

Temperance at Work at Work

Since the Women's Christian Temperance Union of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, temperance in America has been connected in our minds with alcohol and prohibition. This is unfortunate since it limits the application of temperance concepts to just this one aspect, alcoholic drink, and just one choice, enforced abstinence. It is unfortunate because temperance has a foundational relationship to just about every other faith-based value.

In human beings, temperance is about tempering our appetites, our urges, our drives. Heat is used to temper steel and glass. What is used to temper our inner drives? It is that which is most human about us, our abilities to think, to judge, to choose. Yet these abilities in and of themselves are not sufficient. We could choose to release our urges to extreme excess or repress them completely. Neither extreme is generally desirable.

A guide to reason, judgment, and choice is needed. Our faith teaches that that guide is other centered love. More specifically, it is that we utilize our appetites, urges, and drives in such a way as to bring about or do good for others, individually and in community.

The appetites or urges most often spoken of when discussing temperance are appetites for food, drink, and sex. At work temperance would lead us to eat enough food to sustain our energy throughout the workday and not so much as would make us lethargic or cause us to become unhealthy. At work, the urge to drink would likewise be limited by the need to be alert and stay on task. Typically that would mean avoiding alcohol altogether before and during the workday and taking other drinks in moderation. Sexual urges serve the common good by deepening committed love between husband and wife and opening up the possibility of bringing new life into our world. With all the attendant distractions that go with sexual flirtation and the responsibilities that go with parenthood, temperance would tend to hold sexual urges under tight restrictions at work.

Different people are affected more or less strongly by each type of urge. The urge to work is one that is often very apparent in its differences in the workplace. There is the workaholic who always seems to be at work and even takes more home. Temperance would direct the workaholic toward a balanced life—more consideration of home and family, of self-renewal activities. At the other extreme are those with little urge for work, frequently absent, arriving late, constantly gadding about the workspace, eye on the clock for quitting time, and out the door before the nominal end of the workday. Temperance at work would counsel them to make a contribution to the productivity of the workplace appropriate to their jobs.

In all there are many urges experienced by us in our workplaces. We want to talk about others, to gripe, to be liked, to be recognized, to be rewarded, to listen to music, to play, Temperance would measure all the outcomes of these urges against their impact on others in the workplace and in all other parts of our lives.

My own, often overwhelming urge at work, whether at home, volunteering, or at my paid employment, was and is to accomplish a task, to get to the end, to have the problem solved. Once embroiled in a task I have been known to ignore a call to dinner, to forget appointments, to snap at those who interrupt me—even if they had good cause to interrupt. I still struggle to balance my drive for accomplishment with the rightful need that people around me have for my attention and appreciation of them.

Temperance has a role in how we respond to mistakes, errors, and/or ineptitude by our co-workers be they peers, superiors, or subordinates. Movies and TV dramas have infected many with the belief that angry, public yelling and dramatic physical gestures such as sweeping all objects off a desk or table are the way people act in those situations. Temperance would counsel us to consider the situation and the people and then speak and act in the way that is most likely to bring about the desired correction or change in the offending person and others in the workplace. Normally that way does not include intimidation but respect and consideration.

We are driven by many urges and motivations. The key is how well we temper our personally powerful urges to the benefit of others—individuals; families; and workplace, civic, and religious communities.

TEMPERANCE — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of temperance 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 temperance in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of temperance in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based temperance 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?