

Center for Integrity in Business Interviews Dr. Denise Daniels

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Dr. Denise Daniels is a professor of management and undergraduate dean of SPU's School of Business and Economics (SBE). Dr. Daniels regularly consults and provides executive coaching services in the area of leadership development. In addition, she has provided training workshops on a variety of organizational topics, including motivation, decisionmaking, workforce retention, and managing diversity. Clients include Microsoft, Group Health Cooperative, Millennial Resources, the University of Washington, Moss Adams, and Clark Nuber. Her work has been published in numerous academic and professional journals, and she has three times been named SBE Scholar of the Year. Her scholarly interests focus on leadership, motivation, Sabbath, and the meaning of work.

CIB: Denise, you've worked with a wide variety of clients over the years and have conducted research in the areas of leadership development, motivation, life and work enrichment, and Sabbath keeping. For you, what is the glue that holds together these important themes to which you've committed so much of your life?

Daniels: For a long time I have been interested in how people can both experience and express their best selves in work settings, and how the workplace itself either cultivates or compromises the well-being of the people who work there. There is a reciprocal relationship between people and the places in which they work. I've said in the past that messed-up people mess up organizations, and messed-up organizations mess up people. The opposite is true as well: Healthy people contribute to healthy organizations, and healthy organizations cultivate healthy people. Trying to understand the levers in this dynamic interchange has been one of my passions.

I'm also committed to examining how my Christian faith informs my understanding of the workplace and the human interactions that take place there. It seems to me that learning more about God's purposes for creation – and especially for the people made in God's image – would be a good starting point for understanding how we can flourish in an organizational setting.

CIB: When I worked with MBA students at Harvard Business School, one of the countercultural behaviors we challenged students with was Sabbathkeeping. In your research and work with executives, why is Sabbathkeeping so important?

Daniels: This gets back to God's purposes for people. In the Judeo-Christian scriptures we are told, both in the Genesis creation story and then again when Moses received the Ten Commandments, that God rested on the seventh day after the work of creation. There is an implicit message in Genesis that since we are made in God's image and God modeled rest, we

too should rest. This becomes an explicit message in Exodus with the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath.

About fifteen years ago I became very interested in this idea of keeping a Sabbath. I was a relatively new professor, my husband and I had two very young kids (we now have four!), and I felt constantly busy and a bit overwhelmed with all of the demands on my time. The pace of my life certainly was not very reflective of a Sabbath lifestyle, but the idea of keeping a Sabbath sounded really good to me. So, as any good academic would do, my approach to this problem was to do research. Together with my colleagues Lisa Surdyk and Margaret Diddams, we began looking at the impact on both individuals and organizations when practices allowing a more rhythmic life were put in place. At the same time, we began to engage in these practices more regularly and consistently ourselves.

In our scholarship examining Sabbath practices in organizational settings, we found that workplaces which encourage a rhythmic practice of work and rest had higher levels of employee commitment and lower levels of burnout than places with a fast-paced 24/7 culture. Interestingly, in all of my time doing executive coaching, I've never met someone who lost ground professionally if and when they stepped back from work activities one day a week.

CIB: How has the Sabbath played out in your own life?

Daniels: At a very personal level I was amazed to find that setting aside one day a week for Sabbath didn't seem to have any impact at all on my professional productivity, but it did very good things for my relationships with my family and with God. While I don't think that the purpose of Sabbath is to allow for higher levels of productivity, it does make sense that living in the way God designed us to live would lead to positive outcomes for individuals and organizations.

Having said that, I certainly don't feel like I've arrived in this area. I still struggle with receiving this gift from God on a regular basis. And as my husband will attest, there are still many times when I don't live within the healthy rhythms of work and rest for which God designed us. I am still working on this (notice the choice of words there?!).

CIB: Denise, you have also been a leader in the "faith at work" movement for many years. When surveying progress in this field, what do you find encouraging? What do you find less encouraging? How might the church do a better job of expressing the "high calling" of marketplace work?

Daniels: First of all, I think there is a LOT to be encouraged about in the faith at work movement. A large number of organizations have sprung up in this arena with the explicit goal of encouraging people of faith to understand their work as an activity in service to God. I am

personally involved with a bi-weekly small group focused on integrating faith with leadership, as well as a regular breakfast speaker series focused on issues of faith and work. A number of para-church organizations such as InterVarsity are becoming more and more explicit about ways that business can be done as an expression of worship and faithfulness to God. And an increasing number of publications – both books and magazine articles – have the intersection of work and faith as their theme.

