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*Reflective action research and virtue  
development*

Dr. Benito L. Teehankee

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## **Can management work be good for the soul? : Reflective action research and virtue development**

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# **Can Management Work be Good for the Soul? : Reflective Action Research and Virtue Development**

## Abstract

Reports of irresponsible and callous behavior among managers involved in business scandals of the past decade have tended to reinforce the notion that power corrupts those who hold it. The need for virtue among managers has been emphasized by Alford and Naughton (2001) and they present some approaches for achieving this. Virtue development entails systematic reflection, however. The paper presents a method for such a practice based on reflective action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) and the intrapsychic process framework proposed by Schein (1999). A case example on using this approach based on the author's experience is presented. Recommendations for future research and management development programs are provided.

*Keywords: virtue, action research, management reflection*

## 1.0 Introduction

*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.* - Lord Acton (1834–1902)

*... Successful leadership depends upon a fundamental shift of being, including a deep commitment to ... dream and a passion for serving versus being driven by the pursuit of status and power....* - Joseph Jaworski in Synchronicity: The inner path of leadership

The contrasting quotes from Lord Acton and Jaworski above highlight the tension associated with the impact of power and position on the personal character of the occupants of such a position. The Acton thesis, or the tendency of power to bring leaders over to the “dark side” as depicted by Darth Vader in the highly popular Star Wars science fiction movie franchise, has been supported by revelations related to the behavior of business leaders who led their companies to ruin within the last decade or so. Much has been written about the executives of Enron, the energy trading giant, which collapsed at the turn of the century due to grossly imprudent financial maneuvers which were cloaked in secrecy (McLean & Elkind, 2003; Stein, 2007; Teehankee, 2011). Cruver (2002), an employee at Enron during its final year, observed that “greed ... pushed Enron to ignore the very same risk strategies that it was preaching to the world [and led it] to ignore -- or even punish – the messengers of bad news” (p. xv-xvi). More recently, leaders of major investment banks which collapsed during the financial crisis of 2008 became highly public examples of callousness as a notable number of them (e.g., Richard Fuld, former CEO of Lehman Brothers) showed little remorse that their decisions led to the loss of tremendous amounts of capital and jobs while they themselves were personally enriched. Rep. Waxman, who chaired the investigation committee, was led to say after Fuld’s testimony:

you say that you made only \$350 million. That seems to me an incredible amount of money....What I didn’t hear from you Mr. Fuld...is that you say you wished you had done some things differently, but you don’t seem to acknowledge (you) did anything wrong. (Moore, 2008)

Fuld’s behavior stands in stark contrast to that of Toyota president Akio Toyoda, whose behavior after he was appointed to preside over the recall of millions of Toyota vehicles in the US (after a series of lethal accidents involving the company’s cars) was closer to the thesis of Jaworski above. Toyoda publicly wept as he admitted the missteps of the company which led to the safety issues. In one of the more striking public admissions of fault by a CEO of a major company in recent years, Toyoda explained his reflection on the situation during his testimony to the US Congress:

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<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges helpful comments made by participants in the RVR COB Research Colloquium held in December 14, 2011 where an earlier draft of this paper was presented. The comments of Dr. David Coghlan, Professor of the University of Dublin and July 2013 University Visiting Scholar, on an earlier draft are also gratefully acknowledged. The paper’s contents and all errors herein remain the author’s sole responsibility.

... I would like to discuss what caused the recall issues we are facing now. Toyota has, for the past few years, been expanding its business rapidly. Quite frankly, I fear the pace at which we have grown may have been too quick. I would like to point out here that Toyota's priority has traditionally been the following: first, safety; second, quality; and third, volume. These priorities became confused, and we were not able to stop, think and make improvements as much as we were able to before, and our basic stance to listen to customers' voices to make better products has weakened somewhat. We pursued growth over the speed at which we were able to develop our people and our organization, and we should sincerely be mindful of that. I regret that this has resulted in the safety issues described in the recalls we face today, and I am deeply sorry for any accidents that Toyota drivers have experienced. (Toyota, 2010)

The polarities in managerial character exemplified above can be analysed in terms of virtue and vice. Drawing on classical writings on virtue, Alford & Naughton (2001) explained that: “a virtue is the *habitual use of effective means toward a good end*” (p.81). Toyoda's behavior is closer to the practice of virtue or good moral habit while the recklessness without remorse typified by Richard Fuld or the greed at Enron would be examples of bad moral habit or vice.

