

Woodstock Business Conference Moral Decision Making

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Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference

* to establish and lead a national network of business leaders to explore the Judeo-Christian tradition in order:

* to assist the individual to integrate faith, family and professional life;

* to help the leadership of the firm to develop a corporate culture consistent with Judeo-Christian values; and,

* to aid business leaders and corporations to exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large.

The Conference welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious traditions. Grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, the WBC is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

PART ONE

I. Introduction

The WBC chapter began its meeting with the usual self-introductions, opening prayer, Mission Statement, and reading and reflection upon a passage from Scripture. This time it was the account of Peter's dramatic threefold denial of Jesus. The vice president of an international electronic equipment firm opened by stating, "This passage tells me that in our business lives we should stand up for what we believe. It doesn't have to be a popular sentiment." From the opposite end of the table, a man spoke up:

The thing I take from this story is that Peter put himself at risk. He was the only disciple there in the courtyard. He was probably scared half to death, knowing it was not going well for Jesus who was inside right then on trial for his life. Peter was in a very difficult place. He must have felt awful when he denied knowing his good friend Jesus. Peter was just a man. He was trying to get through the night.

Others resonated with Peter's dilemma. They saw a kind of futility in his situation.

What could he do there, anyway? On the other hand, that kind of rationalization is only too familiar to all of us. It is human to try to rationalize in order to get out of becoming involved in a mess.

The topic that day was "What happens to a company's benevolent practices when it faces financial hard times?" During the discussion on the topic one entrepreneur said

It seems to me that Peter's story applies to us. We have similar fears, similar confusions. We are sometimes at a loss to know the right thing to do. Today, the question is how do we either find or re-find our moral compass when we need to act? There has to be a bridge somewhere.

To answer this challenge the Woodstock Business Conference developed, tested, and now offers this series of topics, exercises, and readings for use by business and professional men and women in WBC chapters. The sequence of topics aims to help you find that bridge, to locate the moral compass that can be counted upon so that you might, with greater confidence, make informed and morally sound decisions in the face of the pressures, incentives, norms, and practices of the evolving, rapidly changing world of business within which you operate. What we have is an interactive course in moral decision-making for people who have participated in the WBC process of monthly meetings over a period of time.

Before taking up the topics themselves in Part Two, it will be helpful to recap some important information about the WBC and its process. As was done in the earlier Formation Book, we highlight some of what undergirds the process and mark the trajectory of these particular topics.

We conclude by recommending a specific project to be undertaken by each participating WBC chapter at the conclusion of the course. This project seeks to develop a check list for others looking to find their moral compass in the midst of today's fast-paced business life. We propose exploring an ethics of achievement and hope the experience of participating WBC chapters will lead to the development of a moral road map for the assistance of others.

The Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference

After gaining familiarity with the Woodstock Business Conference process over the course of a year or more, meeting each month to discuss topics, issues, and challenges arising from the world of businesses, WBC members want to take the discussion to the next level. Like the participants in the chapter meeting mentioned above, they continue their commitment to the Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference which states:

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The WBC Process

WBC members say they want to understand what helps and what gets in the way of good moral decision-making in business. In seeking to locate their moral compass, they look for a reliable way to know and understand how to come to authentic moral knowing and acting. Their experience with the WBC process of monthly theological reflection on the issues arising out of the concrete events and challenges at work helped them to greater personal integration, encouraged them to bring their religious values into the management of their organizations, and opened new vistas for beneficial impact on society. Could this same WBC process help them to locate a reliable moral guidance system as fully applicable on the job as in all other aspects of their lives?

The WBC process melds participation with the other chapter members in the monthly chapter meetings with individual prayer, preparation, and reflection done between the meetings.

Recall the WBC meeting format:

- a. Self-introductions.
- b. Opening prayer.
- c. Reading of the Mission Statement with the three goals of the WBC.
- d. Scripture: A passage from Scripture related to the topic for the meeting is read aloud, followed by a period of silent reflection (five minutes), and then sharing of insights (seven to ten minutes).
- e. Topic: Discussion based upon articles, exercises, and questions previously mailed with the meeting notice and minutes of the last meeting's discussion.
- f. Reflection and evaluation on the meeting and the process (five to ten minutes before conclusion).
- g. Closing prayer.

Between meetings members often review notes or minutes of the last meeting together with the articles, exercises, Scripture passage, and questions for the upcoming meeting. The minutes serve an important role because they enable everyone to recall the highlights of the past meeting and to come prepared for the next. They also permit those who missed the last meeting to stay in touch. The fruit of preparation between meetings becomes evident in the depth of the chapter discussions as well as in the quality of WBC members' business decisions and actions.

