AN ANCIENT TALE
By J. B. Ritchey

Once upon a time there lived a very young and very beautiful princess. She dwelt with her husband, a wealthy lord, in a castle near a forest. The young princess felt unhappy and neglected because her husband frequently took long journeys to neighboring provinces. One day, while she was alone in the castle, a handsome vagabond strode out of the forest. He spied the young princess, quickly won her heart, and carried her away with him.

After a day of dalliance, the young princess found herself abandoned. She discovered that the only path back to her castle led through the bewitched forest of a wicked sorcerer. Unwilling to brave the great danger alone, the princess visited the castle of her godfather. She explained all, and begged forgiveness and aid. The godfather, however, was shocked. He refused all help.

The princess had almost given up hope when she spied the Great White Knight. He pledged his unfailing aid -- for a modest fee. Alas, the good princess had no money. The White Knight rode away unmoved.

The princess had no one left to whom she could turn. She decided to brave the great peril alone. She entered the forest, whereupon the wicked sorcerer caused her to be devoured by a fire-breathing dragon.

1.   Who is most responsible for the death of the young princess?

      a.   the princess herself
      b.   the husband
      c.   the handsome vagabond
      d.   the godfather
      e.   the White Knight
      f.   the wicked sorcerer

2.   Who is next responsible?

3.   Who is least responsible?

4.   What is your criterion for the above decisions?

The Ancient Tale

Objective:
- To explore the role of values in decision making
- To understand the role of process in decision making
- To help clarify the importance of values in developing mission statements

Time Required: About 5 -7 minutes to set up; 20 minutes to run; and 15-30 minutes to debrief

Materials Required: Enough copies of the story to distribute to all participants

Preparation: Divide the class into teams, learning groups, or other appropriate grouping

Instructions: Setting up the exercise
- Ask participants to have a pen/pencil and paper handy to write down some words and phrases
- Tell them that you are going to read them a story, and at the end of the story, you are going to ask them to write down the answer to a question
- Read the Ancient Tale
- Ask the participants to write down their answer to the question, "who is the most responsible for the princess's death?"
- Tell the groups they have 15 minutes (you can vary the time depending on the purpose) to come to consensus around their answers to the four questions listed at the bottom of the story. Each group may have only one answer to each question and the group must be in consensus.
- Give each group at least one copy of the story

Allow the groups to discuss and debate and decide for the allotted time period.

Debrief:

1) Ask each team if they have come to consensus (usually at least one team has not)
2) Ask each team for their answer to each question – record the teams' answers on a flip chart.
3) Comment on the similarities or differences in the answers
4) Ask the groups why they chose X character as the most responsible – and note that on the flip chart if you want.
5) Ask the groups to comment on the process they used to answer the questions.
   a. Seek out and probe for the chronological sequence of conversations…what did they talk about first, second, third?
   b. Were they conscious of the order of the conversations?
   c. Did anyone suggest a process for proceeding?
   d. Did they answer the questions in order (e.g., 1, 2, 3, and 4)? Why or why not?)

This exercise invariably creates some heated discussions and debates. It's often surprising how much energy individuals will invest in convincing others that the wicked sorcerer did it, or the handsome vagabond is responsible, and so on.

At the core of the debrief is helping each individual to understand the reason for their investment and the effect it has on the group's process of decision making. Reflected in each character is the story are certain virtues, values, ethics, and other beliefs which are often "below the surface" in many business conversation. For example, those who argue the princess is most responsible may have strong beliefs about personal accountability; those who blame the sorcerer claim that it's the argument most like to stand up in court (what can we prove); the white knight may have some obligation or duty that requires support and rescue; the godfather too may have some role and responsibilities that were committed to; and so on. When these beliefs or values collide, it is difficult to reach consensus.

In business decision making, the conversation may be which product should be introduced or which market should we enter, but underneath that conversation are important values about how quickly do we need to realize income, how important is product/service quality, what assumptions are we making about competitor moves or the speed of change in the market. Without a process of clarifying values, the discussion often goes round and round.

Typically, the groups discuss the questions in order, but one group may have jumped to question four right away. And often, there's a relationship between going to question four early in the conversation and the ability to achieve consensus.

Time pressure and speed also often come up. "We only had (20) minutes…there wasn't enough time to discuss process first!" This is a great opportunity to talk about "going slow to go fast." If a group delays the important discussion in favor of the urgent, it can often not achieve any objectives at all. But if it lays ground work, the process is often much faster.