Your employees and human flourishing

MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER writes that treating people as subjects and helping them to flourish as persons is a powerful witness to the joy of the Gospel. Such thinking is counter to today's utilitarian culture of using people to accomplish personal or corporate goals. Miller gives several practical ways to encourage human flourishing in your workplace. . . .


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How we integrate our faith and our work is a persistent question for Christians. The answers can be difficult to pin down and sometimes feel sentimental. How do we create a culture at work that's infused with faith, while not being explicitly religious?

One practical thing which can have a profound effect is to think about work and management in terms of human flourishing. As a leader or manager you have responsibility for a part of another person's life — their work. It's not the most significant element in life, but it is where we spend the majority of our days. Creating a work culture that focuses on human flourishing is great opportunity on a small, daily scale to exercise virtue and live out our faith at work.

We begin by remembering that each person at the company is not an "object" or a "human resource," but a "subject," a person willed by God for his or her own sake with a call to human flourishing and an eternal destiny. Pope St. John Paul II said that the most appropriate response to a person is love, that is to seek the good of the other, and to practice what he called the "personalist norm," remembering that a person is not merely a means to an end, but an end in themselves.

This is abstract, but here are a couple of practical ways to apply this in our work with others.

Keep their broader life in mind. Remember that each person has dreams and goals of her own. Employees are not radical individuals, but have families and friends. I'm not suggesting that we pry into people's personal lives, but we can ask how this particular job at this particular time fits into their longer life plans. We can pay attention to how they are engaged with work and make sure they aren't burning out. We can ask what could make their job more fulfilling and what they would like to do now and in the long run. This doesn't necessarily mean an immediate promotion or pay raise, but it does mean that as a leader, you're thinking of your staff in light of their goals and not simply your own or the company's.

Think about helping them flourish as a human being both at work and in their life. Work is a wonderful opportunity to build virtues (or vices) that can transfer into other parts of our lives. John Paul wrote about the "intransitive" nature of work that goes beyond what we produce and how work shapes us. Just as having a family and children can help us build patience and become more generous, work too has its challenges and if met with the right attitude can help us grow in virtue and be a benefit to the common good. When we see a young man goofing around and wasting his life, we say, "That guy needs a job!" Why? Because jobs can provide the conditions for us to grow as persons. If you as a leader think about work in this way and become a partner, as it were, with your employees to promote human flourishing, it will build loyalty and trust and provide an opportunity to live out and share the Gospel.

Think about their career and their future. This includes not only what they can do for you now, but what they want, where they're going, and how they can grow — whether at your company or somewhere else. This can be harder to put into practice because we tend to have a zero-sum game and think that we don't want to train an employee and then have him leave for a new job. This is a utilitarian approach to persons, but it's also limited and unhelpful for company culture and loyalty.

I've heard people say they would be afraid to go to their boss and tell him they were thinking of looking into a new job or career. Better to leave quietly they say. A company where this takes place is a broken culture. Employees should feel confident to speak about their future goals, even if it means moving on. Better to leave quietly they say. If employers have the right attitude, some employees may leave, but more will stay precisely because they feel valued.

All of these things can be time consuming, but if people feel that the company is actually concerned about them as persons and not merely treating them as a commodity, it will have tremendous impact on company culture, loyalty and productivity.

In a world dominated by utilitarian thinking and where objectification of persons is commonplace, treating people as subjects and helping them to flourish as persons is a powerful witness to the joy of the Gospel.

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