The WBC Approach

For some, the approach embedded in the WBC meeting format has found its way into individual and organizational decision-making practices. This approach begins with concrete experience, being attentive to all the relevant facts of the situation. It seeks diligently to understand. The quest for understanding not stop with the first explanation that comes to mind. It is aware that biases, untested assumptions, lack of time, or inadequate effort may short-circuit the process. Consequently, the approach works to make sure that all the necessary questions are asked, the patterns considered, and appropriate explanations are weighed. Upon reaching a judgement about the concrete situation we are moved to search for the right course of action.

This search for the most appropriate action requires a similar effort to investigate and understand all the available options. Not only must possible courses of action or inaction be identified, considered, and evaluated with requisite rigor, but the values to be promoted and those that underlie each option must be explored and prioritized. Finally, we make a judgement about what is the right thing to do. When everything is working right, the approach will lead inexorably to responsible action.

The WBC approach is called a process because it understands that the single decision or isolated action is not the end of the story. It continually seeks feedback and reflection, asking questions like those posed at the end of each WBC chapter meeting, "How did it go?" and "Where do we go from here?" Intrinsic to the process is the acknowledgment that growth in moral understanding and moral decision-making is cumulative. Each decision and action builds upon all that went on before. Each sets the stage for what will follow. Yesterday's decisions, large and small, build to shape the direction for today's choices and tomorrow's preferences. For this reason, the process or method followed by a business leader, or anyone else, in his or her own decision-making is of crucial importance.

II. A Course in Moral Decision-Making

This course or sequence of topics is designed to promote moral understanding, deciding, and acting by coming to grips with our successful (and sometimes less than successful) acts of understanding and deciding in everyday business life. We look to see what is going on so that we might come to know how better to tackle problems and issues when they arise. Moral knowing is a skill. Like any skill, we become more proficient with practice and are helped by intelligent coaching along the way. Moreover, our religious faith can offer important guidance for growth in moral knowing, deciding, and acting.

We realize that in our business and professional lives we are never alone. We find ourselves living and working with others. We are in a world that is God's creation; sustained by God's grace and saved by God's redemption. It is, at the same time, a world that is quite hospitable to evil and sin.

Our moral guidance systems, our skills in moral knowing and decision-making, all relate to living in a very dynamic world, where we are subject to change, to growth and decline. This dynamic world is in turn shaped by our participation in it with others. The idea of a moral compass is born of the notion that our time at work is but part of a lifetime's journey where we have the freedom to choose who and what we are to make of ourselves and how we will affect those we love. For this awesome, exciting, and challenging journey, we all need a good compass and up-to-date charts. We can journey much more effectively when we have a good understanding of how we operate and a sharpened capacity to recognize key guideposts along the way.

III. Some Basic Operations and Guideposts

The journey to understanding how our moral knowing works is helped as we begin to locate certain essential features of the decision-making process. Here we highlight four aspects of our internal operations and some patterns found in all business transactions and organizations in order to take full advantage of the series of inquiries contained in the ten topics that follow:

An Inner Drive toward Moral Responsibility

Our sense of moral responsibility is embedded in our very makeup. This sense is not dropped in on us from the outside. It is a part of who we are. Test yourself to see if it is not true. Recall a time when you suddenly heard a child's cry, received an ominous call, or happened upon a scene with things out of kilter. What was the first sensation or feeling? These are times when something almost erupts from within us driving us out of ourselves to care for or about something or someone else. These were times when we are moved to respond to a person, a thing, or an event. We can feel this drive even if its source and direction are not clear. An energizing feeling of care directs our attention outward. The fact to notice is that this dynamism exists and that it mobilizes us to act with respect to objects or persons outside of ourselves. This same dynamic drive moves us forward to understanding and knowing the right thing to do. We can be aware of the drive for or on behalf of another person or thing at work in us, propelling us, as we make moral judgements. It is the fundamental source for what will develop and function as our moral rules, our moral compass.

A Series of Acts

Each moral decision can be broken down into an interlocking series of distinct steps or actions. The fundamental, outward-directed drive not only propels us to our moral judgments but also guides us through these stages along the way. The process begins with our searching for, paying attention to, and understanding all the relevant facts. This stage matures with our coming to a judgement as to how to best explain the situation, event, or occurrence. Immediately, it moves us forward to understand and judge the values at stake. With a grasp of the values involved, we move finally to the act of decision and implementation. This series of acts often proceeds so fluidly and so swiftly that we only notice the end result. However, underneath what might appear as a smooth arc from initiating impulse to action lies this series of connected operations. Good moral decisions occur when the acts at each stage along the path are performed well. Conversely, when we fall short we find that one or more of the acts in the series are neglected or haphazardly done. Among the exercises in the topics that follow are several directed to helping us to discover from our own experience each of the stages or actions in this series of operations. We will look to our own business decisions, good and bad, as the basic text for understanding.

