

A printed version of this process book is available from the Woodstock Business Conference, tel. 202-687-6565 or e-mail: wbc-wtc@georgetown.edu . It is used by leaders to organize and guide local WBC chapters.

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### ***Affirming the Relevance of Religious Faith to Business Practice***

From sharing, praying, and discussing together, business and professional leaders participating in Woodstock Business Conference chapters sharpen their perceptions and gain new insights. This observation of an executive in financial services is fairly typical:

I have seen people get more open, and I have learned to challenge my own assumptions. It has been very positive. We have learned from listening to each other dealing with challenging moral situations such as firing, or going after the money and forgetting family, or the need to take care of the organization as a whole rather than simply individual or selfish pursuits.

One member of the Detroit WBC chapter called the group his "monthly moral check up" and another said:

The group has helped me develop an ability to listen. I value my time with the group because I have found insight through listening. The insights might not exactly come at the time of the meeting, but they come unexpectedly, that day, a week, or even a month later.

Woodstock Business Conference members have found that communities are formed, changes occur, and that they are able to improve their business climate. People report a sense of peace replacing sleepless nights, steady discernment ordering chaos. A radio executive in Washington D.C. said:

No matter what we talk about, I always take something back from this hour and a half. It makes me a better spiritual leader.

The chief financial officer of a healthcare organization remarked:

A challenge in any large organization is how to lead in a consistent manner. How do I provide necessary guidance and example for others? In meeting with this group I learned to be more open, to challenge assumptions, to ask whether this is the morally right thing to do?

Stories in the press about the Woodstock Business Conference routinely affirm the value added to business lives. The Washington Post quoted one participant as saying,

We started rethinking the question of what is faith calling me to do as a person responsible for setting compensation levels.

The Louisville Courier Journal identified the Woodstock Business Conference as a group that looks at ways in which faith can play a role in the workplace in reporting the remarks of one of the Louisville chapter members who advised,

People should not lose track of their spiritual beliefs in trying to combat secular problems.

## WOODSTOCK BUSINESS CONFERENCE: THE PROCESS

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# **INTRODUCTION**

## ***A. Introduction***

Welcome to the Woodstock Business Conference (WBC), a national movement of spiritual and social renewal for the business community. The Conference aims to help business and professional leaders grow in practical wisdom, gain greater integration in their lives, and achieve more effective leadership. To see how the WBC approaches its mission, a little history may be helpful.

### *The Business Vocation Conferences*

The Conference began in 1992 as a response to questions posed by a group of business leaders:

What difference does it make, and for whom, if business leadership is seen as a call for excellence, a call to do God's will?

How does a business run by a committed Christian differ from any other?

These questions arose and returned during the course of three national Business Vocation Conferences organized by the Woodstock Theological Center (1989, 1990, 1991). Business Vocation Conference participants included selected business leaders, experts in business ethics, church leaders, and government officials. No consensus statement issued

an answer to the question. However, several conclusions concerning business activity and religious faith surfaced during these national meetings:

*1. The role of business leadership is difficult and consuming*

Business demands constant vigilance from busy business executives. Time is always an issue. Business leaders and professionals must attend ceaselessly to keep their enterprises viable and growing, to meet competition, and, above all, to make a profit. How this is done and at what price is, of course, where many conflicts arise. The business leaders must account for their decisions to their boards, shareholders, lenders, employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, and, in the case of publicly traded companies, to outside financial analysts as well.

*2. The business enterprise itself plays a fundamental role in public life*

This is an age of interdependent commercial and financial global activity. As they address the needs of their companies, corporate executives, entrepreneurs, and professionals are constantly making moral decisions that affect not only their own firms and themselves but also the broader community and society at large. They find themselves in the role of reconciling conflicting claims to financial and social prosperity.

*3. Moral issues are ever present*

Whether explicitly recognized or not, today's business leader faces moral issues coming from all sides.

Business leaders must draw upon their convictions, beliefs, and experience

In deciding what is the right thing to do, people come to affirm that ethical and moral values provide the guides upon which decisions are based. Ethical and moral values should also undergird the structures and systems that support the business enterprise. One question continually arises:

Where are these convictions and beliefs to be found? How does one locate his or her moral compass? Where is the bridge?

Thoughtful men and women, when questioned about a particular business decision they make, are often unable to articulate fully the moral and ethical values grounding the "decision." The accepted ways of thinking in our culture today, discounts and frequently denies the relevance or appropriateness of religious faith to business practice.

