

A Quaker ethic in business: 350 years old and still relevant?

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Keywords

Quaker Testimonies, speaking truth to power, 10 Principles for a New Economy, decision-making process, trustworthiness, attentive listening

Some context

The Religious Society of Friends or Quakers stemmed from George Fox's realisation, in 1647, that God's light is in every person. With a radical Christian understanding, Quakers rejected violence but embraced equality, simplicity and truth, later known as the Quaker Testimonies. In the turmoil of civil war, the Quakers challenged the authority of both church and state, resulting in persecution and the tradition of 'speaking truth to power'.

Due to their refusal to take oaths, Quakers should always speak the truth, Quakers were barred from the professions and from public office so trade was an obvious way to earn an income. As a result, Friends have had a long and mainly honourable involvement in business.



George Fox by [Thomas Fairland](#) Library of Congress. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Some of the UK's longest-lived companies, with high levels of brand recognition, were founded and run by Quakers for a hundred years or more.



[Plaque on the East Street branch of Barclays Bank, Chichester: photo: Barbara Hayes*]

However, by the second half of the 20th century this involvement was greatly diminished.

'The influence and spread of Quakerism in business began a slow decline in the second half of the 19th Century, with the arrival into UK and USA law of the joint-stock company with limited liability, and subsequently as Quaker businesses were sold by their family owners, or merged with other organisations. Scale and complexity led to professional managers replacing family members. Some of the original Quaker firms grew into global businesses, but Quaker start-ups failed to keep pace with those which exited. The 20th Century saw a continued decline in the number of truly Quaker businesses, and in the number of Quakers following business careers. In the early 21st century the symbolic takeover of Cadbury, in a hostile bid by Kraft, left only Clarks Shoes and Scott Bader (the chemicals company) amongst the few surviving medium to large Quaker, or substantively Quaker influenced businesses.'

[Quakers & Business]

A Quaker response to the 2008 financial crisis

This does not mean that Quakers have ceased to be concerned with the quality of economic life and, following the global crash of 2008, there was a re-statement of Quaker values in 2015 in '10 Principles for a New Economy', recognising the need for a 'right ordering' of the economic system for the common good. The Principles are as follows:

1. The purpose of the economy is the enhancement of life, human and non-human.
2. We do not over-consume the earth's resources.
3. All [including future beings] have an equal right to access and make use of global commons.
4. Everyone needs time and resources to participate in community life.

5. The wellbeing of people and planet are not sacrificed to preserve profits or reduce national deficits.
6. Money is created under democratic control for positive social benefit rather than private profit.
7. A fundamental equality is recognised, not limited by race, gender or social origin.
8. The tax system redistributes from richer to poorer, with richer people paying a greater proportion of their income.
9. Businesses are structured and owned in a variety of ways. Co-operatives and community-owned enterprises form a large part of the economy, as well as private and national ownership
10. A participative and more truly representative democracy is key to our peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

Not all Quakers support every point in the Principles, but the statement led to the development of materials for local reading groups to study, with the aim of helping Friends to develop their understanding and to be more confident in speaking of economic matters. The topics covered included the purpose of economic life, the relevance of Gross Domestic Product [GDP] as a measure of success, ownership models, future energy provision and others. The reading materials encouraged thought and exploration rather than providing 'answers'.

In Chichester, some members of the local Quaker reading group decided that they wanted to continue to explore how they might respond to what had been discussed, and so the New Economy Group was formed. Group members have a range of experience, including international financial markets, the law, psychology, education, social care and industry. We were aware of a whole range of national and international organisations working in economic issues, but decided, initially, to map some of the local activity which touched on our concerns. These included the local credit union, debt advice, transition towns and others. At the same time, we made contact with the Business School of Chichester University. The plan was to learn what other people were doing, to explore connections and ways of working together, and to identify what the group might offer uniquely.

We contacted Rob Warwick, Reader in Management and Organisational Learning, because of his interest in ethics and corporate responsibility and arranged to meet to explore connections. It was at this point that we were invited to lead a session as part of the ethics module for third year students, with the content for us to define.

