

# The History of EBBF: *Twenty-Five Years of Contributing to the Discourse of Ethics in Business*

## *Abstract*

The European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF)<sup>1</sup> is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2015. This Bahá'í-inspired organization is a small network of individuals dedicated to promoting ethical behavior and other Bahá'í values in the workplace. Although relatively unknown in North America, it has had significant influence at the local, national, and international levels. This paper considers how EBBF has helped its members understand the broader conversations of society and contribute to the advancement of discourse in a business context. It offers an analysis of fields in which it has had an impact, and of capacities and methods that have been developed, and suggests ideas worth exploring further for those engaged in contributing to the discourses of society.

## *Resumé*

Le European Bahá'í Business Forum (forum européen bahá'í des affaires) souligne son vingt-cinquième anniversaire en 2015. Organisme d'inspiration bahá'íe, il s'agit d'un petit réseau de personnes vouées à la promotion d'un comportement éthique et

d'autres valeurs bahá'íes en milieu de travail. Quoique relativement peu connu en Amérique du Nord, l'organisme a eu une grande influence aux niveaux local, national et international. L'auteur examine comment le Forum a aidé ses membres à comprendre les grands débats ayant cours dans la société et à y contribuer dans un contexte d'affaires. L'auteur analyse les domaines dans lesquels le Forum a eu des effets positifs, les capacités et les méthodes qui ont été développées, et il propose des pistes de réflexion pour les personnes qui participent aux débats de société.

## *Resumen*

El European Baha'i Business Forum (EBBF, el Foro Europeo Empresarial Bahá'í) celebra su vigésimo quinto aniversario en 2015. Esta organización de inspiración bahá'í es una pequeña cadena de personas dedicadas a promover una conducta ética y otros valores bahá'ís en el lugar de trabajo. Aunque relativamente desconocido en América del Norte, la organización ha tenido una influencia significativa en los niveles locales, nacionales e internacionales. En este artículo se considera cómo EBBF ha ayudado a sus miembros a comprender las conversaciones más amplias de la sociedad y a contribuir al avance del discurso en un contexto de negocios. Se ofrece un análisis de los ámbitos en los cuales ha tenido un impacto, y de las capacidades y de los métodos que se han desarrollado, además sugiere ideas a explorar más profundamente para quienes se dedican a contribuir a los discursos de la sociedad.

Business and capitalism have proven to be exceptional agents of wealth creation and innovation. Yet, if unrestrained in the drive to ever increase

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1 As the article explains later, the name of the organization has been changed to Ethical Business Building Future.

shareholder value, business can adopt behaviors that challenge our moral compass. The 2001 Enron scandal<sup>2</sup> and the egregious practices by big banks and mortgage brokers that brought the global economy to its knees beginning in 2008 remind us of the ethical bankruptcy that often plagues organizations. Interestingly, the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith assert that “[e]very business company should be established on divine principles. Its foundations should be trustworthiness, piety and truthfulness in order to protect the rights of the people” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Compilation* #2062). Even weightier is the following passage by Bahá'u'lláh about one central virtue so essential to successful business practices:

If a man were to perform every good work, yet fail in the least scruple to be entirely trustworthy and honest, his good works would become as dry tinder and his failure as a soul-consuming fire. If, on the other hand, he should fall short in all his affairs, yet act with

trustworthiness and honesty, all his defects would ultimately be righted, all injuries remedied, and all infirmities healed. Our meaning is that, in the sight of God, trustworthiness is the bedrock of His Faith and the foundation of all virtues and perfections. A man deprived of this quality is destitute of everything. (quoted in *Compilation* #2058)

THE BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON  
CONTRIBUTING TO THE DISCOURSES  
OF SOCIETY

The concept of engaging in the prevalent discourses of society is not new to the Bahá'í Faith. In one of His most compelling messages, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts humanity to focus thoughts on the needs of the world: “Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men” (*Tablets* 86). Likewise, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, first published in 1938, Shoghi Effendi, alluding to the “society-building power” of the Bahá'í Faith, announces its inherent potentialities: “Though the society which incarnates its ideals be small, and its direct and tangible benefits as yet inconsiderable, yet the potentialities with which it has been endowed, and through which it is destined to regenerate the individual and rebuild a broken world, are incalculable” (196).

