Quakers and Business Group

Promoting Quaker values in Business and the Workplace

The Friends’ decision-making process – a hidden gem?

This article by Nicolas Burton, Academic Research Working Group Convenor, was first published in The Kingdom at Work Project [Bulletin 8](http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/?ddownload=827) (July 2016), which focused on spirituality in the workplace.

The Society of Friends (Quakers) has a long tradition in the world of business. In this short article, I characterise one aspect of a distinctly ‘Quaker way’ of doing business by examining the theology and process by which Friends conduct Meetings for Business which may have potential relevance as a collaborative method of decision-making in today’s increasingly complex business organisations.

The decision-making of Friends encompasses two broad dimensions: (1) a spiritual dimension described within the theology of early Friends, and (2) a decision-making process, tried, tested and refined by Friends for over 350 years.

The spiritual dimension requires Friends to turn their attention to the Spirit as the source and authority in decision-making, relegating the role of human authority. Friends understand that anyone present in the Meeting may experience ‘leadings’ of the Spirit, and this has an important effect on the way that Friends make decisions together in a process of ‘corporate discernment’. As everyone has an unmediated access to the Spirit, then it follows that every participant has the potential to contribute to the process. By extension, every person present has the responsibility of waiting and listening to what the Spirit may say through him or her as part of the proceedings. The process of corporate discernment, therefore, has a theological dimension that fosters cooperation in contrast to the competitive and confrontational forms of decision-making widely used in corporate board rooms.

The use of silence is an important characteristic of the process. Meetings begin and end with periods of silence, allowing those present to open their hearts and minds to God’s guidance, rather than to focus on individual or selfish wishes. In addition, silence can also be used during the proceedings. For example, short periods of silence between contributions give time for those present to reflect on their meaning. Second, short periods of silence may also reduce the risk of an ego-based debate. Third, the Clerk may request a period of silent reflection to help re-focus the Meeting and discern a way forward. Thus, silence can have a calming effect on those present.

Through the process of corporate discernment, the primary objective is to reach unity. As a collective process, decision-making via resolutions or the casting of votes is shunned. In contrast, Meetings aim to arrive at a sense of the meeting. However, is unity the same as consensus? Friends often insist that consensus is based on a notion of human reason and authority, and commonly understood as requiring mutual compromise between human beings; the decision taken must be agreeable to all present, or at least objectionable to none. In contrast, unity and a ‘sense of the meeting’ is based on a spiritual and corporate discernment of God’s will.

Corporate discernment subordinates human authority. Those nominated who moderate and ‘clerk’ the Meeting are seen as facilitators of the corporate discernment process. Often, contemporary business meetings tend to be structured around a Chairperson who manages the meeting and a Secretary who produces minutes at some future point after the meeting. In contrast, Friends combine these functions into the role of a Clerk who both guides the Meeting and produces minutes in real-time.

The Clerk is not there to ‘lead’. Perhaps the Clerk’s role is one of stewardship, rather than leadership, as leadership is seen as provided by the Spirit. Unlike contemporary business meetings, the Clerk makes sure the Meeting understands what is being approved at the time the decision is made. An important benefit of real-time minutes is in terms of participant understanding and ownership as decisions that are both understood and collectively owned have a far greater chance of being implemented. In other words, unitive decisions are often more likely to be implemented with good grace, imbued, as they are, with the will of God.

Is the decision-making process of Friends transferable to many contemporary business meetings? At its heart, the process balances the creativity and leadings of individuals with a ‘testing’ role of the Meeting. With many contemporary businesses striving to find new ways to improve engagement at all levels of the organisation, and ultimately to make better decisions, such a cooperative process should be of interest to practitioners. Most Friends would agree that the process has a spiritual dimension and may frown at the idea that it is simply a process or technique. It is perhaps the dimensions of cooperation and trust that lies at its heart that can in fact make a contribution to the challenges faced by secular business organisations.

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