Preparing for the CBS business ethics session

Our first task was to develop an outline for the session and check that it fitted with the aims of the module. We rejected working directly on the Principles listed above, as each one would have required a session on its own. However, good decision making is essential to all successful and ethical organisations, and we decided to concentrate on that. It was the decision-making processes of the big banks that were questioned in 2008, along with their particular practices.

We proposed a session to include a little Quaker history, so that students could understand who we are, to provide sufficient information on Quaker businesses, as the basis of our 'authority' to speak in this context,

input on the Quaker Testimonies, as the values that underpin action and an exploration of the Quaker decision-making method, so that they could assess if it felt relevant for business today. Broadly, we were seeking to explore, amongst ourselves and with the students, whether time-honoured Quaker values and methods still have relevance for business organisations. We were not presenting an academic theory, but trying to share an experience.

Members of the facilitation group undertook to research particular areas and, as is always the case, we gathered much more material than we could ever use. The real work began when we started to make decisions about what to include and how to present the material. Quakers stress the validity and importance of every individual's experience. A common quotation is 'What can *you* say?' [George Fox] so we wanted to build on the student's existing experience, provide a new experience, and make the session practical rather than predominantly theoretical. We wished to model the process that we were introducing, as well as explaining the theory. It should be noted that the planning process itself embodied key elements of the formal Quaker decision-making process. A group of people with a wide range of expertise had to listen to each other attentively and seek unity in decision making for a common good. Five of us then worked together to deliver the session in a way that was both coherent and allowed all to contribute.

The CBS programme we developed



[The Quaker team who facilitated the CBS Ethics in Business session: photo: Rob Warwick]

After outlining the purpose of the session as above, and stressing that Quakers share a commitment to particular values and process rather than to absolute 'right answers', we began, as is our custom, with several minutes of silence. The silence allows us to gather our thoughts and to be fully attentive to the agenda and to others present. The students were also silent and, although this is an unusual experience for many people, they went with it. They were then asked to think of a decision they had had to make in the past and to note the values that were part of their decision making.

This was followed by a brief explanation of who the Quakers were historically, their involvement in business, and the factors that led them to thrive as business people. Some of the factors are social and historic, but key are the Testimonies and a community which continues to explore what its shared values mean in action. So we spent time describing these as follows.

Some features of Quaker practice

Quakers do not have a creed or statement of orthodoxy; rather they have Testimonies which have developed over time. Each of the Testimonies is essential to the wellbeing respectively of individuals, all levels of community including workplaces, and the planet. They have been identified over time through the experience of a living community.

Perhaps the best known is the **Peace** Testimony which sprang out of the Quaker origins in a time of civil war. Non violence ranges from dealing with inter personal conflict to being a Conscientious Objector.

The other Testimonies are Truth, Equality, Simplicity and, most recently Sustainability.

The **Truth** testimony is the reason that Quakers cannot make oaths, as their word should always be trustworthy anyway, but it also meant that commercial contracts were honest and honoured, that prices and wages were fair and set rather than bartered, that financial records were meticulously kept. Bankrupts were supported unless there was evidence of wrong-doing, and business activities were overseen by the local Meeting.

Equality was based on the concept of 'that of God in every person', so early Quakers refused to doff their hats to their 'betters', girls had equal education with boys, and everyone should be treated with equal respect.

Simplicity includes lifestyle as well as manner of speech, and Quaker businesses mainly dealt in necessities such as food and clothing or goods and services, such as banking or iron production – necessities that underpinned the activities of others.

In some ways these historic Testimonies are encapsulated by the more recently adopted Testimony of [Sustainability](#).

Implications and applications for contemporary business practice

All the Testimonies are relevant to economic activity and challenge much modern practice. The session did not allow us enough time to explore the on-going relevance of the Testimonies to business in depth, but we could pose some questions to stimulate further thought. These questions included

- What's an honest price when you have to ring your insurance or telecoms company to negotiate a deal?
- What is truthful record-keeping when major auditors have failed to flag up problems in companies that have gone on to collapse or are shown to have falsifying their assets?
- How do we live simply in a consumerist society?

