

Sarva Dharma Values in Business: *An Important Part of the Golden Age*



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A NEW ERA in business trembles to be born, a golden age of business based on the sarva dharma principles of love, truth, peace, right action, and non-violence.

The world at large, and the Spirit within each of us, calls upon us to recognize our inherent spiritual nature and to bring it to our work. Certainly the problems of the world at the dawn of this new millennium demand our deepest, most sincere efforts to "clean up our mess." But even more, our souls urge us to ignite our lives with spiritual purpose, to cherish the gift of being alive, and to dedicate our work to making a difference, not just making money.

We know that trust, quality, creativity, service, and win-win collaboration are essential to operating a profitable, healthy business. Now is the time to see that these business values are extensions of more fundamental human values:

- *Sathya* – truthfulness – fosters trust and honest communications
- *Dharma* – right action – fosters high quality work
- *Shanti* – inner peace – fosters creative and wise decisions
- *Prema* – love – fosters great service based on caring for others' well being
- *Ahimsa* – non-violence – fosters win-win collaboration

The question is, "How can we deliberately build our businesses and work lives on these sarva dharma values?" Some people might say it's not possible... but it is! In one case, the research and development head of a major computer firm discovered that the fundamental difference between "extraordinary" teams and "successful" teams was not brainpower or motivation, but the level of *truthfulness* and *caring* in the relationships among team members and customers.

Another example is the former chairman of a leading telecommunications firm who once addressed some of his top executives by saying that the role of corporate leaders is to "inspire acts of faith," spread hope, and build trust. When asked how these values relate to the "real world of business," he replied that they must have more than good technical or financial skills; they must develop character in themselves and others. He concluded, "Faith, hope and trust... theology is very practical business." In that same firm, they have a strict policy against giving "gifts" (bribes) to obtain new business. In the short term, that seemed to hurt them competitively. But over time, they've seen customers come back to them precisely because

they were trustworthy and honest in their relationships with customers and suppliers alike.

Sathya Sai Baba has said that love is the most fundamental value: love in speech is *truth*, love in behaviour is *right action* (responsible action), love in thought is *inner peace*, and love in understanding/wisdom is *non-violence*. Is it possible that love could be recognized as a basic value of successful business?

In one case, a general manager of a major electronics firm was hired to turn around a very unprofitable business. They had marketed so much they were failing to deliver on all their contracts. His strategy was to first establish a way to serve customers, and then tell them the truth of what his firm could and couldn't deliver. While many were disappointed, most kept their business with his company because they knew they could trust and count on this new relationship. That inspired a positive climate for his own management team, who came together with "a sense of caring, a genuine sense of *love*..." In two years, the business was again profitable, based on serving its customers with integrity.

And consider the case of a residential telephone business with 13,000 employees. It had been the least profitable division and thus the senior vice president was given 2 years to turn it around. Within the 2 years, it became the most profitable division. What the vice president learned from the experience showed up in his business's statement of values as "love." As he stated in the division newsletter:

Using love in this context is a bold step, but I think we're ready to legitimize the "L word" and put love in our business... We're talking about love in the context of love your neighbour as you love yourself, and treat others as you would like to be treated. Adding love to our Shared Values challenges us to own and live our personal values of caring, trust, and respect. Certainly these are all definitions of love. And putting love in our Shared Values Pyramid sends a message to our people and to everybody, inside and outside, that we really do care.

The sarva dharma values are also the basis for successful business strategy. Consider the case of a hi-tech corporation specializing in products and services for heart patients. Their "corporate body" is based on self-directed work teams and "leading by values" rather than "management by objectives." Those values, in *priority* order are:

1. Restoring people to full health
2. Serving customers with products and services of unsurpassed quality
3. Recognizing the personal worth of employees
4. Making a fair profit and return for shareholders
5. Maintaining good citizenship as a company

Regarding this prioritization, the CEO wrote in 1993:

(Our company) is not in the business of 'maximizing shareholder value'; rather, our purpose is to 'maximize patient value.' The 'real bottom line' is the 1,300,000 patients who were restored to full life and health last year by our products... We believe that if we first serve our customers well, provide products and services of unsurpassed quality, and empower

our employees to fulfill themselves and the company's mission, we will indeed provide an outstanding return for our shareholders.

These values seem similar to other successful, customer-driven, value-based companies. But the CEO also talks about what's behind the values of "serving customers" and "recognizing the personal worth of employees" – which produce their financial results...

We are all spiritual beings. To unleash the whole capability of the individual – mind, body, and spirit – gives enormous power to the organization. It truly empowers members of the organization to devote their entire beings to the ultimate purpose for which the organization exists, which is to serve others. That's what I believe is 'spirituality in the workplace,' to unlock the real sense of significance of the organization's purpose.

When it comes to tapping people's energy to actually "make something happen," research shows that clarity about our personal values is more important to our job commitment than clarity about our company's values. In one research project, greater clarity about company values showed NO increase in job commitment, whereas greater clarity about personal values increased commitment by 30 percent.

So, how can we practice all five sarva dharma values in a practical way? Here are some examples to consider:

1. *Truthfulness*: speak honestly with employees and customers; speak directly rather than behind someone's back; speak in terms of facts rather than opinions
2. *Right Action*: conduct business with fair prices and ethical practices; keep your agreements with employees and customers; take responsibility for problems rather than making excuses
3. *Inner Peace*: practice equanimity, even in crises, in times of profit or loss, and in times of praise or blame; see yourself as the source of your emotional reactions, rather than a victim
4. *Love*: connect to a higher purpose in your life in which you can serve others through your work; listen generously and compassionately to others rather than being judgmental
5. *Non-Violence*: conduct business that is environmentally friendly; find win-win solutions to problems, rather than winning at another's expense

How might you work differently if you were practicing the sarva dharma values?

- A clerical person would do his or her best quality work, even if no one were watching.
- A professional would tell the truth about errors or delays, even if it meant a temporary reprimand.
- An executive would continually strive to find creative new ways to deliver goods faster, without costly delays to his or her customers.
- A sales person would not over-promise what a product would do, or overcharge for them.
- A manager would actively seek to resolve a customer complaint rather than hide behind bureaucratic rules.

We might fear that talking about spiritual values in business will evoke conflict around religious differences. So its important to learn how to have conversations about common values across geographies and cultures and how to initiate open dialogues about how we might think, speak, and act in business based on the five sarva dharma values, such as:

- Offering the fruits of action to God and not being attached to outcomes
- Loving our neighbour, including our competitors
- Having "lilies of the field" faith... that good intentions will prevail
- Seeing the Oneness that is behind the world's apparent diversity
- Motivating people – both to work and to purchase – based on "fulfilling one's dharma," not "filling unlimited desires"

Putting the sarva dharma values into practice may challenge our personal creativity to find new ways of working within our businesses. But Sathya Sai Baba is here to guide us. After all, we are an intimate part of God's creation, and as such we share in its creative nature. Let us actively create our work-world based on the core values of sarva dharma and see how we can be a part of ushering in the Golden Age in business.