

Love and the Transformation of Business

Karen Blakeley argues that love is the only solution to the current increasing trend by big corporations of instrumentalising human beings as being simply costs or resources. She rejects empathy and compassion as being implicitly negative or selfish. She begins by suggesting that we need to ‘see’ the employee in the way Christ asked Simon the Pharisee to ‘see’ the woman who bathed his feet.

Luke’s Gospel, chapter 7.36–50, sets the scene for understanding how love could transform business ethic and practice. Jesus has just been invited

to dinner with Simon, a Pharisee. As they both recline at the table, a woman enters, a prostitute who has lived a ‘sinful life’. She enters in

distress but approaches Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair and bending down to kiss them. Eventually she pours perfume from an alabaster jar



Peter Paul Rubens,
*Christ at the house of Simon
the Pharisee* (1618–1620),
Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg

Photo: Wikimedia Foundation

over Jesus' feet, anointing them in a deeply moving act of humility and worship.

Simon is disgusted. Immediately he starts to judge the scene and in particular Jesus. If this man were truly a prophet he would have known that this woman was a prostitute, a sinner. Jesus, as ever, had the perfect response. He turned toward the woman and said to Simon, *Do you see this woman?*

The suggestion is that Simon does not 'see' her at all. Simon sees only a sinner with no name, a prostitute who is 'unclean'. To 'see' this woman Simon would have had to suspend his tendency to judge, a tendency which would have been deeply rooted in his identity as a Pharisee. To truly 'see' someone is to see them through divine eyes, the eyes of love rather than judgement.

The Instrumentalisation of humanity

Moving on to 2017 and the world of business. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has arrived with intelligent automation, the internet of things, nanotechnology, big data, hyper-connectivity and machine learning. In the UK and the USA this has emerged in the context of

neoliberalism – a philosophy which promotes the deregulation of markets, free flows of capital throughout the world, a diminution in the role of the state and legal restrictions on workers' abilities to protect their economic interests. Along with this we have seen the rise of zero-hour contracts, the gig economy, the loss of job security, and for many, the loss of pensions and rights to sick pay.

What has all this to do with love?

Business has always had a tendency to see employees as tools or costs, but this tendency has increased in recent years and will continue to do so. The technology of control has enabled our most powerful companies and organisations to perpetrate the widespread instrumentalisation of the human beings that are the source of their profits.

The examples are numerous. An MPs' report into working practices at Sports Direct claimed that workers were treated "as commodities rather than as human beings". Management had "unreasonable and excessive powers to discipline or dismiss at will", leading to one woman giving birth in the toilet for fear of losing her job¹.

The car manufacturing industry provides multiple examples of the commoditisation of human beings. Toyota – previously a standard-bearer for ethical behaviour – wilfully ignored faults in the Lexus' acceleration system leading to an estimated 89 deaths; GM turned a blind eye to ignition faults leading to 124 deaths; Volkswagen's emissions scandal is well-known – all put their own interests before the lives of their customers and the wellbeing of their communities.

Amazon warehouse workers have long been known to operate in conditions where they are controlled to such a degree that they are said to be treated "like robots". Office life at Amazon is no better. A famous New York Times article by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld described the punishing Amazon culture where white collar staff are referred to as "Amabots" and the dominant values amount to "purposeful Darwinism". The article shows how Amazon is in the forefront of the kind of culture that may soon dominate many workplaces:

Amazon...has just been quicker in responding to changes that the rest of the work world is now experiencing: data that allows individual performance to be



measured continuously, come-and-go relationships between employers and employees, and global competition in which empires rise and fall overnight. Amazon is in the vanguard of where technology wants to take the modern office: more nimble and more productive, but harsher and less forgiving.

Performance can now be tracked so precisely employees are being reduced to a set of metrics. As David Streitfeld put it, “[h]ow does data, which bestows new powers of vision and understanding, redefine who is valuable?”

We are increasingly seeing the human as just another aspect of the material world – a cluster of data, a cost, a commodity, a tool, a means to an end. We do not ‘see’ our fellow human beings but are conditioned to judge ourselves and others, either as costs or, for the privileged few, as ‘talent’. The more this mindset seeps into our consciousness the more we will lose our notion of the human being as something set apart from the material world, or as I like to put it, as ‘sacred’.

