



A Catholic and a Jew decide to start a business ...”

Is it possible to run a company on Judeo-Christian values?

According to Dave Fitzgerald and Lisa Galanti, co-founders of Fitzgerald + CO advertising agency, the answer is – Yes.

Fitzgerald and Galanti shared their thoughts at the latest BELIEVES session on Tuesday, July 12, 2016, entitled “A Catholic and a Jew decide to start a business ...” with a packed house of business professionals and leaders in attendance that was so full extra chairs had to be pulled in.

Fitzgerald opened by saying, “Before we get started, I want to share that I know just how much Catholicism means to Lisa. Several years ago, we were on a small plane sitting a few rows from each other. We began to hit some turbulence, and then hit an air pocket, at which point the plane dropped 10,000 feet. From behind me, I hear Lisa shout ‘Jesus Christ!’ I turn around and find her gripping the arm rests. With that, I confirm ‘See how much he means to you too!’”

Everyone laughed.

Fitzgerald and Galanti started their company in December 1983, and the agency has flourished since through many phases and evolutions in the organization.

Running their company on Judeo-Christian values was a lot easier when they ran it themselves, versus now when they are owned by a public company, acknowledged Galanti and Fitzgerald. But it is still possible.

“We’re going to share our story today through parables,” shared Fitzgerald. Galanti added, “And we brought visuals.” Galanti continued, “Why posters of the crucifix and tablets of the Ten Commandments behind us? As Dave and I talked about how we turned to our faith as we faced dilemmas and challenges leading our agency, we realized that in every Catholic church, the crucifix is front and center – and in every Jewish synagogue or temple, the tablets of the Ten Commandments are front and center. Each serves as a visual inspiration or reminder for how to faithfully live our lives and go about our work. So we brought them with us this morning.”

She added, “Dave expressed that at times he imagined Jesus sitting in the chair next to him, and that made me think, ‘To whom do I turn or what do I do?’ For me, it is the 10 Commandments because it’s my connection to God – and how nice that the Ten Commandments bind us all.”

Before Fitzgerald and Galanti shared several dilemmas or challenges, which they presented as parables, Galanti shared her thoughts on the Jewish concept of God and its impact on her.

According to Galanti, the meaning of Torah is “learning” or “educate,” and the Jewish concept of God is that of a learning God.

“The Jewish concept of God is a God who makes mistakes, a God who loses his temper. The Jewish God isn’t as perfect, just like the Jewish characters in the Bible aren’t as perfect. I understand Jesus is considered pretty much perfect. For those who follow Muhammad, I understand he’s pretty perfect, too. Moses? Abraham? David? Not so much. This may explain why some Jews can be prone to debate and why some Jews seem unwilling to just accept ‘authority.’ Even the Jewish God is subject to being talked out of something.”

Most of all, with the Jewish concept of God around her and the Ten Commandments beside her, Galanti said she gained strength to face dilemmas and challenges with honesty, openness, passion, compassion, and a persistent desire to “do the right thing.”

“And doing it alongside someone who regularly brings the compassion of Jesus to the chair beside him makes for a great ride! So with that bit of background about Judaism and me, let’s jump into the parables,” said Galanti.

Fitzgerald then shared the first parable – starting the company.



“Lisa and I worked together for a smaller agency before starting Fitzgerald + CO,” said Fitzgerald. “Our client was Marriott – and a great client they were.”

Unfortunately, during the engagement, some accounting issues emerged that had nothing to do with them personally. As a result, Marriott informed Fitzgerald they were leaving the current agency – and would not honor the 90-day notice. Marriott offered to follow Fitzgerald to another agency or he could start his own agency; the catch: Marriott needed a decision in five days.

Fitzgerald and Galanti decided to form Fitzgerald + CO. While Marriott happily compensated Fitzgerald for the work, Fitzgerald turned the first 90 days of payment over to their former agency, thereby helping to support the people impacted by the loss of business.

What was the second parable? The parable of personality disorder.

