FOUR LEVELS OF HAPPINESS

Robert Spitzer

Why should corporate America care what a Jesuit priest has to say about ethics? Simple. It works. If you didn't know better, you might think you'd stumbled into an Ignatian retreat. The Jesuit priest at the front of the room -- dressed in clerics -- is talking about spirit, about inner peace, about seeing the good in people and making time each day for quiet contemplation.

People in the audience nod, smile knowingly, and scribble notes. Behind them, visible through the large picture window, the waters of Puget Sound lap against the shore.

But this isn't a retreat. It's a meeting for top business executives from across the country, sponsored by the Pacific Institute in Seattle, a corporation specializing in personal development and organizational change. Fr. Robert Spitzer, SJ -- philosophy professor, speaker, and newly named president of Gonzaga University in Spokane -- is telling them, in his own irrepressible style, how to succeed in business.

And everybody's listening.

"I'm going to suggest," says Fr. Spitzer, switching on the overhead projector, "that we start with happiness."

He gestures toward the screen behind him at the Four Levels of Happiness (see box story). Using philosophy, self-deprecating humor, and unbridled enthusiasm, he encourages his listeners to move beyond a happiness based solely on what they own or can achieve (levels 1 and 2) to finding happiness through contributing to a common cause or participating in ultimate good (levels 3 and 4).

"Try this exercise," he suggests. "Think of your whole life's meaning in terms of being better than others [level 2 happiness]. Then ask yourself three questions:

An Ice Cream Lover's Guide to the Four Levels of Happiness

Level 1 is pleasure and possession: I have all the ice cream I can eat. Along with plenty of food, drink, sleep, and sex. We feel happy when our basic needs are met. Yet people who focus only on their own physical pleasure end up feeling worthless and bored.

Level 2 is personal achievement and ego: I have more ice cream than you do. Or a better job or a bigger car or better looks. At this level, we feel happy when we win the comparison game. But people who get stuck at this level become jealous, aggressive, and lonely.

Level 3 is doing a good beyond myself: I love you so much I'm happy to give you my ice cream. Happiness comes from doing good for others or contributing to the common good. But staying at this level can lead to disillusionment when we discover that we can never be perfect love for anyone or find anyone who can be perfect love for us.

Level 4 is participation in the ultimate good. For those with faith, it is union with God (who's far more delicious than ice cream). There's no crisis here. God is perfect and fills us perfectly.
What's your anxiety level?

How are your relationships going?

Is life a problem or an opportunity and an adventure?

"Now make a concrete list of all the ways you could contribute to all the groups you touch . . . family, co-workers, friends, church [level 3 happiness]. Then pretend that's the reason you're here. Now ask yourself the same three questions."

In the last three years, more than 200 companies -- including Boeing, Toyota, and other members of the Fortune 500 -- have turned to Fr. Spitzer for advice on improving their people systems. He gives about 70 talks per year, including half a dozen Pacific Institute executive overviews. His 26-part video curriculum, "Purpose in Life: Ethics and Organizational Success," has been viewed by thousands of employees throughout North America.

Why should corporate America care what a Jesuit priest has to say about ethics? Simple. It works. Before-and-after studies show that companies that have embraced Fr. Spitzer's principles and concepts enjoy increased trust and teamwork, improved morale, less passive/aggressive behavior, and lower costs. And that translates to a better bottom line.

- At Mark Christopher Chevrolet in Ontario, Calif., the 200 employees carry laminated wallet cards reminding them to look for the good in others and focus on what they can contribute to the team. Sales at the dealership have jumped from 300 cars per month to more than 450.

- Teams at Central Atlantic Toyota in Baltimore are achieving new levels of success since putting Fr. Spitzer's principles into practice. One team focused on encouraging companywide use of the Lotus Notes software program. Usage jumped from 37 percent to 79 percent, saving thousands of dollars annually in time and paper expense.

- An area sales manager at Rhodes Furniture, a chain of 103 stores in fourteen states, rethought his attitude about teamwork. He wrote to the other sales managers, saying he could no longer take part in the "friendly competition" among regional sales forces. He vowed to share any inside information he had so everyone could benefit. His stunned boss, senior vice-president of marketing Steven Hurwitz, tells the story to illustrate the impact of Fr. Spitzer's ideas. "I'm a marketing guy, a pragmatist," says Hurwitz. "I'm not swayed by motivational tapes, things people sell on TV. But this philosophy is unusual and effective."