In spite of these early calls for

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<sup>2</sup> In 2001 accounting practices at Enron (an American energy company) resulted in the indictment of many of its executives and, eventually, the corporation's bankruptcy as well as the dissolution of Arthur Andersen (one of the world's largest accounting firms) which audited it. One of the consequences of this scandal was the enactment of new regulations regarding the accuracy of financial reporting for US public companies.

action, it was only in 1983 that the Universal House of Justice—the supreme, international legislative authority of the Bahá'í Faith—declared that it was now time for the Bahá'í community to start focusing some of its energies on the “progress of the world” and the “development of nations” (*Messages* para. 379.2–3). This announcement led to a series of initiatives in the realm of social and economic development. Most prominent, perhaps, was the creation, in 1999, of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) at the Bahá'í International Community (BIC). Focused on learning about participation in social discourse, ISGP has been given an increasingly important role to play in the successive five-year plans by the Universal House of Justice to build community life throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, addressing the Bahá'ís of Australia, the Universal House of Justice elaborated on the ways in which Bahá'ís could engage in the discourses of society:

Such participation can occur at all levels of society, from the local to the international, through various types of interactions—from

informal discussions on Internet forums and attendance at seminars, to the dissemination of statements and contact with government officials. What is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few—so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society. (Letter, 4 Jan. 2009)

In 2010, the Universal House of Justice further encouraged the Bahá'í community to participate in discourses of society:

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. “Is not the object of every Revelation,” He Himself proclaims, “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?” Every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among

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<sup>3</sup> The Universal House of Justice announced the beginning of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Era in 2001 with its simultaneous institution of the first of four five-year plans that would guide the Bahá'í community to 2021, the conclusion of the first century of the Formative Age.

His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. (Ridván 2010)

Because EBBF is a Bahá'í-inspired organization, it is naturally influenced by these insights and by the global plans of the Universal House of Justice.

### THE BIRTH OF EBBF

In 1990, a group of about thirty Bahá'ís with interests in business and economics met in Chamonix, France. The meeting was the foundational event in the creation of the EBBF, an organization devised specifically to foster discourse about ethical business practices and about how they could be instituted and sustained. Even more important to these founding members was the sincere belief, based largely on their individual application of Bahá'í principles to their own business practices, that an ethical foundation in business is not merely “good business”—it is a moral imperative.

Since then, this Bahá'í-inspired organization has had significant influence at the local, national, and international levels. It has been a regular participant in high-profile conferences such as the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995), the UN General Assembly Special Forum on Environment: the Rio+5 Conference (1997), and in the World Summit on Sustainable Development

in Johannesburg (2002). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, EBBF developed educational seminars in Albania, Bulgaria, and Russia. It presently provides courses on ethics in business at the University of Bari, Italy's second largest University. It has forged partnerships with organizations like AIESEC<sup>4</sup> (the world's largest student-led organization), with the European Commission, and with the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Finally, it has published several dozen publications and has developed a network of 1,000 current and past members spread throughout the world, many of whom have had a transformative influence in their places of work.

One of the unique aspects of EBBF is the fact that, from the outset, it has welcomed participants from all backgrounds, whether or not they happened to be Bahá'ís. Today the non-Bahá'í members of the organization form a significant portion of the membership, and they are some of its most engaged members.<sup>5</sup>

Because it is not an official Bahá'í institution, EBBF has the freedom to

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4 AIESEC was originally a French acronym for *Association internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales* (English: International Association of Students in Economic and Commercial Sciences); however, the full name is no longer officially used, as members can now come from any university background.

5 It is estimated that only 43% of the approximately 1,000 EBBF members are Bahá'í.

experiment with ways of influencing the prevalent discourses in business and economics while staying true to its Bahá'í principles. Indeed, in order for this organization to function more effectively among the business community at large, under advice from the Universal House of Justice, EBBF recently changed its name from European Bahá'í Business Forum to the less parochial name Ethical Business Building the Future.

### EBBF CORE VALUES

Of course, while the name became world-embracing and more pointedly indicative of its goal to foster ethical business practices, its vision had this same mission and objective since the beginning: "EBBF's vision is to enhance the well-being and the prosperity of humankind. Its mission is to promote ethical values, personal virtues, and values-based leadership in business as well as in organizations of social change and academic institutions" (Starcher, *History*).