*5. The apparent gap between faith and work*

Men and women of faith speak of an apparent gap between their faith experience and life in the marketplace. They conclude that the knowledge born of faith that we are loved by God sometimes seems naive in the face of the often harsh realities encountered in the

world of work. Woodstock Business Conference members seek new language, new more effective channels for encouragement, and fresh instrumentalities to help business leaders, executives, and professionals to bring their religious faith to business practice in mature and responsible ways.

#### *6. A quest for spirituality*

Research suggests that acceptance of a world where faith and work are sealed off from each other does not come free of cost. In fact, it runs counter to our deepest yearnings. People in business and the professions are hungry to figure out how to relate faith and work. We see a quest for meaning and a way to bring "the deeper self to decision making."

#### *7. Spirituality vs. religion*

"Work and spirituality" is now a very popular topic. A spirituality in business movement has been driven by concerned individuals who are attempting to integrate their lives. This is a bottom-up phenomenon rather than a system of thought or behavior imposed from above. Some favor the term "spirituality" out of the concern that "religion" may be considered to be dogmatic, oppressive, restricting, an unwelcome imposition from outside the individual. The idea of spirituality is thought of as freeing, basic, true, something at the core of the individual as a spiritual being. Our society rightly demands respect for the personal and deeply held beliefs of others. Failure to do so smacks of bigotry and puts people at a marketing disadvantage, to say the least. No movement seeking to respond to our deepest yearnings wants to be tarred as oppressive, outmoded, or quirky.

#### *8. Religious belief contributes to ethical and moral values*

For people of faith, meaning can be found in religion, not as the mindless oppressor of personal freedom but rather as a trusted path by which they can approach their ultimate goal in life, eternal life with their loving God. For Christians, religion in general, and particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition, contributes to ethical and moral values in a number of significant ways:

- \* Thousands of years of prayerful reflection have produced a rich treasury of thought directed to practical resolution of questions of right and wrong. Guidance in the form of stories, parables, commandments, exhortations, and wisdom sayings abound.

- \* The motivational power of religious conviction sustains morally correct behavior. Having in mind one's ultimate purpose, loving union with God, curbs any bent toward narcissism, self-gratification, and sin.

- \* A picture of the world emerges from which it makes sense for people to take the dilemmas of moral action seriously and make the effort to do the right thing

- \* A way of life is presented which is more comprehensive, integrating, and demanding.

\* A community of believers opens access to a much deeper range of values than those expressed in the conventional wisdom of the day.

\* A community of believers also provides needed support for people to do the hard work necessary to get the whole picture, to find the fullest explanations, to come to good judgements, and to do the right thing.

The Judeo-Christian tradition sees business as a calling, a vocation. This tradition highlights the fact that as a business person you are a steward, entrusted with God's creation. You employ your talents and skills. You manage the assets at your disposal for the creation and distribution of wealth, employment, needed products and services. The executive, manager, and professional need to be able to perform with skill and competence. Hopefully, you can do so with peace of mind. Business people gather in Woodstock Business Conference chapters to reflect on their religious faith and its meaning and impact on the totality of their lives. Such gatherings demonstrate an important coalescence of the spiritual quest in the world of work.

### ***B. The Mission***

The Conference's founders embarked on a mission. They set out to help people of faith find the necessary language and encouragement to create business cultures that are consistent with Judeo-Christian values. To do this, they envisioned a national network of business executives and professionals who would meet in local chapters to offer each other a kind of peer ministry in support of the mission.

The Business Vocation Conference (BVC) was formally incorporated in 1992. The founding business leaders engaged an executive director, incorporated, and obtained tax-exempt status. They deliberated and hammered out a Mission Statement that today states:

#### **MISSION STATEMENT**

The Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference is to establish and lead a national network of business leaders to explore the Judeo-Christian tradition in order:

- to assist the individual to integrate faith, family and professional life;
- to help the leadership of the firm to develop a corporate culture consistent with Judeo-Christian values; and,
- to aid business leaders and corporations to exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large.

The Conference welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious traditions. Grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, the Woodstock Business Conference is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

BVC pilot chapters started in three cities (Milwaukee, New York City, Washington, D.C.). The Washington, D.C. chapter, organized and coordinated by James L. Connor, S.J., director of the Woodstock Theological Center, was the most successful of the three pilot groups. Its meeting process was amplified, refined, and then offered as a model for others.

