

THE



# JOURNALS OF BOAZ

JEFF APPLGATE

## ▶ INTRODUCTION

**A**s a teenager, I had the opportunity to spend three summers at Kanakuk Kamps in Branson, Missouri. While at Kanakuk, I was exposed to Christian college athletes who demonstrated how to live out their Christian faith in community. I wanted the faith and community that they modeled and accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord. For that decision, I was changed for eternity. The Apostle Paul says “that if you confess with your mouth, Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Rom.10:9), and “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature;

the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Kanakuk is where I firmly committed to follow Jesus in every area of my life.

While attending Baylor University, I returned to Kanakuk during the summer breaks and had the privilege of serving in the role of counselor and other leadership positions. During those college years God developed my vision for ministry and established my identity in Christ. As a Christian, I have the power of God’s Holy Spirit residing in me, which has been the foundation for my identity, worldview, confidence, and source of my strength to persevere through trials.

I started my career as a Sales Representative with LSI Industries, a manufacturer of lighting, signage and graphics for gas stations. I was not the charismatic salesman who could captivate an audience and quickly close a sale. Fortunately, the sales process often took years to develop and required discipline, hard work, and integrity to earn the business. I learned that I needed to regularly see our customers face to face, listen to their business concerns, respond with helpful solutions, and build a relationship of trust. As the contractor who manufactures and installs branded graphics at our customer's retail locations, I was one of the first contacts and the face of the new relationship. My customer's reputation and career depended on how well my company managed customers' transitions. I learned that *people buy from people - and they buy from people they trust*. Having a foundation built on an identity in Christ provided core beliefs that fostered trust and confidence that helped propel my career.

## ▶ YOU HAVE BEEN SET APART

**Y**et I have been set aside for so much more. Jesus told his disciples, "you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8) and that they will "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Mt. 28:19). I was safe in my identity in Christ, but I was not living as someone *set apart* as Christ's witness to the people encountered in the marketplace every day. How do I share Jesus without imposing my beliefs on them or creating an awkward feeling as if I am trying to proselytize them? Pursuing this effort has been a journey that I have worked toward for many years in the marketplace.

After nine years in sales, I was promoted to Vice President of Sales and travelling a lot. I had a young family and, yearn-

ing to spend more time at home, I pursued an opportunity to lead and rebuild another division of the company which built products for technology companies such as Nokia, Motorola, and Compaq Computer. This was my first opportunity to exercise the responsibility to establish a new vision for the business and to lead a group of people to achieve that vision. Having put my reputation and career on the line, I naturally struggled with the fear of not being accepted and the possibility of failure.

As I brought these doubts to the Lord, He provided daily encouragement through His Word. It gave me confidence to trust Him with all my anxiousness and plans. The result? We were able to re-build a young and hungry sales team, grew revenue and profits, expanded our services, gained entry into the exploding telecommunications market, and pioneered a new technology along the way. Initiating changes can be exciting but also a huge responsibility. Change directly impacts the lives of so many people. Carrying the burden of the responsibility made my times of prayer in the morning ever more fervent.

Sharing the gospel message of Jesus in the workplace was not something that I was comfortable doing, but I felt the burden to care for and pray for the people on my team. I recall one early morning praying specifically for the opportunity to share the gospel with someone that day. It was later in the afternoon after I had long forgotten about that morning

prayer and I was deep in the tasks of the day when one of our customer service representatives knocked on my door. What happened next changed me profoundly and showed me how God works through His Spirit in the workplace. She sat down and directly and simply

asked me, "Can you tell me how I can know Jesus?" Immediately I recalled the unusual prayer hours earlier and felt chills ran down my spine. I had the privilege to share Jesus with her and pray with her to accept Jesus as her Savior that morning. God answered my prayer that very day and showed me how I could be Christ's witness in the marketplace. God showed me I did not have to respond to the pressure to share the gospel of Jesus in an unnatural and awkward way. The

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## BIBLICALLY BASED BUSINESS MODEL