I have also seen an increase in the ways churches are supporting the business professionals within their congregations. More than a decade ago I don't think I had ever heard a sermon on how people might be able to do their Monday through Friday work as an act of worship, unless it was indirectly through providing the financial means for the "real" work of the church or missions. In recent years I've seen this changing. The Center for Faith at Work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York is a great example of how a church is thoughtfully promoting a faith-infused approach to work, whether that work is in finance, the arts, medicine, etc. Just in the past few months my own church began to commission people to serve God in their work as scientists, accountants, teachers, lawyers, etc. So there is much to celebrate.

On the other hand, there is still quite a way to go. I don't think most people of faith intuitively understand how their 9-to-5 jobs can be an act of service to God. I don't think most pastors feel as comfortable addressing workplace issues as they do exegeting scripture. Many people – whether they have a personal faith commitment or not – seem to want to perpetuate a dividing wall between faith and work. I think that in the United States in particular, which is heavily influenced by the Jeffersonian tradition of "separation of church and state," many organizations communicate a sense of "leave your faith at the door," which may diminish how people think about their faith informing their work in helpful ways.

CIB: How might the church better serve women who seek to integrate their work and faith?

Daniels: I love this question! As difficult as it has been for churches to begin supporting members of their congregations to consider their calling to the marketplace as equally valid as a call to the priesthood or pastorate, this has been doubly true for women. Historically within the church, women have had their leadership questioned or limited for a variety of theological and cultural reasons. And establishing hurdles for women has not been the exclusive domain of the church – within the culture at large there have been some deep and long-standing challenges for women as they engage in the workplace, and particularly as they navigate positions of leadership in organizations. As a result, women in the workplace – whether they are leaders or not – are often afterthoughts to most faith-at-work initiatives.

I think there are several ways this can and should be addressed within the church. First, it would be helpful if church or para-church organizations would ask themselves how a particular program, sermon, or event might impact women. Issues related to meeting schedules (breakfasts can be particularly hard for working moms to attend), event speakers (are women

represented up front?), lack of inclusive language used (I still hear “businessmen” referenced on a regular basis), and participant make-up (are women explicitly invited and included?) might be considered.

Perhaps more importantly, the expectations that churches – and perhaps all of us – have for men and women should be carefully examined. Do we affirm the gifts of women in the workplace? Do we affirm the gifts of men in the home or with small children? Do we consider issues of balancing work and household management as primarily a women’s issue or do we explore it with men too? Conversely, do we talk about the problems of finding one’s identity in work as often with women as we do with men? Promoting a culture in which the specific gifts and callings of every individual – whether male or female – are encouraged and celebrated is important. And similarly, discussing the breadth of challenges that the workplace can create for both men and women is also important.

CIB: I know you believe deeply in business as a sacred calling. Why are you so passionate about this? Was there a formative experience in your life that solidified this view? If so, what was it?

Daniels: I don’t think there was a singular issue that shaped my thinking on this, but rather it’s been a developmental process across several decades. I was raised in a family in which hard work was highly valued, and also where a genuine faith commitment was modeled. However, I don’t recall any explicit conversations around the intersection of faith and work during my early years. I do recall wanting to get a job as a young teen, and being frustrated when I was too young to get hired.

My very first job at age 14 was in telemarketing, making cold calls and trying to sell circus tickets. (I was terrible!) As many adolescents and young adults do, I worked in a series of entry-level jobs throughout high school and college – everything from arranging flowers to waiting tables to cleaning houses. While I knew that these jobs were a temporary placeholder for me, I worked alongside other adults for whom this type of work was their career. I know for many of these people their work was simply a means to an end – something that was necessary for their “real” lives. But some of them clearly viewed their work as something more than just a paycheck. They did their work diligently, with attention to detail and obvious care for the person who might be the recipient of their efforts. I was somewhat surprised when I began working in corporate contexts to realize that just like the various working-class employees I’d gotten to know, some people viewed their work as a chore to endure, while others seemed to take more pride in what they did day to day. I became interested in understanding what characteristics of the workplace and the worker might influence how a job was experienced. Because my own faith is central to my life, it seemed only natural to explore this aspect of work as well.

Relatively early in my career at Seattle Pacific University, my colleagues Kenman Wong, Randy Franz, and I received a Faculty Grant for Theology and Vocation, funded by the Lilly Foundation, to develop a summer seminar to train other faculty members in ways that a theology of vocation affects business practice. Together with many of our SBE faculty colleagues and led by Tim Dearborn (who was then SPU's dean of the chapel), we began really wrestling with what it means to understand business as a calling from God. We wrote papers and began a series of collaborative summer seminars with colleagues across the country exploring this in more detail. I owe quite a debt to these colleagues for expanding my horizons in this area.

