

Prudence at Work at Work

Prudence is the virtue for living in the complex, real world, interacting with complex, real people. It is practical intelligence, practical wisdom, put to work often for the benefit of one's own interests and when extended, for the good of the wider community.

Prudence as a quality or trait is about shrewdness, skill and good judgment in the use of resources. Prudence as a faith-based value goes far beyond that. It adds the dimension of being motivated by a sense of purpose or mission, moving one beyond self-interest to concern for others, for maintaining good relationships, and acting for the common good

I remember stories about my grandfather during the Great Depression. Like many of his generation, his work hours were cut. Although he still had a job as a general laborer in a local factory, he and my grandmother did much for themselves to stretch a dollar. They had a big garden; they raised chickens; he repaired the family's shoes; he did all the maintenance work on their home including painting it. Yet at one point, he, an immigrant Slovenian, hired an unemployed African American father to paint his house. In raising their own food and doing the maintenance work on their home, my grandparents were being prudent in the ordinary sense. In hiring an unemployed father to paint their house during the depression, my grandparents exercised the faith-based virtue of prudence.

To be a truly prudent person in this complex age requires much. We must be open to learning from our own experiences, from the counsel of others, from the teachings of moral and ethical behavior of our faith. This is particularly true in the workplace. We need to learn who the influential opinion makers are, how and when new ideas or suggestions have the best chance of being accepted and acted on, how much freedom of action we have in our workplace roles, and who are the workmates who share our faith-based, social value of working for the common good not only of the employer but also of the community.

Understanding the dynamics of the workplace helps a person exercise the quality of prudence. Pairing that understanding with a knowledge of the social justice ideas inherent in the teachings of Jesus Christ enables one to take appropriate actions to improve our society. The actions called for by the virtue of prudence are very likely to be small steps. But, like the concepts of the quality movement, small steps accumulate over time and give rise to significantly better situations.

Any person can speak up. A prudent person carefully chooses the proper time, place, and manner to speak up or to act. These elements are chosen with care based on sound knowledge of the people and situation and judgment based on past experience and solid ethical principles. That leads then to action.

In today's recession, it would not seem prudent, as a personal quality, to replace a furnace or hot water heater that has three to five years life expectancy remaining. Yet, if one's finances can handle it, it might be prudent, in the sense of a faith-based virtue, to replace the furnace or hot water heater early for the employment it provides to installers and manufacturing employees in this time of high and climbing unemployment.

Prudence brings together learning, practical realities, and especially mission—to be Christ in the world.

Prudence — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of prudence in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of prudence in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of prudence in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based prudence in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?