

What Do God and Profit Have in Common?

We seek to honor God in all we do at ServiceMaster and also to grow profitably. Are these two objectives compatible? Do they mix? Should they mix? The daily operations and performance of our company confirms they can and do. But for many, we still represent an oddity—something that goes against the norm of separating the sacred from the secular.

As we prepare for another annual meeting, we have once again received letters and questions from our shareholders regarding these two objectives. Some express concern about the use of “God language” in our annual report. They believe we are on shaky ground when we try to mix God and profit. Others think it is an incredible presumption to suggest that the service we do for profit can be considered a work of God.

On the other hand, some shareholders want the company to be more explicit about proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ as part of honoring God in all we do. They remind us that no one can serve two masters—God and money—and suggest that our objective of growing profitably may be encroaching on our first objective of honoring God.

We seek to honor God as an *end* goal and recognize that growing profitably is a *means* goal. Both are important. For us, the common link between God and profit is people, all of whom

have been created in God's image, are part of the world God loves, and are essential to the running of this business.

Reference Point

We do not use our first objective as a basis for exclusion. It is, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix. It also provides a reference point for seeking to do what is right and avoiding what is wrong. It does not guarantee we will always do the right thing; we make our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we typically cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out into the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

Our objectives are not to be used as simplistic reasons for financial success. They cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. They do, however, provide a common foundation from which to confront life's difficulties and failures with the assurance that the starting point never changes. They cause us to think about and rethink who we are, why we work, and what is the purpose and meaning of it all.

Although we live in a diverse and pluralistic world, we believe that the work environment need not be emasculated to a neutrality of no belief. A belief that God exists and is active is not just some relic of the past or, as Stephen Carter notes in his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, like building model airplanes—just another hobby, something quiet and private, something trivial and not really a fit activity for intelligent, public-spirited adults.

As a business firm, we want to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we don't want to play by these rules, we don't belong in the ball game. But we also believe the business firm has another purpose. It should be a moral community to help shape human character and behavior. It should be an open environment where the questions of who God is, who we are, and how we relate our faith to our work are issues of

discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. They are “whole” people who come to work every day, and they bring their faith with them.

Peter Drucker’s classic definition of management is “getting the right things done through others,” but what we are suggesting at ServiceMaster is that leaders and managers cannot stop there. We also must be concerned about what happens to people in the process. The people who are producing profits and accomplishing the mission of the firm are human beings with cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. As the soul of our firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage, which is why we as leaders of the firm must be involved in what I refer to as “soulcraft.”

Soulcraft

The Leadership Engine, the business bestseller by Noel Tichy of the University of Michigan Business School, describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level. ServiceMaster was one of the companies he studied. At first, he was concerned about whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives. He wrote,

For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value to honor God in all we do is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more “normal” organizations. But the truth is that...when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal, [other-worldliness] about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. Profit [to them] is a means in God's world to be used and invested, not an

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end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts.

Tichy goes on to say,

ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values...because everyone from the [top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of [their] twenty-one principles of leadership says, if you don't live it, you don't believe it. And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company and no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work.

As we continue to implement our objectives in ways consistent with what has been reported by this objective third party, we can confidently say to our shareholders that God and profit *do* mix. They are part of running a good business. As we keep our focus on honoring God as an end goal and growing profitably as a means goal, we do not serve two masters and we remain mindful of the admonition of Jesus, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?”

POINTS TO PONDER:

- ✦ We seek to honor God as an *end* goal and recognize that growing profitably is a *means* goal. Both are important. For us, the common link between God and profit is people, all of whom have been created in God's image.
- ✦ The business firm...should be an open environment where the questions of who God is, who we are, and how we relate our faith to our work are issues of discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding.

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- ✦ Management is “getting the right things done through others,” but what we are suggesting...is that leaders and managers cannot stop there. We also must be concerned about what is happening to people in the process.

Questions:

- ✦ What are the important people or moral values included in your mission statement? Is profit an end goal or a means goal in your business?
- ✦ In what practical ways do you as a manager or leader seek to develop the people you lead?
- ✦ If a business expert like Noel Tichy spent time at your company, what would he say about how your written objectives line up with your daily practices? Where would he suggest improvement?