CIB: What is a research project you are currently working on? Why are you excited about it, and how can it have an impact on the business community?

Daniels: Recently I've been working on a project with Al Erisman to look at how the "fruit of the Spirit" discussed in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians might be manifest in the workplace. We've translated the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) to make sense in the workplace. For example, patience might be expressed when someone takes the long view in an organization.

We also looked at a number of performance appraisal instruments used in a variety of organizations to see the extent to which organizations seem to measure these characteristics in their employees. We found that some aspects of the fruit of the Spirit are well-represented in performance appraisals, while others are absent. For example, faithfulness is often measured, but patience is not. This made us wonder what it might look like if we valued patience more in our organizations. Could we have avoided some of the excesses and ethical challenges that many for-profit businesses experienced over the past decade?

The next phase of this research is to see how many distinct factors are expressed within the fruit of the Spirit, and compare them with concepts of "virtues" that have been made popular by Martin Seligman and his work with positive psychology applied to organizations. We are curious to see how the fruits of the Spirit compare with secular conceptions of virtuous behavior.

Another project I'm beginning to work on examines what it means to participate in "redeeming work." More often than we might like to admit, the experience of work is not uniformly positive. In Christian terms I would say that because of the Fall, work is not what God intended for it at Creation. I'm interested in examining ways that we can either advance the purposes of Creation, push back against the effects of the Fall, or minimize aspects of toil that we experience in our work.

There has been quite a bit of work done to determine why some work is experienced as meaningful, and other work is not. Much of the approach of positive psychology today is

focused on helping us figure out how we can use human strengths and virtues to improve our workplace. And much of what is being done in this domain is interesting and helpful; there are many parallels between meaningful work and redeeming work. But I believe that redeeming work has the potential to take us a little bit further because it is predicated on the notion that there are broken aspects of the world, and we can work to mend some of those broken pieces or experience personal growth when “fixing” isn’t possible.

CIB: As a learner, what do you read, watch, or follow? Why?

Daniels: At the moment I’m reading Susan Cain’s book *Quiet* as well as Malcolm Gladwell’s recent *David and Goliath*. Both are popularizations of social science research, and this is an area that has always intrigued me. As an undergraduate I double majored in psychology and economics because of my interest in the intersection between human motivations and behaviors and the organizational and economic contexts in which such motivations and behaviors play out. I’m also reading Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf’s *Every Good Endeavor*, which provides a theological framework for thinking about work – both why it is so compelling for so many people, and why and how it causes so much frustration and pain.

I love to read and find myself interested in just about everything. As a result, my reading habits are pretty eclectic. I try to stay current with a variety of academic publications related to management, but I also regularly read parenting books, the news, theology, *The Economist*, and whatever recommendations friends send my way.

CIB: As an expert in leadership, what are three to five key principles that business leaders ought to keep in mind as they consider their own leadership development?

Daniels: It is hard to narrow this down to a short list! I guess if I had to, I would say three things are key: First, it is important to know yourself. This idea has been around since the ancient Greeks, and it really is critical to being an effective leader. It is important to understand your strengths and weaknesses and know how you are likely to respond in a variety of circumstances in order to be most effective. When people know their strengths, they can capitalize on them. When they know their weaknesses, they can work to mitigate them and/or surround themselves with others who can help them compensate for them. But perhaps most importantly, knowing yourself means knowing where your value comes from. If you derive your value from what you do, you will always have a sense of anxiety around your performance. On the other hand, if you derive your value from who you are as a person made in the image of God, there is this amazing sense of relief that comes from knowing that your performance doesn’t define you. I have found this to be a very freeing concept in my own life, but also one that I have to re-learn on an ongoing basis.

The second key principle for effective leadership development is working to understand others. This is best done by developing the habit of listening carefully to what others are saying. In our hyper-competitive, hyper-speed world, we rarely give ourselves or others the time and space to really listen, with no agenda other than a desire to understand the other. Without an understanding of someone else's perspective, we set ourselves up for misinterpretation, disappointment, and often failure.

Lastly, I would say that learning vicariously is incredibly important for leadership development. If you only learn from your own experience, you may have to make a lot of mistakes before you succeed. Those who are able to pay attention to the successes and failures of others are often better situated to succeed themselves. Of course, everyone still makes mistakes, but it is possible to short-circuit some of the worst of them by learning from others.