

Earning Respect

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"I DON'T WANT MY COMPANY TO BECOME A dumping ground for Christians who can't find work," the company owner told me as he paced back and forth in my office. "I've got nothing against Christians, but I'm running a business here, not tryouts for people who need a second chance at life."

The discussion wasn't unfriendly at all. In fact, as I listened to him express his concerns, I realized most of what he was saying was right.

As one of the region's largest employers, our firm frequently had entry level positions requiring limited skills and experience. Pastors in the area often called me on behalf of someone in their congregation, or referred them directly to me. Though I never asked about faith in the interview process, (nor is it or should it ever be legal to do so), these pastoral referrals sometimes jumped to the head of the list simply because it was easier than working my way through the stack of walk-in applications that emerged when we ran ads.

Looking back on it now, I realize the pastors and I had been unfair to the firm. I'd been unfair because the employees and supervisors working with these new-hires paid a price if the new worker couldn't do the job. The

pastors were unfair because over time they became less concerned with referring quality candidates to me, and began to make referrals based on dire need or utter futility. The phrase "no place else to turn" was common.

So that day as my boss, a gentle man by nature, tried to get me to see I wasn't giving his company my best effort, or his supervisors the best workers available, I had to admit I had been wrong.

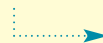
"You're absolutely right," I said. "I'll make it a point not to slip back into this pattern."

He was caught completely off-guard.

I've always loved debating, and always hated admitting I was wrong, so he was a veteran of long and sometimes-exhausting debates with me about human resource issues. He came into my office expecting this to be another such debate, so my immediate acquiescence left him dumbstruck.

The next day we sat together in the lunch room and he asked me why I caved so easily.

What do you think I told him?



Scripture Passages

Genesis 45:16-19

Genesis 41:9-45

Introduction

In the first two sets of lessons in this series we targeted personal changes we need to make in order to glorify God and enjoy His fellowship even as we serve Him in the workplace. The first set of five studies is designed to move us from a place where we're consumed by our careers to the place where we truly understand God's priorities, and work's place in His economy. The second set of studies seeks to get us to understand that moral relativity has no place in God's creation, least of all in the workplace. This means we must be equipped to exhibit steadfast character in all areas of our lives, including on the job. Making these two shifts—from driven ambition to a healthy work ethic, and from moral relativity to steadfast character—helps us to fulfill the two greatest commandments: to love God completely and to love others.

With this lesson we begin our third set of studies and thus our third intended shift. We begin to discuss work not merely as a way of meeting the demands of our own relationship with God, but how God wants us to fulfill His command to evangelize and disciple (Matthew 28:19-20) even as we work. In this set of five lessons, we want to:

- learn how to work side-by-side in a multi-cultural workforce without sacrificing our own commitment to Biblical principles.
- discover how to work alongside and care for people of many faiths, or no faith at all, in ways that draw them to the hope of Christ in us.
- be ambassadors for Christ, not merely spectators.

The first lesson in this quintet of studies, then, is focused on discovering ways to earn the respect of employers, coworkers, vendors and customers as we do our jobs. We begin by examining the end of a story first, and then working our way backwards.

In Depth

Read Genesis 45:16-19. In the space provided below, write an assessment of Pharaoh's impression of Joseph. Why do you think Pharaoh responded the way he did? What do these passages tell you about Joseph? About Joseph's relationship with Pharaoh?

What a remarkable testimony to the working life of Joseph! That Joseph's joy would so move Pharaoh tells us much about the kind of worker Joseph was, and it is precisely this kind of respect we Christians should be pursuing with our employers.

But let's not merely marvel at the outcome. There are some things we can learn from Joseph that lead us in this direction ourselves.

We begin with a summary of Joseph's story to date, and it isn't a pretty one. Joseph is the eleventh son of Jacob, and one of Jacob's favorites. Because of Joseph's favored status and partly because of a dream he had that foretold a time when he would rule over his brothers, jealousy reared its ugly head. Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave to Midianites who happened to be passing by, thinking they would be rid of him for good. Joseph was then sold by these Midianite traders to the captain of the guard in Egypt, a man named Potiphar. The Bible tells us the Lord was with Joseph during this time, so much so he stood out among Potiphar's slaves. Eventually, this led to Potiphar turning over great responsibility to Joseph, giving him charge of his household so, as Scripture says, Potiphar "had only to worry about the food he ate"—so completely and competently did Joseph handle Potiphar's affairs.

Then trouble struck Joseph again. Potiphar's wife took notice of how handsome Joseph was and tried to get him to sleep with her. Joseph resisted, even to the point of refusing to be alone with her. One day, though, the household servants were gone and Joseph was working in the home. Potiphar's wife badgered him again, this time taking hold of his garment. When Joseph pulled away and left, she still held his garment. Frustrated by his refusals, she got even by accusing Joseph of trying to assault her. Potiphar then throws Joseph into the prison where the king's prisoners were kept.

