

Competing With Integrity in Kingdom Work – The Responsibility of the CEO

Summary

Pressures upon CEO's of Christian organizations to succeed are immense. The temptations to compromise our Kingdom values and engage in action that lacks integrity become intense at times. One aspect of this that confronts non-profit Christian CEO's arises because of competition – either real or perceived – from other non-profit Christian organizations. How should the Christian CEO understand competition within the realm of God's Kingdom work? How does the Christian CEO keep balance for the organization in the context of such pressures? When does the Christian CEO contravene Kingdom value in being unduly competitive? Is it enough to present your message well and then trust God for the results?

Competition in the Kingdom happens regularly. Churches compete for members; Christian non-profits compete for donors; Christian educational institutions compete for students. Tools, strategies and skills employed in the business world to enhance the competitiveness, i.e. the marketability, of the organization and its products, find their way into the thinking of Christian leaders and their institutions. We develop a mission statement, articulate our values, and then put it together in a wonderful package called the vision that we can sell to current and future supporters or clients in order to sustain and grow “the ministry”. We are often in denial that competition exists and that much of our effort as CEO's gets expended on ‘branding’ our institution so that it is more appealing to the limited pool of donors or clients within our Canadian reality. The unexpressed goal is to beat out the Christian competition.

So what is a Christian CEO to do about this reality? Does she or he just get into the fray and play the game, perhaps breaking a few rules here and there to score and win, no matter the consequences for other, less successful non-profit Christian ministries? Or is there a way for a Christian CEO to present well the vision of her institution, be committed to working Christianly as a person and institution, be as wise and savvy as possible, but trust God to honour these efforts?

Competition¹ – a contest between rivals, the effort of two or more parties acting independently to secure the business of a third party by offering the most favourable of terms -- flourishes in our world. Debate arises as to whether competition should be considered a by-product of Adam's rebellion, or whether the competitive spirit reflects some aspect of the divine image in which humanity was created by God. Some would point to the rivalry that emerges between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 and conclude that competition is symptomatic of sin. Others might argue that competition in the Kingdom represents the diversity of vision and values that God purposely creates among people through His dynamic Spirit. People get passionate about their Kingdom assignments.

Striving for excellence should not be equated simply with competition. Seeking to be and do the best for God is not competition. When we strive to be the best because we desire to boast in our achievements, or because we want the prestige of being first, or because we want to be the biggest – then competition is generating unhealthy

¹ Compete – to strive consciously or unconsciously for an objective; be in a state of rivalry. This can function at the personal or corporate level. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the two levels.

consequences. When we criticize another agency or organization for purpose of promoting our own so as to gain some advantage, the competitive spirit is becoming harmful. When we twist the truth in our publications, or recruit donors or employees or clients without revealing key information that we know would affect their decision, then competition is becoming too dominant.

In the realm of God's Kingdom terms like humbleness, goodness, sacrificial love, truthfulness, peace do not walk easily alongside the notion of competition or rivalry. In fact one might make the argument that some of the 'works of the flesh' that Paul names in Galatians 5:18-20 could be translated by the word "competition" (i.e. ἔρις – contention, rivalry; ἐριθειᾶ – selfish ambition). Paul contrasts these attitudes and behaviours with the fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love and including peace, goodness, kindness and self-control.

In terms of entities external to the Kingdom and its purposes, the metaphor that the NT uses is not competition but warfare. Satan seeks to destroy God's work and His people by whatever means possible. For him the end justifies using any means. Much of the language of controversy and rivalry we read about in the NT illustrates this fundamental and pervasive spiritual conflict (persecution, counteracting false teaching, opposing false apostles, etc.). We might argue the case that warfare is the ultimate form of competition and rivalry. If so, then we might say that the Christian competes against the forces of evil and seeks to destroy them. In this sense the Christian competes in a good cause and for good reasons.

Within the Kingdom rivalry and competition do not get good press. Consider the following cases:

Case # 1: When Jesus is teaching his disciples that "they must welcome these little children in my name" (Mark 9:37), the apostle John responds by saying, "Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop because he was not one of us" (9:38). Jesus rebukes him and says that "whoever is not against us is for us" (9:40). I am not sure I know exactly what Jesus meant, but I think he at least was saying to John that such people are part of the Kingdom, not outside the Kingdom. So they are not competitors, but collaborators.

Case # 2: In the initial chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul chides the Corinthian Christians because they are creating factions centred around different Christian teachers – Apollos, Peter, Paul and even Christ. Paul's response to this kind of activity is quite clear – "there should not be divisions among you" (1 Corinthians 1:10). The reason is that the Messiah is not divided. He goes on to argue that such activity is "worldly" and not "spiritual" (3:1-3).

