

# **BUSINESS AS A CALLING: AN MBA ELECTIVE EXPERIENCE**

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## **Abstract**

Catholic Schools and Colleges of Business have an opportunity to help their students recognize the importance of seeing their chosen business profession as a spiritual calling. Capitalizing on this opportunity would not only help students integrate their work life and personal life but also see their work as more than just a means for income and advancement. This paper discusses how and why the authors developed an MBA elective course experience at the University of Dayton to provide such an experience. Using the major themes from Catholic Social Teaching and the University's Marianist heritage as their foundation, the authors engages graduate business students in a semester long examination of their core values, beliefs, personal vision, and spiritual calling. The course also featured prominent alumni and business professionals who shared their stories about how they integrated their faith in their professions.

## **Introduction**

Living-Asset Stewardship, Servant Leadership, Corporate Social Responsibility, Living Companies, Learning Organizations, and the importance of corporate values, are topics that are commanding greater attention as organizations struggle to deal with issues of how to balance the needs of shareholders and stakeholders, how to develop real purpose and meaning for employees, and how to overcome the fragmentation, distrust, fear, and internal competition that robs an organization of its ability to continually create and share the new knowledge and innovation so necessary for survival.

The above topics recognize the intersection of business practice and the wider societal concerns that reflect and respect the complex interdependency between these two realities. The intersection between business practice and the social context has important consequences for both business and society, especially in light of the corporate frauds and financial scandals of the past seven years.

Since many of the issues and topics noted above involve the role that a firm's culture can play in encouraging/discouraging certain behaviors, the issue of how organizations create healthy ethical cultures and the importance of "tone at the top" are also inextricably linked to the intersection of business practice and societal concerns.

The challenge for Catholic business schools is how to address these issues in their core business courses both at the undergraduate and graduate level given their Catholic identity and religious heritage. More specifically, the question becomes how Catholic business schools can use Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and their religious heritage to inform and enhance those topics that bear on the issues noted above.

The authors were drawn into a consideration of these issues through their work with a School of Business committee at the University of Dayton charged with addressing how to more fully integrate CST and the school's Marianist heritage into the core business curriculum. One of the primary outcomes of this effort was the development of a very successful MBA elective course titled, *Business as a Calling*. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to share the development process for the course, and (2) to describe the course, its objectives, and its methodology.

### **The Theme: Business as a Calling**

It is probably easier for students pursuing degrees in one of the "helping professions" (i.e. nursing, medicine, teaching, social work) to see their careers as a vocation or calling than it is for business students. While this may not be a surprise, as business educators in a Catholic and Marianist university, we must not be comfortable with this difference for the following reasons:

- Business is one of the major sectors of society
- Each sector is integrally related to the others
- Cooperation and collaboration among all sectors of society is needed for a healthy and fully functioning economic system
- Business has obligations to its stakeholders and to the welfare of society as a whole

As a Marianist university we are committed to an educational process that focuses on the development of the whole person and a formation in faith. These two characteristics of a Marianist education involve the recognition of one's vocation or calling as necessary to fulfill God's plan for all of creation. This identification defines what a person is to become and what he or she is to contribute to society. It is also recognition of the role of work in developing the whole person. As individuals recognize their unique calling to their chosen business profession, they can begin to see their role and responsibility in developing healthier organizational cultures and a better economic system. In an October 1998 Harvard Management Update about spirituality in the workplace, Judi Neal noted that, "I am sensing a real hunger for people to connect to something greater than themselves...a huge hunger to nourish the soul and spirit." Seeing one's profession, their life's work as a vocation is essential to nourishing both soul and spirit. In an interview in 2000, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) said..."For a true calling, income is not the criterion, but the practicing of some skill in the service of mankind."

The authors were also convinced that while good ethical coverage in core business classes and/or a required ethics course is necessary in a Catholic business school, it would not be sufficient to address the following issues:

- Can values and beliefs improve the workplace and enhance performance?
- Can we create organizational cultures wherein people really look forward to getting to work each day?
- Are there other management and leadership models besides those rooted in traditional thinking and conventional wisdom that can empower employees to excel and to find pride, joy, and fulfillment in their work lives?
- Is the moral, spiritual, and character development of those aspiring to leadership positions just as important as the technical/functional skills of leadership?

