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Doing Business The Quaker Way

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Imagine filing into the conference room for a business meeting, only to find the other participants sitting there in thoughtful silence. If someone has something to say, they stand up and speak; then others take their turn. No one ever interrupts. When a person finishes having his say, the silence resumes until someone else is moved to speak. No authority figure presides over the meeting, no vote is taken, and there is no agenda.

That's how Quakers run their meetings, whether they have gathered for worship or to conduct the congregation's business. If their methods sound eccentric, consider this: In centuries past, Quaker meetings produced decisions that shaped the course of capitalism. Given the poor-quality decisions emerging from corporate conference rooms these days, a revival of Quaker methods may be long overdue.

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"I think that managers can adapt certain elements and the guiding spirit of the Quaker business meeting to their purposes," said Margaret Benefiel, a Boston-based management consultant and the author of *Soul at Work: Spiritual Leadership in Organizations*.

Those elements include "a quiet, reflective frame of mind, mutual respect, [and] the idea that no one person has all the truth, but must listen deeply to others to gain a fuller picture of the truth," said Benefiel, who is a Quaker herself, and teaches at Massachusetts' Andover Newton Theological School when she is not advising managers.

Quakers are more properly known as The Society of Friends, which comprises not one organization but many. Each meeting house sets its own procedures. But they are all egalitarian. Quakers have no priesthood or hierarchy and defer to no human authority figures.

The faith was born in England during the 17th century. Persecuted for their beliefs, Quakers banded together for self-protection, forming communities and networks based on mutual trust. Supported by those communities and empowered by those networks, Quakers invented new ways of doing business. (At least one of their innovations is still with us: the traveling salesman.) Indeed, author David K. Hurst locates the cradle of capitalism in the little town of Coalbrookdale, England, where Quaker manufacturers like Abraham Darby forged the iron sinews of the Industrial Revolution.

During early Quaker meetings, "the business activities of their members were scrutinized by their peers, not only for their soundness but also to ensure that the interests of the broader community--not just the Quakers--were protected," says Hurst, a management consultant based in Oakville, Ontario, who wrote about Quaker business methods in his book *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change*. The Quaker congregation "would stand behind the activities of members who were in good standing, and if one of them got into trouble, they would supervise the liquidation of the business and make good the deficit."

Quakers soon crossed the ocean to Nantucket, which they made into the world capital of whaling, and to Philadelphia, where they planted the seeds of America's own Industrial Revolution. Bethlehem Steel, for example, was founded by the innovative Quaker entrepreneur Joseph Wharton, who also endowed the world's first collegiate business school at the University of Pennsylvania.

These days, the Wharton School is not known for propagating Quaker business techniques, and most people associate Quakers more with oatmeal or activist organizations like Greenpeace. But Quaker business methods are not necessarily obsolete; they have merely fallen into disuse, which is not quite the same thing.

In their meetings, Quakers do not let anyone impose a decision on the group. Instead, they wait for a consensus to emerge from a free and open discussion.

Probably the most distinctive feature of the Quaker meeting is that it begins and ends in silence. This approach may not lend itself easily to a corporate conference room.

"I suppose that on a very small scale, if you are trying to get people who already trust each other somewhat to express real concerns or come up with different ideas, it can help to think about starting a meeting without an agenda and in silence," Hurst says. "The pressure of silence is immense, so you can't just spring it on an unsuspecting group. They have to know its coming and what the objective is. A complete change in physical context from the office environment might help too."

Hurst, a non-Quaker, says he admires the Friends' theology and their community-oriented business methods. But he notes that modern corporations long ago grew too big to be managed the Quaker way.

"Huge scale undermines innovation and entrepreneurship and our ability to control our own creations," he said. "Unless we can make our large, complex organizations a lot smaller, we cannot hope that modern board meetings will ever resemble their Quaker counterparts."

Nevertheless, some firms may feel that they have little to lose by experimenting with Quaker methods. After all, most managers already spend much of each day in meetings that seem like a complete waste of time. These meetings may be conducted "efficiently" in that they plow through a long agenda and produce decisions for each item. But as those early Quakers knew, efficiency is not necessarily the same thing as effectiveness.

"Studies show that half of management decisions fail," Benefiel said. "Quaker practices can help managers make better decisions."