This same vision is likewise manifested in the core values, or principles, of EBBF. First, and most obviously, the organization intends to promote ethical business practices. Second, it believes that business has a social responsibility as well as an economic mission, both to the employees within its purview and to the community at large. Third, it is dedicated to sustainable development and stewardship of the earth's resources, an issue that is clearly relevant to so many enterprises,

as brought to public consciousness by the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill<sup>6</sup> in 2010, the toll from which is still being tallied.

A fourth core value of EBBF likewise remains at the forefront of public consciousness—the partnership of women and men in all fields of endeavor. Here again, the ongoing discourse about the emergence of women breaking through the "glass ceiling"—both in business and in politics—while having taken a turn in the right direction in some countries, still remains a crucial concern and an unresolved global issue.

### A SPIRITUAL ORIENTATION TOWARD WORK

Another core value encompasses the totality of what EBBF is about, a desire to redefine the meaning of work itself. For while the goal of sustaining the financial well-being of the family and the community is noble in and of itself, according to the Bahá'í principles, work done in the spirit of service is tantamount to worship.

While in the past, work could be

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6 The largest marine oil spill in history, caused by an April 20, 2010 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig located in the Gulf of Mexico. The investigation found that BP and Transocean employees aboard the rig had—while engaged in testing procedures—ignored early indications of a problem and thus missed opportunities to prevent a full-scale blowout. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

a source of pride—whether in the trades or crafts, or at the more lofty levels of creating family-owned corporations that were passed down from generation to generation—today's workers more often than not feel like corporate mercenaries whose sole purpose is ultimately to drive up value for shareholders. Certainly creating a meaningful atmosphere in the workplace can still be fostered, but only if those in business are dedicated to fashioning a work environment where the employee can take pride in work and can be enabled to feel that he or she is vested in the business, both emotionally and financially.

In some instances, this attitude might be cultivated by being paid in stock options with larger corporations, or, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá proposes in the following observation about "profit sharing," as vesting in the worker a sense of belonging and pride in the work done: "Therefore, laws and regulations should be enacted which would grant the workers both a daily wage and a share in the fourth or the fifth of the profits of the factory in accordance with its means, or which would have the workers equitably share in some other way in the profits with the owners" (*Some Answered Questions* ch. 78, para. 5).

Another core EBBF value related to the spiritual environment and sense of belonging in the workplace is the utilization of non-adversarial decision-making processes, the same sort of administrative tool advocated in the Bahá'í concept of consultation. In my

own work experience in business and nonprofits, I have found that application of the Bahá'í principles of consultation leads to richer solutions, fosters a climate of trust, and improves the likelihood that decisions will be implemented successfully. A participatory process gives workers at every level of a business a sense that they are more than mere subordinates to a profit motive, to the bottom line. They develop a sense of being valued and appreciated. Loyalty and heightened engagement result from having a vested interest in both the success of the business and in the sense of having personal input in the creative decisions about how the business operates.

Finally, a core value that must be in place for any of the previous objectives to be realized is values-based leadership. What this means is that leadership itself must foster and support all the core values already cited, but, more importantly, that leadership both manifests these values in personal behavior and comportment and is chosen because of demonstrated institutionalization of principles such as trustworthiness, fairness, and equity.

#### FROM IDEA TO ACTION:

#### THE EVOLVING STRUCTURE OF EBBF

EBBF started as a loosely organized group but quickly developed a structure inspired by Bahá'í institutions. Originally, it had an elected governing board of five individuals, and it now has a seven-member board. Each year, all eligible members elect the new

board, and the board appoints various committees, an advisory council, and a director general.

Three years after its creation, in 1993, EBBF was incorporated in France as a nonprofit organization. Its statutes indicated a direct reporting relationship with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of France, from which the organization has also received, over the years, some financial support.

EBBF successfully demonstrated from the outset the value of Bahá'ís working hand-in-hand with non-Bahá'ís in order to advance those core principles articulated earlier. This approach to collaboration was reinforced by the Universal House of Justice in 2010 in its appeal for an open approach to collaboration: “Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone” (Ridván 2010).

EBBF has members on all continents and has been active in over forty countries. Its activities include an annual conference, an annual general meeting that normally attracts several hundred individuals, and other, smaller events. Although many of its activities are planned by committees, EBBF functions organically: many endeavors

emerge at the grassroots—thanks to the individual initiative of one or a few members—and then they may spread internationally. These activities include participation at international, national, and local conferences; networking in person; and using social media tools, education, mentoring and training, and a multitude of projects all related to the promotion of the EBBF core principles.

