Which comes first: fulfilling your core ministry purpose of equipping students from a Christian perspective or supporting the mission with business services? I serve as the chief financial officer at Compassion International, a large nonprofit ministry where I have been employed for 27 years. In addition, for many years I was on the board of directors for a large Christian school. But most important, for 16 years I had the privilege of supporting my two children as they attended Christian schools.

Some might question how a person who has served 27 years in an organization could still be stimulated, challenged, and stirred with passion. But being part of a dynamic ministry is anything but dull. When I began in 1980, Compassion was assisting 40,000 children, and it had a U.S.-based staff of about 35. Today we are aiding more than 850,000 children and are managing a U.S.-based staff of almost 600. Imagine the challenges of growing with a ministry that has experienced this type of change. Every one of the business services used to support our core ministry has changed many times. Throughout these years of change, I have come to recognize the critical need to guard core ministry and support functions so that they continue to walk equally yoked in quality, vision, alignment, and passion.

What do I mean by business services? It is a term to describe the many functions that support the core purpose of a ministry. In a school setting, these services may include accounting, administration, human resources, information technology, admissions, marketing, and development. None of these functions exist for their own end. They exist to support the core ministry purpose of the school. No one ever made the decision to sacrificially pay for Christian education because of the quality admissions process or the efficiency of the human resources function. I am certain, however, that many have decided not to invest in a Christian education for their children because these functions were done poorly and the quality seemed inconsistent with the mission of the school. Let me challenge you regarding why business services needs to be an area of excellence.
Quality Reflects on Ministry
Core Purpose

As a school parent I was always unsettled when I heard stories of poor business practices in the school that I trusted with my most valuable asset, my children. Seeds of doubt are planted in the minds of parents when inconsistent messages occur between what is taught in the classroom and what is modeled in the business office. Parents wonder how a school can be qualified to teach business principles and concepts if it does not employ those practices itself.

The familiar Scripture passage from Luke 16:10–12 says, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” (NIV). Have you ever considered that parents have this biblical principal in mind when they view schools? Parents entrust their most treasured possession into your hands. Do the parents of your students think, “How can I trust this school to equip and influence my child with the level of quality I expect if the school can’t even maintain accurate accounts?”

Need for Integrity

All nonprofits share a common challenge. Donors, including parents who pay tuition, are all seeking to find organizations they can trust. They want to give, and they want to invest, but they are not sure whom they can trust. At Compassion, one of our core values is to be a ministry with a reputation of integrity, one that can be trusted. This is not our core mission. Our mission is “releasing children from poverty in Jesus’ name.” That mission, however, will never be accomplished if we lack integrity. How does this information relate to your business services? Follow along with me for a minute.

In the last 20 years, there has been a growing distrust of educational institutions. Christian schools are not immune. It is natural and reasonable to question the cost of education, which has risen disproportionately to the income of parents and students. The congressional research report *The College Cost Crisis* gives this statistic: “According to information gathered from the College Board and the Census Bureau, over the last 22 years (since 1981), the cost of a public four-year college education has increased by 202 percent, while the CPI [Consumer Price Index] has gone up only 80 percent” (Boehner and McKeon 2003, 6).

Investors—another way of saying parents and students—want to know why this trend has occurred. At the same time, the press is decrying the falling quality of educational institutions. I will be the first to acknowledge the complexity of these trends and perceptions. There are many factors outside the control of universities and Christian schools that affect their ability to deliver quality education. Perception, however, is the reality we must all deal with. Parents, who are hearing and experiencing these trends, want to know that all their funds are being used effectively.

In this same congressional report, the following conclusions of public perception were made: “Americans believe institutions of higher learning are not accountable enough to parents, students, and taxpayers—the consumers of higher education” and “Americans believe wasteful spending by college and university management is the number-one reason for skyrocketing college costs” (Boehner and McKeon 2003, 2).

Parents and students recognize the outcome of your core mission. They see the results of the classroom every day. But how do you combat the growing distrust of business services, which tends to be a dark box, an area of expense questioned by all, including teachers? You must develop a culture of integrity and transparency. I like to use the word *integrity* interchangeably with *transparency*. Nothing is hidden, and there is a consistency in all areas of ministry. Combating the growing perception of distrust will take both an intentional change of image and a commitment to transparency.

Ministry Anchor or Ministry Accelerator?

I recently attended the Willow Creek Leadership Summit, where I was challenged by many of the fine speakers. One of the most impressive was General Colin Powell. He shared many leadership principles, but the one that challenged me was this: surround yourself with talented people and ask those who are not performing well to move to other jobs. In Christian ministries we are often reluctant to take a hard position on underperformers. General Powell made it clear that over time, the consequence of allowing an underperformer to continue in his role is to
Limited Effectiveness in the Kingdom

I am sure I will now risk offending many theologians. But as a CPA I can claim that my view of the spiritual world has been warped. It is true that God can accomplish all His desires and purposes without ever using us at all. After all, we are all broken vessels at best. Why, then, would I suggest that poorly run ministries can hinder the kingdom of God? I believe that the Lord chooses to use His children as His tools to accomplish His purposes. If the tools are not well maintained and not kept sharp, the outcome will be less than His desired standards. Throughout Scripture we are called to grow in our faith, to seek the Lord, to learn, and to sharpen one another. The same is true organizationally.