Pursuing virtue entails sensitively reflecting about the goodness of one's behavior as means to specific good ends and asking oneself whether there is a strong linkage between such means and ends. Unfortunately, the level of reflective skill this entails is not a main focus in how managers are developed. Management education practitioners have become more aware of the need to inculcate a reflective mindset among managers. Mintzberg (2004) has been one of the most vocal critics of traditional management education -- exemplified by the ubiquitous MBA program -- which he refers to as tending to form “calculating managers” (p. 95). He refers to the MBA as “management by analysis”. He elaborated:

An obsession with “fact” blinds the calculating manager to everything but the present. It is certainly true that calculation derives from “hard data” of the past. But such data tend to be categorical more than nuanced, often reducing complex realities to simple measures, mostly recent. (p. 101)

Mintzberg (2004) and his team at McGill University have implemented a management development program which they have called International Masters in Practicing Management (IMPM). The program, designed to be an alternative to the traditional MBA, aims to develop five mindsets, namely: reflective, analytical, worldly, collaborative and action. The first module focuses on the “reflective mindset” to encourage “true wisdom” (p. 299). He quotes Lao Tzu who supposedly said that “knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom.”

Mintzberg (2004) explained their basic approach:

to develop a reflective turn of mind, the participants focus on themselves, their work, and their world, to appreciate how they think, act, and manage; how they cope with the stresses of being a manager; and how they learn from experience to become more discerning—more “critical” in the constructive sense of this word. (p. 300)

Mintzberg (2004) reported that many participants of the reflection module (which extended over two weeks) have found it a life-changing experience. This was consistent with the intention of the IMPM program to develop “more thoughtful, more balanced, and wiser managers” (p. 302).

Berggren & Soderlund (2011) have examined the role of various experiential action learning strategies for management development such as reflection reports, personal learning contracts, roundtable examinations, live cases, action-oriented thesis work, and organizational knowledge theaters. They found that action learning approaches constitute a powerful means of addressing the need for developing reflective skills among managers although it comes with challenges.

A promising recent approach to managerial reflection which has potential in supporting virtue development is insider action research, especially the form described by Coghlan and Brannick (2010) as “individual reflective study” (p. 106). They describe reflection as “the process of stepping back from experience to question it and to have insights and understanding with a view to planning further action” (p. 24). Virtue-oriented action research of this form, therefore, would mean that the manager will be doing research on himself and his actions. By closely observing how he acts and reflecting on his motives (ends) and behaviors during such action (means), this can help in improving awareness and commitment to improved virtuous action in the future.

The development of virtue among managers in positions of power seems to require systematic reflection in order ensure that the manager’s behavior does not lead to bad moral habit and instead lead toward good moral habit. It also helps promote internal coherence between a manager’s espoused values and his actions by avoiding the “overactivity trap” (Jaworski, 1998, p. 127). This paper aims to present an approach to such a managerial practice. In particular, the paper aims to:

1. Link Alford and Naughton’s (2001) management virtue theory and Schein’s (1999) ORJI intrapsychic processes theory as a framework for guiding managers in reflective virtue development using first person action research as proposed by Coghlan and Brannick (2010),
2. Describe a case example of such reflection based on the author’s experience as an academic manager, and
3. Recommend future research on and applications of virtue-oriented management reflection in management education.

## **2.0 Theoretical perspective**

The paper utilized conceptual and theoretical formulations from management virtue theory (Alford and Naughton, 2001), insider action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) and

intrapyschic processes (Schein, 1999) to formulate and describe a virtue-oriented management reflection approach.

## ***2.1 Management and virtue***

As introduced above, virtue is essentially achieving good ends through good means (Alford & Naughton, 2001). A good moral habit has been acquired by repeatedly choosing the good over the bad. In pursuing this process, the person achieves progress towards excellence in character, thereby acquiring a stable disposition to act well, that is, to use the right means in pursuit of good ends. Conversely, a person who habitually chooses bad means or pursues bad ends is said to have acquired a bad moral habit or a vice (Alford & Naughton, 2001).