#### SOME OF THE MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF EBBF

In order to fully grasp the reach and impact of EBBF, let us take a deeper look at some of its major fields of action. In particular, let us examine its contributions to major conferences, its publications, its education and research, and its lasting partnerships.

#### SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO MAJOR INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

EBBF members helped organize, facilitate, or were invited to present at numerous major national and international events, volunteering significant time and knowledge and developing a reputation as reliable and trustworthy partners.<sup>7</sup> Relationships built with organizations and individuals grew stronger over the years and organically

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7 A full list appears in George Starcher's *A History of the European Bahá'í Business Forum: 20 Years of Contributing to Responsible Business Practices, 1991-2011*. Paris: EBBF, 2013.

spread to other like-minded individuals and organizations. For example, this excerpt from George Starcher's comprehensive book on the history of EBBF recounts how his active involvement in the World Business Forum at Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 led to such new relationships:

[I]t brought together over 320 leaders of corporations, networks, and NGOs to discuss the responsibilities and contributions of the private sector to the goals of Habitat II. EBBF was a co-sponsor and active participant in the World Business Forum and was recognized as one of the leading networks of progressive business leaders. Its members attended, chaired or served as panel members at a number of events. The fifteen members of EBBF present organized six workshops, including one in French, which were all well attended. EBBF drafted the statement: *Emerging Values for Sustainable Human Settlements* for this occasion and distributed it widely. Also, EBBF had an exhibition stand visited by hundreds of people. EBBF's intensive involvement in the Forum was a result in no small measure to our close relationship with the World Business Forum's Chairman, Marcello Palazzi, who had met Bahá'ís at a number of previous conferences and was so impressed with the EBBF's aims that he became an honorary member. George

Starcher, the Secretary General of EBBF, participated in drafting the final document produced by the World Business Forum as a whole and as a result was one of the six presenters of the conclusions of the Forum to the United Nations Habitat II Partnership Committee, composed of governmental delegates to the UN system; he also chaired the closing Plenary Session of the World Business Forum, on the theme "The Leaders' Panel: Governance, Leadership, and Participation." It was at this Conference that EBBF representatives met several members of the International Board of AIESEC and agreed informally to seek ways of collaborating. (Starcher, *History*)

This relationship with AIESEC proved fruitful and long lasting, as we will see later.

## PUBLICATIONS

Although EBBF provides a valuable forum for professional managers and businesspersons, students, and other interested persons, its knowledge base, while expanding, has remained mainly at the practitioner level and might be perceived by some scholars as "lacking academic rigor." This author does not see this as a flaw. The target audience of these publications is the practitioner, not the academic scholar. While the Bahá'í Writings encourage scholarship, they also contain



a valuable caveat: “Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 51). Therefore, in order to assist individuals in applying its core values, EBBF has encouraged its members to research and publish on topics related to the principles of the network. These publications have a very practical orientation and are typically in the form of small booklets or e-books that are sold at EBBF events and can also be purchased online.<sup>8</sup> They are typically reviewed and edited extensively by the research committee of EBBF before their publication.

As an example of the positive, tangible impact of EBBF authors, let me share my experience in applying the concepts of one such publication. In the early 2000s, I was posted in Belgium where I was managing director of the subsidiary of a Canadian company. Faced with a situation where I had to downsize and restructure the organization, I discovered an EBBF publication, *Socially Responsible Enterprise Restructuring*, a work written by George Starcher in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO).

I read and re-read the booklet countless times so that it became a

source of guidance during the four years it took me to complete the restructuring of the company. By applying concepts of the book—such as the necessity at times of restructuring to balance the needs of all stakeholders (not just shareholders)—and by involving employee representatives and the unions in the exploration of solutions through a consultative process, we avoided any work or supply disruption, and, what was particularly rewarding, we brought the company back into a profitable position.

So it is that one of EBBF’s strengths is its ability to transform thoughts, ideas, and principles into practical applications in the workplace. In other words, EBBF is not merely a group of people who share ideals or abstract notions about the future; the organization is fully grounded in the reality of each member’s own work experience and seeks to contribute to each individual’s concept of work and how best to carry out activities every day in accordance with some of the fundamental principles articulated in the authoritative texts of the Bahá’í Faith.