It is also my belief that the Lord wants to use Christian organizations to make a significant impact for Him. What is it that may limit your school’s ability to create this impact? Do you believe that God will bless your ministry beyond its capacity to receive that blessing? Could it be that a lack of organizational capacity to handle growth is limiting God’s blessing?

We all know the verse from 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” I believe that there is a flip side to that coin. Just as God will not give us more than we can bear, I also believe that God will not bless us beyond our capacity to receive His blessing. My great fear is that someday I will come before the Lord and learn of what might have been done if only I had been ready to be used by Him. Our responsibility is to sharpen the tools so that our ministries are not limiting the Lord’s blessings. What areas of your ministry may be limiting God?

Changing Your View

How can you avoid complacency in your business services? How are they viewed in your ministry? Consider the fairy tale of Cinderella, a poor young girl tormented by her stepsisters. The stepsisters are not the leading characters, and no one really wants to know about their lives. Yet they make an impact on the entire tone of the story. They try to destroy the hopes and dreams of Cinderella. How would that story have been different if the stepsisters had been viewed as encouraging supporters of the heroine? Are the support services of your ministry viewed like the bad stepsisters in a fairy tale or as a group of supporters who bolster your amazing mission for God’s glory?

We know from 1 Corinthians 12:28 that administration is a spiritual gift. Each spiritual gift has a purpose, and every gift needs to be prioritized appropriately. When the gifted administrator is empowered to do his job well, he will serve the Body and allow the overall mission to succeed. However, this positive impact will take place only when a school understands the value of its business services.

In the past, many have seen a conflict between funding the classroom and funding business services. This perception is especially prevalent during budgeting. When schools have limited resources, every dollar matters, and business services often seem to take away from classroom opportunities. I believe that this paradigm is wrong. It is not a competition but a partnership, each one seeking ways to make the other more effective so that the overall ministry becomes the best it can be.

Invest in Quality Staff

I cannot tell you how many times I have seen ministries and especially schools fill critical positions with well-intentioned people who are not qualified for their jobs. Maybe the inability to reasonably compensate discourages the truly qualified people from applying, or maybe it’s believed impossible to find Christ-centered staff who have high levels of training. Whatever the reason, this is shortsighted stewardship. The cost of placing the wrong person in a job far exceeds any short-term savings an organization may realize. Have the faith to invest the resources needed to employ the right people in your ministry. In the long run their contribution will more than exceed their cost.
Invest in Equipping and Training Staff

Qualified staff are qualified only for a short time. We live in a world that is changing at a pace never before imagined. If you expect your ministry to grow and expand to help more students, you can also expect to need the skills required to grow and change accordingly. At Compassion we recognize that none of us are qualified for the jobs we will be doing in five years, even if in the same roles. Part of our duty is to learn and to become equipped so that we will qualify for those future job requirements.

In most ministries, resources are limited. During budget planning, the funds for staff training and equipping are often viewed as low-hanging fruit that can be sacrificed if resources are needed in other areas. This may solve a short-term problem of balancing the budget, but the long-term consequences are far more costly. Employees who fall behind in their skills quickly lose their effectiveness. It is less expensive to fund staff training than to lose staff because of poor performance and then have to hire and train new staff.

Adopt a Customer Service Mind-Set

Who are your customers? For most organizations this is not a hard question. But for nonprofits and especially schools, the answer is not as clear. Consider the different constituents you work with. The most obvious are the students. This is the group that you are called to have an impact on and to serve. Then you have parents. These are the people who pay the bills and who should be convinced of the value your ministry offers. Then there are the educators. This team is the most critical in terms of successful ministry outcomes. Finally, you have the administrators. They are the coordinating body that brings the other groups together. So whom do you serve? Where do you place your resources? When I served on a school board, it quickly became apparent that we were often in a no-win position. If we allocated resources to teachers, then parents had to pay more; if we held tuition down, then students received fewer services. Every decision to help one constituent group seemed to hurt another. The dilemma of nonprofits is to identify and serve all its customers.

My observation is that many nonprofits rely on the vision and strength of their mission to inspire customer loyalty. Often, nonprofits ignore investing in service to their customers. However, we live in a very competitive environment, and we cannot afford to be lax in our service mentality. Parents, students, teachers, and administrators have options. If they do not perceive themselves as well-served customers, they can choose to move to another Christ-centered mission that wants to serve its constituents.

Nonprofit organizations that stand out in the eyes of their donors are the ones that practice excellent customer service without compromise to their mission. The small things that serve the constituents do matter and will have an impact over the long run. A Christian school must intentionally identify whom it serves and adopt a customer service mentality.

Conclusion

The theme of this issue is “A Dangerous Complacency: Business Practices.” It is a topic that deserves much attention. I would challenge you to read the remainder of this magazine and consider the risk of not strengthening your ministry in all areas. A ministry does not exist for its business services, but neither can it survive without them. We cannot afford to ignore this area of ministry. Passion for the ministry is not enough to sustain it. As much as we do not like to view ministry from a secular perspective, ministries are businesses, and good management principles are true whether they are applied to for-profit businesses or to nonprofit ministries or schools. My hope is that you will take the next step and consider the investment needed to ensure that your ministry is equipped for the future so that you can achieve the goal of making an impact for the kingdom of God.

Reference


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