

Leadership and Values : A Lesson for Corporate America (Op-Ed)

By Dan Seligson



In the wake of our recent U.S. election, it is timely that we, American leaders of families, teams, boards, communities, local and state government, and ultimately the federal government itself, reiterate our unwavering commitment to full participation by everyone – regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, or political affiliation – to ensure that our discipline as well as our society thrives. At the center of this commitment is open discourse, free from discrimination and harassment, and a willingness to consider diverse points of view. This is essential to our advancement on every level.

Open discourse does not equate religion and science, nor climate change and climate change denial. Religion and science can coexist, but not as equals, because science is open discourse and fundamentalist religious sects, Christian or Islamic, are closed. Those sects would have us use holy books to begin and end discussion of the origins of the cosmos and

Man. Science, by contrast, jettisoned two centuries of predictive and precise Newtonian theory of gravity for Einstein's radically new and improved one. Fundamentalism is a collection of writings and science is a process. They may not be equated.

On climate change, the weight of evidence supports it and its man-made origin. There is room in open discourse for arguing about the evidence, and even for denying climate change, but not for equating the theory and denial.

Mr. Trump's pick for National Security Advisor, Mike Flynn, writes in *Field of Flight*, Islam is weak in science. He blames the Quran. But Bible and Quran are not so different that his explanation can be correct, even if his observation has merit. The famous quote on the subject comes from Abdus Salam, winner of the 1979 Nobel Prize in Physics. "Of all civilizations on this planet," he wrote, "science is the weakest in the lands of Islam." The Quran led Dr. Salam to study nature, not to accept without question its cosmology. Though he considered himself a devout Muslim, he was not a fundamentalist. Islam is religion. Muslims are human beings. It is up to the individual Muslim, then, to decide which of Islam's teaching to accept, and so it is true for the Christian, Mormon, Jew, and so forth. Mr. Flynn could have taken the bold, leaderly step of equating Christian and Islamic fundamentalism in today's United States. Instead, he appealed to fear among his almost exclusively Christian readers. Conflict of interest trumped open discourse, and whether in Kansas or Karachi, that path leads only to the Third World.

Rex Tillerson, Mr. Trump's pick for Secretary of State, is CEO of Exxon-Mobil, a monolith that has been at the center of climate change denial for decades. Though their scientists warned of manmade climate change in the 1970s, the company's value depends on expectations of future growth. Limits on fossil fuel emissions would limit that growth, and self-interest has led them to sow fear, uncertainty, and doubt on

the science itself. Mr. Tillerson regards FUD as prudence; we don't have all the facts, of course. But such an argument is the last refuge of the scoundrel. Mr. Tillerson has begun with his conclusion, that climate change is neither a threat nor man-made, and came up with justifications to support it. That makes him a fundamentalist in his approach, and thus in opposition to open discourse.

Before an audience of thousands in 2001, Nobel laureate Rick Smalley said, "Energy is the most important problem facing mankind amenable to technological solutions." Mr. Trump's pick for Secretary of Energy is Rick Perry, who said during the 2016 campaign that DOE is a department he'd eliminate if elected. Self-interest will now prevent him from carrying out his promise, but it won't prevent him from hobbling DOE. As for his commitment to open discourse, it ends with his commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible.

Of Flynn, Tillerson, and Perry, not one is committed to open discourse, and thus each steers our country to a Third World abyss. The latter two, with their rush to burn fossil fuel, lead us to a changed climate we can compute but cannot imagine. Selecting these individuals, Mr. Trump signals his true intent. Open discourse is for losers, knowledge is for little people, and wealth is the adult scorecard.

America, we can do better than this. You, in your leadership roles at every level no matter how modest, must do better. The centerpiece of your mission must be open discourse, free from discrimination and harassment, and a willingness to consider diverse points of view. This is essential to our advancement on every level.

About the Author: Dan Seligson studied experimental physics—MIT '77 (Phi Beta Kappa) and Berkeley '83. As a scientist and manager at Intel (1984-2001), he made many

important contributions in process technology, manufacturing, and machine learning. Applications of machine learning to genomics led to advisory positions at Curagen, Raindance, and Ion Torrent Systems, and ultimately to the founding of Immumetrix, a molecular immunology company. Dan has been awarded eight US patents.

Since 2012, Dan has written two novels and made original contributions to the sociology of polygamy. Moby Dx: A Novel of Silicon Valley (2013), is a 21st-century social novel templated on Moby-Dick. The titular role is played by a biotech company, Moby Dx. Taboo (2015), also set in Silicon Valley, examines the identity politics of Islam in America. A work-in-progress is a historical novel set in the 7th-century Arabian Desert. His website, danielseeligson.com, combines his interest in religion, fiction, and photography.

Dan lives in Palo Alto with his wife and children.