

Capitalism and Morality

EXECUTIVE SUITE AND CORPORATE SUCCESSION

Elizabeth Reiley

Elizabeth is an MBA student at WJU

“Executive Suite” opens with the chimes of Wall Street and Avery Bullard, President of Tredway Corporation, leaving a meeting with some board members. Tredway Corporation is a furniture manufacturer. As Mr. Bullard is hailing a taxi he dies on the side of the street. George Caswell sees this from the office window and sells his stock before anyone finds out the news. The plot continues with the board members having to decide who will replace the president. This exchange of power is critical to the success of the business. The two primary candidates for the position are Mr. Shaw and Mr. Walling.

Mr. Shaw is a board member who believes he should be the replacement for presidency. He is only concerned with the finances of the company and the stockholders. Mr. Shaw does not care about the products they sell and how their quality has decreased in past years. “That’s priced merchandise, it serves a definite purpose in the profit structure of this company. We’re not cheating anyone.” In his attempt to reach the top he is involved with office politics and greed for more power. He has the vote of Julia Tredway, who had an affair with Mr. Bullard. Mr. Shaw also has Mr. Caswell’s vote. He gains Caswell’s vote by promising him the shares of his stock that he had sold right after Mr. Bullard died. The only other person who would take the job of president is Donald Walling.

Mr. Walling is an engineer who has a passion for developing new ideas and innovative products. At first he does not want the job of president and thinks he is too young for the position even though Mr. Alderson wants him to take the position. Alderson thinks that Mr. Bullard did not want him to be president. Walling realizes that Mr. Shaw will ruin the company if he is elected president. This motivates Walling, and he decides he is the right candidate for the presidency.

At the end of the film, the board members meet to elect a new president. The first vote does not count because not enough people vote for Mr. Shaw. Walling makes a motivating speech to the board. “The force behind a great company has to be more than the pride of one man; it has to be the pride of thousands. You can’t make men work for money alone, you starve their souls when you try it, and you can starve the company to death the same way.” Walling has the attention of everyone in the room as he continues with his speech. “And that’s when we started doing things like this: the FK line. Walt, are your boys proud when they go out and sell this stuff? When they know the finish is going to crack, the veneer split off and the legs come loose?” After this and the breaking of a table, Walling gains Julia Tredway’s vote. After her change of mind others follow and vote for Walling to be the new president. Walling shows the leadership skills and qualities he possesses and proves that he is the right man for the job, and that he is what the company needs. The board members realize that Walling will also need the help of Shaw especially dealing with issues concerning the finances of the company. Just as the story of “Executive Suite” opens, it closes with the chimes of Wall Street.

The center of the plot is the conflict between Mr. Shaw, the antagonist, and Mr. Walling, the protagonist. Mr. Shaw has concern for the company, but his primary concern is getting ahead in his position and with money. Mr. Walling shows pride and compassion in his work. He is not concerned about himself, he is concerned about the other employees at Tredway Corporation. He realizes how much they depend on their jobs. Unlike Shaw, Walling wants to help the company not just himself.

In “Executive Suite,” there are many things the audience could critique and look at. The story is very realistic and relates to many business issues today. Many of the events that are taking place in this plot have happened within recent years in other businesses. The characters have also changed throughout the story, which happens in the real world too. They have changed their minds, attitudes, and beliefs. There is also a great catastrophe, which is the basis for the plot and setting of this work.

This novel is very realistic, especially with events that have happened recently with companies such as insider trading and business politics. Examples everyone knows are the scandals at Enron and Martha Stuart selling her stock. These are similar to what happened after Mr. Bullard died. Mr. Caswell sees Mr. Bullard die and decides to sell his stock at a high price before the rest of the shareholders learn about the information. Another example of business politics in this story is the affair between Mr. Bullard and Julia Tredway. It is not until the end that Julia Tredway decides to vote for Walling. Throughout most of the story she is planning on voting for Mr. Shaw. As soon as Mr. Bullard died, characters started to change.

Many characters have changed throughout the novel, including Mr. Walling, his wife, Mr. Shaw, and Julia Tredway. At first Walling thinks nothing of being president. He believes he is too young and is more interesting in his family and developing new products. After the board has discussed potential presidents, Walling believes he is what the company needs. Aside from him, Mr. Shaw is the only other candidate. Walling and Alderson know what will happen to the company if Shaw takes over. After his speech to the board members, he has convinced others that he is the right person for the job. His wife also changes her attitude. She does not agree that he should be president when he first makes the decision. The audience knows this when she does not make the call to hold the meeting. She realizes and changes her mind when she goes down to the office to try and hold up the meeting. After Mr. Walling speech, he first changes the mind of Julia Tredway, after she has altered her decision other board members follow.

