

Jeff Garson
Radical Decency Reflection #39
June 5, 2011

A Radically Decent Business – Lessons Learned

Work dominates our lives. It consumes the best hours of the majority of our days – for most of our adult lives. It is also the place where the counter-productive values that dominate our culture find their truest and most unrestrained expression. For these reasons, it needs to be a key area of focus for our efforts to operationalize Radical Decency.

Two factors make change in the workplace more immediately feasible than, say, change via the political process. The first is its hierarchical structure. While the pressures of the competitive marketplace are great – a point discussed below – business owners have the power, if they chose, to implement Radical Decency within their organizations.

The second factor is, ironically, its amorality. In business, values are not a priority. What matters is profitability. If the standards ways of operating dictate a competitive dog-eat-dog approach, they will employ these tactics. Equally, however, if Radical Decency becomes the new norm, they will adopt that approach instead. Businesses won't resist a different and better set of prevailing values, they will simply adjust.

With these thoughts in mind, one key goal I have in mind is to demonstrate that a radically decent business is not only possible but is, in fact, an entirely sound and profitable model. I discuss these ideas in greater detail in Reflection #15, "*Transforming Business – A Values-Based Approach to Social Justice.*"

In the summer of 2005, I set out to create such a business, joining together with a group of "healers" in a practice that came to include psychotherapy, life coaching, chiropractic, message therapy, and financial planning. The goal was to create a truly holistic healing practice based on the principles of Radical Decency. See Reflection # 24, "*Holistic Healing – A Five Pronged Approach.*" The experiment lasted three years and, while the business ultimately closed, we learned a lot of valuable lessons in the process. A few of the more important lessons are discussed below.

Lesson #1: Be clear, specific, and persistent in describing what Radical Decency is and how it impacts every aspect of your business.

Why? Because if you don't do this, many of the outsiders with whom you deal – customers, vendors, referral sources, investors, lenders – will fail to get the message. They will assume you are just like everyone else; just another business with a catchy marketing slogan on your marketing material and business card: "Progress is our most important product;" "the customer always comes first." And, they will expect and encourage the sharp practices that are the marketplace's norms.

This process contains two dangers. The first is a squandering of precious time and energy as you seek to work with and for people who, because Radical Decency is your unbending first priority, you should never have engaged with in the first place.

The second danger is a more subtle process of seduction. In seeking to create a radically decent business, the greatest risk is not a cynical abandonment of the philosophy's core values. It is, instead, an almost imperceptible, decision-by-decision, retreat to the cultural norm. Given the pressure to be profitable, saying no to "gray area" deals, strategies and tactics can be excruciatingly difficult.

Putting a brake on this process requires continual attention to many ways in which Radical Decency can be incorporated into every aspect of your operations. To succeed in this dramatic divergence from the marketplace's norms, the encompassing values that give the philosophy its juice need to be applied across-the-board – from marketing and pricing to the ways in which employees, vendors, competitors, neighbors and the environment are treated. Otherwise, the pull of business as usual practices will be too automatic and too strong to resist.

In our business, Radical Decency's principles were explicitly written into our governance procedures and ultimately found their way into 11 principles for operating a small business. In addition, one regular staff meeting a month was devoted solely to the intricacies of its application, and we worked hard to explicitly honor its principles in our other meetings. In retrospect, I wish we had also reinforced the message through a more detailed manual of principles and procedures, an in-depth orientation for new employees, and regular staff seminars and retreats.

Lesson #2: Be careful, discerning and patient as you build your staff and support team (accountants, attorneys, etc.).

Radical Decency sounds easy – and who could be against it? But its actual implementation in a business environment is very tricky. Because businesses have to be profitable, conventional financial success needs to be priority 1A, standing side-by-side in importance with – but clearly subordinate to – the goal of creating a radically decent enterprise. In other words, in that hypothetical 20% zone where Radical Decency and profit driven choices seem to conflict, the business' underlying values need to clearly and decisively prevail.

When it comes to building a staff and support team, finding people who know how to make money in conventional ways is relatively easy. Equally, people can be found who put their values first. But finding both together – people who combine a determination to make Radical Decency a priority and, in addition, are committed to the hard work and focus that a successful financial enterprise require – is much more difficult.

What we discovered was that traps exist in both directions. On the one side, competent people would arrive, saying all the right things about Radical Decency. But as we got

into the nitty-gritty of working together, they were unable to break out of their conventional, business as usual modes of thinking.

The most poignant example was a key professional who struggled to trust that the division of profits would fairly reflect his economic contribution. In the midst of negotiations, he was diagnosed with a condition that threatened his ability to practice. Seeking to be true to our principles, we gave him the right to re-tool in a less physically demanding healing modality – when the time came – in addition to a guaranteed percentage of profits. However, within months of reaching this agreement, he left, unable to escape the belief – encouraged, very predictably by his attorney – that, as his business collaborators, we were intent on taking advantage of him.

On the flip side were co-workers who warmly embraced Radical Decency but seemed to confuse decency with a lack of accountability on the productivity side of the ledger. The hard truth is that, when an employee's non-workplace needs are acknowledged and accommodated, she, in turn, has a special responsibility to strike a workable balance between those needs and the business' inescapable need to be profitable.

In retrospective, we were too forgiving on both sides of the equation. At times, we overlooked the warning signs with productive employees who lacked the requisite commitment to Radical Decency. At other times, we allowed accountability to slide with well-intentioned people who simply lacked the commitment to priority 1A – the business' economic success.

My counsel to people seeking to create radically decent businesses is to pick your collaborators with care and, if possible, to test them out before committing. Then, pay attention to the evidence on both sides of the equation – and trust your gut. Is this person actively interested in Radical Decency? Does he read material that discusses the philosophy with a lively interest? Does he raise issues – on his own initiative – about how to apply it? Or does he effectively put it to aside when he turns to the day-to-day practicalities of running the business? And of course, on the business side, don't be seduced by the person's philosophical compatibility. Remember to be discerning about his competence, willingness to work, and follow through.

Lesson #3: Strive for profitability but don't let fear of financial failure drive you.

Business is tough and reaching boldly for a better way to do it makes it tougher. So, when years of hard work are at risk, the temptation to let go of your larger goals for the sake of economic survival. But business as usual is the easy option. If you can't make a go of it financially, better to wrap things up and try again. Settling for just another job is life's booby prize.

In this respect I am proud of what we did. After 3 years of hard work, we closed our doors. But my abiding belief is that we grew from the experience and took invaluable lessons from it that we each, on our own way, are applying in our new professional endeavors. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.