

Great to Goodness: Investing in Kingdom Excellence

Phil Hanson and Terry Young explore how far well-known models of business excellence might go in creating a platform for Kingdom outcomes, and what might be the blind spots and gaps.

The very fact that you are reading this suggests that you are called to express your Christian faith in your working life. That probably involves being an authentic Christian at work, modelling Christian morality and gently encouraging colleagues to faith. These are essentially individual actions that will all have genuine benefits, but can a company as a whole draw near to the Kingdom of God?

History is full of Christian business owners who made a huge difference to the world of work, especially for their employees, by exercising these Christian behaviours from a position of significant personal influence. Their companies have often been described as Christian Businesses.

The idea of describing an enterprise, however, as a 'Christian Business' is problematic. Someone once asked whether a car, when occupied by four Christians, somehow becomes a Christian car. If a business is to be described as Christian, what does that mean for its recruitment policy for example?

The major theme in Jesus' teaching in the three synoptic gospels is about the

coming of the Kingdom of God. Tom Wright regularly reminds us that we don't have to wait for the next life to experience the Kingdom. We are called to advance the Kingdom in this life. It is what we mean when we say, "Thy Kingdom come".

Christians who meet with a Spiritual Director may be asked how they are going to be 'multiplier Christians'. This raises the question: might we have a much bigger leverage on the Kingdom through the overall operation of our business than is possible through our own individual example and witness?

The term 'Kingdom business' is increasingly used to describe an operation whose overriding purpose is to advance the Kingdom. Kingdom businesses operate in the real world with the same competitive pressures and commercial challenges as any other business. Long-term financial success is essential but their ultimate reason for existence is expressed in Kingdom terms.

Jesus describes the Kingdom of God in a series of images. "The Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon

the soil; like treasure hidden in the field; like a mustard seed". Matthew 13 contains no less than seven different images of the kingdom. Jesus never defines the Kingdom precisely. In the same way it has been very hard to come up with a satisfactory sound-bite definition of a Kingdom business.

If Kingdom businesses exist, they will be known by their Kingdom impact and their Kingdom behaviours. This study, so far, is focused on what might constitute Kingdom behaviours in business. Much excellent work is being done by others on measuring Kingdom impact¹.

A well-run business with a strong focus on ethical practice will inevitably be a force for good in some ways. However, does an 'excellent business' go far enough in Kingdom terms and, if not, what are the gaps and blind spots? Some so-called 'business best practice' may actually pull in a different direction to Kingdom. By exploring the overlaps and underlaps between business excellence and Kingdom behaviour it is hoped to do two things. Firstly, it will help to create a list of things that 'a Kingdom business is like'. Secondly



The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was put into the lake... Matthew 13,47

it will begin to enable business leaders to look at their operations through a Kingdom lens.

The title ‘Great to Goodness’ is of course a parody on Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great*² which explores what differentiates the most successful (great) companies from the rest (good). It is about how some make the leap and others don’t. What is being explored here is the idea that there is another set of differentiators that constitute a similar leap but this time from great to Kingdom.

A Lens into Business Excellence

The concepts of business best practice and business excellence have been around since the 1980s and there are at least 100 different approaches to choose from. Some governments have made the widescale adoption of business excellence an important plank in their industrial competitiveness policy. They believe that businesses working this way will not only benefit themselves but they will also contribute to a better future for others.

The most commonly used generic business excellence models, the **Malcolm Baldrige Award** and the **EFQM Excellence Model**, are actively used in over 70 countries worldwide. In Europe alone the European Foundation for Quality Management believes that at least 30,000 organisations are using the EFQM model. The Japanese Deming Prize is probably the next most widely used approach. Whilst each of these approaches is intended to be of value to all sizes of enterprise, the cost and effort involved mean that the adoption rate is greater among medium and large-sized companies.

All these approaches have, over the years, attempted to research and refine their guidance for excellent business practice. Baldrige and EFQM each have an ethical thread running through them, expressed as Societal Contributions, Sustainable Development and Human Rights for example. The EFQM vision is

that if every company adopted these ways of working, the world would be a better place – which is already something of a ‘Kingdom’ claim.

The benefit of using these well-known and tested models as a lens into business excellence is that their high-level criteria can be used to produce a much more detailed picture of best practice in different aspects of the business.

In our research we put the EFQM and Baldrige models alongside each other

and three key themes emerged: purpose, people and process. With a picture of Kingdom already in mind, these areas looked as though they might begin to offer a promising basis for a comparison with Kingdom behaviours.