Our Frame of Reference

We never operate in a vacuum, morally or otherwise. All of our actions, including our acts of moral decision, take place within a frame of reference or horizon. This framework includes all that we know and care about, the ideas, conditions, and assumptions that guide us in our perceiving, understanding, explaining, valuing, and judging. It determines the reach or limit of what we can understand and the judgments we make at any particular time. What we know and value or disvalue determines what we are attracted to and what we try to avoid.

There are also things we know that we do not know. There are matters we have a hunch we might come to learn about someday but presently lie beyond our reach. Sometimes these matters are called the "known unknown." In math this idea is often represented by the symbol x . Then, there are things we can not even imagine. There exists a world so far beyond our experience that it exceeds our ability even to question or probe the possibilities.

The beginning topics in this course explore our frames of reference, the corporate culture, and the traps to good decision-making hidden from us because of the limits of our horizon or frame of reference.

The Dynamic at Work

Our horizon, what we know and care about changes. It can and does expand and grow over time. The inner drive powering us through our actions of moral decision can, in the process, also enlarge our horizons, causing us to expand the scope of the good we desire. Our experience just as clearly demonstrates that our choices sometimes move us in the other direction. We can shrink morally.

We come to sense and appreciate the dynamic at work in us that directing our attention and driving efforts to value. The value-seeking motivational thrust that drives us beyond ourselves permits us to move toward the discovery and internalization of previously unknown values. It pushes us in the development and promotion of virtues in a cumulative pattern for improvement. We will explore the dynamic at work and its cumulative pattern in the topics and exercises selected for this course.

Social Organization, Business Transactions, and Participants

Understanding the Social Dynamic of Business

The development of skill in moral decision-making would be half-baked if we stopped after considering ourselves as isolated individuals. That simply is not the world we live in. It is clearly not the world of business and the professions. Our companies, firms, and associations exist as social structures. They gather and organize individuals to provide needed goods and services for far larger multiples of people in society. They do this through many systems, patterns of cooperation, and interactions that ease the process along. In business, we see large numbers of people who are required to cooperate in one fashion or another in order to accomplish a particular goal.

In this context, it is clear that the decisions we make not only affect our own development, our growth or decline. They also impact the organizations where we work and the ways of doing business generally. What we experience of the dynamic at work in ourselves is also applicable to our business organizations. The systems and behaviors of

an organization either promote or discourage the inborn value-seeking thrust of the individuals within their organizations and with others they encounter. There is no neutral.

The mission of the Woodstock Business Conference does not stop with its first goal, personal integration. It moves on to the second and third goals, developing corporate cultures consistent with Judeo-Christian values and beneficially influencing society as a whole. The topics in this course will highlight additional guideposts for moral decision-making within the framework of these three levels of concern.

Internal Structure of Transactions

Any business or commercial transaction is a social construct. It has an internal structure with identifiable steps or stages. Little can be attained by any one individual acting alone. Most goals and objectives can only be met when a numbers of participants successfully negotiate each of the stages. As a result of this social structure, moral obligations are imposed on all participants to do what is necessary to proceed through each stage because they must successfully move through each stage if the goals of the transaction are to be met.

An Illustration

An office lease helps to illustrate this structure. The stages of a lease transaction begin with (i) initial introduction of the parties and validation of their intentions, (ii) qualification of the parties' abilities to perform under an anticipated lease, (iii) inspection of the premises, (iv) negotiation of the terms of the lease, (v) documentation, and (vi) final formalities. Each stage is ultimately aimed to secure facilities for lessor to conduct and to provide steady rental income for the landlord. In a business transaction we can see the stages, the necessary social structure. The clear goals of the transaction serve to highlight the aims and related structures within each participating business. Beyond the goals of the landlord and its rental agents and the goals of the tenant and those assisting it to secure necessary office space, the lease transaction may also involve architects, contractors, and tradespeople who build out the work space, government inspectors, utilities, business machine and furniture providers, bankers who help finance the transaction, and the attorneys who document the lease. Each has its own specific goals. Each has to cooperate if the deal is to be done. The patterns of cooperation and resultant obligations among the several participants necessary to complete the lease transaction can be noticed.

From the example of a simple office lease one can generalize to any business transaction and identify the necessary stages, patterns of cooperation, and resulting obligations that combine to make that business deal the social structure that it inevitably is.

Notice the Stages and the Health of Participating Organizations and Associations

Good moral decisions in business require people to notice the scheme or series of stages necessary to complete a transaction. Because organizations and associations of people

must cooperate to get the deal done, the health of those organizations and their arrangements must also be taken into account in any comprehensive moral decision.

