



Minding the Gap - November 2015

A Faith and Work Publication

Welcome to Minding the Gap, a monthly thought about faith in the workplace!

"Principle and Form"

Recently during a visit with a former coworker, he and I recalled a prior conversation during which he made a statement that became critical to the life of our company. He said, "I may consent to a policy or decision if I am able to understand the 'why' behind it." What we recognized to be true was that for persons having responsibility for creating policy (**form**), the why (**principle**) behind that form needs to make sense and be clearly understood before it goes into effect. **Principles** encompass values, virtues and ideals, while **forms** are the structures, processes and policies which enable **principles** to be expressed in our lives, both individually and organizationally.

A biblical example of this distinction is found in John 7:21-24 (*The Message*) where Jesus in his encounter with the Jews in the Temple says: "I did one miraculous thing a few months ago (healing the man by the pool of Bethesda), and you're still standing around getting all upset, wondering what I'm up to. Moses prescribed circumcision----and so you circumcise a man, dealing with one part of his body, even if it's the Sabbath. You do this in order to preserve one item in the Law of Moses. So why are you upset with me because I made a man's whole body well on the Sabbath? Don't be nitpickers; use your head --- and heart! --- to discern what is right, to test what is authentically right." The "authentically right", the **principle**, is to show compassion for those suffering. It must never be limited to a set of conditions - the Sabbath or **form**-- which might prevent the values and virtues (**principles**) from succeeding.

In the world of work, we encounter many policies and procedures. Indeed, they are needed to provide order and prevent chaos. The challenge for us as coworkers is to look beyond

these **forms** to be sure they support the **principles** on which they are based. In my former workplace, we had what was known as the "Policy Exception Procedure" which recognized that any policy would not be able to fit every situation. If you as a coworker encountered such a situation, you were able to access this procedure for an exception to the policy. We did not agree with the axiom "If we do it for one, then we must do it for all." There will always be an individual circumstance where the policy is not applicable because of a value or ideal which takes priority.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a leading 20th century Christian theologian, believed each advance in implementing love and justice creates possibilities for idolatry, for treating progress as more complete and final than it really is. He stated, "There is no 'Christian' economic or political system (**form**)...God's order (**principle**) can never be identified solely with some specific form of social organization." What an exciting, but challenging statement!

Blessings to you this week as we all give thanks to our Creator for so many good gifts!
- Jim Grubs

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