Case # 3: In Genesis 13 we have the story in which Abraam and Lot divide the land. The reason for this is that their holdings had grown so large that there was quarreling between their households. Competition for water and pasture was creating division. So Abram told Lot to choose what part of the land he would desire to have and Lot chose the Jordan valley. Abraam then occupied the Canaanite highlands. Abraam acted to deal with unhealthy competition and God blessed Abraam for his initiative.

Case # 4: In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus tells the parable of the Talents. Individuals are entrusted with the management of part of the owner's estate (expressed in monetary terms). One is given 5 talents, another 2 and another 1. Their task is to use this capital to increase the master's economic base. We find no hint in the parable that there is

competition among them as they go about their task. The master does hold them accountable for excellence in managing his resources.

Based on accounts such as these and the absence of texts that seem to promote the idea of competition within the boundaries of the Kingdom, we have to conclude that an exclusive spirit of rivalry does not cohere with Kingdom values. We are family, brothers, beloved. “A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand!” The Kingdom of God is built on grace

Now we do find a healthy stimulus for spiritual development – even a provocation to love. Paul uses athletic imagery to illustrate this passionate striving for spiritual excellence. However, it cannot be done at the expense of other believers. To do so is to destroy the very thing one is seeking to attain by God’s grace. Sometimes jealousy does occur within Kingdom ministry. A good example is the occasion when Aaron and Miriam complain that Moses seems to get all the prominence. “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?” they ask (Numbers 12:2). God acts swiftly and decisively to remind them that He is the One Who makes such decisions. In His anger He makes them leprous. Only Moses’ intercession saves them from a horrible death. What makes this scene even more astonishing is that Aaron and Miriam were Moses’ siblings! So a spirit of competition never seems to be appropriate within the context of the Kingdom. Rather there is the language of imitation, encouragement, teaching, restoration for service, and humility.

So I conclude from this brief survey of Scripture:

1. that in so far as our ministry encounters evil, competition in the form of spiritual warfare will of necessity occur, as we seek to destroy evil and its forces with God’s help.
2. that in so far as our ministry functions within God’s Kingdom, the competitive spirit must be controlled by the Holy Spirit lest it soon become destructive of the person and the community because competition is incompatible with the fruit of the Spirit.

If we truly embrace a Kingdom mindset, then competition with other Kingdom members or entities, will not be the question. Rather we will seek to ask how we can assist one another to achieve the respective missions God has placed within our stewardship.

Within the Christian context various strategies are engaged to control the damage that inappropriate competition can create:

1. Parish Concept. We might name this the ‘geographical’ response to competition. Essentially as the Church expands into new territory, new parishes are created. A parish is a geographically limited area within which a community of believers seeks to exercise its divine mandate. Each community has its own parish and is responsibility to carry forward God’s mission in that space. Of course, if the Church is singular, such a method works quite well. But the reality is that the Church is not singular, but quite diverse. Some denominations use official parish models, others do not. Thus the model might work well when you have a single Christian organization overseeing the work, but when multiple organizations are engaged in the same work in the same area, the parish concept no longer is adequate to control competition. This is the case in terms of church planting. It is also the case when we consider ‘parachurch’ agencies that answer to no denominational group.

2. Service Niche. Another response to competition is to define your ministry in terms of a specific service that no other offers in your region. This gives your ministry a place that does not compete with others, at least in terms of the service being provided. It might be stewardship ministry, or safe-houses for abused women, or a camp for a specific group of people. However it is defined, it avoids ministry competition by filling a service niche that none or few others offer. While this reduces competition in terms of service offered, it does not necessarily reduce competition in other areas (i.e. donor recruitment and retention).
3. Product Differentiation. Another way ministries try to mitigate competition is by offering a product that is unique. While this is similar to the previous strategy (service niche), this one applies perhaps more specifically to Kingdom ministries engaged in education, medical work or international aid, for example. So we discern educational institutions offering a Christian K-12 educational product or a home-schooling product, or a Bible Institute or Bible College product or a Christian liberal arts University product or a Graduate School product or a seminary product, etc. In this way the ministry entity shows distinctiveness and tries to avoid 'competition' with similar agencies in its region. It becomes complex, however, when an entity incorporates more than one kind of product. Its ability to mitigate competition is seriously jeopardized.
4. Consortial Arrangements. Another strategy adopted particularly in educational contexts, is that of collaboration to achieve a similar mission. The one I am most familiar with is the Associated Canadian Theological Schools of Trinity Western University. This is a consortium of six seminaries and two academic units, forming the Graduate School of Theology for the University. This kind of consortial arrangement is unique in Canada and in ATS, as far as I am aware. By working collaboratively, the entities eliminate competition, accomplish their respective missions, and do so with significant strategic advantages. It takes time to find workable solutions which will mitigate internal competition for students and funds, but it is achievable. Because the entities are denominationally linked, there is no question of competition in the same group of churches.