In 2001 our business of product identification and labeling for the technology market was doing very well. My prior superior had left the company and was leading the turnaround of a large national personnel staffing company. He recruited me to join as one of several Group Vice Presidents to lead the south Texas market. The job promised new challenges, financial rewards, and a chance to be home every night. Ironically, the attacks on September 11 and subsequent collapse of the economy happened just a couple days after I turned in my resignation, but I continued to look forward to the next challenge with a new industry. I was particularly drawn to the opportunity to work under the leadership of Kevin Miller, a business turnaround expert who employed a biblically-based strategy. Leading people who did not know me through difficult changes in a rapidly declining economy provided an entirely new challenge.

All of the regional Group Vice Presidents charged with restructuring the company met in Dallas where Kevin rolled out the company vision, strategy, and core values. The vision painted a clear picture of our future company, the strategy provided a logical direction, and the values established a consensus that would guide decisions. To a secular audience this is exactly what one would expect from a business turnaround expert. However, soon afterwards in a presentation to an outside group of Christian business leaders, Kevin outlined Scriptural principles and a servant leadership style that anchored the turn-around strategy. Jesus modeled servant leadership and provided His disciples clear goals and instructions on how to build His Church. Connecting biblical principles to the building of a business was a revelation to me.

I was the new guy with little relationship capital, coming in to execute disruptive change to the organization. In just a few months, I had closed and consolidated offices, re-organized management, changed operational procedures, and implemented weekly performance metrics to sales and operations. Establishing and maintaining trust with my team during this period was the biggest challenge of my career. By 2003, I was one of the last of the team of Group Vice

Presidents recruited to help with the transition who was still standing. We had accomplished our goals during a rapidly declining economy, but it was not without casualties. I felt it was time to make a change. The Lord had carried me through a tumultuous period that was required for the survival of the company. I learned to how to build a business on a foundation of biblical values. I learned to connect vision, strategy, and servant leadership taught by Jesus to build a lasting great business, and I was equipped with practical skills I could take with me to my next business venture.

## REBUILDING A HISTORIC HOUSTON BUSINESS

In 2003, I joined Blackwell Plastics as President to lead the rebuilding of a Houston-based 70-year-old plastic injection molding company. The company had a storied history in supporting some of the great entrepreneurial companies in Houston. After starting in the later 1930's as a manufacturer of fishing tackle, in the 1940's during World War II the company manufactured products for the C47 transport planes. In the 1950's, it built the first plastic cooler parts for Igloo Corporation, as well as parts for NASA's Freedom 7 mission. And in the 1960's, it created the first heart by-pass pump. In the 1970's Blackwell Plastics manufactured more than one million Weedeaters.

Eventually in the 1980's, the company settled into manufacturing natural gas fittings for Phillips Petroleum. Then in the late 90's Phillips divested of the gas fitting business resulting in the tragic loss of much of Blackwell Plastic's business. That is when I had the opportunity to lead the rebuilding of the business with the option to purchase the company at a later date. This would be an opportunity to apply my experience and biblical principles to rebuild the business.

In 2004, during my first year, the founder and owner had a heart attack. He went in for by-pass surgery and experienced complications that nearly took his life. For months we did not know if he was going to survive. Mr. Blackwell was the founder and had provided jobs for the employees for 70 years. My task was to provide assurance that plans were in place to maintain company operations. Leading in a crisis was not new for me, but this gave me an opportunity to connect on a deeper level with the employees and lead them in prayer for Mr. Blackwell's recovery. I would regularly share updates that at times seemed hopeless but proclaimed that

God was in control and that my confidence was in His plan for us. He did eventually recover. When faced with a crisis, people watch how you respond. My first reaction was to pray and demonstrated my hope and confidence in the future was in our God.

Mr. Blackwell felt it was important to sign every payroll check and hand deliver a paper check to every employee on Friday. Each week I was presented with a stack of checks to sign, and I took that occasion each week to pray over the entire stack of checks, praying for each name and family as I signed their check. Having a weekly schedule allowed me to fulfill my commitment to pray for every employee and trust in God to work in their lives so that they could testify to His glory.