For these reasons, the authors believed that the School of Business must respond to the challenge of helping students recognize the importance of seeing their professions as a spiritual calling. Capitalizing on this opportunity would not only help students develop as whole persons but also see their life's work as more than just a means for income and advancement. A well designed course could also identify their responsibility as business professionals not only to their firms but also to society.

### **Course Development Process**

Since the authors were already co-chairing an ad-hoc committee appointed by the dean and charged with discussing how the School of Business could more fully integrate its Catholic and Marianist identity into the school's curriculum, a series of meetings involving the authors and then Dean Patricia Meyers were held in the fall semester 2005. Support from Dean Meyers for developing the course changed the focus of these meetings to how best to proceed with the course development process and whether the course should be offered at the graduate or undergraduate level. Since the course would be for elective credit and clearly experimental in terms of its design and pedagogy, the dean suggested that the course be offered as an MBA elective. The authors agreed with the dean's suggestion.

A target date of fall 2006 was set for offering the course for the first time. A decision was made not to begin the course development process by looking for texts and articles in support of our views and beliefs and then building a course around these materials. We wanted to begin with a blank slate in order to create a unique experience. The process began by identifying course themes that would later develop into course objectives. This process took several meetings before reaching agreement on the following themes:

- Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and our Marianist heritage can be useful in exploring issues related to the role and purpose of a business, its relationship to the common good, and the need to see one's entry into a business profession as a spiritual calling.
- Work has an important spiritual dimension.
- It is important to identify and study individuals and businesses that are known for exemplary practices associated with the theme Business as a Calling.
- Examine how CST and our Marianist heritage can inform and enhance a firm's culture, management philosophy and practices, leadership development, and our economic system.

Early in the development process it was decided that if we were going to create a unique student experience it would be necessary to develop a pedagogy that went beyond a format of lecture, readings, class discussion, films, and case analysis. Guided by our third theme, we knew that it was important to find individuals both in the alumni and business community that could speak to our themes and objectives and be a part of the course. To begin to lay the groundwork for such involvement we decided to seek alumni and business community reactions early in the development process to our themes and ideas. Breakfast meetings were held over an eight week period with both alumni and business leaders to gather input about our themes and the course. Not only was the idea for the course and themes enthusiastically received but also permission to

use their input in helping to market the course was granted. We were also able to secure commitments during this development process for guest speakers once the course was scheduled.

### **Course Objectives**

Once the feedback on course themes was completed we began the effort to finalize course objectives. The following course objectives emerged from the original themes:

- To explore the relationship between the growing interest in spirituality in business, particularly in the mainstream business press, and the search for deeper meaning and personal fulfillment in our work lives
- To recognize that the long-term solution to the fragmentation, conflict, fear, and intense personal competition found in most organizations is an awareness of the importance of creating cultures that recognize the importance of building a workplace community
- To recognize that one's calling/vocation into a business profession is a necessary first step toward a process of integrating one's professional and personal life---a critical element in finding the deeper meaning and wholeness in our work lives
- To explore ways for business professionals to use their gifts and talents to improve both their organizations and our economic system. Our Catholic and Marianist identity and tradition contain many useful principles/practices/philosophies that can be used to inform and enhance organizations and our economy.
- The real role of leadership is to create the necessary workplace community that allows the individual the space to find the deeper meaning and search for wholeness in one's work life. Such efforts are not only beneficial to employees but also critical to the firm's efforts to create the kind of culture that fosters deep personal commitment, innovation, a culture of ethics, and a learning organization.
- Leadership is not values neutral. Therefore, we can not separate discussions about one's leadership ability from discussions about the moral and character development of individuals who aspire to leadership positions.

Through the writings and works from both CST and our Marianist tradition, we wanted to reexamine in light of the above objectives many of the conventional management and economic theories, practices, and policies found in any core MBA business curriculum. By using these works, we wanted students to explore how these principles and practices from our tradition could be related to efforts to create healthy corporate cultures, more effective leadership models, and a better understanding of the intersection of business practice and societal concerns.