The BVC Board came to recognize that the Woodstock center and the Woodstock process played a unique role in the growth of the Conference. The day-to-day operations of the Conference moved to the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. in 1993. The BVC board on May 25, 1994, changed the name of the corporation to the Woodstock Business Conference and made other conforming changes.

The activities and coordination of efforts between the Woodstock Business Conference and the Woodstock Theological Center developed to such an extent that, in June 1998, the boards of both organizations decided to formally consolidate the WBC within the Woodstock Center as an integral unit of the Center. This consolidation gave the WBC a ready-made platform for further growth and access to the resources necessary to sustain its gains. WBC chapters grew from one in the fall of 1993 to sixteen by mid-1999. II.

## **THE WOODSTOCK PROCESS**

The success of the WBC has been due, in large measure, to its ability to provide a vehicle to address the yearning for integration in our lives. It facilitates positive responses to our desire to make a difference in our firms and the wider society. People are not satisfied with the status quo. Business executives, managers, and professionals want to bridge the apparent gap between faith and work. The process used at WBC chapter meetings promotes practical wisdom with theological reflection on the salient issues and problems of the contemporary workplace.

### ***A. Chapter Meetings***

What is this Woodstock process and how does it work? Local WBC chapter members gather each month to address issues arising out of their experience in the workplace. The approach is deceptively simple but each step is vital to support an atmosphere of trust and faith-inspired reflection. The meetings themselves are scheduled to mirror the time, place, and surroundings of a typical business meeting. They generally take place at the same place, date, and time each month. The meetings, lasting about one hour and a half, aim to begin on time and end on time so that busy people can count on and set aside the same time each month.

### ***B. The WBC format:***

The WBC format evolved over time from the experience of business and professional people who began to engage in systematic theological reflection on their lives in the

workplace. Over time, its elements and the order of proceeding emerged and were refined.

1. Introductions.
2. Opening prayer
3. Reading of the Woodstock Business Conference Mission Statement with its three goals.
4. Scripture: A passage from Scripture related to the topic under consideration is read aloud, followed by a period of silent reflection (five minutes), and then sharing of insights (seven to ten minutes).
5. Topic: Material on the topic for the day has been previously mailed with the meeting notice and minutes of the last meeting's discussion.
6. Reflection: Evaluation on the meeting and the process (five to ten minutes before conclusion).
7. Closing prayer.

***C. Each feature of the WBC meeting format serves a critical role***

1. Introductions. The aim of this element is to build a sense of community. New people are often present. WBC chapters grow and thrive because members so value their own participation that they invite their friends and colleagues to join with them.

2. Opening prayer. Each session begins with a prayer, an acknowledgment that God holds us in existence and gives us the light to know and the strength to do the right thing. We must have God's grace, light, and support to hear His Word and learn what to do in the case or situation under consideration.

3. Mission Statement. After asking God's grace for the meeting, the next step is to recall the WBC Mission Statement. Reading the threefold mission statement at the beginning of each meeting helps keep discussions on track and avoids wasting valuable time. This element, reading the mission statement at the beginning of each meeting, was incorporated in direct response to frustrations experienced in earlier theological reflection groups where participants frequently sought to revisit the purposes for the meeting.

4. Scripture passage and reflection. One of the great strengths of the WBC process is that period marked by reading a pertinent Scripture passage aloud followed by a five minute interval of silent reflection. After the silence, participants share how the particular story or image struck them, how the passage applies in life today. The discipline of silence, so rare for many busy executives, opens new vistas. WBC members remark that their appreciation of this phase of the process grows over the course of a year. By entering into our discussions through the threshold of Scripture, we are introduced to the "mind and heart of Christ," with His sense of purpose and values. He is the touchstone or criterion for the accuracy of what we will decide. This contrasts with "popular" or "conventional wisdom." His is the "world" or the "context" within which we want to place and locate the issue or problem we will be considering. By entering in this manner, a whole new light shines on the subsequent discussion of marketplace issues.

The richness of this phase struck one WBC participant who said:

I found the few moments of reflection in response to the Scripture, to be very, very moving. It would probably be much more difficult to get some insight into the Scripture without the WBC structure. Reading Scripture this way allows barriers to come down. Scripture allows a common ground for our discussion of the topic that follows.