Managers are constantly seeking to achieve objectives (ends) by using various operational activities and strategies (means). What guidance can be used to evaluate such ends and means? How do we differentiate between good and bad means? Between good and bad ends? Drawing on writings on the cardinal virtues, Alford & Naughton (2001) explained how virtues apply to managers.

- Prudence or practical wisdom – sound decision-making for the good of each person and the good of the organization
- Justice - relating with others to give them their due
- Temperance – moderation; knowing what is enough
- Courage – control of emotions to direct them to the good; willingness to take on reasonably risky projects for the common good and see them through

The use of the cardinal virtues for defining the good makes managerial decision-making essentially humanistic. Giving other persons their due because of their being human beings while also working on self-mastery gives a coherent basis for judging the goodness of a manager's means and ends.

Alford and Naughton (2001) suggest the following reflection questions (adapted for personal reflection) for arriving at virtue-based managerial decisions about means towards ends:

1. END: What am I doing it for? -- Is my personal motivation inherently good? Is the outcome I seek inherently good? Am I doing it for a good and for the common good? And not just for money or recognition?
2. ACTS (means): What am I doing? -- Is my action plan proportionate to my end and respectful of human development?
3. CIRCUMSTANCES: What are the particular circumstances? -- Have I taken into account the history, present and future consequences of the act?

The goal of such reflection is to help the manager to assess his own development as a person while acting as a manager. The notion that a person is an active agent of his own character transformation as he decides to act in certain ways while he works is well described in the conceptualization of virtue development in Catholic Social Thought (Pontifical Council for

Justice and Peace, 2006). Two aspects of human work are taken into account: the objective and the subjective dimensions. The objective dimension refers to output of work as it is accomplished in the pursuit of an objective. This corresponds to the link between ends and means discussed above. The subjective dimension is critical, however, since it refers to what is happening to the character of the person as he does the work. This is elaborated as follows:

In the subjective sense, work is the activity of the human person as a dynamic being capable of performing a variety of actions that are part of the work process and that correspond to his personal vocation: “Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work” [270].

Catholic Social Thought argues for the priority of the subjective dimension of work. The ability of a manager, as a person, to engage in rational thought makes him unique as an entity in an organization. He is not merely an asset or instrument of the organization to accomplish work; he is himself transformed by work – whether for the better or for the worse. Thus:

... The subjective dimension of work must take precedence over the objective dimension, because it is the dimension of the person himself who engages in work, determining its quality and consummate value. If this awareness is lacking, or if one chooses not to recognize this truth, work loses its truest and most profound meaning. In such cases — which are unfortunately all too frequent and widespread — work activity and the very technology employed become more important than the person himself and at the same time are transformed into enemies of his dignity.

The level of self-awareness required to monitor the subjective dimension of management work requires deep reflection. Such reflective practice can be aided by a systematic approach and this is possible through action research.

## ***2.2 Individual reflective action research and intrapsychic process***

Action research has been defined as:

... an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry. (Shani & Pasmore, as cited in Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 4).

The main idea in action research is that it uses a scientific approach in addressing a problematic situation by involving those who are directly experiencing the situation. Action research works through a conscious cyclical four-step process whereby a manager embedded in a particular situation (context) and having a particular intention (purpose) engages in (1) planning,

(2) taking action, (3) evaluating action and (4) further planning, and so on (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). The process is depicted in Figure 1 with the initial phase of constructing.

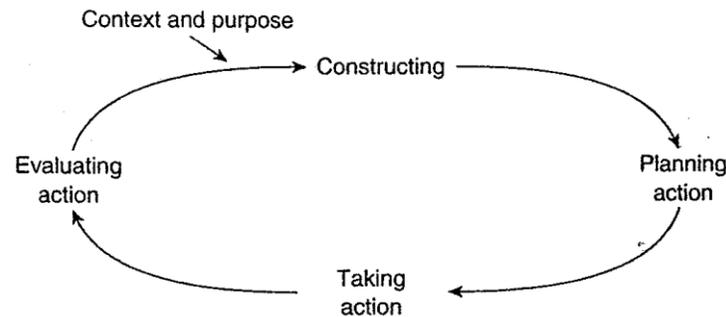


Figure 1: The action research cycle  
Source: Coghlan & Brannick (2010, p. 8)

The constructing phase involves a “dialogic activity in which the stakeholders of the [action research project] engage in constructing what the issues are, however provisionally, as a working theme, on the basis of which action will be planned and taken” (p. 9). Personal and organizational issues do not merely present themselves as such. The manager gains recognition of these through dialogue with himself, which is essentially what reflection is, or dialogue with others. This allows the issue and the agenda of change around it to be defined.

