



Sean Langley's new series focuses on the seven deadly enemies of man(agement) ■

When my nephew said, several years ago, that he wanted Panic! At the Disco's first album for Christmas, my immediate reaction was, "who?" Little did I imagine that their 2011 album – Vices and Virtues – would later inspire my writing! Like many artists across genres, the Las Vegas-based rock band was exploring the sins, and the spiritual opposites, which afflict mankind. It got me thinking about how those behavioural traits play a part in the success, or otherwise, of our organisations and leaders.

The early writings of Evagrius, Pope Gregory I and Dante Alighieri helped the Catholic Church to define its 'seven deadly sins'. Whilst I would be foolish to enter a religious debate, I may just park that idea temporarily... or maybe not.

For those unclear what I am talking about, the seven deadly (or cardinal) sins are meant as a reflective observation, and description, of the objectionable behavioural traits displayed by humans. Christian churches use them as educational aids to warn followers of the dangers. For an example of their application in popular culture, many readers will be familiar with the 1995 film, *Seven*, in which a serial killer punished transgressors of the seven sins.

I found myself contemplating that these seven sins are often played out in the workplace, thankfully not as extremely as in that movie. Nevertheless, studying and understanding them can spiritually enhance our own teachings on management.

Sean Langley IRRV (Hons) is a benefits and revenues consultant, and author of *©The phat Controller (A Leadership Handbook)*. Go to www.seanlangley.co.uk

The seven deadly sins...

So, what are they? Translation and semantics over hundreds of years have resulted in a gradual metamorphosis of the precise list, but currently they are identified as: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony.

Modern religious teachings now talk about a corresponding, or opposite, acceptable behavioural trait, as follows: humility, charity, kindness, patience, chastity, temperance, and diligence. So we have:

Lust v Chastity

Gluttony v Temperance

Greed v Charity

Sloth v Diligence

Wrath v Patience

Envy v Kindness

Pride v Humility

Over coming months, I am going to consider how such seemingly personal and individual characteristics manifest themselves in organisational-related behaviour, and how a little attention to it can prove positive. Frequently there is a fine line!

Pride is often considered the most serious of the seven deadly sins – identified as a desire to be more important than others, or failing to acknowledge the work of others. Does that sound familiar to you? It does me, my life punctuated by experiences of people displaying those characteristics.

Yet are we not also told to have pride in what we do? I would argue that would be a very positive characteristic, particularly where an individual has performed well, or identifies with the high quality service that their employer delivers. So why is it a sin?

It becomes a sin when it is false pride, believing oneself to know more or be better than others. Arrogance or conceit

is the manifestation. You know the type – as you pass them in the street they look the other way, without so much as a smile of acknowledgement. Is this the mark of a true leader? I think not!

True pride is based on a more genuine premise, and often marked by self-belief or self-confidence, neither of which are sins. People with these qualities do not view themselves as 'better', but different – and that is what sets them apart.

Hawaiian author Serge Kahili King describes these conflicts well, explaining that someone with true pride may or may not be a superior person, but that doesn't matter to them.

Organisationally, pride can manifest itself in the inability to embrace change and, consequently, an arrogance that the organisation is bigger than the market. Is this what befell Woolworths? Certainly I have heard ex-employees of other long-lost High Street retailers talk about the inability of their senior management to recognise the threat posed by out of town retail parks.

What is needed is the opposite positive behavioural trait – humility. King explains that true humility has to do with acknowledging and respecting who you are and what you can do. And yet there is another conflict here, as this almost borders on arrogance, too. Once we become aware of our humility, we lose it!

However, it is the ability to recognise that by putting others' needs before our own, we can achieve much more than by being self-fulfilling. By acknowledging the good work that others do, we show humility, and self-fulfillment becomes a by-product. We don't have to tell others how good we are, we just do it.

I will leave the last words to Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu: *"I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others. Be gentle and you can be bold; be frugal and you can be liberal; avoid putting yourself before others and you can become a leader among men."*