Even there, the Bible says, God was with Joseph. In fact, we see Joseph became a treasured worker in the eyes of the warden of the jail. Fast forward to a day when the Pharaoh has a dream no one can interpret. The chief cupbearer, who had been a prisoner with Joseph during a stint when Pharaoh was unhappy with him, remembered Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and mentioned him to Pharaoh.

Think about a time in the workplace when someone you loved or trusted took advantage of you, or did something unfair to you, or hurt you seriously in some fashion. Describe how that made you feel?

What effect did that action have on your attitude toward that person?

Did this unfair action have an effect on your attitude in general? If so, describe it here.

Now consider Joseph. This same kind of personal earthquake happened to him not once but twice! Yet each time Joseph bounced back. Describe some of the characteristics Joseph must have exhibited in order to rise up each time in the eyes of Potiphar and the warden.

What about Joseph's attitude? Could Joseph have made such an impression and still be bitter and unforgiving? Why not?

This brings us to Joseph's encounter with Pharaoh. Read Genesis 41:9-16. In verse 16 Joseph gives God the credit for what Joseph is about to do. In our culture, though, it can be uncomfortable when someone praises our work to use phrases like "it wasn't me, it was all God" or "praise God." Though the principle is true, it can make our coworkers very uncomfortable if it comes too soon in our relationship with them. It can also sound trite and insincere if not supported by the rest of our lives.

What do you think this teaches us about appropriate times to introduce the language of faith in a workplace setting?

Especially in today's multicultural workforce, introducing the language of faith into our conversations is risky until we've established ourselves as competent and compassionate. What are some of the ingredients necessary to make our coworkers and employers believe we're competent?

What actions make them believe we're compassionate?

When Joseph is brought from prison to face Pharaoh, how might he have messed up this opportunity?

Especially when we've experienced unfair treatment, bitterness often carries itself over into a grudge, and grudges affect future performance. Joseph seems to have avoided this pitfall all along the way, and it's an important career ingredient for those seeking to establish themselves as workers representing Christ.

Now examine the rest of the passage in Genesis 41:17-36. Joseph listens to the dream and then interprets it. But that's not the end of the story, is it? What does Joseph do after he interprets the dream?

Think about this incident for a minute. Joseph is taken from prison, and is in no condition to be presented to Pharaoh, so he must get cleaned up for the appearance. Then he's presented immediately with the task at hand: interpret the dream.

And *on the spot* he offers Pharaoh a plan to deal with the upcoming crisis! Not later, not after thinking about it for a few minutes, but right there on the spot. What does this tell us about Joseph?

Likely in your list above, you mentioned Joseph had initiative, that he could sort out complicated issues and make rational suggestions for action that were simple enough to be readily understood. But there's one place where we realize Joseph hasn't overreached. Can you find it?

Now read verses 37-45. What does Pharaoh do?

Fast forward again to the end of this story, in Genesis 45:16-19, where Pharaoh responds so generously to Joseph. Even without reading chapters 41-44 where we see Joseph's actual performance, what does this say about how well Joseph succeeded?

Discuss the comments Pharaoh makes throughout this story about Joseph's relationship with God. How does Joseph's competence affect Pharaoh's impression of God?

What effect will competence have on our ability to co-exist in a multi-cultural workforce?

Often, when workers aren't competent, they compensate by ingratiating themselves to their bosses and coworkers. How can a lack of competence tempt us to waiver or compromise on matters of faith in order to curry favor?

Conversely, why does competence give us the ability to withstand such temptations?

Consider your present work circumstances. What steps can you take to increase your employers' respect for your work ethic? What steps can you take to increase your coworkers' respect for your output? Take these issues to prayer this week as you prepare to move to the next study.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Flattery and compromise don't glorify God, but neither do judgmental attitudes and legalistic demeanors. Competence and compassion are important characteristics for Christians who want their work to matter for God.
- We must not allow setbacks, including those that seem unfair, to make us bitter.
- While Joseph credited God with being able to interpret the dream, using the language of faith in our workplace requires tact and wisdom. The language of faith is most easily accepted when we've established ourselves as competent and compassionate. We must be careful, though, not to take credit for God's gifting and work through us.
- We must avoid reading Joseph's account purely as one of personal competence and gifting. Joseph was indeed highly gifted and dependable. We should emulate that. But, as with all great men of God, it is inextricably linked with his complete trust in the Lord to superintend circumstances.
- Joseph gave Pharaoh more than he expected when he not only interpreted the dream but offered a plan for mitigating the pending disaster. Showing initiative and giving our employers and coworkers more than they expected can glorify God, providing that "more" isn't robbing other areas of our lives