The action research relevant to this study is called “individual reflective study” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 106). This approach would have the following elements:

- The manager is engaged in an intended self-study of herself in action
- The manager may be “engaging in a study to improve professional practice”
- The manager is “engaging simultaneously in a process of self-reflection, examining her own assumptions in action and learning about herself as events unfold.”

An important method supporting reflective action research is journal keeping. Journal keeping may have the following functions for the reflective manager (McNiff et al. [as cited in Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 27]):

1. A systematic and regularly kept record of events, dates and people
2. An interpretive, self-evaluative account of the [manager’s] personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, with a view to trying to understand [the manager’s] own actions
3. A useful way of dumping painful experiences
4. A reflective account where the researcher can tease out interpretations
5. An analytical tool where data can be examined and analysed.

Journal notes of leaders have been shown to be a useful source of qualitative information for reflection and sensemaking (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, & Humphries, 1999; Krim, 1988).

Moreover, a manager may structure his journal entries in ways that allow him to keep track of experience, the questions that arise out of such experience, insights received, how he weighs evidence in order to verify understanding and how he makes decisions and takes action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

Another useful approach to structuring journal entries is based on the cognitive structure that characterizes how a manager thinks about and engages the world of work. Schein (1999) gave a framework for understanding a person's internal thought processes which he refers to as intra-psychic process. The framework provides a basis for guiding reflection and he called it the ORJI model which stands for Observation, emotional Reaction, Judgment, and Intervention (Figure 2).

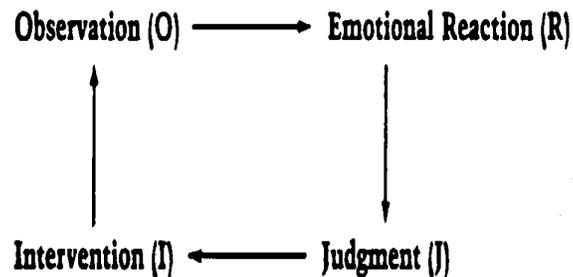


Figure 2: Intrapyschic Process: The Basic ORJI Cycle  
Source: Schein (1999, p. 87)

Coghlan and Brannick (2010, p. 34) give the following guide questions for using Schein's ORJI framework for reflective action research:

1. What did I actually observe? Can I describe it?
2. How did I react? What feelings were aroused in me?
3. What was my judgment about what happened? What thoughts or evaluations did the event trigger?
4. What did I do about it? How did I intervene? (Remember that not doing nothing or remaining silent is also an intervention.) (p. 34)

### 3.0 Case Example

As a newly appointed chairman of an academic department, I had an occasion to employ journal writing as a reflective tool in helping me improve my thought process in aligning my actions with what I believed to be good intentions. During its first strategic visioning exercise, the faculty decided to pursue a thrust of "bridging faith and management practice". I considered this a highly meaningful and relevant end for the unit I was heading and I wanted to become a role model in pursuing it through virtuous management decisions (means).

To help me in this process, I kept a journal related to specific events, issues and virtue reflections from January 2011 to February 2012. I used the Memoires software application

running on a Galaxy Tab tablet device as my journal. The software application allows easy diary or journal writing and allows a theme to run through several entries. It has the advantage of being secure and private and able to quickly backup all entries securely in the cloud of the Internet through the GoogleDocs service.