There are undoubtedly other strategies that ministry entities have devised to limit the negative effects of competition. However, the pressure to secure resources, the need to maintain the validity of the mission, and the ambition to be the best all conspire to keep unhealthy competition alive and well within the Christian world.

One strategy we would not condone is a refusal to pursue excellence. We should not confuse the pursuit of excellence with competition. Within the Kingdom context excellence is defined in reference to God's values, our specific mission, and the criteria of excellence set by peers (i.e. best practices). Within graduate theological education, for example, the ATS urges seminaries to define what they mean by "good theological education" and then to do it. It helps the institutions to identify best practices and then to implement them in ways that cohere with their mission and values. The system is designed to be externally non-competitive, but internally challenging. Of course ATS

competes in the larger world of graduate theological education and so in that context it must govern itself carefully so that it responds Christianly.

If a competitive model is not appropriate in the Kingdom for defining the relationship of our ministry to other ministries, what model do we use? If the Kingdom is God's family, is there room for sibling rivalry? As we have sought to demonstrate earlier, the answer should be no. Rather we seek to extend the 'right hand of fellowship', recognizing the grace of God in the lives and callings of other believers. Perhaps the response of Jesus to Peter at the end of John's Gospel will give us some direction here. You will remember that Jesus is rehabilitating Peter for future ministry and urging him to "feed my sheep." As part of his message Jesus foretells how Peter will end his days. Jesus urges Peter to "follow me" (John 21:17-19). But Peter looks around and sees John and asks Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" (vs.21) Peter is moving into competitive mode here. Jesus shuts him down by responding "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." (vs.22).

We do a lot of looking around at other ministries. We want to know, perhaps we need to know, what they are doing. We do so from the best of motives, because we want to learn how to do things better, to imitate those doing it well. We also do it from the worst of motives – we can't let them get ahead of us! Jesus would say to us, "Do not worry about what others are doing! Follow me!" We deal with the spirit of unhealthy and harmful competition by determining to follow Jesus! He will lead us to fulfill our calling, our mission, and our vision. We must be wise, but harmless.

Practically speaking, I think this means:

1. that CEO's must lead their ministries to obey God's two great commandments – to love Him with all we have and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We cannot compete harmfully with our neighbour and love him at the same time. So as we create strategies and implement plans, we have to keep them always within the boundaries of these two great commandments.
2. that CEO's are responsible to live the model and follow the principles personally, holding all others within their ministry to that standard. Agape must reign; goodness must prevail. The CEO must be the primary agent to implement. The challenge of hypocrisy is considerable in this context – saying one thing but in fact doing another.
3. that CEO's must be willing to sacrifice ministry success in order to follow godly values. You may have to deny lucrative government funding because it requires you to incorporate values that are inimical to the Kingdom. You may have to reject a generous donation because it will pervert your mission. You may not be able to hire that really capable person because she does not accept the beliefs and values that are the heart of your ministry. You may have to let that employee go who constantly rejects these values. You may have to reject cooperating with another agency because they do not hold to your values, even though such an alliance has potential to generate significant funds. You may have to reject a method of advertising because it demeans other institutions and does not represent who you are fairly.
4. that CEO's must work deliberately to create among their employees a healthy, spiritually-based pursuit of excellence, but not a competitive spirit between employees. Each must be treated by others in the institution with respect and

dignity, with encouragement to fulfill God's calling in their lives to the greatest degree possible.

At the base of it all, I think, is the responsibility of CEO's to control their personal and corporate egos. Prestige is a huge temptation for all of us. The desire to be at the top lurks in the heart of every CEO and within the collective heart of every board. The counterbalance to this must be a humble trust in God, a steady embrace of the principle of agape as the best way to live and serve, and a constant pursuit of excellence in ways that help others.

Some questions for further consideration:

1. Does competition exist between Christian ministries? If so is this good or bad? Why? Do you have positive or negative experiences in this regard?
2. If we conclude that competition is inimical to Christian values, how do we pursue excellence and present our stories in appropriate ways?
 - a. How does this influence the way we advertise and market our ministries?
 - b. How does this influence the way we talk about other ministries to donors or clients?
3. What responsibility do I have as a CEO to establish a positive spiritual environment towards competition within your ministry?
4. What specific steps will you take in the next six months to identify harmful competitive practices within your ministry and actively change them?