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My Favorite Part of Business

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My Favorite Part of Business

Abstract

"The operational function of an organization, whether product or service related, is really the heart of the firm. This is where the real action is."

Posting about business operations from a Christian perspective from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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Comments

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My Favorite Part of Business

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Dale Zevenbergen

As I head into the 25th year of my career, I have truly come to love and appreciate the world of business – how one group of people can serve another group of people in what certainly can be a God-glorifying manner. Having worked in or with most of the various areas of business, I have gained an appreciation for all areas. As a CPA I certainly appreciate the field of accounting, which is also known as the “language of business.” The related areas of finance and economics are also fascinating to me. I worked closely with engineering and IT, and am amazed at the products, equipment, and systems these people can put together. Human resources and the legal aspects of a firm are critically important. And I love the adventure of marketing and sales – developing products and services that meet and fulfill a need, and then communicating the value of that offering to a target audience.

All of these areas can be done *Christianly*, and we absolutely need more Christians leading in these areas. That’s why I teach at Dordt – to be a part of the growth and development of future Christian business leaders who will be able to join God in redemptive work within organizations and societies. But the one area I have grown particularly fond of is often misunderstood and even viewed as “less exciting” than the other functions: operations. The operational function of an organization, whether product or service related, is really the heart of the firm. This is where the real action is. While I can’t say I was particularly gifted or successful when I worked in operations, I find the field fascinating. I love learning and studying how businesses (or organizations in general) operate.

The main reason I love operations is related to the impact it can have. In my experience, there is tremendous opportunity to utilize resources efficiently and effectively in operations (i.e. stewardship). And, in most organizations, there are more people working in operations than any other function. The opportunities for stewardship and treating people with the respect and dignity they deserve as image-bearers are more abundant in operations than any other area, at least in most organizations.

I have come to the conclusion that businesses are simply all about people. Yes, pursuing a profit is a key driver of a business (and the only way to stay “in business” for the long term), but profit really is just an outcome. I heard author and speaker [Ken Blanchard](#) speak this June at the [Iowa Association for Business and Industry](#)’s annual conference, and he described this dynamic beautifully: “Profit is the applause you get for creating an environment for your people to thrive in, and they in turn take great care of your customers”.¹ It starts with people within the organization. Then satisfied customers. And then, the applause of profit. Yes, this is an oversimplification. You also need a strong brand, a distinct value proposition, and clear communication, etc. But from what I have seen – it starts with people and allowing them to thrive.

There are many ways to create an environment where people can thrive in their work, but two movements I have seen in action that work beautifully together are **lean** and **servant leadership**. I’m not saying these ideas are the only way to do business *Christianly*, but they are certainly two very good ways! I’ve seen first-hand how one organization has leveraged both of these philosophies to make a very good company even better. I worked for or have been closely observing [Pella Corporation](#) for my entire career. Pella is not perfect; I do not intend to over-glorify the organization. But it is a very solid, well-run company. Admittedly, much of the experience I have in business is with Pella, and my perspective on lean and servant leadership is heavily influenced by Pella and how they have incorporated these philosophies into their

culture. So how do lean and servant leadership come together to create a wonderful environment to work in? I would summarize the combination of the two concepts in one word: **empowerment**. But we'll get back to that. First, let's define the concepts...

I'll start with **lean**. Lean is simply the relentless pursuit of eliminating waste in processes. There are several methods and tools that can be utilized in a firm's *Lean Journey*. Some are sophisticated and statistical in nature, others are quite simple. I won't go into these methods here, there are plenty of resources out there on lean methodologies – the first I'd suggest is the [Lean Enterprise Institute](#).

The one dynamic all of the lean tools have in common is teamwork and brainstorming. That's what I love about lean – the involvement of the people that do the work. Yes, engineers and managers can put equipment and resources into service, but the best ideas for improvement come from the people doing the work. At Pella, they not only *allow* the operators in the factory to come up with ideas to improve the safety, quality, and productivity of the processes they work with, but they *expect* it! In a lean organization, much of the decision making authority is moved to the shop floor – to the people actually doing the work. The organizational structure naturally flattens out, and people become... *wait for it...* more empowered! The era we live in has been referred to as the age of the “knowledge worker,” and that is what team members in a lean environment are allowed to become. They are not mind-numbed robots just doing repetitive work, but are empowered, thinking workers who have the authority to stop a process and say, “no, this isn't working, there has to be a better way!”

Now onto **servant leadership**. As with lean, there are many resources out there on the topic of servant leadership. Pella Corp first latched on to the concept when key leaders read Jim Hunter's book [The Servant](#), a resource I highly recommend. A servant leader can be someone at any level in an organization, and very simply is someone with an attitude of *serving* those they lead. A servant leader is not weak, but humble. A servant leader still casts a vision, but works more on breaking down barriers that get in the way of their people than telling them what to do. This philosophy embraces the gifts and capability of the people on the team, and creates an environment that allows them to use those gifts. Or, in a word – Empowerment!

One of the leaders at Pella Corp who had the biggest impact on me is Denny Van Zanten. Denny defined the servant leadership philosophy this way: *The skill of influencing people to work enthusiastically toward goals identified as being for the common good*. He went on to say that it starts with a foundation of trust and respect, includes putting others before yourself, and identifying and meeting the needs of others. He went on to say that the attributes of a servant leader mirror the fruits of the Spirit.²

In a culture of servant leadership, there is a passion for “catching” people doing things right, not doing things wrong. Again, it's not utopia, people still make poor choices – choices that might need to be addressed. But the discipline involved is always with a spirit of giving the person direction on how to make changes to be able to stay on the team, not to simply punish or “get rid of” them. Human dignity and preciousness is a priority. This priority shows up most powerfully during tough times, as Pella and many other organizations have experienced since the economic downturn that began in 2008. I was amazed to observe Pella doing everything they could to treat people right as the economy put downward pressure on orders. They eventually had to make tough decisions about facilities and jobs, but I am confident that profits in the short-term were sacrificed as they sought to keep people on the team as long as possible.

So in my experience, lean and servant leadership work beautifully together. Empowered workers are more fulfilled and excited about their work, and go home with a better mindset and attitude for the other areas of their lives. That is what operations is all about: people. People who are passionate about their work, who serve customers with excellence, which in turn, *might* drive a profit for the firm. A profit that can be shared with all team members, and that will allow the company to stay in business. That is why I have come to

love operations, and why I believe it can be an agent for shalom in God's world.

Footnotes

1. Blanchard, Iowa Association for Business and Industry conference, June 10-12, 2015, presentation. [↩](#)
2. Van Zanten, Dordt College, October 2015, presentation. [↩](#)