#### EBBF AND RESEARCH

For EBBF to make a difference, it had to read its environment and identify areas where it could make a unique contribution. For example, almost immediately after the creation of EBBF, the Iron Curtain fell, and the opportunity emerged to help Eastern and Central European countries make the transition to market economies.

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<sup>8</sup> A full list is available at [www.ebbf.org](http://www.ebbf.org).

However, instead of proposing the mainstream neoliberal model of development, EBBF promoted ethical entrepreneurship.

The first such project was in Albania in 1992, where EBBF contributed a series of articles to the *Albanian Economic Journal*. This was followed with the organization of a conference in early 1993 on Managing the Transition to a Free Market Economy, and with presentations at conferences later that year and in 1994.

This initial success was followed by sustained efforts in Bulgaria, where EBBF member Theodore Bourilkov organized seven yearly conferences in collaboration with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Bulgaria, with the Bulgarian Association of the Club of Rome, and with the Institute for Sustainable Development. One indication of the profound impact these conferences had can be inferred from what one of the participants had to say: "This is the first time the expression 'business ethics' has been heard in this country since 40 years ago" (cited in Starcher, *History*). Furthermore, a letter to EBBF from the Universal House of Justice dated 3 March 1994 provided a great deal of encouragement to these early efforts: "The Universal House of Justice . . . commends you most warmly for your energetic and imaginative initiatives in Albania and Bulgaria. Beyond their service components, these activities are undoubtedly serving to attract the positive attention of prominent people in those countries to the Faith" (quoted in Starcher, *History*).

## EBBF AND EDUCATION

In addition to involvement in assistance to specific countries and emerging economies, EBBF members have also been engaged in many direct education and research activities. The educational initiatives have been mainly in the form of small conferences and seminars and, on occasion, full-length university courses. While several EBBF members are regular lecturers at universities around the world, it is in Italy that this aspect of EBBF effort has had the most impact.

A full-semester course on "Ethics and Economy: Towards a New World Order" has been taught each year at the University of Bari for over seventeen years. The relationship with AIESEC in Italy has also borne fruit in the field of education, and as a result, in 2004 EBBF Italy was asked to create a post-graduate course on Human Resource Management and Business Ethics. In addition, each year, Italian AIESEC members attend a four-day conference on the principles of EBBF.

While contributions to academic research by EBBF have been limited, its members have been involved in many research projects with practical applications. For example, in 2009 EBBF was involved in a two-year research collaboration to find indicators of values in the workplace, a project funded by the European Union. This project brought together two universities and several NGOs, two of them Bahá'í-inspired, and, consequently, EBBF was recognized for its contributions by

the European Union, learned a lot from the process, and inherited a tool kit and process it could use in other projects.

Another example of EBBF contributing to research in the vital discourses of society is related to the theme of the full partnership of women and men in business. Barbara Rodey, George and Diane Starcher, and Michel Zahrai all researched the topic extensively before writing about the subject and then giving presentations at various conferences, such as the Microcredit Summit in 1997 and the Global Dialogue on Microfinance in 1998.

Each international EBBF conference is also an opportunity for learning and exchanging ideas related to the principles of EBBF. Over the years the conferences have evolved into a format that includes short lectures followed by open workshops to further exchange ideas related to the topics of the lectures. There are also many facilitated discussions on the themes of the conference.

This collegial learning environment inspires participants and empowers them to contribute actively in sharing diverse perspectives that enhance everyone's experience. Furthermore, at these conferences, no distinction is made between Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í participants. As a result, every attendee is uplifted by the spirit of this annual event, and all return home with exuberance, motivation, and courage to incorporate EBBF values in their places of work and even to initiate

projects on their own.

Finally, EBBF has enthusiastically utilized the Internet and related social media tools to enhance its profile and increase its outreach, hosting, for example, regular webinars and online knowledge centers on topics such as ethical finance, corruption and bribery, consultative decision-making, social entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and corporate social responsibility.

#### ENDURING PARTNERSHIPS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Partnership with like-minded organizations and individuals is at the core of EBBF's success. In most cases, these partnerships were born of the personal relationships between individual EBBF members and other organizations. They have been sustained to the extent that these relationships continued or a formal collaboration framework was established.

