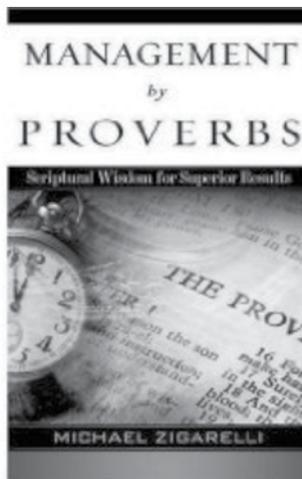


BOOK REVIEW

MANAGEMENT BY PROVERBS: SCRIPTURAL WISDOM FOR SUPERIOR RESULTS BY MICHAEL ZIGARELLI

Reviewed by Ruby Simpson, CCIM
President, Simpson Commercial Properties



Management by Proverbs answers the practical question: how can I be a good Christian manager or company owner without sacrificing my Christian ideals and principals, and still run a profitable endeavor? The answers lie in the Book of Proverbs.

The book is full of specific examples of companies that adhere strongly to Christian ethics and principles while growing and seizing market share and providing excellent services or products. The book's 25 management principles come directly from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs.

As a text for business schools, it meets the criteria most students seek: practical suggestions grounded in real life examples, with the twist that these principles were enumerated long before the advent of the internal combustion engine. Each chapter includes discussion questions that would be helpful both in a classroom setting and

in a group of Christians who gather for support. In fact, the author recommends Accountability Groups which he defines as “a circle of spiritually mature friends who will keep us on track and moving forward...”, and he gives clear instructions on setting up or joining such a group.

The book also contains several case studies. I do not know if the target audience of this book is strictly an academic setting, where case studies would be helpful, or a larger audience, where a case study – by definition with no wrong or right answer – is simply frustrating to a reader looking for guidance. The author has one chapter devoted to the treatment of homosexuals in the work place, asking the question whether or not a company that lives its Christian mission should hire someone having an openly homosexual lifestyle. He carefully presents arguments on several sides of the question, but fails to give much guidance on its resolution. If the book is intended for wide distribution, it may be helpful to cite the ways different businesses responded to these difficult issues, even if that information is included “in the back of the book.”

The strongest recommendation for the book is that it sets forth Scriptural guidance with very practical suggestions about relying on the book of Proverbs in the day to day operation of a business. In Proverbs gossip is proscribed. The author not only defines gossip in the workplace, he explains why gossip is harmful to the operation of a business and gives clear suggestions how gossip can be dramatically reduced, even nearly eliminate, by changing the corporate culture so that gossipers eventually become unwelcome.

Similarly, he grounds ongoing employee training and advancement, profit sharing and performance review in Biblical terms that flesh out generic business school ideas by showing why adhering to Christian principles is both holy and smart.

Some of the examples used by Dr. Zigarelli grate, however, as being unrealistic. In the book's introduction he cites the example of someone who had "recently purchased" a company with contentious union-management relations, narrow job definitions and workers indifferent to company performance. Labor costs were out of control and the company was on the verge of losing its top customer, among other terrible problems. When I read this example, my first thought was that the buyer had either failed to conduct any due diligence before his purchase, or had purchased the company for far less than he might have spent for any of the company's competitors. What in the world was he thinking? Who buys a company unaware of such problems unless he had a turn-around plan in mind, that plan formulated during due diligence?

The author comments that the slide to cultural conformity and away from Biblical principles "...can happen when we see dozens of ads per day implying the good life comes from owning more stuff." Since most of us are in the business of creating more stuff or selling services to customers who could do without those services in the event of a famine, this kind of comment is specious.

The chapter on providing a realistic job preview was of particular interest to me, an independent contractor selling investment real estate. My industry suffers from more than 50% first year attrition because of its easy in, easy out attitude. Carefully vetting potential salespeople using this book's suggestions would improve the odds new salespeople will be able to perform. It's a truism that a good manager would not intentionally hire someone unqualified for a job, but the book nicely explores the delicate balance between managers who hire only those able to pass the mirror test versus those who are so scrupulous that hiring requirements cannot be met.

There's a long continuum from a compas-

sionate desire to give an employee who slips up another chance, to monitoring bad behavior or inadequate job performance, to termination. The book cautiously navigates the delicate path between encouraging an employee to perform versus terminating that employee, and gives good direction to the manager forced to make that call.

Most importantly, the author consistently reminds the reader to remember that conducting business in a Christian manner is not without its pitfalls. He outlines a number of examples of business decisions based on Proverbs' principles even though the decision makers knew that they were risking failure. This is clearly what Jesus calls us to do: be obedient and follow Him, especially when the world calls us to be expedient. Profit is nice, after all, very nice indeed, but it's not eternal.