### **Course Methodology**

#### **Guest Speakers**

To achieve our intended objectives it was important to involve business men and women willing to share their calling as business professionals. While readings, case analysis, discussions, and reflection papers were a necessary component of the course experience, they would not have the same impact as the involvement of successful business professionals willing to share their faith experience and calling in the pursuit of their careers.

To implement this component of the course we decided to invite nine business professionals during the course of the semester to spend sixty to ninety minutes sharing their experience with the class. These individuals came from a variety of backgrounds: Chief Executive Officers and

owners of successful family owned businesses, a prominent law partner, the former CEO of a major bank, retired executives from industry and the Air Force, a current vice-president of a local firm, and a physician and CEO of a national blood and tissue bank.

### **Credo and Vision Statements**

Another unique aspect of the course was an assignment, in lieu of an in-class final exam, that required each student to develop a credo and personal vision statement. As the student feedback will later show, this proved to be a very important and successful exercise.

Guidelines were provided for both the credo and vision statement. Students were told that the credo represented a self-reflection designed to help each person identify their ethical principles, beliefs, and core values. We wanted them to address the question, “Who is this person who is or soon will become a business professional?” An additional issue to be addressed was, “What major tensions between my principles, values, and beliefs and business profession are most likely to occur?”

Guidelines for the personal vision statement stressed that the two major components were to be core ideology and envisioned future. Core ideology is made up of one’s basic values and primary purpose. This foundational ideology defines the character of who you are. It is your center, your essence or soul. The envisioned future is composed of goals and a description of what it will be like to achieve those goals. The envisioned future represents those 10-30 year audacious goals---those unrealized dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

Not only was the assignment well received but the outcome exceeded our expectations. One student wrote that....”The most important assignment of the class was without a doubt the credo and vision statements. I will be carrying these with me when I go on job interviews to make sure the firm’s values match up with my own.” Other students commented on how they benefited from having to surface issues and feelings they had not addressed or thought of previously. One student wrote.....”It was the first class that challenged me to find myself---to realize what I really stand for.” Another wrote...”You challenged us to think in a way we’ve never been challenged to. You affected not only my work/career, but my home life as well.” Clearly the use of both the credo and vision statement assignment was responsible for this “going deeper” experience.

### **Challenging Conventional Thinking**

Since most of our students take elective MBA classes near the end of their program, we wanted to find a way to engage them in a reflection and discussion of topics that are usually presented from a conventional business and management viewpoint in required business courses. We decided to address the issue of the role and purpose of a business in order to begin this reflective process. Two assignments in particular helped to jump-start this discussion. Marjorie Kelly’s book *The Divine Right of Capital*, and *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II’s encyclical were assigned course readings. We asked students to contrast both of these readings with concepts and theories presented and discussed in other MBA classes that dealt with such issues as agency theory, stockholder verses stakeholder theory, leadership, and the role and purpose of a business. Reflection papers were used to engage the class in a discussion of the concepts and theories presented in these readings as contrasted with theories and concepts presented in other MBA

courses. Our primary intent in these assignments was to foster a deeper reflection of the overriding theme of the course, namely, “If business is a calling, then what are we being called to do as business professionals?”

### **CST and Marianist Values**

Our final course theme centered on how CST and our Marianist values could inform and enhance a firm’s culture, management philosophy, and practices. The primary purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate the “practical wisdom” of using CST and our Marianist values to help organizations develop healthy corporate cultures, enhance leadership, and improve performance. To demonstrate the practical wisdom in the Church’s social teaching we focused our efforts on the following principles of CST:

(1) the dignity of the person and work, (2) the common good, (3) subsidiarity—delegating authority and decision making where possible to the lowest level in order to promote a culture of respect and trust for people and pride in work, and (4) solidarity---fostering a culture of loyalty to one’s co-workers and sense of the larger community. We used examples from Joseph Bragdon’s book, *Profit for Life*, to show how some of the best run companies in the world used many of the principles and practices that fall under the rubric of CST and our Marianist values. Bragdon discusses how firms such as Toyota, Nokia, Johnson and Johnson, Nucor and many others demonstrate a profound respect for people, communities, and the environment in the way they conduct business and manage their firms. As a result, these firms not only do well, as measured by shareholder returns and stock market indices, but also achieve wonderful results for employees, customers, and their communities.