Catastrophe is introduced for the plot. Mr. Bullard dies at the very beginning. His death is the basis for the whole plot. If that catastrophe had not occurred there would be no story line. Sub-plots contain the alliances the board members are forming with each other. One example is Shaw promising stock shares in exchange for a vote for presidency. Another example is Alderson siding with Walling. Other sub-plots are the personal lives of the board members. Some men are participating in affairs, such as Caswell, while others are dedicated family men, like Walling.

The setting primarily takes place at the office building of Tredway Corporation. The setting emphasizes the corporate world and capitalism. Even though the setting is in the office building, “Executive Suite” is still filled with drama and politics. The offices of the board members are set up so as someone walks in the secretary’s office is first, and then there is another door to the board members office. Outside the building all the audience hears is the hustle and bustle of the working city and the continuous clock hours of Wall Street.

The clock chimes are symbolic to the theme of the movie. The chimes represent the hours of Wall Street and the time constraints and pressure felt in business. People in business are always concerned with deadlines and the chimes reinforce that. Wall Street is also important in the movie because of the blackmail and insider trading with Caswell’s stock. Wall Street itself represents money, power, and capitalism which are key elements in “Executive Suite” and any business.

Many lessons can be taken by looking at this story and the real life events that relate. "Executive Suite" focuses on leadership, greed, and company politics, and pride. When will the American Businessman every have enough money, control, power, or status? Affairs are not going to get you anywhere personally or financially. If Mr. Bullard had been more prepared the board should have already had a president in case of his death. Even though you have formed agreements with people, it does not mean that they will last. If you are participating in insider trading, it will probably hurt you in the end. Finally, many times the good guy finishes first.

Julia Tredway had an affair with Mr. Bullard before his death. She was so upset after his death; she did not care about her money or stock at all. Caswell was also having an affair. He pretended he was flying out for business and went to the airport, but never got on the plane. While he was having an affair, Mr. Caswell was only concerned with the stock he had sold and the money he would get. He knew that selling the stock was not a moral decision but he was being greedy and his greed consumed his life.

If Mr. Bullard had thought ahead he would have already chosen a president in case of extenuating circumstances. Even if he had not decided on a president and wanted the board to vote, maybe he could have had an interim president. This might help with the chaos of the company after the president died. Having an interim president already chosen would also make the stockholders and employees feel more at ease. The interim president may make them feel more confident about the future of the company.

Mr. Shaw was sure he had the vote of Caswell and Julia Tredway. Along with his vote he only needed one more to be elected president. After Walling made a promising speech and changed the mind of others, Shaw had no chance for the presidency. Shaw had the vote of Caswell because of blackmail. Caswell thought that if he voted for Shaw he would be sure to get his stock. He was being very greedy with his money even though he was already a very successful businessman. When Shaw was not elected, he did not give the stock to Caswell. Caswell ended up losing money and self-respect because of his immoral actions.

Mr. Walling had no interest in taking the role of president at the beginning of the story. As he begins to change his mind, he takes on the role of a motivated leader and presents his abilities to the rest of the board. He is looking in the best interest of the Tredway Company and all the employees. He is not just concerned with money and getting ahead, as Shaw is. Mr. Walling is the protagonist and he end up getting the position.

As Walling stated in his speech about starving the employees souls, they need motivating and interesting work they can be proud of. Recent surveys have shown that interesting work is the number one outcome non-managerial employees are concerned about. They need something they can take pride in. Walling feels the same way about business which is why he succeeded. There is a great deal of pride in Mr. Walling's character.

"Executive Suite" is filled with drama created by greed, corruption, and politics in business. Even though this is an older story, the contents affect today's society just as they did back then. Business has not changed a great deal over time. There are still the same issues affecting companies every day. An immoral and corrupt company is not a business. Eventually it will fail, just as Tredway Corporation would have if Shaw took over. Enron is another example of a business failing because of greed and corruption. To be successful a company needs good leadership and employees who will make moral decisions. Leaders need to not just be concerned with them but need to show concern for the wellbeing of their employees, it is only then that they will find success.