From the outset, I was confronted with a situation that challenged my views on how an academic department should be managed if we were to be true to our faith-based thrust. This involved the university practice of hiring contractual agency staff for augmenting department secretaries. I will narrate my intrapsychic reflections on this issue using the ORJI guide questions recommended by Coghlan and Brannick (2010):

1. What did I actually observe? Can I describe it?

As an academic department offering undergraduate, masteral and doctoral courses, we operate a 12-hour office, i.e., from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. We are assigned one regular status secretary who works for 8 hours. A contractual secretary is assigned to the department for 8 hours, overlapping the full-time secretary's schedule, so that we are staffed for the full 12 hours. At the end of five months, the contractual secretary's contract ends and the office has only one secretary for two weeks, after which the contractual secretary (or a different one) resumes service under a new five-month contract. During the period that the department has only one secretary, the front desk would not be manned during the morning period. During this period, phone calls and walk-in inquiries would often be unattended, too, unless a faculty member was present in the office and could find time to attend to them. This would cause disruption in the workflow of the faculty. Files and information that were handled by the contractual secretary were difficult to trace, which led to lapses in service quality to both faculty and students. The contractual arrangement gave no security of tenure to the secretary concerned. Moreover, a new contractual secretary would entail lower service quality while a new round of training had to be completed. This situation was a source of stress for my fellow administrators, the faculty and me. Students were also expressing concern about the service lapses.

2. How did I react? What feelings were aroused in me?

I found the staffing situation deeply troubling and frustrating. I was troubled by the uneven service quality provided by the department and I was frustrated by the inconsistency of the situation with our avowed purpose of practicing faith-based management by providing job security to our staff. I was ashamed that as a chair of an academic department that teaches sound management practice, I was faced with a difficult management situation that was causing problems for my constituencies and stakeholders. I was anxious that raising the matter with top administration may cause some tension but I was worried that allowing the situation to continue would not be operationally tenable and would make our department appear to be hypocritical about our thrust.

3. What was my judgment about what happened? What thoughts or evaluations did the event trigger?

I found the situation unfair to the staff, the other members of the department and the people the department served. I began to think that the administration was either

unaware of the problems that this practice was causing my department and others in a similar situation or, worse, was more than willing to take advantage of the contractual staff in order to minimize the costs to the university, even if this violated, in my view, the spirit of labor laws as well as Christian principles. In any case, I concluded that if I did not act on the situation, I would be complicit in an unjust arrangement.

4. What did I do about it? How did I intervene? (Remember that doing nothing or remaining silent is also an intervention.) (p. 34)

I discussed the situation with other faculty in the department during a planning workshop. They were equally concerned about it and we resolved that I, as chairman, would request that the second secretarial position also be manned by a regular status secretary. Working with a colleague, we crafted the proposal and made sure to cite not just the operational requirements but also the thrust of the department to promote just labor arrangements. The Dean endorsed our proposal. The proposal was evaluated by the Compliance Office and recommended its disapproval to the executive director for human resources on the grounds that (1) a competent contractual staff could do the work of the second secretary and (2) other offices are working under similar arrangements and were able to manage. No mention was made on the mis-alignment of the contractual practice with the department's thrust. I dialogued with the compliance analyst who evaluated our proposal but his recommendation to disapprove our request remained. I appealed the matter to the executive director for human resources. Eventually, the executive director approved an arrangement where the contractual secretary will be given a one-year contract (instead of five months) and the said contract may be renewed immediately without service interruption. While this was less than what I aspired for, I deemed it a significant improvement over our starting situation. I felt validated that I could pursue an administrative action to improve what I viewed as a morally problematic situation and to achieve some progress in advancing justice. I also felt that the dialogues produced by my action served to bring attention to the bigger problem that the contractual practice represented: administrative policies may be adopted that are not attuned to the demands of department operations and which are seriously misaligned with the principles that a Christian university espouses.

In order to further utilize the above reflections for personal virtue development, I used the means-ends analysis adapted from Alford and Naughton (2001).

<p>END: What am I doing it for?</p>	<p>Is my personal motivation inherently good? Is the outcome I seek inherently good? Am I doing it for a good and for the common good? And not just for money or recognition?</p>	<p>My intention was to “bridge faith and management practice” by addressing a situation I believed to be unjust in order to correct or improve it. Better service and a more humane working condition for a secretary are important goods to pursue in themselves and I pursued them not for myself but for the benefit of the department and the university.</p>
<p>ACTS (means): What am I doing?</p>	<p>Is my action plan proportionate to my end and respectful of human development?</p>	<p>My use of faculty deliberation in workshops, proposals through the formal channels and follow-up dialogues with decision-makers allowed me to calibrate my response as events unfolded. I was careful not to disrespect anyone in the process of pursuing my proposal. Although I was tempted in many instances to pass judgment on the administrators who allowed the practice, I worked hard to control this prejudice and instead thought that these individuals are applying what they believe to be a rational and sound approach to department staffing. This enabled me to approach them to pursue my proposal.</p>
<p>CIRCUMSTANCES: What are the particular circumstances?</p>	<p>Have I taken into account the history, present and future consequences of the act?</p>	<p>My inquiries about the background of the contractual practice helped me to appreciate the situation and why the practice remained. However, the formation of a new department with a faith-based thrust presented an opportunity to address the practice and to change it.</p>