The examples used in *Profit for Life* also demonstrated many of our Marianist values such as practical wisdom, reading the signs of the times, and learning in community. We were able to provide examples from Bragdon’s Living Asset Stewardship (LAS) companies of how LAS leadership is committed to the engagement of the whole person at work, how teams learn in community to be better problem solvers, and how the practical wisdom of this approach to management has helped these firms outperform their competition by reading the signs of the times in terms of what it really means to become more flexible and responsible in meeting customer and employee needs in a global marketplace.

Finally, we used both CST and our Marianist values to address an aspect of leadership that is often not covered or taken for granted in management courses, namely, the moral and character development of the leader. Peter Senge has noted that in recent years there has been a decoupling of the connections between the personal development and maturity of those aspiring to leadership positions and the capabilities of those in leadership positions. From our discussion with MBA students most note that discussions of leadership in other business courses still center on the functions of leadership---strategy formulation, strategic planning, execution, etc. and not the importance of the moral and character development of those in positions of authority. This is both surprising and disappointing in light of the numerous corporate scandals in recent years involving the failure of leadership in creating healthy corporate cultures.

### **Course Results**

Formal course evaluations scheduled by the School of Business both semesters have been very positive. However, the authors have conducted their own form of evaluation and feedback by

sponsoring a dinner outside of class the evening the final assignments are due. These dinner meetings have been extremely helpful in assessing both course content and methodology. Moreover, the discussion during these gatherings served to sharpen students' understanding of calling and to solidify their commitment to that perspective in their chosen professions.

For example, the first semester the course was offered we had no idea how effective both the credo and vision statement assignments would be. A number of students saw these assignments as challenging them for the first time to think about their values and beliefs. In one example a student commented that..."I came into the class not knowing what to expect and came out with a whole new perspective about who I am and what I want to do with my life. This class forced me to really identify who I am and what I want to accomplish". Another said that..."This course helped me understand who I am and how my spirituality factors into the kind of employee and employer I want to be. I was able to come to conclusions about a set of personal beliefs that I will be able to draw upon for guidance through the rest of my life".

The feedback on the use of guest speakers also confirmed how effective this process was in helping the class to recognize the importance of one's spiritual and moral development. It also demonstrated how you can both do well and do good. One student commented that ..."I don't know how else to put this, but this course changed my life. I learned that it is indeed possible to be driven to help others and to be successful at the same time". Another commented that..."Through this class, its speakers and topics, I have been able to realize a purpose in my life as a businessman and understand that having a strong set of beliefs will only enhance my career".

Additional feedback revealed the need to reduce the volume of reading since a number of the articles assigned were never discussed due to time constraints. A number of students commented both semesters that they would like to see fewer readings with more in-depth discussion and reflection. One such example had to do with a suggestion to spend additional time on the moral and character development issues associated with leadership. A number of students have also suggested the need to create an MBA 659 Business as a Calling web site for the course that could be used as an on-going resource both during and after the course. This suggestion, among others, is under active consideration.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

We launched this course in the fall 2006 semester not knowing what to expect or how it would be received. Our underlying premise was that we could use CST and our Marianist heritage to inform and enhance the educational experience of those students desiring careers as business professionals. We wanted to challenge our graduate students to extend themselves beyond just a consideration of ethical issues and dilemmas. We wanted them to see how approaching one's profession as a calling would not only make them a distinctive graduate but also help them see the integration that is possible between one's personal and professional life.

We have been both gratified and humbled by the experience. While we have achieved a degree of success there is much that still needs to be done. In the final analysis, we know that what we really brought to the class was a passion and conviction that as a Catholic/Marianist School of Business we had an obligation to help our graduate students to become more fully integrated

business professionals. The rest of the story and the ultimate success of the course was more about a group of students who were willing to accept the challenge and enter into the process, experience, and space that we provided. Perhaps this final student comment best sums up what we ultimately brought to the course.....”You touched each one of us in that class--- partially because of the passion you have for the subject---but mostly because you challenged us to think in a way we’ve never been challenged to”.

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