For Fr. Spitzer, the joining of big business and Jesuit theology is clearly a merger made in heaven. "I have an agenda as a Jesuit," he admits. "It's to help people make the most of their lives and their personhood. To help people be as ethical as they can, to help people see their transcendent dignity, and, if they have faith, to come closer to God."

"I noticed," he adds, "that there were a lot of people [in business] who were just straddling levels 2 and 3. These people, if they were going to get on the level 3 side, would have to be able to justify in level 2 terms why they were moving toward level 3. And that's where I could help them."

That meant selling virtue not as its own reward but for its practical business value.
"Religion and good business and ethics don't have to be in any way antagonistic," Fr. Spitzer asserts. "They all make sense together.

"Does every single solitary business person want increased teamwork?" he asks, warming to his topic. "Does every business person want increased trust in the workplace? Does everyone want increased openness to change? Increased ability to take risks? Increased contribution of ideas and creativity, an increase in morale and good will, decreased supervisory structures, decreased costs? Of course they do.

"Now I know one thing. The only way you can do that is to create an effective people system . . . What's good for your people is good for your business."

Fr. Spitzer encourages executives to take fifteen minutes of contemplative time a day -- reading, reflection, or ("for those who have faith") prayer -- for the good of their business as much as the good of their soul. When you're at peace, he points out, you get more done, you connect better with people, your judgment is better, and you have more breadth and depth of vision. You change from the "driven leader" who pushes people to the goal to the "animated leader" who inspires people to be their best.

Fr. Spitzer himself could be a poster child for his philosophy. Despite a schedule that would exhaust the Energizer Bunny, he radiates joy, energy, and excitement for life.

What keeps him going?

"Prayer," he says without a moment's hesitation. "If I look at my calendar in the morning before my prayer, that's a mistake. But if I'm praying and trying to stay with some humility, there's such a love and a joy about what I do. All of a sudden, it's too easy. It's like I'm on these greased skids, zooming along."

He starts his day around 5 a.m., sitting in the chapel meditating on Scripture or simply talking to God.

His favorite prayers are "Thy will be done," "I love you," and "Please bring good out of whatever harm I may have caused." No matter how he prays, he feels God's presence there.

Fr. Spitzer's spiritual life hasn't always included that heartfelt dimension. Born in Honolulu in 1952, he first found himself drawn to the intellectual dimensions of truth. He graduated from Gonzaga University with a degree in public accounting and finance. "I was extraordinarily a mental intellectual," he recalls. "Everything was categorized and referenced and methodologically purified."

He entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1974. During a 30-day retreat in Portland God "liberated" his heart.

"God opened up my heart by letting me know how much he loved me," he says. "I knew that from my mother and my brothers and sisters, but somehow it was God loving me. I couldn't resist. I just loved him back."

Those who know him say that connection between the head and the heart is a key part of his broad appeal. Fr. Spitzer is equally at home -- and equally well received -- whether his audience is sacred or secular, students or business people, movers-and-shakers or ordinary folks.

"He's genuine," says Mark Leggio, owner of Mark Christopher Chevrolet. "You listen to him and you know he cares about you. He's not just out to sell his stuff. He legitimately wants to see you do well, personally and professionally."

Fr. Spitzer's formal work with businesses began in 1992 when he founded the Institute of Professional Ethics at Seattle University. Together with Gil Tumey, an ethicist at Boeing, and a small advisory
board, he scheduled a series of Saturday seminars at the university. The response was underwhelming. They had to twist arms, invite friends, and drop the price from $99 to $25 just to fill a small classroom.

In 1994, Tumey invited him to offer his seminar at Boeing. Soon he was teaching it twice a month to groups of more than 300; since then, more than 6,000 Boeing employees have taken the seminar.

In late 1995, Fr. Spitzer met Pacific Institute's founder Lou Tice, whose belief that all lasting change comes from within meshed well with Fr. Spitzer's "people-first" approach to business ethics. Working through the Pacific Institute -- which claims more than half the Fortune 500 companies as clients -- Fr. Spitzer has been able to get his message into many of the nation's top corporations.

"They get what they want," explains Fr. Spitzer. "They get decreased costs, they get improved morale, they get improved teamwork... And, of course, I get what I want: that people love one another more, that ethics improve, that people hold each other in greater dignity and esteem, that people are happier and less compulsive. And that God is smiling upon it all."

Writer and editor Christine Dubois has published more than 400 articles in 45 magazines and newspapers, including U.S. Catholic and Catholic Digest. She and her husband and two sons live near Seattle.