Leading Wisely in Difficult Times is an inside look at three companies and their leaders who desire a deeper relationship between faith and work. Their inspiration did not strike with bolts of lightning or visionary dreams, but with whispers of grace, thoughtful conversations, seemingly accidental encounters, and most importantly, a long formation that was started in their families and nurtured through their churches and education. These are not stories of perfection, of saints without blemish, but of leaders who are saints under construction.

We open Chapter 1 with the observation that though faith is taken seriously by many leaders in business, their example is often ignored. Our current academic culture reads business as purely secular, legal, and highly instrumental. Most business cases marginalize religious faith. They fail to take it seriously as part of a leader’s moral vision.

Many founders of companies started with a vision that was informed by their religious faith, companies like Cadbury (Quaker), Malden Mills (Jewish), Herman Miller (Calvinist), Service Master (Evangelical), Dayton Hudson, now Target (Presbyterian), Cummings Engine (Disciples of Christ), Mondragon (Catholic), etc. Unfortunately, these motivations and visions are rarely commented upon.

Our cases, three companies examined in six chapters, tell this story. Two chapters are devoted to each of the three companies we examine. The first chapter outlines the case itself, beginning with a short description of a dilemma perplexing the leader. In order to understand the problem at hand, we provide background to the situation by explaining the kind of company the leader is working in as well as the faith dimension of either the leader or the founders of the company. This background description allows the reader to be more informed in order to address the dilemma at hand by connecting the specific situation to the larger culture the leader inhabits. The case then returns to the initial dilemma and how the leader deals with it and ends with questions for discussion.

The follow-up chapter to each of the cases reflects upon the questions of the prior chapter, bringing in theological sources for reflection. The point of this chapter is not to simply provide answers to the dilemma, but to bring the reader into deeper reflection on the significance of human action in business, especially within a broader theological vision.

Our first case on Reell Precision Manufacturing (Chapters 2 and 3) describes leaders wrestling with the question of whether to lay off employees or not during an economic downturn in their industry. Their options on the table for reducing payroll are relatively clear: laying off co-workers to achieve the necessary reduction in costs or implementing a program of reducing wages to prevent layoffs for as long as possible.

The case addresses how The Golden Rule, “treats others as you would like to be treated,” is not simply a vague disembodied platitude, but a powerful and authoritative principle of faith that guided the leaders in how to treat employees in times of retrenchment. It helped them to formulate a last alternative layoff policy, because that’s how people want to be treated. They also created a target wage (living wage), an employee ownership program, open book management, commitment to the community, and other programs and professional postures based upon their clear understanding of what it means to be spiritual, human beings.
Nonetheless, it is unclear whether they are at the last alternative—will revenue return, is their cost structure too large to support the business, are they too inefficient?

The second case on Engineering Products (Chapters 4 and 5) addresses the problem of when customers are king and begin to dictate the terms and conditions of business to such an extent that the identity of the company begins to change. They held significant power over EP, enabling them to dictate the terms of EP’s prices, production location, supplier relations, and so forth, which began to negatively affect its identity through declining employee morale and stewardship through shrinking margins.

Yet, the faith journey of Earl Stevens, the managing director of EP, prevented him from seeing his problems as simply being imposed from the outside. He had to come to terms with the fact that some of the strategic choices that he and the leadership team had made in the past were at least partly to blame for their current situation. It was this deep sense of responsibility that led to a confession by Stevens’ to his employees. What Stevens was essentially confessing is what being human is about, that we see things imperfectly and we act imperfectly. To grow in virtue involves admitting and learning from imperfect decisions. It is also about handling the consequences of those decisions, especially if they have significant negative impact on others.

The third case on Tomasso (Chapters 5 and 6) engages a leader’s challenge to practice a company policy that has become more difficult than it looks. The vice president of finance had to layoff two employees as a cost saving measure. Company policy is that managers who fire or layoff employees must follow-up with former employees twice.

This unusual policy was created by the CEO Robert Ouimet for two principal reasons. One is for managers to be sure that employees are alright and to see if they need further help. Another important reason for the practice is that the manager and former employees have the opportunity to reconcile differences. Ouimet’s faith has demands on him to humanize the world of work and not simply to enhance his pocketbook. He developed this practice to find creative ways for himself and his employees to develop as whole persons in the work they do.

The final chapter (7) concludes with a reflection on practical wisdom, which is the central virtue for the faithful leader. We provide three important lessons drawn from our particular case studies for the practically, wise leader. The first is “to take time to remember.” The second lesson is to take wise counsel. And the third lesson is the ability to have foresight.

It was these lessons that gave these faithful leaders a deep sense that their talents and the successes of their companies are not theirs alone. Without this gratitude for what has been received in grace and love, it is doubtful that Reell would have taken the time and made the sacrifice incumbent in that choice to save jobs. It would be highly improbable that Tomasso would seek reconciliation with its former employees, or that EP would have taken the care to communicate and confess their mistakes to their employees. These practices along with their ability to see things whole have been born from a call among these leaders to create bonds of connection that bind people together as a community of persons. Faithful leaders then become witnesses of action that reflect, over a lifetime, the image God has imprinted upon them, an image of a community of persons where each is fulfilled in the other.