



Your Faith at Work

"You can't sell from an empty wagon."

That statement from Chick-fil-A's former Chief Operating Officer (and my supervisor) Jimmy Collins has always stuck with me.

Usually, Jimmy was directing this observation toward the Chick-fil-A Operator family around the realities of being ready for business: proper inventory, properly trained talent, and an "on-stage" attitude all the time. You can never be successful if your "wagon" is not stocked and ready to go.

While this might be a powerful picture of a business that's prepared operationally, I also learned from Jimmy and Chick-fil-A's Founder, Truett Cathy, that you can't *lead* out of an empty wagon either! No organization's culture will be any stronger than the values, philosophies and, if genuine, the faith of its leader or leaders.

Is there a clear 'why' for the business's existence? Are there strong values that become motivations and filters for decision-making? If the "why" is rooted in the genuine faith of the

leader, it will impact his or her decisions and behaviors.

I got to see this up close and personal in the life of Truett Cathy and many of the leaders he attracted.

I joined Truett as his first marketing director in January 1981. Because I interviewed for the better part of five months, I had a pretty good idea that Truett was not only a very wise entrepreneur, but also a man whose faith permeated every aspect of his life. But two years into my new role, I got a crash course on how important his faith really was.



ARTICLE BY STEVE ROBINSON

Steve Robinson is the former chairman of the board for Links Players. He spent more than 30 years with Chick-fil-A, where he led as Senior VP of Marketing. His book **Covert Cows and Chick-fil-A: How Faith, Cows, and Chicken Built an Iconic Brand**, published in 2019, draws on lessons he learned working with the Cathy family at one of America's most successful restaurant companies.

CRASH COURSE

The year 1982 hit America's economy hard. Prime interest rates were north of 18 percent. At the time, Chick-fil-A was a mall-based restaurant chain, and because of the cost of money, mall development came to a screeching halt. Retail sales crashed and CFA's sales crashed right with them. Truett had personally borrowed to build the company's first office building. And to cap it off, I played a major role in a national promotion that went \$2 million over budget.

Add all this up, and we faced a *major* cash flow crisis. To the point, would we even survive?

Truett came to our young executive leadership team with a simple but desperate question: "What are you guys going to do get us out of this cash crisis?"

We had no quick or pithy answers, but agreed to go off site for two or three days and search for potential solutions.

In less than a day we had cut budgets, frozen hiring, dramatically reduced new store openings, while leaving in our plan the 1983 introduction of a new product we felt pretty good about: Chick-fil-A Nuggets.

But Truett's oldest son, Dan Cathy, expressed a potentially greater concern. Chick-fil-A had a fairly young family of CFA restaurant Operators and staff who had hitched their futures to the company: "How do we address their concerns and fears about the future?"

In that moment, my understanding of whom I was working for was about to become even clearer.

Truett's answer to Dan's question was not a common, strategic response. Instead, he reiterated why Chick-fil-A existed. I'll paraphrase what I heard him say that day:

I do not want anyone at Chick-fil-A putting their trust in me, my family, or the company for their future. This is not my business. I consider the Chick-fil-A sandwich and business a gift from God for me and all of us to steward. We must seek God's direction on how to best steward this gift, and trust the outcome to Him. If it's God's desire for Chick-fil-A to survive this, we will acknowledge Him. If it fails, we will still acknowledge Him to give direction to our futures.

FRESH PURPOSE

We spent the remainder of our retreat trying to put what he had shared into one sentence. It had never been done, and with CFA's growing family, everyone who was part of it needed to know Truett's mind and heart about why the business existed. It resulted in Chick-fil-A's Corporate Purpose:

To honor God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us,
and

To have a positive impact on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A

When our executive team unpacked the results of our retreat with the staff, the plans were well-received, but the Corporate Purpose was a huge hit. It was almost like a storm cloud had lifted. People were not surprised because they already knew Truett, but they were excited and embraced the clarity of how he and other leaders thought about the business. Not one word of Chick-fil-A's Purpose has changed since 1982.

So let's come back to the potential role of faith in a business.

If faith is a genuine part of a leader's life, it should impact how they lead,

make decisions, and behave. No silos, be yourself!

Truett had not had an easy life leading up to 1982, and the financial crisis was not his first crisis. He had been through many. Serious health issues, the tragic death of his brother, a restaurant fire, and another one that shut down. But through it all, he had come to embrace God's grace in his life: through salvation, blessing his marriage and family, and the "gift" of the Chick-fil-A sandwich, to name a few.

Truett created a business culture that ultimately focused on helping every person in the business have the opportunity to thrive and be all God gifted them to be. I saw it and personally benefited from this culture. It's the biggest reason I stayed at Chick-fil-A for 35 years.

CHRIST, FAITH, AND WORK

Christ told His disciples that He is the Vine, and His followers are the branches. No branch (me/you) bears fruit apart from Him. Truett believed that, and leaned into his Christian faith for leadership and wisdom. The result was that he created a culture that was contagious and great 'soil' for all of us to prosper and serve others.

Faith that is genuine, authentic, and lived out requires no sermons or training videos. It creates an environment that is contagious—because it flows from the true Vine, not just the giftedness of leaders.

I am grateful that I was a part of an organization that focused on more than profits.

May I encourage you: Leaders do their organizations no greater service than to be crystal clear about why the organization exists, always demonstrating how that purpose affects all decisions and behavior. ■■■