Our search now moved to finding a similarly robust framework for ‘Kingdom’ that would align with these themes and would enable us also to produce more detailed criteria as a basis for comparison.

	Business Excellence	
	EFQM	Baldrige
Purpose	DIRECTION Purpose and vision Culture and leadership	LEADERSHIP Senior leadership Governance & societal contribution STRATEGY Development Implementation
People and Relationships	EXECUTION Stakeholders Sustainable value Driving performance	CUSTOMERS Expectations Engagement WORKFORCE Environment Engagement
Processes		MEASUREMENT, KNOWLEDGE MGT Organisational performance Information management OPERATIONS Work Processes Operational Effectiveness
Results	RESULTS Stakeholder perceptions Operational performance	RESULTS Product & Process Customer Workforce Leadership Financial and Markets

Figure 1 A framework for Business Excellence

A lens into Kingdom

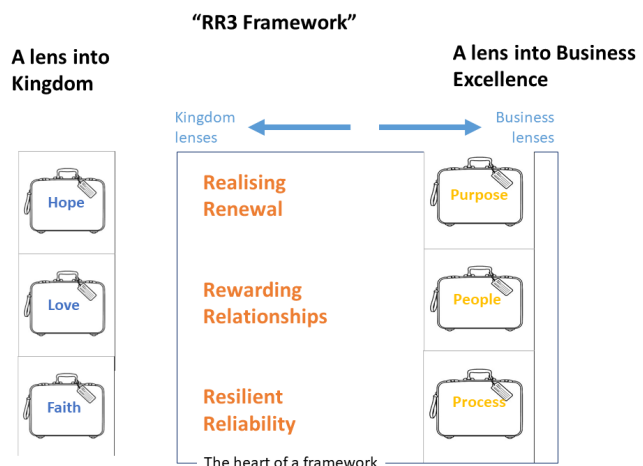


Figure 2 “RR3” Kingdom framework

Although this framework is presented as logically unfolding from business to Kingdom, the development was more by trial and iteration. The three right-hand headings in Figure 2 – purpose, people and process – are not the only ways to summarise business excellence but they offer a helpful starting point.

Our starting point for Kingdom comes from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – a well-known passage, as illustrated by its use in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. When he introduces 'the most excellent way' (1 Corinthians 12:31b), he concludes one of his most electric passages with this summary: 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.' (1 Corinthians 13:13.) We are seeking to make the connections between "the most excellent way" and "business excellence".

The final piece of the framework identifies less theologically loaded terminology to bridge Christian and secular thought – the 3 double-Rs in the middle.

Hope

Hope in the Bible is explained in a variety of ways: bringing our problems before God; knowing God has a plan for us; hope as a blessing, as a source of joy and as a source of strength. We are reminded that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character produces hope (Romans 5:4). Hope grows in us through experience. We are encouraged to be patient in hope. Christian hope is something that doesn't fade when circumstances do. Hope embraces aspiration, creativity, and vision. It longs for a better world. Hope enables Christian business to care about, and do something about, the planet. Hope makes work, at its best, fun. In our desire to bridge between Christian Hope and Business Purpose we have used the term **Realising Renewal**.

Love

St Paul unpacks the reality of unconditional love for us in 1 Corinthians 13, describing

it as the greatest of the three virtues. We are called to share with others the unconditional love that we each receive. That can be a challenge with those we love, let alone with our working colleagues and customers. Imagine how it would be if we rewrote 1 Corinthians 13 substituting "our working relationships" for the word "love". Our working relationships are kind, patient, keep no record of wrongs etc. Which of us could live up to that for any length of time? In seeking to bridge from 'Christian love' to business relationships we have used the term **Rewarding Relationships**.

Faith

Faith is typically described as a journey. Some would say it is a series of "starting again moments". It is a journey with plenty of scope for mistakes and learning along the way. We are called to be holy as God is holy. It is a call to moral perfection. The great gospel surprise is not that we become perfect by trying harder, but by faith in Jesus.

The quest for perfection is central to business excellence. Products and Processes are subject to both continuous improvement and step-function change (both gradual and Damascus conversion).

If we accept that faith seeks perfection, we have a way of connecting perfection at a theological level with perfection at an operational level. **Resilient Reliability** is the phrase we have used to bridge these ideas.

Questions raised in the space between Kingdom and Business Excellence

The framework has been used to examine the business excellence criteria (EFQM and Baldrige) through the lens of Kingdom behaviours: In particular, Business Purpose through the lens of Christian Hope, People through the lens of Christian Love and Process through the lens of Christian Faith.