Human beings are sacred, not mere objects, just another aspect of the material world. And the sacred belongs to the spirit, it is ‘set apart’ from the material, as holy, to be revered. The sacred implies purity, of great worth. Unfortunately, many technologists in the forefront of AI do not view human beings in this way. They see them as little more than sophisticated machines¹. We are in the midst of a cultural battle to recover the sacred – to redefine human beings as sacred, both of and yet beyond the material.

It seems that one of the ways in which we might accomplish this is

to learn to ‘see’ others and ourselves as Christ sees us, through the lens of love.

What is Love? Seeing the other

The question Jesus posed to Simon asked him ‘Can you dissolve your judgements and just see this woman as a human being, made in God’s image, and on seeing her, love her as one of God’s children? Can you take away your filters that make you see this woman as merely an object? Can you cultivate a state of heart that transforms your relationship to others – and to yourself?’

This may sound unrealistic to the world of business. Business has its own language, emotional intelligence (which can be measured and assessed of course), empathy, even compassion. But I will argue that Jesus’ emphasis on love, loving one’s neighbour *as oneself*, is the only response that will address the growing problem of the instrumentalisation and desacralisation of the human. Empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence do not do the same job.

Empathy, Compassion and Love – do we need to use the L word?

Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University, wrote a much talked-about book, *Against Empathy*. Bloom defined empathy as ‘the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does’ (p.16). He differentiated empathy from emotional intelligence because experiencing empathy involves experiencing the same feelings as the other person. Emotional intelligence involves us ‘understanding’ our own and others’ emotions; empathy involves feeling them. Empathy is what makes us flinch when we see someone hitting

their head on a low door frame.

There has been much research to suggest that empathy enables us to ‘see’ the other, to connect to those with whom we may not have any previous connection. By seeing others through the eyes of empathy, we are less likely to treat them as an object or set of data.

But, according to Bloom, there are significant problems with empathy.

1. We tend to empathise with those more like us – those who share our values, backgrounds, culture and concerns.
2. We empathise more easily with the one as opposed to the many. We will feel empathy and often donate money to parents who want to take their child to the US for expensive medical treatment. We will not feel the same empathy when asked to save thousands of children’s lives by donating money for mosquito nets in Africa.
3. We will feel empathy with those who are alive and present to us but not to those not yet born. Hence, we ignore the consequences of our actions for future generations.
4. Empathy for our in-group can lead to negative emotions and violence towards out-groups. This is seen in negative reactions to immigrants, or violence at sports matches.
5. Empathy may be selfish. We often act to reduce our own pain when we see someone suffering, rather than working out what would be best for the recipient of our concern.

Bloom’s argument is subtle and worth the read but the evidence against empathy highlights the darker nuances in this powerful emotion. Bloom recommends us acting with ‘rational compassion’, balancing heart and mind. But there are problems too with compassion.



**Only love
will do**

Photo: <http://hdwallpapersrocks.com/>

What role does compassion play in helping us to 'see' the other?

A recent study by Cavanaugh, Bettman and Luce investigated the effects of different emotions on charitable giving. In the experiment, each participant was shown a picture that conjured up either love, pride, hope or compassion. They then asked each participant, how they would they share out a \$10 bonus. They could donate to a local cause, an international cause or keep it for themselves. The authors found that only love caused a significant increase in giving to the international fund – what they term as giving to 'distant others'. They conclude:

"Although both love and compassion are associated with feelings of social connection, only love caused consumers to donate more to distant others. This evidence suggests that love has a unique broadening effect"

Compassion, unlike love, contains both positive and negative emotions (such as pity and sadness) and these seem to limit our circle of concern in a way that love does not.

Compassion triggers a desire to help those nearest to us and most like us; love broadens our circle of concern to include all members of humanity, and to help them in positive action.

What role does love play in helping us to 'see' the other?

It seems Jesus knew something that science is just beginning to understand. Only love will do. In Cavanaugh's experiments, the picture used to provoke love was that of a parent looking down on their new-born baby. Unlike compassion and empathy, the reactions to this picture involved no judgements, internal dialogue or negative emotions ("how terrible", "I want to help", "this is wrong", "poor thing"). The picture conjured up pure love, enabling us to respond with a full, overflowing, wordless heart – no judgements, pain, sadness or aching to see justice prevail – just love. In that moment of love, judgement is suspended and for the first time, we can 'see' the other.

