

James Butler's Newsletter #56

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

April 2007

I am so pleased that so many of you enjoyed the '80s pop nostalgia last month. It always fascinates me how people react to some of the themes I choose! At a recent workshop (themed on what business can learn from ER), the audience started to set challenges for future topics – so watch out for newsletters on what business can learn from the detective series *Columbo*, or the movie *Top Gun*.

By the time you read this, I will have spent some time working in the charity project my wife and I support. Regular readers will know we love South Africa, and inspiration for newsletters can come from my trips there (see the *Isandla Siya Gesa* issue). This month, I want to talk about the South African theology of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu

The southern African people have a theology or ethic known as Ubuntu (from the Bantu language). It doesn't readily translate into English, but the normal working definition is a *person 'becomes human' through other persons*. Essentially, our wellbeing (spiritually) is defined by our community wellbeing. Archbishop Tutu, who incorporated the African Ubuntu into his Christian theology has described it as:

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

This is very contrary to the Western tradition of individualism and placing oneself at the centre of one's circle of concern. As I have read recently about Ubuntu (see Book Review), I have reflected what this means for my life and how I conduct myself in relation to others, especially in business. As someone who has worked for five years helping people identify and achieve what is important to them as individuals, you can imagine why I have found this intellectually challenging!

If we subscribe to the principle of Ubuntu, and you can guess I do – or I wouldn't be writing this newsletter – what does it mean in practice for us living and working in our daily lives? For me, Ubuntu sums up a few general principles that I have tried to live by for some time anyway:

What goes around, comes around:- In my experience, those who smile at the world, and those around them, get smiles back. Those who act unethically or maliciously, seem to reap what they sow. Not in every case, of course, but overall. So before we act in certain ways, maybe we need to ask what we want to come around in the future.

Do unto others:- A variation on the same theme, but I have found that if I treat people the way I would like to be treated, I get a better response. If I act childishly, rudely or inconsiderately, I find resistance or deliberate menace in return (and perhaps I deserve it).

If you 'win', does your customer or supplier lose? Before doing what I do now, one of my responsibilities was to negotiate supply contracts, running to very large sums of money. I never liked dealing with those who were always out to win in negotiation. I far preferred (and therefore gave more business to) those who were looking for a partnership. So who got screwed in the end?

Don't bear grudges:- I have a client at the moment who every time we speak raises issues of conflict with a significant other from the past. They are unable to move on and create a bright new future, because they hold grudges about the past. Who is that serving? Not them, nor their partner. Ubuntu suggests that our individual need for apology or retribution should be subservient to the wider community need for reconciliation. And ultimately we would benefit from not carrying the polluting grudge around with us for so long.

Business Ethics

Any of you who have attended my workshops or training days will know that whilst I like to theorise on how we can be more effective, gain more clients, achieve higher profits and run better businesses, I like to ground all the thought into actions too. I will have passed nothing on through this issue if you read it and nothing changes. Given the topic, I can't tell you what to do (and as a coach I don't see that as my job!). But if I get a bit more specific about applying Ubuntu in your daily life, you may see the actions you need to take.

Given that a person becomes human through others, it is perhaps most important to consider who the others are. It will be the people in and around our family – our parents, children, siblings, spouses and our more distant relatives. It will be the people we work with – those in our team or business, our customers and our suppliers. It will be other people in our business network. It will be our wider community – our village, street and in the extreme the wider global human community.

How do you think you are defined, in terms of the wellbeing of others? Do you do all you can do for those mentioned above? Do you consider their benefit as much as your own. Is your own good fortune, in whatever field, in harmony with or at the expense of others? What in your behaviour over the last seven days would you like to have done differently? How can you change your behaviour in the future?

One organisation I work with has a guiding principle of "people grow by connection". When this is allied with the principle of Ubuntu, the outcome is a large network or community of people helping each other, forging new connections and working for a common benefit. This can be passing a referral on for someone you know, with no gain for yourself, or it can be supporting a community or charity initiative through your business.