Business Purpose in the excellence models is something that sits above vision and strategy. The emphasis is on clarity of purpose, on governance and on systematic execution. It's about doing what you say you are going to do. There is, however, little real evaluation of the rightness of the stated purpose.

The EFQM and Baldrige models make a particular virtue of the business being rapidly adaptable to changing situations. This has, of course, been a significant factor in the pandemic and in recent world events. This fleet-of-foot adaptability carries with it a particular challenge which is to be able to change direction without changing destination.

'The quest for perfection is central to business excellence'

When we look at purpose through the lens of Christian hope, we can see that hope isn't something that changes with the data. Optimism may ebb and flow with the known facts, but real

hope is a constant. Hope is sometimes described as a compass, the north star to which we turn after a change of path.

It is the rightness and the constancy of business purpose that become the Kingdom difference. Christian-founded charities constantly wrestle with creeping secularisation, and some have lost any real evidence of their original purpose. The same challenge exists for a Kingdom-purpose business.

A test of all this might be to examine the executive incentive programmes to see if they are all about the levers of growth and share price, or do they acknowledge the long term Kingdom purpose?

In the business excellence models **People** are seen as 'stakeholders' with an inherent interest in the business. Employees are seen as important assets and resources whose well-being matters. Best practice is about recruitment, retention, training and development. Much of this good practice is enshrined in employment law. It is however a picture of people as a 'means to an end' rather than an end in their own right.

God's intended plan for the totally efficient workplace was spoiled by the introduction of human greed, rivalry, enmity and anger. The result is deeply inefficient. The picture of working life painted, for example, by the television programme "The Apprentice" is a caricature of this reality. This is a long way from the original meaning of Company which was *cum panis*, breaking bread together. As we use the RR3 framework to explore "people" through the lens of Christian love we see a workplace that fosters rewarding human relationships through grace, not fear. Business excellence is about human resources whereas Kingdom behaviour is about human relationships. Kingdom is about knowing people, not just knowing about them. Here too others are working to find ways to measure the quality of relationships in business³.

Business processes in EFQM and Baldrige are to be sharply focused on meeting and exceeding customer needs. They need to be continuously simplified and improved for better quality, faster response times and lower costs. Where processes are not fit for purpose, customer service depends on the goodwill of exhausted employees to constantly compensate for them. Employees and stakeholders are encouraged to be part of this improvement journey. It is a brave company, however, that underwrites these efforts with a commitment to

finding meaningful work for those displaced as a result. It would be a significant step of corporate faith.

The forensic attention to detail that is required is often made possible by technology. Processes are controlled by micro-measurement and monitoring. The result has the risk of being dehumanising. It removes the joy of job satisfaction and replaces it with the fear of failure and insecurity. There is no longer faith in the individual. It is maintaining faith in the individual that differentiates the Kingdom business in its proper pursuit of resilient reliability.

Where next?

If the RR3 framework in Figure 2 captures a reliable set of connections, then it has potential applications in assessing businesses and driving strategy.

The next step is to test the framework, first by verifying its logic through peer review of publications such as this; and then by validating it with communities of business stakeholders who share a declared interest in Kingdom practices.


This article, therefore, is a call for comment and criticism of the RR3 framework, its internal connections and the bridges it establishes between Kingdom values and business excellence.

It is also a call for collaborators willing to share their experiences and join with the authors in forums and other conversations to identify the most applicable and powerful aspects of this thinking.

What we have proposed is essentially a way of thinking about faith and business and the crossovers and tensions between the two. However, it will probably be more accessible if it can be turned into a thinking tool, such as a diagnostic questionnaire or a self-assessment website. It may even be that the best embodiment of this material is as a guide for external consultants to use in supporting businesses.

Running a business for the glory of God can be intensely rewarding and stressful. The reward comes as a business realises its full spiritual potential and its full potential as a business. The stress comes from balancing disparate, perhaps incompatible, perspectives.

The RR3 framework is not aimed at adding to the stress or merely increasing the number or complexity of checklists for business stakeholders. Our goal, rather, is to enable business leaders to have a considered view of their organisations from a Kingdom perspective.

If you would like to join us in pursuing that goal, we would welcome your involvement. 

1. James Waters, 'Let's Move Past "Can We?" – How to Measure Your Business's Kingdom Impact', Christian Economic Forum 2019.
2. Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, Random House Publishing, 2001
3. Simon Barrington et al, *We are Company*, <https://www.wearecompany.co.uk>



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