

On Being a Quaker and a Small Business Owner

Dawn Crimson, Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting



It is impossible to know how much of my outward life and behavior is because of my Quaker faith and practice, or how many of my own personality traits led me to find the Quakers in the first place. With Friends, it seems the conversations are rarely about our work lives, which is strikingly similar to my experience traveling outside the U.S. When I stayed in bed-and-breakfasts abroad, if a conversation began with “Where do you work? How many people do you manage?” I could be sure it was an American asking. Among Friends, conversations more typically tend to nurse relationships as well as to explore leadings and the application of values. To me these are much more interesting, and satisfying to the soul.

The traits, qualities and behaviors I might identify as my Quaker ways include: the drive to help, the ability to listen for the whole person I am engaging with, the compulsion to find fairness, the struggle with authority not anchored by discipline, the tendency to introversion, the humility of a tamed ego, and the many ways to assign “value” beyond the mere monetary. In my line of work the definition of value includes a reduced patience for and a reduced interest in owning personal possessions.

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In 2012, after a lifetime as a corporate employee, I opened a small business. The longer I have worked at this, the more I know about what I have yet to learn. A primary struggle is managing the interplay between authority and leadership, control and empowerment. I am far from qualified to be wearing all seventeen hats in my organization, and I need lots of help from people who have talents I lack.

I find marketing and sales to be the greatest challenge. Getting my business story out and known to the public takes lots of networking and interaction, not to mention a resistance to modesty and humility. I am learning to project my enthusiasm and competence as well as communicating the value of the services. It can be exhausting. In sales, I am learning to use my Quaker orientation to explore each client's needs. I find I am better able to listen deeply to them than most can. Yet stating my price and value, and asking for the business, requires martialing an internal force—and I choose that metaphor to illustrate how difficult it can be to do as a Quaker.

My sense of fairness and equality makes me yearn to pay a living wage to my team, but this is at odds with my need to set prices low enough to be valuable to clients and high enough to make a living for myself. The truth is that in a small business, all the obligations get paid before the owner does, and that can make for lots of fear and anxiety month to month. For this reason, I am not yet able to afford to donate our services occasionally as much as I would like to.

Once we have landed client projects and are on the job, my greatest pleasure is to do what I call “Mary Poppins this thing.” I let loose my highly-developed skills for getting things done and taking care of those things that most people dread doing. With my team, we manage all the belongings in a household that is destined for downsizing, relocation, and liquidation. Enormous creativity is tapped for deciding what happens with every single item in a home, from vinyl LPs to hazardous chemical products, from unusual collectibles to overstocked supplies, from old building materials to cars and boats.

In the process, we indulge our deep caring for the circumstances of our client, our high aesthetic for order and beauty, and our sense of rightness in sharing power over decisions about the “stuff.” The value of possessions is first about legacy, and only secondarily about money.

If the essential function of a small business can carry deeper meanings of helping, listening, humility, and value, the worthiness of the work is sufficient fuel for overcoming the inevitable gaps in talent and personality. But most of all, this venture only succeeds when I can develop leaders in my organization, and leadership in myself.

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