages the whole man, so to speak. Contact with the visible manifestations of God's love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect. Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the “yes” of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all- embracing act of love.”

Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, ‘Deus Caritas Est’

The wonderful thing about love is that it is not a one way street. It is an exchange. It is a giving and receiving that occurs in a spirit of trust, openness and truth. So leaders can allow themselves the luxury of not feeling totally responsible for creating a loving context. It is a shared outcome.

Employees bring to our relationship with them their own capacity for the development of the type of organisational milieu that we have been discussing. They have their own experiences, understanding and spiritual awareness to share with us. The employer’s task is how to sensitively tap into this bank of human capital and allow it to flourish.

“Leaders who make a difference to others, cause people to feel that they can make a difference. They set people’s spirit free and enable them to become more than they might have thought possible.”

“The Leadership Challenge”, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, 2007

So, love is always a two way street. Employers need to be sensitive to the sensibilities of their people and employees need to do the same in regards to their employer. Few

employees would not understand what is meant by care and love. There would be an even smaller number, if any, who would be resistant to establishing love as a basis for their work.

“Work is love made visible...”

“The Prophet”, Kahlil Gibran

Some staff members may have never heard of the words “Gospel values” but they know about compassion, justice, service and peace, to name some. It is these essential values and their practical application that are the important reference points of our work not how they may be described and encapsulated. It is important for leaders to demystify the Gospel message and allow even those that have rarely heard of it to feel that they are in tune with its essential goodness. Our language and approach in these matters need to always seek to create the experience of inclusion rather than the reverse.

A loving environment is one that takes us beyond daily routines and well-trodden paths. It is one in which fears of long-term sustainability are dispelled and the beauty of the moment realised and treasured. Ongoing concern for the survival of the Gospel message and how Catholic or other religious based organisations are to impart it to their people is understandable given changing staff demographics and a societal environment less interested in traditional, Christian practices. Such concerns can be counterproductive if we allow them to dominate our organisations. Fear is the enemy of love. It is impossible for these two experiences to coexist.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear...”

1 John 4:18

Excessive concern about how we can bring staff to embrace Gospel values can inadvertently lead to the adoption of practices that enforce those behaviours considered desirable. In my view, such an approach would inevitably lead to an erosion of those very values that religious based organisations are seeking to instil. Ultimately, the Christian message is an invitation to participate in something special.

“The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests...Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.”

Matthew 22:2-9

True invitations are never an imposition but always a loving embrace.

Leading staff to embrace the essence of Gospel values, which in my view is love, requires us to move beyond words and engage in their practical expression. If this can be achieved, then it is likely that employees from a variety of backgrounds will be able to fully accept and

engage with them. A leader's aim cannot be to simply bring people to articulate Gospel values but rather to help employees live the spirit of these values through loving action:

"It is by your love for one another that everyone will recognise you as my disciples".

John 13:35

Gospel values cannot be imposed on people. It is unwise and contradictory for any leader to try to do so. However, if a leader's daily actions are motivated by the loving spirit that underpins them and employees are invited to do the same then the Gospel's values will resonate throughout their organisation and beyond.

End.