

The Inner Game

Philip Hanson and Terry Young look at our trials and temptations in business and suggest ways of overcoming them. We too easily blame the devil, some are natural business trials.

At one of the regular meetings of a group of young Christians, all of whom were in business and professional roles, the question being debated was whether there could be practical answers to spiritual problems. The stimulus to the debate was that members of the group were seeing almost every setback they encountered in their working lives as somehow the work of the devil. There is no doubt that seeking to do God's work in any context can make you a target for spiritual attack. If you want evidence, ask any church leader.

That, however, isn't to say that every setback is the result of spiritual opposition. The obstacles we face every day in business are mainly the direct or indirect consequences of human decisions, including sometimes our own. Stuff happens and the root cause could be a pandemic, a distant war zone or a global financial crisis. There surely are some special moments when we seek to follow God's will for our work situations that make it worth the devil's while to attempt to meddle. But to imagine that everything we do is a magnet for opposition is to give the devil rather too much credit.

Where discernment might suggest some form of spiritual opposition, let's try something simple, with a helpful distinction between "trial" and "temptation". Trials happen without being initiated by God or the devil. Trials are typically tests of our strengths. If we endure the trials that befall us, with God's help, we will be wiser and stronger for doing so. We can grow through adversity.

Times of trial in business might happen when, for example, your

relationship with your boss is badly strained, when you are forced to accept unachievable targets, when you must implement plans that you don't agree with or when you see the recognition for your work going to others.

Temptation, on the other hand, really is the work of the devil and it is a test, not of our strengths, but of our weaknesses. Business life will inevitably deliver trials and there will also be moments of temptation to our pride and our greed for example.

The book of James suggests that we should expect to experience both trials and temptations. In the opening of the first chapter we read, "whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" and a few verses further on, "blessed is anyone who endures temptation" (See James 1:2-4 and 1:12-15).

Trials test our strengths; temptations test our weaknesses

Both trials and temptations have the propensity to spoil work. They can each create a friction that delivers inefficiency and failure. The effect can be experienced both as inhibitors at a personal level as well as bigger problems at a corporate level.

W. Timothy Gallwey's best-selling *Inner Game* books have made a significant contribution to what is now known as sports psychology. At the heart of this is the idea that one's performance on any given day is a function of your skills minus your inhibitors. Two professional golfers may, for example, have honed their skills to a similar and very high standard, yet when put together in

the heat of competition they may achieve very different results. In the crucial moment they must overcome their inhibitors; doubt, indecision, anxiety, insecurity, lapses of attention etc. The benefits of all the years of investment in skills remain constant but a lapse of concentration or a sudden gust of wind can make a huge difference to the outcome. Professional sportspeople have off-days and amateurs can experience even more inconsistency.

In football matches the crowds may create inhibitors in the minds of players by distracting taunts, sometimes amusing, often unkind. In cricket, bowlers may seek to unsettle batsmen by an insulting or intimidating word in their ear, so-called "sledging", aimed at spoiling their concentration and producing poor shots. Sportsmen and women may be adversely impacted by press reporting. Intruding worries that have nothing to do with sport may be the things that detract from achievements. Top sportspeople who struggle with these inhibitors talk of battling their mental demons and needing to take time out to focus on their mental health.

The word 'professional' has come to mean, not only expert skills but also the ability to totally block out these things that could steal concentration and spoil performance. To achieve a repeatable high standard requires both things. In Malcolm Gladwell's popular book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, he argues that to become world class in any field, you need 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. However true this may be, it doesn't guarantee that these learned skills can lead to high performance when tempered by negative emotions.



Performance equals Skills minus Inhibitors

These ideas are not confined to competitive sport. The same challenges face musicians, actors, performers, ministers and business leaders for example. An important business presentation, however well prepared, can be blighted by inhibitors in the same way. A job interview may go well or badly depending on the applicant's ability to manage their momentary inhibitors.

There are many sources of inhibitors that don't need any help from the devil. The ebb and flow of life delivers its own worries and distractions. We should however be alert to the possibility that spiritual attack might take the form of feeding our inhibitors and undermining our performance. When it happens, it will come from the tools in the devil's kitbag: greed, doubt, fear, disinformation, discouragement, distraction, pride, temptation, idleness, malice, jealousy idolatry and more.

This leaves us with a spectrum from trials to temptations. Let's take an example of having to make the right decision under pressure.


Trials often start when something unexpected happens. We can't control when a key client or our boss will push us for an immediate action. There may be other equally urgent demands on our time. Perhaps an important employee is so frustrated that they have just tendered their resignation. Maybe you are committed to a school parents' evening and feeling deeply guilty that you missed the last one. The prioritisation process is a nightmare.

When it comes to temptation, it may be hard to make a good decision under the pressure of self-interest or self-protection. Maybe there's a new job offer just under the table if the decision goes one way. Maybe there is job insecurity if the decision goes the other way.

Sometimes we may be faced with a mixture of random and ethical factors, both trial and temptation. The client has opportunistically chosen to try to extract a low-price deal by exploiting your period-end target pressures. In this case personal achievement of revenue goals weighs against pricing integrity.

As business leaders how might we discern the source of setbacks as well as

creating a culture in which employees enthusiastically take empowerment? First and foremost is prayer. Whether seeking clarity, combatting personal inhibitors, or spiritual attacks, there is not one of the devil's schemes that can't be combatted through prayer. Practically, this also means removing obstacles in the path of employees, and being sensitive to what is preying on their minds and potentially inhibiting them from doing their best work. This requires listening and understanding as well as encouragement and recognition.

Much has been written about our calling to redeem the workplace. We can lead by example and set the tone for integrity and honesty in our business dealings. We can seek to prevent the trials people experience by involving our employees in developing the vision and giving them the degrees of freedom to execute that vision. We can seek to understand, encourage and reward our staff. We probably can't avoid every workplace trial, but we can surely minimise them. All that may still not be enough. We must also invest in prayer that is sharply focused on the workplace inhibitors that just might be the work of the devil. 



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