The Story of the Cross Keys Business Roundtable

by Geryll Zehr

Building and maintaining a business driven by positive Anabaptist values is impossible without some support from like-minded men—men who have similar values and are on a similar path. Information sources are not lacking—newsletters, seminars, books, training videos, and websites abound. What are sometimes lacking are Anabaptist perspectives and values, and the encouragement and support of friends to implement them.

A business roundtable, as the men in the Cross Keys group discovered, is a way to address both of those problems. The Cross Keys group was founded in 2004 and now contains twelve members who meet for two hours once a month to absorb and discuss pertinent information and personal experiences. Not by accident, all of the members come from different (noncompetitive) fields of business. This intentional design minimizes problems with sharing sensitive business information. "We can all feel quite free to share what we are facing business-wise," explains member Elam Esh. Applicants for membership must be confirmed by unanimous secret ballot, ensuring a high level of trust and compatibility within the group.

Cross Keys is designed for the group, to meet the needs of the members and to serve the members. No one profits monetarily from it; at the end of the year any left over dues are donated to charitable causes, and the cost for each member is only about $350 yearly.

The primary purpose of the group is to help its members find the knowledge and information they need to build strong, stable businesses and provide wise leadership to their employees. Building business relationships with other professionals and acquiring timely and effective information can be difficult given the expense and the pressure of daily schedule demands. Nevertheless, "One of the musts of being a businessman," explains Sam Ebersol, "is good information from a banker, an accountant, and a lawyer. That is why we make sure we bring in speakers from those fields each year."

"It has opened up a wealth of information for me," says Esh. "I can't just invite an attorney or speaker to sit down with me personally for a couple or hours over a cup of coffee and chat, but we can have one come in and do that for the group." The range of subjects covered in the last year is significant. An attorney addressed the group on wills and estate planning, an OSHA compliance specialist discussed compliance priorities, Richard Shank shared on Christian practices for collection, and other speakers discussed tax code changes, the recent events in the banking industry and how to work within the new banking environment, and the field of energy and what is happening in the energy market. The group also took a trip to the New York Mercantile Exchange to get an inside look into trading and the affect it has on business. Other areas of focus include leadership skills and time management.

Upcoming events include a safety meeting with a safety expert engaged to speak on work and home safety. The group has broadened this meeting into a community event, with the public

invited to attend, as a way of serving the community by providing teaching on this important topic. Esh points out that “We want to find creative ways not only to learn and grow, but also to serve.”

Upcoming topics for the group include sales and marketing, banking, Department Of Transportation regulations, contracting issues such as insurance and workman’s compensation, partnership and exit strategies, properly maintaining OSHA 300 logs, family relationships within business, several open roundtable discussions, and an end of the year evaluation of the group by its members to clarify how it is working and how members are experiencing it. Plans are also being made to take a business oriented trip to Washington, DC and include as part of the trip some time spent volunteering in a soup kitchen or similar establishment.

The group, which started with a core of six members, now contains twelve, a number which allows both a diversity of views and maximum participation by group members. Discussing issues with one another is an important part of the life of the group. Just planning time to sit down and talk with other business owners is important, says Ebersol. “If you don’t plan interaction with other business owners into your schedule, it doesn’t get done.”

When asked about the benefit he has received from the group, Esh said, “Let me put it this way. In six years, I have never considered whether or not to renew my membership.” Others expressed similar sentiments, underscoring the value they have received both personally and professionally.

Esh points out that many Anabaptist businessmen are first generation entrepreneurs; these are men who are breaking new ground and haven’t had the opportunity to assimilate significant business savvy from their fathers. Yet, information and instruction is vital, and must come from somewhere. Rather than just pulling from any source that offers itself, joining a business roundtable offers the opportunity to intentionally create a learning environment which is framed in the context of likeminded businessmen who share Anabaptist values. Experiencing coaching within our circles and our culture is not just a nice idea, it is a necessity, and business roundtables are a vital way of achieving that goal.

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