In the 19th Century, Rowntree banned advertising because of the risk of promoting consumerism. Early Quakers wore simple greys; now simplicity is more about avoiding single use plastic and aiming for sustainable production. Equalities legislation has come a long way since the Quakers began, but inequality continues with low pay in many sectors, and the CEO is given more public respect than the cleaner. The Peace Testimony prevents Friends from working or investing in companies associated with armaments, but we all come across conflict at work.

Quaker decision-making

Having explored the Testimonies as the values that underpin decision-making, we then took a detailed look at the decision-making process itself. Of the religious groups that began at the time of the English Civil War, the Quakers are one of the most long-lived, and the decision-making process is a key factor in this. The process is unique to Quakers, and is used at every level of the Society of Friends, from deciding whether to have a fridge in a local Meeting House kitchen to the national, ground breaking decision to be the first religious group to support gay marriage.

The purpose of what Quakers would call a 'Meeting for worship for business,' is to achieve unity in decision-making. It is not a debate, there is no point scoring and no voting. Instead it is a time of attentive listening to all the views or ideas expressed, each of which has its own validity. After an opening silence, a topic is introduced. Each of those present can contribute only once, unless there is an essential point of information. There is a time of silence after each contribution, so that people can absorb what has been said. When everyone who wishes to has spoken, it is the role of the Clerk, who acts a bit like a chair person, to prepare a minute that outlines the feeling of the meeting and notes the particular decision which is understood to be 'the mind of the meeting'. The draft minute is read out and amendments agreed if necessary. If 'the mind of the meeting' is not clear, that itself is written as a minute and the decision is deferred to a future date, possibly with a request for more information. The traditional signal of assent is 'I hope so', spoken aloud. Once accepted, the minute cannot be changed, except for points of grammar.

Apart from unity in decision-making, within what can be a very disparate group of people, a Meeting for Business can also be an opportunity to exercise Quaker values and to build community.

"These Meetings are not merely occasions for transacting with proper efficiency the affairs of the church but also opportunities when we can learn to bear and forbear, to practice to one another that love which 'suffereth long and is kind'." (Quaker Faith & Practice 3.03).

How the CBS session 'worked'

We had three essential questions for ourselves and for the students.

- A] Does this method have value in a complex world where it is important to hear many views and experiences, respectfully, if good decisions are to be made?
- B] Might this approach contribute in smaller groups to a sense of team and the common good.
- C] Is this approach to decision-making helpful in engaging university students and others in grappling with complex ethical issues?

Two members of our group explained the why and the how of the process, and provided a handout (see Appendix) before the whole group presented a role play, so that the students could see it in action. We were concerned that it would not be a very exciting watch, but felt it was essential to demonstrate how the process works. It may have been the quality of silence, respect for grey-haired visitors or their own innate kindness and humanity, but the students respected the process and remained attentive.

After the role play the students split into three groups, with one of our number as a resource person to each group, and were asked to do a case study. A complex organisation had two matters to decide - one ethically complicated and the other more straightforward. Students chose the role they would represent in the organisation and their input was from that perspective. Not all groups came to a decision on the more complex issue and one, encouraged by the resource person, did as Quakers would with more time, and came back to the issue for further consideration before making a decision. All engaged with the task, although some found the concept of speaking only once very difficult. One person taking the role of Clerk commented how hard it was **not** to speak, and a second acknowledged that normally they would be formulating their response rather than really listening to what someone else was saying.

We spent some time hearing what worked, what was difficult, and how the students experienced the process, before reverting to the personal decision they reflected on at the start of the session. Might it have felt different or had a different outcome using this sort of process? One view was that they may have felt more confident in the decision if it had been arrived at in this way. We also looked at the values that students had identified. There were certainly some links with the Quaker Testimonies, although the language was different. But interestingly for us, several students referred to how their decision might impact their future. This may have been partly pragmatic - 'How will this look on my CV?' - but it is also an insight from someone at the start of their career. Ethics exercises are often presented as 'What do you do now, in this case?' with perhaps less emphasis on 'Where this line of thought might take you in the long term across a career?' Or 'What will its future impact be on you personally and on society?'

