

GiST Stories: Living for Jesus in the Corporate Workplace

By Robyn Bain (GiST Committee)

Changing cultural views on the nature of diversity, love and tolerance have created both opportunities and challenges for Christians in the corporate workplace. We spoke to Andrew*, a PCQ church member, about his experiences. You can also find Andrew's interview on our GiST workplace resources page along with useful resources on the gospel and religious freedom – www.gist.org.au.

(*not his real name)

What kind of work do you do?

I'm a senior manager in a large corporation. I manage a team of about thirty-five people in a fairly senior role, and I have a lot of dealings with senior leaders across the business. I am probably the most senior visible Christian in a workplace of thousands.

What opportunities do you have to show and talk about Jesus at work?

I'm quite open about my faith with my executive peers and teams. I talk about Jesus whenever opportunities arise. I talk about going to church on the weekend or being involved in bible study during the week to demonstrate it's a normal and important part of my life. I look for opportunities to talk about how my faith impacts the way I work and my philosophy of life, particularly the meaning I live for.

I find most of my senior leader peers are quite driven to climb the corporate ladder. They are often focussed on the false notion that security comes from having and being in control of the things of this life, managing their own brand and achieving all they can. These are often people who spend their working lives exerting a lot of control and influence to maximise their success. Often their challenge is to maximise a corporate career while balancing competing demands in life. As a result, I often find myself talking to people about the busyness of life, what motivates us, how to balance priorities and where we get our meaning from. I often like to explain that Jesus gives me greater meaning and purpose beyond the things of this life. The grace he has shown in his sacrifice for me gives me security. I talk about being motivated by a desire to do the tasks God has given me well rather than climb the ladder.

Team members have sometimes approached me looking for help in the pain of life challenges such as divorce and depression. A few of my colleagues have experienced the death of loved ones. They often say they can tell there is something anchoring my life they don't have. That's an opportunity to point straight to Jesus and the stability and security I have in him. Some have said that they'd love to have what I have but they just can't believe. Some then say they still want to send their kids to a Christian school or church to learn Christian values. It's interesting to take opportunities to talk to them about what why they feel Christian values are important. That often opens up opportunities to talk about who Jesus is and what he has achieved for us on the cross. Through a Christian group at university I learned that a great way to quickly work out what someone believes and open up the conversation to the gospel is to ask who they think Jesus is. To do this I actively try to build these discussions from a respectful relationship so that others feel comfortable for me to outline my faith.

I have quite a few team members who are gay and who have influential leadership positions in LGBTQI groups. LGBTQI identities are supported in my workplace as part of a broader diversity movement. I'm one of the only senior leaders who doesn't wear a rainbow lanyard which stands out, particularly as many know I'm a Christian. I do notice a lot of fellow Christians avoid engaging with LGBTQI colleagues or discussing their faith because they are worried about how that will be viewed. But I see many opportunities here. Many of my LGBTQI colleagues have had negative or judgemental experiences with Christians or church and this provides an opportunity to build on my relationships and show a different side of my faith. One colleague challenged me openly about the judgemental views of Christians on LGBTQI issues. I explained that God cares about every person, and that the Bible says that all those who don't have faith in Jesus are facing the judgement in the same way, and that God's saving grace is for every person who comes to him. Because we always relate well at work, they know I'm not a judgemental person myself but someone who relies on God's grace.

I really try to take a personal interest in my colleagues and team members and build good relationships with them all, no matter what their background or beliefs. I strive to celebrate the full spectrum of diversity in our workplace. As a result, I am quite close to the people in charge of pro-diversity efforts at work. This creates opportunities to talk to them and other leaders about opening up the idea of 'diversity' to consider people of faith. I often have opportunities to speak up as someone of faith on how to treat minorities well in the workplace.

As a senior leader, consistently showing care for every person is extremely important. The theory of 'servant leadership' is currently a popular in corporate discussions. I take the opportunity to tell colleagues that this idea is partly based on the example of Jesus. I try to guide my team by serving them and showing that my faith drives me to do that. I try to demonstrate the kind of humility Jesus calls us to.

In what ways do you find faithfulness to Jesus challenging at work?

My biggest challenge is avoiding getting caught on the corporate treadmill along with everyone else. For professionals who've spent much of their life working to develop a set of useful capabilities and then receiving praise and promotion on that basis, it's very easy to start working for self rather than for Jesus. I find it's even easier to begin believing the praise that others (and the world) offer and to rely on my own strength and ability to control my environment. I pray and think about that a lot, especially with my wife.

I'm very aware that in my own sinful mind, I invest in people's praise and want to avoid upsetting them. Christians in my position can easily fall into the trap of separating our corporate and Christian lives. Doing that makes you inoffensive —you don't upset people or create waves and you can achieve corporate success. One of the reasons why I have discussions with colleagues about life's meaning is to avoid that trap. I am not only challenging them but also challenging myself to be open about my faith and work in way that flows from it. Others (including my non-Christian colleagues) can then hold me to this and I pray for opportunities to share my faith and the gospel.

Being openly Christian at work always has a degree of awkwardness and it is becoming harder. I also pray about this a lot. There is a push at work to keep your own views to yourself and never challenge others. But Jesus constantly challenged peoples' views. I have to meet that push in a way that is faithful to Jesus and demonstrates the love of God for my colleagues. I have to be very deliberate about what I say and do — which reminds me of Jesus' teaching to his disciples to be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves as he sent them out to be witnesses. I need to be above reproach, striving to please God in all I say and do, while also being awake to the way people

might perceive my actions and words. Sometimes people try to entrap me by getting me to say something 'offensive'. So, I am constantly pointing to God's love for people in Jesus, nurturing good relationships and being respectful. But I also work at communicating that God cares about how we live. He wants every one of us to have a relationship with him or face his judgement.

How can churches help workers like you live faithfully for Jesus in the corporate sphere?

I sometimes sense that my Christian brothers and sisters feel Christians shouldn't seek corporate promotion or look for opportunities to serve at that level. I think there is a fear that doing so compromises our ministry. But as Christians we need to encourage one another to be good stewards of God's creation, embracing (rather than shying away from) opportunities God gives us to glorify him through serving people and sharing the gospel through our work. This is true of anyone who has opportunities to excel in any particular skill. I think working well often leads to opportunities to glorify God. I'm also conscious that all my colleagues (Christian and non-Christian) have been created to steward creation. One of my tasks as a leader is to help them with that particular God-given purpose (even if they don't see it that way).

Some of the Christians who have been the biggest encouragement to me have managed a corporate career with uncompromising faithfulness to God. They credit their success to God and work hard to balance work with family and church life – often giving up work opportunities to do so. I have seen the way their accomplishment as leaders in the workplace has pointed to God's glory. However, it's important to note that success isn't a given, we often fail or stumble because of our sinfulness, limitations or simply because life in this fallen world isn't always fair. But I take comfort that God has everything under control. My colleagues lack this security as they constantly scramble to control life's risks.

We could pray and think harder together about how we let the gospel shape our drive at work, the decisions we make and the careers we build. It's great when my Christian friends regularly ask me how they can pray for me at work and at home and encourage me to be openly faithful to Jesus in every part of my life.