Galanti began the parable by mentioning, “Early on, we were a small agency, and we worked in close quarters. We were working on the same clients and pursuing the same agenda. Our environment was collaborative and intense.”

According to Galanti, Person X was clearly an outlier in terms of the ability to connect and get along with the other colleagues.

“When working in such an intense and confined environment, personality means a lot,” Galanti said. “Amidst 120 people, you can handle an outlier or two. Not so much when one person represents a significant percentage of your organization.”

The challenge for Galanti and Fitzgerald, however, was they had just asked Person X to quit the job at the current agency to take a risk and join them in their brand new agency. Now they were considering having Person X leave their firm and had to have a tough conversation.

“We met with Person X, talked one-on-one and two-on-one, and hoped for better days. At the end of the day, it was neither a skill set we were trying to change nor a knowledge base that needed to develop. It was simply a personality disorder we were trying to change. And neither of us is a psychologist.”

What Fitzgerald and Galanti both were clear on after the conversations was that Person X had to go. They believed it was a disservice to Person X, their clients, and themselves for Person X to stay.

“It was the compassionate thing for Person X and, importantly, the compassionate thing for rest of our small little agency,” Galanti said.

Fitzgerald then sat down with Person X and talked openly and honestly – not trumping up some made-up reason.

Fitzgerald said, “We love you. We’ve talked previously about the challenges. We’re not expecting you to change your personality for us, but we are expecting you to change your job.”

Galanti and Fitzgerald provided Person X a generous severance and support. While there was some short-term discomfort from the circumstance, the long-term result was Person X was happier, and Fitzgerald and Galanti were happier too.

“There’s no way Person X would be fulfilled in our environment, and now Person X is thriving to this day,” said Galanti. “In terms of the Ten Commandments, not only did we tell the truth, but also we demonstrated great compassion and concern, thereby not cutting Person X off at the knees or any other metaphor for ‘murdering’ someone emotionally ... reminding us of the Sixth Commandment, thou shalt not murder – physically or emotionally.”



And the third parable – Would Jesus lay off anyone?

“In today’s world, the average tenure of a Chief Marketing Officer is 18 months,” said Fitzgerald. “With churn comes layoffs. It’s an inevitable part of the business. You have to do it for the quality of the company to be maintained, but you also have to do it with compassion.”

Fitzgerald went on to share how he handled the circumstances each time he had to tell someone the tough news.

“Every time I faced layoff discussions, I handled them myself,” he said. “Each time I put an extra chair near me, as a place for Jesus to be in the room. Before the conversation began, I would touch the chair for His presence. No one ever noticed or asked about it.”

Galanti then introduced the fourth parable – thou shalt not covet thy neighbors’ goods.

“Many times we were presented with ethical, financial, or other dilemmas with a major competing client,” she stated. “In advertising, you can handle only one company in an industry. In contrast, lawyers and CPAs often handle multiple clients in the same industry.”

Every one of Fitzgerald + CO’s agreements included a non-compete clause, and they had to ask for client permission to even talk with a client’s competitor. Fitzgerald + CO is fortunate to have had some very loyal clients – as well as being pursued by other prospective clients.

“And every time we exchanged a loyal client for a bigger one, albeit always with our client’s permission and blessing, we got bludgeoned. It was just greed, coveting, and gluttony on our part that was the driver.”

Galanti and Fitzgerald shared it took them three times to finally learn not to get enticed by the allure of a bigger client in place of retaining a loyal one.

“When we went to Marriott in particular and asked them about taking on one of their major competitors, Marriott said, ‘Do what’s best for your agency and your people,’” said Galanti. “We went for it. We hadn’t been part of an agency review nor undertaken due diligence and research as to the new client’s values and internal alignment.”

In six months, the Fitzgerald + CO team found misalignment in values and more with their new bigger client. Before long, they resigned from the relationship with their recently acquired client.

“We got drawn into the trap of gluttony in this situation, but it was also the Eighth Commandment – though shalt not commit adultery ... even with permission,” said Galanti.

Fitzgerald then spoke about the fifth parable – the great abrogation of trust.