Reflecting on the experience, we were pleased with how the session had gone. In particular we were impressed by the openness of the students, their willingness to engage with unfamiliar concepts and to give serious consideration to the possibilities of this way of working. We had the impression that some of them at least would continue to mull over the experience. Those just setting out on a career are not in a position to introduce radically new ways of working within existing business structures but listening attentively, speaking and acting honestly, taking all views seriously and seeking unity are all beneficial and possible.

At the outset we identified the core concepts and ideas to be explored in the session. In retrospect it may have been helpful to have mentioned 'Meetings for Clearness' which use the same method but take no decisions, acting as preparation for particularly complex decision-making. More significantly, we could have chosen to use the session completely differently and instead explore the '10 Principles for the New Economy', how they relate to the Testimonies and what this might mean for our wider economic life. Kate Raworth [2018 edn] suggests that her model of [doughnut economics](#) should be on the table at all business or decision-making meetings as a prompt to behaviour. Perhaps the Quaker Testimonies or the 10 Principles could have a similar function. Maybe we'll explore those options another time.

Acknowledgements

For their respective contributions in helping me to develop this article, I would like to express my thanks to **Rob Warwick** for inviting us into the university; to all the **members of the Chichester New Economy Group** who contributed to preparing the session; to my fellow presenters – **Janet Beckett, Hilary Cooke, Derek Foote** and **Jenny Webb** – who also commented on this article; to **the CBS students** for their openness in engaging with what we were presenting; and to **Bob MacKenzie**, who offered suggestions and guidance in helping the article 'fit' its academic context.

Appendix 1

The Quaker Meeting for Business process

1. The Meeting begins with a few minutes silence as people focus their minds.
2. The Clerk acts a little like a chairperson and 'manages' the meeting. S/he is usually a mature Quaker but as responsibility for the meeting is shared any Friend can be the Clerk. The Clerk does not participate in the reflection on a subject, unless it's to give a point of information or similar. The Clerk ends the opening silence, usually with a phrase like 'Thank you Friends'.
3. The agenda will already have been circulated and the Clerk or a suitable person will introduce and briefly outline the matter for decision.
4. All those present have an equal right to speak and show that they wish to speak by standing. If two people stand at the same time one will sit and stand again in due time. Those wishing to speak do so only once so in-put should be well considered & significant.
5. After each in put there should be a silence to absorb/ reflect on what has been said. Others may then speak. This is not a debate or argument for or against another speaker's contribution but a statement of views, feelings or information.
6. Second contributions are acceptable if genuinely necessary. If we are truly listening then things do not need to be just repeated. This is not about hammering home an argument.
7. When the Clerk discerns that full consideration has been given to the issue s/he will draft a Minute, possibly with the help of an Assist Clerk, to draw together what's been said and to give the outcome, if one is clear. This is then read back to the Meeting for amendment/acceptance. To signal acceptance Quakers say 'I hope so', the hope being that the decision is acceptable and guided by the spirit.

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*About the photo of the plaque.

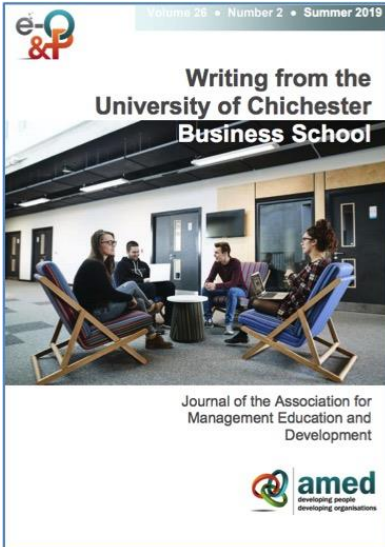
Barbara writes:

‘I believe the plaque was put up by local Quakers as part of a Quaker history trail. The building owner must have agreed, but I assume it’s just chance that the building is now a bank.’

About Barbara

Barbara Hayes is a member of the Chichester Friends New Economy Group. Prior to retirement, she was an Industrial Chaplain in Oxford and Birmingham, working in the retail, manufacturing, science-based industry, transport and social enterprise sectors, alongside work on corporate responsibility and ethics.

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