Each year I have a theme for the business that captures the strategy in a few words. It is printed on a t-shirt with a verse that supports the theme like a

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sub-title. As I have worked to build culture in the various organizations, I have led with a favorite theme: "Love one Another." It captures an overarching message that Paul gave to Timothy and has been a guiding principle to me in building company culture: "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). John 13:35 tells us, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love is the foundation for the culture that I seek to develop. The teams that I have managed often hear me repeat the phrase, "If we respect each other and genuinely care for each other, everything will take care of itself." Employees will care for the facilities, the restrooms, the equipment, the customers and will be there for each other. If Paul's goal of his instruction for Timothy could be distilled down to love, then that is good enough for me.

Love was the environment that Jesus created for his disciples and love was the goal that Paul set for Timothy, but Jesus and Paul had a big job—to save the world. Jesus and Paul set high standards, led by example, and required sacrifice and high performance from their disciples. In all of the companies I have led, I have aspired to foster a culture of

love but also expect hard work and require excellence. One of the company Core Values that has been part of every company I have managed is what I call the *Cycle of Success*. It is a sequence of setting goals, measuring performance, evaluating progress, and setting new goals. The Cycle of Success provides clear direction, established expectations and measurable results that we use to drive accountability. Creating a culture of respect and love for one another is the catalyst that supercharges the goals and metrics generating exceptional results.

The company achieved success and were recognized by Houston's Economic Development Council as Houston's greatest small company in 2006. As we trust God in our

personal and business life, we see His provision, we experience His healing, and we put faith in Him for our future. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

As business leaders, we should recognize that God cares for our business life and give Him glory for the difficult pruning that allows us to grow as well as for the success that we enjoy. Business leaders have a platform to tell our story. If Christ is living in us, we cannot share our story and the story of our company without proclaiming the power of Jesus in our lives.

## ▶ THE WAYS OF BOAZ

**A**fter 10 years of successfully rebuilding the business, I decided to pursue the option to purchase the company. But when negotiations stalled, I decided to leave to start my own business. In 2013, I left the company and founded Texas Injection Molding through the acquisition of a small Houston-based plastic molding company. I had to invest everything I had saved, including the savings for my son's college education (and this was during his senior year in high school!). I also had to sign an unlimited personal guarantee on a business loan. Then I finally took the leap to become

an entrepreneur. The only similar experience in my life was when, in faith, I accepted Jesus as my savior, left the old-self behind, and put my trust in Jesus for my redemption and eternal salvation. "All In" was the theme for our first year, and I was re-building again.

The new business' vision, as stated on the website, is to bring glory to God through being recognized as the best in what we do. Our strategy is simple: to recruit and retain the best *People*; to maintain the best manufacturing *Processes* to provide repeatable product; and to provide our people the *Technology* and tools to do their jobs.

The "secret sauce" or "magic in the bottle" that makes us stand out in the marketplace is our culture. Our culture takes as its model the biblical character of Boaz, the grandfather of King David. Ruth 2:4 records, "Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, 'May the Lord be with you' and they said to him, 'May the Lord bless you.'" This verse provided a vision for the culture, leadership, and management in Texas Injection Molding.

Boaz's greeting, "May the Lord be with you," suggests that he sees great value in his relationship with the Lord and puts his trust in God for his well-being and the well-being of his staff. His reapers replied, "May the Lord bless you." Not only do they acknowledge the Lord's influence on their harvest, but they also support the culture of respect and care for each other that Boaz had established. Today workers are often cynical of ownership. I frequently talk to people in our organization and write a letter each quarter where I follow Boaz's example to intentionally proclaim my trust in the Lord. I would hope that my staff will also pray for me as Boaz's staff prayed that the Lord would bless Boaz. Boaz was the owner of the field and is described as a "worthy" man. Not only did he create a culture of respect and love, but he also created a prosperous business providing for his family and the community.

