

A Failure of Ethics

Current research by secular and church groups tracks how people practice their faith priorities. Ten years ago, 80% of North Americans claimed to be Christian, and most regularly attended Church. Today, that number has slipped 15%. Researchers say that people are searching for God. But, where they search is increasingly outside the Church, and on one's own.

All faith trends impact society, including the workplace. But, today's patterns are having a widespread, negative impact the workplace. As people turn away from being informed and nurtured by the 'Church,' their sense of ethics becomes impaired.

Ethics asks: to whom am I responsible, and for what? Applied to Christianity and taught through the Church, ethics is the study of Christ-centeredness in one's BEing and DOing - living and working. We are responsible to Christ and to practice his values.

People, outside the Church, leave themselves open to false truths and values. Diminish or dismiss Jesus from the center of how we live and work, and other values will compete for our priority. Those values include organizational culture; what the boss says; society's ideologies; and the self, to name a few. It is the self, however, which invariably gravitates to the center of our values. Putting self as our center is called, self-referencing.

Self-referencing can be understood as: *If I consider myself a good person, and/or if I think my idea or conduct is noble, or if I think a particular course of action is best, then I may proceed with it.* People who live this way usually insist that they believe in God. They give generously to charities, love humanity, and are good to their families. But, the center of their lives is *self*, and their values and decision-making are self-referenced.

Self-referencing is dangerous. It is limited by what we learn and do on our own. Limited responses are incomplete responses. They damage people, workplaces, our economy, and our social fabric.

Examples abound! They include politicians who live by their own values and professional ideologies, damaging their families, abusing the public's trust, and placing themselves above the law.

Self-referencing infects service organizations and charities. Their services are compromised when individuals decide what is appropriate conduct, bypassing administrative rules and procedures, government regulations, and the public's interests.

In business, especially nowadays, self-referencing permeates like a cancer. Business events in the past year are filled with examples. A particularly striking one is the subject of Lawrence McDonald's recent book, [A Colossal Failure of Common Sense](#). Mr. McDonald explains the values and events which caused Lehman Brothers' collapse. The values are ethical self-referencing.

Greed, intimidation, pride and arrogance are recurring themes in Mr. McDonald's book. These values drove decision-making, ultimately destroying the company. More important, as Mr. McDonald explains, people were damaged - employees and stakeholders, clients, publics and, ultimately, the wider economy. Those themes are classic manifestations of ethical self-referencing.

Christian ethics is the opposite of self-referencing. Christian ethics are centered in Jesus and his teaching that **God** is the center of all things, not the self. This is God's world and it operates by her/his values. There are consequences for going against God's values.

Jesus summarized the core of Christian ethics as: *love God, love self, and love neighbor.*

- *Love God* proclaims God as our personal, moral and professional center. We love God as a being, and respect his/her authority. We choose to live by God's values.
- *Love self* recognizes that each of us is a being, whom God uniquely made and passionately loves. Loving self helps us appreciate how precious we are to God. It also helps us love other people. How we love others depends on how we love ourselves, a point well-documented in Scripture and psychology.
- *Love neighbor* is our response to all people, celebrating their uniqueness as human beings, passionately loved by God.

To use the word, love, in the competitive nature of the marketplace probably sounds strange. What love does, though, is infuse the marketplace with respect, civility and courtesy. It is the opposite of greed, intimidation and arrogance. You can be competitive and love. In fact, when so many organizations are struggling for a competitive edge, nothing succeeds like respect, civility and courtesy. 'Success' is related to values.

To choose Jesus and his values for our ethical center is not easy. It needs nurture, encouragement and support beyond the self. It needs a Church community. For those who live apart from faith communities, learning and practicing ethics becomes that much harder. God made us to be in community (Church), and benefit from God's work in it.

Self-referenced ethics is a growing cancer in North America, fed by more and more people distancing themselves from Jesus' teachings, explained and encouraged by the Church. Self-referenced values destroy workplaces and people's lives. Jesus and his values enhance workplaces, stakeholders and publics. Your local church can help you learn what Christ's ethics are, and how to apply them with his help.

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