“In one situation several years ago, we had considered a merger,” said Fitzgerald. “We had gone so far as to take PR head shots and met at an airport with parties from the other company to finalize everything.”

In the final face-to-face encounter at 5 PM on the Friday before the merger was to be announced the following week, Fitzgerald told the merger partner, “Don’t tell anyone until I can tell my people – I’ll call you on Monday.”

The merger partner agreed.

“On Saturday, I got personal calls by two people saying, ‘I hear you’re merging,’” retold Fitzgerald. “I called the merger partner and said, ‘The deal is off. If you can’t do the one thing I asked, we can’t have a relationship because I can’t trust your handshake and for as long as I am here this firm will be founded on truth.’”

Fitzgerald and Galanti then spoke of one more parable – pride cometh before the fall – before taking questions.

John Monroe, CFO at TradeRocket asked, “As a small firm turning into a large firm, how have you maintained your values?”

Some members of the Fitzgerald + CO team who were attending the session spoke up.

“These two (Galanti and Fitzgerald) have guided the ship with true compassion,” the team member said. “It’s why we’ve stayed, and for some of us after we left, came back.”

Another team member added, “As you grow you have to still act like a small company – staying relatively flat. The farther you get away from the front line, that’s where it falls apart. Dave used to walk around with a box to get people’s extra pens when the firm was young. I would tell him in later years to ‘take the long way’ to get coffee.”

After the Fitzgerald + CO team members shared their comments, Fitzgerald himself added that they’ve been intentional in having a very thorough on-boarding process to run all employees through the agency’s values.

Galanti added, “Every month, we also give a ‘Davey Award’ to one team member for reflecting the mission and values of the firm. At the end of the year, there’s an annual recipient chosen by all employees.”

The next question came from CTK Parishioner Maureen Becker.

“How do you experience each other’s faiths?”

“We go to one another’s family events, christenings and Bris, baby namings, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and more,” Galanti and Fitzgerald shared.

There was also an interesting story that Galanti shared in response to Becker’s question.

“For Dave’s 50th birthday, we wondered, ‘What would mean a lot to Dave? Other than Dave’s family, we realized nothing means more to him than his faith. So we decided he was going to get a meeting with Pope John Paul II.”

So Galanti first called the Cathedral of Christ the King to see how this could happen. Then she got connected to Archbishop Donoghue.

“And God bless him, he made it happen,” Galanti said.

Bringing the story full circle, on another occasion when Galanti and Fitzgerald were at Bones, they noticed Archbishop Donoghue having lunch too with someone, so they all said hello to one another.

“Archbishop Donoghue introduced me by saying, ‘Let me introduce you to my favorite Jew.’ I was and remain so flattered. But I had to be honest and responded that “you know you’re my second favorite Catholic,” identifying Fitzgerald as her first. Archbishop Donoghue would have it no other way! Archbishop Donoghue also attended my daughter’s Bat Mitzvah – and we celebrated ST. Patrick’s Day every year with lunch following Mass.”

One more question – how has your faith evolved in working with another – was then asked of Galanti and Fitzgerald to begin closing out the session.

Galanti responded, “My personal outlook and decision-making have been enhanced through Catholic interactions.”

Then Susan O’Dwyer, Director of Business Development at Habif, Arogeti & Wynne, asked the final question of the session when she said, “Was there ever a time when pitching for business where faith played a role in getting or not getting the client?”

Fitzgerald replied that oftentimes people didn’t know.

So that the attendees could continue to reflect on the topic, Fitzgerald and Galanti left everyone with these four questions to ponder:

1. What challenge have you faced in your business life where your actions or decisions were influenced by your faith?
2. Has your faith made it more difficult or easy to be happy or successful in a business environment? How?
3. Have you allowed your faith to take a back seat when faced with a business decision? When and why? Would you make the same choice(s) again?
4. “What’s the resistance you face to integrate faith in the work life?”



The next BELIEVES session will be on Tuesday, August 9th when FOX 5 News Anchor Russ Spencer speaks on “Dealing with Challenging People.”