Another added:

Reading Scripture and reflecting on it helps us to look at our business lives in an entirely different context. The WBC meeting is the first time in years or perhaps ever in our lives to just sit down and read the Scripture. What we think about when we take on business issues is different because of the Scripture, whether or not we talk about it during our discussion. And, it often leads right into the topic we are to discuss at the meeting.

5. Topic. Next comes the topic for the day, i.e., the case, issue, problem, or opportunity. We focus on concrete details from our work experience stimulated by the case presented in the articles, exercises, and questions sent out by the coordinator. Here we also recall the feelings, drives, motivations, and concerns associated with the event. While not explicit in the format itself, a series of orderly steps inevitably emerges from the back-and-forth of the discussion:

(1) What is the data? What do I see? Necessary data includes not only the events themselves but all the surrounding circumstances: the people, relationships, and communities involved, as well as the underlying desires and motivations of the participants.

(2) What does it mean? We push to understand and explain what is going on. The discussion develops a range of explanations. Hearing different perspectives helps people to come to a fuller understanding of the situation.

(3) Judging: "This is it!" Eventually responsible business people are by training and inclination prompted to "make the call," to name the fact of the matter after due consideration of the explanations offered. And then, we judge, "Is this good?" "Is it worthwhile?" "Do I like this?"

(4) What shall I do about it? The final step is deliberation, discernment, and decision. Responsibility calls us to respond with some kind of action.

These four steps follow the same pattern in any human activity where we are functioning well, where we are the best we can be. When we can see the pattern at work in ourselves and in the meeting process, it helps us to confirm that we are on the right track.

6. Reflection on the Meeting. Another important, and often unrecognized, step in the process takes place during the final five to ten minutes before the end of the meeting. Here, we stop to reflect back on the meeting to see how well or badly it went. We recall some important insights that arose and identify issues that warrant further exploration. It is here that chapter members might select the next topic and accept responsibility for its preparation and presentation.

7. Closing prayer. The meeting concludes with prayer, an expression of gratitude. Often it is The Lord's Prayer. We acknowledge that God has been with us, helping, guiding, even challenging. We hand it over to the Lord. "Thy will be done."

#### ***D. Between Chapter Meetings***

Over time, the WBC process helps to inform the members and promotes better, more thoughtful, and more effective action. However, achieving the three goals of the Woodstock Business Conference mission requires continuing, cumulative effort. This brief examination of the process of orderly steps outlined above helps to understand what is going on during the meetings themselves. It is also useful for individual members between the meetings as we reflect on our daily work and make practical decisions, particularly in situations involving ethical implications.

##### *1. Minutes of the meeting.*

Minutes or notes of the discussions at each chapter meeting serve a crucial function. They help to recall the insights reached and decisions made as a result of the meetings. Fortunately, one or more members in a group are usually able to take good notes for the group. These notes or minutes are also helpful for those who were out of town or otherwise had to miss a meeting. It enables them to stay in touch. A sample of the minutes distributed by the coordinator of the Washington, D.C. chapter can be found in the Appendix. Minutes need not be so extensive. However brief, minutes are a real help to sustain and nurture the WBC process.

##### *2. Preparation for each meeting.*

Each month, chapter coordinators circulate a package of materials with an agenda, notes of the past meeting, articles, exercises, Scripture, and focus questions. This package enables WBC members to reflect upon the Scripture passage and the upcoming topic in preparation for the next meeting. Experience has shown that progress in personal and group growth occurs more rapidly and surely when members prepare in advance for chapter meetings.

When individuals come prepared, the meeting moves quickly as each shares the fruit of previous reflection and prayer, rather than simply offering spontaneous reactions at the meeting itself. This kind of preparation makes the sharing qualitatively different—much deeper, more provocative, and mature.

### *3. Beyond the Chapter Meetings*

Any movement toward personal integration cannot rest on a one and a half hour conversation once a month. Many members, challenged by the monthly conversations, pursue intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth outside the meeting. They explore and share articles, books, tapes, programs, and spiritual reading.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, has excellent advice about doing reflection well. He insists that the only way to learn is by doing, reflecting on our success or failure, and doing again. A Daily Examen or focused review on the events of the day is one invaluable exercise. (See the articles on the Daily Examen in the Appendix: "The Ignatian Examen" by James L. Connor, S.J., "Rummaging for God" by Dennis Hamm, S.J., and "Welcoming the Spirit — Every Day" by William J. Byron, S.J.).