

You're Fired

Decoding "The Apprentice"

Few people can honestly say it's their job to watch NBC's stratospherically popular program, *The Apprentice*, but I'm one of them. On the show, 18 candidates vie for the opportunity to land a six-figure job running a company for Donald Trump, the leading real estate developer in New York City.

"It's a 15-week job interview," says Trump. In this interview process, candidates are divided into two teams, competing weekly on a managerial task. Each week, one person from the losing team gets "fired" and booted from the show. Ultimately, the candidate still standing at the end gets the job offer, crowned as Trump's apprentice.

I say it's my job to watch *The Apprentice*, not because it exemplifies best business practices, but because I'm dean of a business school that cares deeply about the direction of our culture. And consequently, I'm asked by the media on occasion to comment on the show.

So, after ingesting every minute of this season's episodes, I'm, frankly, quite chagrined. It advances some of the assumptions about business, leadership, interpersonal relations and success that our business school seeks to correct.

Distorted Values

Directly or indirectly, some of the values powerfully advanced on *The Apprentice* are these:

■ **Money and possessions are synonymous with "success."** The show's theme song says it all. In 60 seconds, it uses the word "money" no fewer than 20 times—even going so far as to use the term "Almighty Dollar"—while flashing copious graphics of luxury cars, corporate jets and thousand dollar bills. To top it off, this linkage between possessions and the good life is reinforced with the boldfaced graphic: "What if you could have it all?"

■ **Profit is the primary purpose of business.** Almost every week, the winning team is determined exclusively by who made the most profit—nothing more, nothing less.

■ **Trump is a role model for leaders.** Accordingly, the show implies that savvy leaders are terse, pretentious, feared by employees and impatient. They have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to failure, leading to the next Trump value.

■ **"Capital" punishment is demanded for under-performance.** If you fail, you're gone. Make whatever eloquent case you can for why things didn't work out, at the end of the day the least competent person is sent packing.

The Blame Game

In Trump's world, finger-pointing, gossiping, backbiting, and ganging-up on people are acceptable behaviors. In fact, they're virtues because they're pragmatic.

The Apprentice devotes a generous amount of time to contestants conspiring against one another, forming political alliances against members of their own team before going into the boardroom. That's because once in the boardroom, Trump actually *requires* his subjects to blame one another for problems that are typically group deficiencies. Hedge for even a moment when Trump asks you who should be fired, and you risk committing suicide.

Now, in fairness, the show does champion creativity, quick thinking, resourcefulness and good stewardship—values we at Regent University cheer. But those values are eclipsed by the show's stereotyped view of what business is all about, what it takes to succeed, and what constitutes "success" in the final analysis.

Given its audience of 16 million viewers per week (and 28 million for last year's final episode), perhaps nothing in our day has done as much damage to the movement toward enlightened business leadership.

A Better Way

That more enlightened view, showcased in corporations like Southwest Airlines, ServiceMaster, Men's Wearhouse, Mary Kay, Chick-fil-A, The SAS Institute, AES and countless others, entails conceptualizing profit as a means, not an end, in business. It views the corporation as hav-

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By Michael Zigarelli

ing a broad social responsibility to all stakeholders—as an agent for good, a tool to improve people's lives.

The enlightened view encourages people to manage by humility and servanthood, not by fear and intimidation. It prefers people to profits, relationship to rivalry, grace to greed, and often, forgiveness to firing.

Moreover, when it comes in defining “personal success”—the show's darkest hour—an alternative view is that success is not correlated with money or possessions. One would think we'd no longer need to make such axiomatic statements, but clearly we do. It's just not getting through to many of the culture-shapers of our day.

As for Christian leaders and managers, there's one final take-away from *The Apprentice*. We, too, should strive to be apprentices. Not of the Trumps of this world, of course—or of any mere mortal for that matter. As Dallas Willard reminds us in *The Divine Conspiracy*, we're to be apprentices of Jesus, seeing him clearly, surrendering to him daily, and emulating him in everything we do. That's the key to real success in life—success as God defines it!

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