My means-ends analysis indicates to me reasonable link between pursuing a good end with good means.

#### **4.0 Conclusions and recommendations**

A managerial position can be an opportunity for development of virtue as well as vice. The practice of reflective action research using means-ends analysis while focusing on one's intrapsychic process can be a helpful method for one to move towards virtue.

It is not a complete method, however, as the manager must constantly guard against incomplete information, misperceptions, prejudgments and other psychological traps (Schein, 1999). Future research should look into how individual reflection can guard against such traps, especially the role that an open approach which promotes dialogue with stakeholders may play (Nielsen, 1996; Senge, 1990; Gentile, 2012).

With respect to management development programs, it is recommended that virtue-oriented reflective action research be included as a target competency in MBA programs and offered in public management or corporate governance seminars. In line with the recommendation of Mintzberg (2004), the building of a reflective mindset among managers is essential for promoting socially responsible management practice.

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## About the Author

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His research interests involve Catholic social teaching, management and organization, business ethics, organizational leadership, workplace spirituality, alternative forms of management and organization, and action research. Last 2008, the Asia-Pacific Social Science Review published his paper entitled “Humanistic Entrepreneurship”. Furthermore, he contributed chapters related to corporate governance and corporate social responsibility, some of which appearing respectively on “Essentials of Investment in the Philippine Capital Market” under Southville Publishing and “Doing Good in Business Matters: Frameworks” under the Asian Institute of Management. He has presented numerous research outputs to various conferences and is a regular contributor to The Manila Times, Business Mirror, and Business World.

Teehankee’s professional practice includes being a consultant and expert for renowned organizations such as Globe Telecom, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, PLDT, Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Marsman Tours and Travel, Amkor Technology, Development Bank of the Philippines, Philippine House of Representatives, and the Presidential Management Staff. He has also served various professional organizations, including the Pambansang Samahan sa Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Management Association of the Philippines, Philippine Academy of Management, Philippine eLearning Society and the Philippine Society of IT Educators. His other memberships include Shareholders' Association of the Philippines, Asia Academy of Management, Philippine Statistical Association, and Pi Gamma Mu.

In 2012, DLSU awarded Teehankee with the “Gawad Br. Cecilio Hojilla FSC for Outstanding Lay Partners in the Lasallian Mission, specifically for Faith Formation”. The Catholic Mass Media Awards also gave him a “Special Citation for Best Business Column - "Sex and Billboards" for an article he wrote for the “Managing for Society” opinion column of The Manila Times.



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Center for Business Research & Development

***Bridging faith and scholarship ~ Influencing policy and practice***

The Center for Business Research and Development (CBRD) envisions itself to be a leading research institution producing scholarly work and influencing business and policy in the Philippines and Asia-Pacific region. It is the research and advocacy arm of the Ramon V. del Rosario College of Business (RVRCOB) of De La Salle University (DLSU).

As a signatory of the United Nations – Principles for Responsible Management Education (UN-PRME), the RVRCOB promotes the UN-PRME principles, which encourage us, among others, to “engage in conceptual and empirical research that advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of corporations in the creation of sustainable social, environmental and economic value”, and to “facilitate and support dialogue and debate” among different stakeholders “on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability.”

## **Research thrusts**

Keeping in mind DLSU’s mission “to be a leading learner-centered research university, bridging faith and scholarship in the service of society, especially the poor”, CBRD provides support to research programs and activities that address the following themes: responsible management education, multistream management approaches, humanistic management, ethical business practices, sustainable business practices, corporate social responsibility, corporate governance, social marketing, SME development, family business management, and social entrepreneurship.



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