



Lawsons: A Family Business with a Difference

■ by Kina Robertshaw

Lawsons

Lawsons is a family business, founded in 1921. The company operates throughout London and the South East. Lawsons is well-established with 340 employees, a business that prides itself on being a specialist, experienced, responsive and friendly one-stop timber and builders' merchant. In 1990, Simon Lawson joined the business, succeeding his father, and has seen the business continue from strength to strength, winning the Best Independent Builder's Merchant in the 2009 Builders' Merchant Awards for Excellence.

Lawsons' Mission

Lawsons makes much of the family values that permeate through the company, shaping the way it goes about its business. The company strapline makes this crystal clear, 'family values – professional service'. This sounds very laudable, but how does a business, specifically a Christian business, put this into operation? If you were to try to guess the mission statement for a timber and builders' merchant, you might come up with something along the lines of 'selling more wood to more builders than anyone else'; or perhaps something a little less prosaic, but along similar lines. In case I am being a little disingenuous, here are a couple of real life examples from other companies gleaned from the web:

■ *to make it easier for you to do business with the support on hand to provide all your building needs quickly and efficiently with exceptional customer service and advice every step of the way.*

■ *to be the best timber and builders' merchant in the eyes of our customers, and people are at the heart of our business.*

Well not Lawsons, it takes an altogether different approach. Their mission statement, actually their 'family mission statement' reads: **'to make work as interesting and satisfying as possible'**. If I were thinking of a new job, I would already want to work there! Lawsons' mission sets their company apart from other similar businesses; everything that the business does stems, in theory, from their mission - a mission for people to take pleasure and enjoyment from what they do. But can work really be as stimulating and rewarding as the Lawsons' mission statement claims? And what light does Scripture shed on this question?



Simon Lawson

In *Why Business Matters to God*, Jeff Van Duzer

states that "consideration of creation independent of the Fall will end up ignoring much of the reality of today's world. Considering the Fall without considering Christ's crucifixion and resurrection will leave us unduly hopeless". In Scripture we find God's perfect design for work is affirmed, through Adam, as an integral part of the perfection of Creation. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). We see that work has worth and dignity, a service to God, something that gives purpose to human life. ►►

▶▶ We also find work in the Bible as toil. Work, which was once a pleasure, became a burden as a consequence of humankind’s disobedience:

“Cursed is the ground because of you;... in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17-19).

Isaiah prophesied a coming golden age in which work would have the fruitfulness and enjoyment once possessed in the ideal state:

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; ... and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well” (Isaiah 65:21-23).

Here we understand work as having some of the qualities that it possessed pre-Fall. The details offered in Isaiah’s vision include people enjoying the work of their hands and not labouring in vain.

The story of God’s redemption of the world He created gives us hope. Christ died on the cross not only to serve us, but also to restore all things, where God’s objective is to free people to be what they were created to be.

We can experience Isaiah’s prophecy - as the Lawsons’ mission claims **‘to make work as interesting and satisfying as possible’** – so that we are not discouraged by the thwarting reality of our present world in which thorns and thistles still grow.

The book of Ecclesiastes provides a fitting summary for biblical images of work, taking us through the full cycle. Life lived ‘under the sun’ positions work as a terrible toil – echoing the sweat and toil, thorns and thistles of Genesis 3 – ‘a mere striving after wind’ (Eccles 2:18-23; 5:16-17; 6:7). But Ecclesiastes does

not end there; rather he offers a guide for finding enjoyment in life, presenting repeated images of simple enjoyment found in work, when accepted as a gift from God (Eccles 2:24; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:10). Nevertheless in this world our work will always ‘fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:28).

Simon recognises that Lawsons is a gift from God.

When asked what characterises him as a Christian entrepreneur, rather than just an entrepreneur, he says it is his ‘acknowledgment of all the success to God’. “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth” (Deut 8:18). It is this trait that enables him to lean on God, humbling him in the process. Simon believes that meekness (God’s cure for pride) is an important quality to avoid the trap of *hubris* that comes with success in business. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5).

For Simon, knowing that he is a steward for God’s resources motivates him to get up in the morning and to make life better for other people. To make a difference is a challenge he loves. Lawsons articulates a compelling and challenging mission, a statement that many today, through their own contrasting workplace experience, cannot relate to. Work is too rarely seen as being interesting and satisfying. Far too many people toil away in jobs that leave them unhappy and unsatisfied. *If you are a Christian entrepreneur leader, how do you honour God and allow employees to find meaning and satisfaction, whilst running a profitable business?* ▶▶



Simon running the London Marathon

Lawsons Values

While their mission keeps Lawsons focused, it is the values that hold them together. Up to four times a year over the last five years, Simon has invited some of his employees (including some he does not know particularly well) to his house and cooks them a meal of their choice. He calls these meals ‘values lunches’. Through these lunches Simon has the opportunity to serve (minister to) his employees.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them (John 13:14–17),

I can imagine Simon putting on his apron getting ready to cook the meal for his staff. We see a similar image in Scripture: Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist as the lowliest slave would do in ancient times. Christ took on a form of servant, then washed His disciples' feet. Christ lowered Himself into a posture of humiliation. He did not just talk about washing feet, He got His hands dirty. Simon can afford to take his employees out for a meal or hire a chef, but he prefers to prepare a three-course meal for his employees himself. Jesus, our model of servant leadership, sets us an example which challenges Christian entrepreneurs to be servants willing to serve in any way that glorifies and honours God.

Through ‘values lunches’ Simon tries to demonstrate biblical servant leadership. He says he connects with the narrative of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. Simon says that it is all about people; the values lunches are all about his employees. “I have no agenda, it's their agenda”. They talk about anything they want: football, life experiences, how the business and its values can improve the common good, how the employees themselves can be valued (from their point of view, not from the directors’) and how it feels like working on the front line.

It is difficult to be vulnerable in the workplace, especially if you are the CEO, but it comes easily to Simon. “I make myself vulnerable”. During values lunches Simon takes the



Values Lunch

opportunity to talk about some of his life challenges. Simon talks about his experience of divorce, what it is like to be a single father and some of the things that he struggles with; issues he believes some of his employees relate to. Putting himself on the spot enables Simon and his employees to build relationships of trust and his staff are able to share their experiences without feeling as if their employer has everything held together.

Have I made the case? Should you need more convincing, the Lawsons values are as follows:

- Job Security & Honesty
- Empowerment & Delegation
- Training
- A Sense Of Belonging
- Good Working Conditions
- Fit For Purpose Equipment
- A Fair Package
- Job Rotation & Promotion Prospects
- Sponsored Events: Family Day, Children's Christmas Party
- Improved Communication
- Give Something Back To The Community. ■

Before coming to study theology at Ridley Hall Cambridge in 2010, Kina Robertshaw owned My Choice, a department store in Lusaka, and was involved in several other business ventures. She is now researching the subject of Christian Entrepreneurship, interviewing 50 Christian entrepreneurs about what motivates, frustrates, challenges and satisfies them.