Boaz was the landowner and leader of the farm. He could have kept his faith to himself, not wanting to offend those from other tribes or beliefs. But in his leadership, he chose to express his convictions to influence his team. He was not imposing his beliefs on his staff but was simply living out his faith and praying that the Lord would be with his staff. As

leaders in our organizations, we have personal convictions, and it is our responsibility to speak our convictions and share our perspective.

On the wall next to my bathroom sink I have a framed poem handed down to me by my father titled, "*Walk a Little Plainer Dad*." The message is that our kids watch our every move and that we should be the example they can follow. It is the same in our workplace. Our peers and co-workers are acutely aware of the leader's actions. Do you come early to work to study the Bible? Do you have a reference Bible handy? Are you different because of the Holy Spirit that lives in you? Do you serve others? Do you love all people? Do you praise God and lift others up in love? It is said that I would rather see a sermon than hear a sermon any day. Let's make sure our employees see a sermon in us every day as we live life in the midst of a messy competitive world.

It is said that great leaders give credit when things go right and take responsibility when things go wrong. This is true in giving credit to your team, but also in giving God credit for His involvement. We are building a new manufacturing facility and the design includes a rock garden in the front of the building. As the Israelites placed 12 stones from the Jordan

river to proclaim to the next generation the miracles that God had performed, we are inviting our employees, customers, vendors and friends to bring a

rock for our garden to proclaim the great things God has done in our lives. As Christian leaders, we have many opportunities to declare our faith and God's provision.

Management guru Tom Peters coined the phrase Management By Walking Around (MBWA) and promoted the tactic used by Boaz. Boaz could have stayed in the house and let the servants do the work, but instead he was out in the fields with the workers. Going in the fields he could observe the work, talk directly to the reapers, and hear directly from the front lines, putting him in a better position to make good decisions and build good will.

I am a list maker. I find satisfaction working like a bee going from task to task, wasting no time, checking off the list. Unfortunately, this behavior often conveys to my co-workers that I am busy and don't want to be bothered. I have to be disciplined to make time to linger, ask open-ended ques-

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tions, and wait through sometimes awkward silence to let co-workers fill the gap. When I take the time to stop and afford a few extra seconds to listen, I will be amazed by how much I can learn in a 15-minute stroll through the manufacturing floor.

Being available allows me to learn of my teammates' personal concerns. While wandering around a couple weeks ago, a teammate shared that a former team member had lost their granddaughter to a drowning accident. This gave me the opportunity to write a personal note and join with others to pray for the family. As a Christian leader in your company, you will find natural opportunities to pray with your employees and provide leadership in a pastoral role.

I have been working out my faith in the marketplace for over 30 years. As Christians we have a new identity in Christ and have the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. We have been set apart to be Christ's witnesses to the marketplace and the community in which we live and work. As leaders we are afforded the privilege to live out our faith and build high performing companies based on biblical principles. We should all aspire to be the "Boaz" for the people and organizations that we lead.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**JEFF APPLGATE** is the Founder and CEO of Texas Injection Molding, a Houston, TX. based manufacturer that provides plastic injection molding services to many industries in the south-central United States. Jeff has been committed to manufacturing for 33 years in a variety of roles, having served as the co-founder and Past Chairman of the Greater Houston Manufacturing Association and served two terms as President of the Society of Plastics Engineers. In 2005 Jeff was awarded the Texas Mainspring Manufacturing Award for his commitment to manufacturing excellence and innovation in Texas at the Applied Manufacturing conference in Arlington Texas. He is the author of *Lead Your Family: Vision, Mission, and Core Value* (2021), member of Houston's Second Baptist Church, and serves on the advisory boards of the University of Houston College of Engineering, Houston Community College Advanced Manufacturing Center and Camp Eagle. Jeff holds a joint degree in entrepreneurial management and finance from Baylor University. He is married to Julie Applegate and they have 3 grown children.