



GIVING UP YOUR SOUL IS BAD BUSINESS

BY TÁCITO NOBRE

During tough times, companies—and the people in them—tend to give up their souls. Workers put aside who they truly are, what they most care about, and what they really want to create. They begin to do things they would have condemned in the past, such as managing their teams in ways that they themselves would never want to be managed, all in the name of accomplishing short-term results to remain competitive.

This process usually begins with the CEO. Pressured by shareholders' demands or analysts' expectations, top executives sacrifice their personal lives by working 70-hour work weeks. At the same time, they demand that everyone in the organization do the same, pressuring them to produce more with fewer resources. However, results do not necessarily follow. Instead, tension increases, and commitment, energy, and creativity all decline.

Executives justify sacrificing their souls because they believe that everything is secondary to the bottom line. However, this assumption is based on the erroneous belief that people need to work harder in order to produce better outcomes. This is not true. Working harder tends to produce more—but of the same. If companies want to increase their competitiveness, they need to constantly create new products and services, new strategies, new processes, and often a new organizational culture. As the cliché goes, they need to work smarter, not harder.

Feeding the Soul

But current working conditions don't support working smarter. According to quality pioneer Edward Deming, our prevailing system of management is based on fear. Fear of failure, fear of being embarrassed, fear of not getting a promotion, or fear of getting fired.

Fear is the dominant emotion—the main source of energy and the impetus to action.

But when human beings are in a state of fear, do they behave in innovative or habitual ways? Habitual, of course! When we're afraid, we almost always revert to our most ingrained patterns of behavior. In fact, brain physiologists explain that the primitive part of the brain takes over—the limbic system, where our “fight or flight” programming resides.

Why does management by fear still persist? Most organizations are still designed based on what Douglas McGregor termed “Theory X”—the idea that employees are unreliable and uncommitted, and work merely to earn a paycheck. From this perspective, people need to be bullied or frightened into acting on behalf of the organization. “Theory Y,” however, offers another possibility—that employees are responsible adults who want to make a contribution. Based on this alternative mindset, it is possible to consider aspiration as a source of action—one that is far more effective than desperation ever could be.

Businesses can learn a lot from sports and the arts in this regard. Ask an athlete what usually happens when she mentally repeats “Can't miss” or “Can't fail” before or during a performance versus repeating “I'll make it” or “I'll get it.” Thinking about what you want to create works much better than thinking about what you want to avoid. Picasso pointed out that if you trace the history of any great piece of art, the crucial moment in its development inevitably came when the artist had the vision of what needed to be created. Why would business be different? Being able to articulate what deeply matters to us is a powerful source of energy. As the old saying goes, “Dreams feed the soul.”

Accessing the Soul

Visualizing what we want to create doesn't mean escaping reality; it means being present in a new way. The martial arts offer an excellent example of handling challenges from a posture of creativity rather than fear. The essence of disciplines such as karate and aikido is to develop a capacity to be more and more quiet, centered, and relaxed in dangerous situations. Martial artists know that, by doing so, they can produce outstanding results.

During the last several years, the Society for Organizational Learning has sponsored a research project involving interviews with more than 150 leading scientists, artists, and government, business, and religious leaders. One of the conclusions reached by the researchers has been that the internal place from which a leader operates matters; in other words, the quality of consciousness determines the quality of performance.

If these ideas seem too abstract, take a moment to reflect on the best decisions you have made in your life, professionally or personally. Now remember where you were when you made those decisions. Were you in the office, feeling stressed or desperately grasping for an answer to your problems? Or were you taking a shower, driving quietly, or observing your kids? I wager it was the latter.

When Leonardo da Vinci was painting “The Last Supper,” the church commissioner was impatient for the painting to be completed and complained to the Duke that Leonardo occasionally took long breaks from his work. The commissioner argued, “If a gardener doesn't take his hands off his scissors during the whole day, why does [da Vinci] need to leave his paintbrush?” But Leonardo understood that he needed incubation periods, away

from the work, in order to produce his best. With humor, he replied to the Duke, “Great geniuses sometimes work better when they work less.”

Different fields of knowledge have alternative explanations for this phenomenon. Psychologists would say that our unconscious mind processes information, in quantity and speed, thousands and thousands of times more effectively than our conscious mind. When we turn off our conscious mind, we let the unconscious mind work better and the answer suddenly comes to us. Spiritual leaders would say that, in silencing our mind, we access our soul, which is our full potential and knows all.

Connecting Souls

Although individual performances are important, companies increasingly rely on decisions and actions taken by teams. Here, again, businesses can take lessons from the world of sports. High-performing sports teams sometimes find themselves “in the zone,” where they experience peak performance. Bill Russell, the star center of the 11-time world champion Boston Celtics, spoke of those special times: “Every so often a Celtic game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even a mental game, and would be magical. That feeling is very difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. It came rarely, and would last anywhere from five minutes to a whole quarter or more. . . . It would surround not only me and the other Celtics, but also the players on the other team, even

the referees.”

In researching all kinds of high-performing teams—heart surgeons, firefighters, astronauts, trial lawyers, business teams, and others—Carl Larson of the University of Denver found the same phenomenon reported in different terms: the atmosphere of the room becomes “super-charged”; there seems to be a “group mind” or “collective wisdom”; team members experience the sensation of being “a conscious part of even a more conscious whole” and feel a “luminous transparency” between all the participants. David Bohm, the famous quantum physicist, once explained this experience to consultant Joseph Jaworski as “a single intelligence that works with people who are moving in a relationship with one another.”

If you want scientific proof that this “single mind” could exist, consider the experiment by Mexican neurophysiologist Jacobo Grinberg-Zylberbaum. Two people meditated together for a period of 20 minutes, aiming to feel each other’s presence. They then entered separate Faraday chambers (metallic enclosures that block all electromagnetic signals) while attempting to maintain their direct communication. One of the subjects was shown a flash of light that produced electrophysiological responses; the responses were measured by a machine. In about one in four cases, although no electromagnetic signals could have been transmitted between the two subjects, the brain of the person who hadn’t been exposed to the light showed electrical activity quite similar to that displayed in the first subject.

In my work as consultant, I have

seen several groups experience this special kind of connection. Most of the time, the precipitating factor was that people talked openly and listened deeply—or, as I prefer to say, talked and listened from the heart. And as many ancient cultures believed, the heart leads directly to the soul.

Stop Giving Up, Start Using It

In modern society, we take for granted the existence of gravitational and magnetic fields. Executives and managers must also learn to recognize that every company produces its particular *social field*, created by people’s thoughts and emotions, relationships, and the organization’s physical space. This field is an invisible but powerful force that influences the quality of short- and long-term performance.

Giving up your soul doesn’t create a promising field and it doesn’t produce the best possible results, even over the short run. The alternative strategy: Start really using your soul—feeding, accessing, and connecting. By doing so, you will produce much better outcomes in all senses—financial and material, but also physical and spiritual. As Joseph Jaworski says, “Anyone who walks into a locker room of a championship team can feel the energy, the excitement, the mutual trust and the extraordinary sense of the possible.” Why can’t you feel the same when entering your office? It can be this way, as long as you bring your soul along for the ride. ■

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