I have been lucky enough to have the humbling experience of seeing what a materially poor community in South Africa can derive from connection with another community in the UK. Whilst the money raised has made a difference in their lives, what has made the biggest impact is that someone else cares, and is prepared to travel 12,000 miles to learn about them, from them and with them. If my wellbeing is defined by that of others, I am honoured to have met these people and seen their lives change. My hope now is that I can continue to reflect the principle of Ubuntu in my daily business interactions – serving clients, growing my business and doing all the other things I do each day.

How can you reflect Ubuntu in your daily life?

Painless Business News

If the discussion of Ubuntu has interested you, you may be interested in my next Workshop in Oxford, on 3rd May. We will be considering business ethics, and how the way we do business can be as important as *what* we do in business. Places are limited, but if you would like to join us at 5pm that Thursday for some intellectual debate (and some Jelly Babies!), please email carol@painlessbusiness.com who will be handling bookings. The cost is £20 on the day.

After mentioning my associate Ann a few times in recent issues, I thought I would provide a bit more background on her. Ann started working with me last autumn, and has made a real difference to my own sanity as the Painless office has got busier and busier. I knew Ann would be an ideal person to work with my clients, having tested her abilities myself, and she is certainly proving popular. She has a background with American Express, but has run her own coaching business for a few years. She is based on the south coast (realising a long-held ambition to live by the sea) and is yet another Nottingham graduate in my life (I think that must be at least seven – does no-one go to any other universities?).

Ann will be leading some of our training events later in the year and is doing great work in one-to-one support for clients. If you would like to try a free consultation with Ann, with a view to working with her, please email Carol (carol@painlessbusiness.com) and she will arrange it.

Book Review

The book that inspired this newsletter was *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu – his perspective on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which he chaired. An amazing book that has touched me in terms of the Ubuntu theology, and humbled me in terms of the stories of suffering and forgiveness in South Africa. The transition in power in that beautiful country, without the carnage everyone predicted, is an inspiring story.

If the story of the Commission interests you, I can recommend *In My Country*, a movie starring Juliette Binoche and Samuel L Jackson. Now, to me Mr Jackson is the embodiment of cool, and he lends a suitable gravitas to the story – which can be harrowing at times. I liked the film so much, I bought it for Bev for her birthday. I didn't think that seeing South Africa in film would only stoke her desire to return!

Painless Puns

Nelson Mandela has the following to say on Ubuntu:

Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to improve?

Previously I have shared a quote from Mother Theresa, and I think it is apt to repeat it now:

Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.

I feel slightly uneasy about following two Nobel Peace laureates with my usual puns, but it helps to keep things light-hearted. After my last newsletter a contact from New Zealand emailed me to say hello – this is in her honour:

What do you call Maoris on Prozac? Once were worriers.

Another thing that interests me is why women love cats. Cats are independent, they don't listen, and they like to be left alone all day to sleep. In other words, every quality women hate in men, they love in a cat.

I don't know about you, but I get annoyed when obviously fit people park in disabled bays to save a few yards of walking. I saw advertised recently a sticker to put on their windscreen if you see them do it: *Park somewhere else. Stupidity is not a disability.* That made me smile!

Final Words

I hope this issue has made you reflect on how you relate to others – whether you always put your needs above those of your community. If you have an alternative ethic for conducting life and business, I'd love to hear it. If you have the good fortune to have a successful business that is enriching you, to paraphrase Mr Mandela, how are you helping the community around you to improve?

Next month I suspect we won't be quoting three Nobel Laureates in one issue, and we can return to 80's pop trivia. Maybe we can revisit the Top Gun theme and consider the lyrics to "Take My Breath Away" by Berlin?

Warmest regards

James Butler

email: james@painlessbusiness.com voice: +44 1491 659073

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