This leaves us with some fascinating questions. How can we learn to trigger this way of 'seeing'? How can our business leaders learn to 'see' their people, even to love them, not as objects or robots but as precious, distinctive human beings with inalienable rights rooted in the realm of the sacred?

I don't have the answer to these questions although I have explored them for some time through my own faith and through other psychological

and spiritual approaches. I offer here some initial thoughts intended to provoke discussion.

What can we do to 'see' the other?

Firstly, we look inward. Jesus said that it is not what goes into a person's mouth that makes him unclean but what comes out. The uncleanliness is rooted deep within us. We are born selfish and needy, and we have ego drives that generate harmful and selfish behaviours which drive our tendency to use others as objects to meet our own needs.

To help cultivate love, we can start by learning the valuable skill of self-observation without judgement. According to 1 Corinthians 11:28 'Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.' We first self-examine, and then as we eat of the bread and drink from the cup, Jesus is with us. When we view ourselves through his eyes we know we are loved. Examining ourselves means simply at first observing ourselves but without judgement. We might particularly notice movements of the heart – flashes of anger, of jealousy, of contempt – or of compassion, joy and kindness.

The Kantor/ Streitfeld article quoted earlier highlights Amazon's instrumentalisation of its employees with incessant work demands and the never-ending process of harsh peer and managerial reviews. These practices contrast even with some of its neighbouring tech giants. Amazon's "purposeful Darwinism" (regularly culling a percentage of its workforce) is not the only route to global conquest.

In recent years, other large companies, including Microsoft, General Electric and Accenture Consulting, have dropped the practice — often called stack ranking, or "rank and yank" — in part because it can force managers to get rid of valuable talent just to meet quotas².

And other high-growth companies have adopted quite different HR policies:

Many tech companies are racing to top one another's family leave policies — Netflix just began offering up to a year of paid parental leave².

As we get to know ourselves, we learn when we are in danger of getting hooked by the system, or judging ourselves and others by worldly standards. But it is only as we get to know ourselves that we can start to cultivate love. Regular spiritual practice and accountability to a spiritual mentor can be helpful in this process.

Jesus told his disciples to "love one another as I have loved you", and the second commandment tells us to "love our neighbour as ourselves". These deep statements intrigue and challenge people of faith as they offer a new perspective on the world — one which is rooted in love and which offers ways of connecting to the very source of love.

We are in danger of losing our sense of the sacredness of human life, of stripping away all that makes life

'... We are in danger of losing our sense of the sacredness of human life, of stripping away all that makes life meaningful and worth living

meaningful and worth living. This will affect us all, the vast majority whose lives are tracked, evaluated and manipulated, but even the elites, selling their souls for what the writer of Ecclesiastes calls 'vanity' and 'meaningless'. If we do not resist these trends, we will end up

being reduced to a set of data, controlled and manipulated by machines that rob us of our values, our self-respect and ultimately our very souls.

At a 2006 US retreat for scientists and evangelical leaders James 'Gus' Speth, former environmental adviser to US President Jimmy Carter, made this statement:

I used to think that top global environmental problems were bio-diversity loss, eco-system collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems. But I

was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. We scientists don't know how to do that — we need the help of religious leaders. (Shared Planet, BBC Radio 4, 7th October, 2013)

Speth was trying to protect another sacred entity from instrumentalisation and objectification — our planet.

This debate needs to be led by those who have practised exploring and nurturing the spiritual life in the world of business. They have a lot to offer in the debate around the instrumentalisation of the human. As we learn to 'see' the other in our workplace, we have the opportunity to cultivate love within ourselves, to spread love amongst those we interact with, and to champion love as both an invaluable and an effective way of doing business.

This article is from a lecture given by Dr Karen Blakeley at the AGM of the Industrial Christian Fellowship on 26 June 2017. Adapted for 'Faith in Business Quarterly' and used with permission.

A number of FiBQ articles and speakers at Faith in Business conferences have detailed their efforts to build practical love into their workplaces. See especially: Kina Robertshaw, 'Asking Big Questions: Life at the Mitchell Group', FiBQ 16:3, pp.13-15, and Kina Robertshaw, 'Lawsons: A Family Business with a Difference', FiBQ 16:4, pp.24-26. 

1 BBC Radio 4, 22.11.17, the moral maze.

2. Jodi Kantor & David Streitfeld, *Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace*, New York Times, 15 August 2015.



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