Topics in this course focus attention on the social structures found in ordinary business transactions and within participating organizations. Participants will be led to experience and identify the social dynamics and moral claims integral to business operations.

IV. What Difference Does Religious Faith Make?

Mere attention to what is going on in ourselves, within our organizations, and in business transactions as they unfold still is not enough. As judgements of fact and value are made, decisions taken, and action initiated, those interested in moral decision-making ask, "What difference does one's religious faith make in this situation?" Questions about the role of religious faith, gospel values, and finding God spontaneously arise as one undertakes the journey outlined by the topics in this course.

One view holds that our faith marks an encounter with God and God's grace moving us to meet and address instances of social dysfunction and sin. This occurs wherever we are we are called to harness the cooperation of others. It happens when we see the possibility for and manifest the value of seeking the good. In gratitude and appreciation for God's gifts to us, faith motivates us to discover and chose God's will in the concrete situation at hand. It empowers us to face up to the challenge, take on the conflicts, and renew the social structures that govern our firms and our business transactions. We are charged to identify and address the roles and patterns of cooperation within and among our business organizations. We are enabled by faith to look for God's grace in the middle of a crisis. It is a power that transcends and reconciles the cumulative effects of laziness and inattention, bias and suspicion, cynicism and mistrust. Our religious faith working intelligently in the middle of business transactions empowers us to have a beneficial influence on our organizations and society.

Christian faith acknowledges decline and evil in the world; but, by reason of God's redemptive act it claims that sin is not the last word. It sees the transformative power of divine love at work in everyday life on the job and at the office. This realization directs our concerns and desires as we search for solutions to human problems. It lines us up for an encounter with God's grace with the result being attitudes of joy and gratitude. It leads us in the search for forgiveness and reconciliation and the quest for the greater good.

Many of the insights in this Part One are taken from the work of Fr. James L. Connor, S.J, and J. Michael Stebbins of the Woodstock Theological Center and Kenneth Melchin at Saint Paul University, Ottawa. The Appendix has background materials from Fr. Connor and Dr. Stebbins. Dr. Melchin's book *Living with Other People*, Novalis/Liturgical Press, Ottawa and Collegetown, MN (1999) is particularly germane and insightful.

V. A Project for the Year: A Consensus Statement to Help Build a Moral Compass

The aim of this course is to help people in business and the professions sharpen their intelligence and grow in the skill of good moral decision-making. Accordingly, we ask Woodstock Business Conference members who take this course help us to promote moral decision-making by developing a consensus statement based upon their experience locating and refining their moral compass. Such a consensus statement should best be drafted at the end of the course. It should contain:

- (1) a brief description of what participants learned as they explored their acts of moral decision-making,
- (2) a list of the valuable questions to ask,
- (3) an itemization of the traps and pit-falls to good moral decisions, and
- (4) recommendations as to what might help individuals and organizations locate a reliable moral guidance system.

An example of the kinds of questions others find valuable is contained in the Woodstock Theological Center's book, *Ethical Issues in Managed Health Care* (Georgetown University Press, 1999). It is called "Questions to Guide Ethical Decision Making" and is set out in the Appendix.

Statements from each WBC chapter participating in this course will be combined to produce guidance for others, promoting understanding and locating guideposts for good moral decision-making for men and women in the workplace.

VI. Conclusion

As the WBC chapter meeting referred to at the beginning drew to a close, the group returned to the question of how to locate what was morally correct. One executive said he saw an answer from Peter's story:

What would the motivation be for Peter's turnabout? When Jesus looked at Peter standing in the courtyard, their eyes locked and their personal relationship came alive. This was a man that Jesus loved and respected very deeply. When that happened, Peter saw someone he really loved. He must have recalled the community in which they shared their lives and values together. It all came alive to Peter in that look. Then Peter realized that what he had done was not up to snuff. Sure, he had been very confused and may even have thought, "What good could he have done?" But, the basic question is, not so much what do you think, but who do you love? When push comes to shove, the values of our communities, groups, and the people we love will guide our actions. We are

sustained by our communities of love. I think it is there that we will be able to retrieve our moral compass.

Life is too important to leave it to happenstance, hunch, intuition, or hit-or-miss. We need to discover and understand this unfolding structure of human operations in ourselves. We also need to realize that we are in this together. We need to collaborate, and do it as well as possible. It is hoped that, at the conclusion of this series of topics, WBC members notice in themselves an increase in the skill of knowing and doing the right thing and that WBC chapters as communities will produce tangible statements that can serve others in their journey of moral understanding and acting.

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