One of the most stable and productive relationships established has been with AIESEC, a global, non-political, independent, nonprofit organization run by students and recent graduates of higher education institutions. Its members are interested in global issues, leadership, and management. The association has over one million alumni and 70,000 current members. The EBBF has had a formal partnership with AIESEC at the international level and in several countries since 1996, based on a shared belief in the importance of values-based leadership

to the next generation of responsible world citizens.

The international president and other members of the association often attend and speak at the annual EBBF conference. EBBF member Larry Miller served as a “strategic advisor” to AIESEC International, and many other EBBF members have given presentations and workshops at national AIESEC events. For example, this author has given workshops in Belgium and Canada. The values espoused by both organizations are very similar, and EBBF has attained the status of “mentor” to AIESEC, an organization that has proven to be a most useful resource for EBBF because many students who are members of AIESEC join EBBF upon graduating.<sup>9</sup>

The main purpose in writing this article is to share some of the lessons learned by EBBF in the field of social discourse. For while EBBF has been around for over twenty-five years, it is still relatively unknown outside its immediate circle of influence—the Bahá’í community and the business world. As we noted at the outset, applying oneself to live an ethical life is in itself quite a challenge in the context of contemporary society, and much more so in a business environment.

When I was a young marketing product manager at a large healthcare conglomerate, my manager took me aside in his office one day to tell me

that I would never make it to senior management roles because I was not adept in the art of lying. While it is hard to accept the concept of dishonesty as an art, it is all too often a fact in the corporate world that the ends justify the means, regardless of the ethical implications of those means. As a result, questionable or clearly inappropriate ethical practices too often prevail. Common business orthodoxies, for example, put the needs of shareholders ahead of those of other stakeholders. EBBF helped me, and others like me, develop a vision of workplace practices conducive to a more meaningful and more satisfying career by assisting us in contributing to constructing a workplace where we need not leave our values at the door. Here are a few examples.

Coffee for Water, a specialty coffee company, was created by EBBF member Jahan Tavangar after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Although for-profit, it has a humanitarian mission: “to provide safe drinking water in the coffee-growing regions of the world, where one in three people lacks access to clean water. By selling their coffee, we help those communities leverage their own resources to develop clean water projects and prevent waterborne diseases. Our profits fund life-saving water purification projects in the countries where we buy our coffee beans” ([www.coffeeforwater.com](http://www.coffeeforwater.com)).

In 2010, EBBF member Arash Azami founded BAS, a company whose business solution allowed customers to move toward energy independence.

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9 Starcher’s *History* discusses other organizations with which EBBF has forged lasting partnerships over the years.

In 2014 it won prizes in two categories at the 2014 MIT Climate CoLab Challenge. In 2015 Aazami moved away from the company to create the BAS Foundation, whose mandate is to “explore new solutions, new ways of independence-increasing empowerment for people around the world.” Interestingly, while most business leaders tend to hold on to power as long as they can, Aazami had no such ambition: “A company is a means to an end, and not a goal in itself. I specifically designed BAS to be a vehicle that would enable people to become energy-independent. The underlying concept is strong and proven, and will now be adopted by more and more energy companies. However, right now BAS is not in need of new innovative concepts. The focus should be on the execution of the Path to Zero. And it is because of this that I make room for new management” (EBBF, “The Netherlands”).

Giuseppe Robiati has been CEO of Gruppo SCAC in Milan for the past twenty-six years. A long-time member of the Bahá’í community and member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Italy, he has served on many industrial boards and was a cofounder of EBBF. In a talk he gave ten years ago at an EBBF conference, he explained how respect for diversity and absence of prejudice had led him to accommodate his many Muslim immigrant workers by providing a prayer room at their workplace—a rather daring initiative in a staunchly Catholic country.

When I first joined EBBF in 2001,

concepts like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability were still leading-edge, and the network provided me with a support group of like-minded individuals who believed it was possible to try to apply these types of socially minded practices in the workplace. Today, many of the values espoused twenty-five years ago by EBBF are becoming mainstream. For example, corporate social responsibility has become a requisite for obtaining a social licence to operate for all major corporations; impact investment funds—funds where social as well as financial returns are expected—are growing in popularity; and certain countries are now imposing minimum ratios of women to men on corporate boards.

#### SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON WHAT HAPPENS NOW

In this author’s opinion, EBBF’s ability to contribute and influence thinking emerged and was sustained as the result of individual members’ personal engagement in researching, networking, producing publications, and/or presenting at conferences. To the extent that these were sustained, EBBF kept its leading edge. However, when individual members shifted their efforts elsewhere, EBBF’s influence waned. As a result, while the principles of EBBF and its areas of focus have remained stable, the impact of its voice has decreased.

## THE CSR MOVEMENT

For example, EBBF was initially at the forefront of the CSR movement. It published a dozen publications related to CSR themes and participated in countless conferences internationally, nationally, and locally. While the body of knowledge produced by the organization remains impressive, many others have joined the cause and have invested more resources and energies to position themselves as thought leaders. As a result, EBBF has lost some of its leading edge in CSR, not because the message is wrong or stale, but simply because the CSR ideas and concepts promoted by EBBF have now been absorbed into mainstream thinking.

## PROMOTION OF MICROCREDIT

The discourse about microcredit offers a similar lesson. EBBF embarked on promoting the microcredit concept formally in 1995 at the UN World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, where it facilitated several workshops on the subject. The next year, EBBF was asked to participate in the preparatory meeting to the 1997 Microcredit Summit, and at the summit itself, EBBF had a table where it displayed a few publications on the topic. A position that focused on the spiritual dimensions of microcredit congruent with the principles of EBBF was articulated and helped contribute to the evolving discourse on the topic.

The result was that networking at these events paid off, and in the following months and years, many more opportunities to engage in the microcredit discourse emerged—on the topic of microcredit and women entrepreneurs, for example—and new long-term collaborations developed. Most significantly, EBBF instigated an initiative to co-organize the Global Dialogue on Microfinance and Human Development, an event held in Stockholm in 1998 as an integral part of the first UNESCO Business Forum on Enterprise, Development and Culture in the Global Age. At this forum, Nobel Peace laureate Mohammed Yunus accepted an honorary EBBF membership.

Since then, the forum has lost its thought leadership, but a number of its members have continued to study the field and have given presentations on the topic. Some have even become practitioners in microfinance. For example, Anda Boros worked in Afghanistan as a senior consultant on microfinance, and Gary Reusche managed a large USAID project on microfinance and SME development in rural development in the Ukraine.

## MORAL LEADERSHIP IN THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Moral leadership is another area where EBBF has focused a lot of resources and efforts. Several members, inspired by the framework on moral leadership developed at Nur University in Bolivia,

saw an opportunity to adapt the program to the business environment. The Values-Based Leadership (VBL) project started in 2006. It involved the collaboration of several individual EBBF members who created a professional development program targeted at businesses. Several workshops were held, and the material was then converted to online learning modules. A private organization, the SLMLI (Spiritual Capital and Moral Leadership Institute) was created in 2010 and offers courses and workshops on the topic. But as far as I am aware, the Values-Based Leadership project has had limited impact as a formal training program in the workplace.

#### EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN IN THE WORKPLACE

EBBF members, inspired by the words of Bahá'u'lláh regarding the equality of women and men, have been promoting gender equality in the workplace from the beginning of the organization. They published several documents and spoke at several conferences on this principle. EBBF has also implemented this principle in the organization, as indicated by the fact that its membership is fairly equally comprised of both women and men. Indeed, the longest-serving member of the governing board of the organization is Dr. Wendy Momen. She has been a relentless leader of the advancement of women and has organized events at the UN Commission on the Status of Women since 2008.

Dr. Momen was invested with the Order of the British Empire by Prince Charles in January 2015 for services to the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and to the community of Northill, England.

#### RESPONSIBLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In the early years of EBBF, a body of knowledge was developed to help ex-Soviet Union countries learn about responsible entrepreneurship. In more recent years, the organization has explored the emerging areas of social entrepreneurship and social innovation. To the credit of EBBF, some of its members were among the first to recognize the emergence of social entrepreneurship—applying business models to solving social issues. Since the late '90s, EBBF members have made contact with leaders of the movement, collaborated with various organizations, and researched and published articles on the topic.

For example, George Starcher attended the first meeting of Social Entrepreneurship Club at Harvard Business School in 1999. Contacts were then made with the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship and with Ashoka (an organization that funds social entrepreneurs). Many EBBF members were founders, advisors, or members of HUBs for social entrepreneurs (a worldwide network of local co-creation workspaces). I was personally an advisor to HUB Ottawa, consulted in the field, and wrote

a publication on social innovation, *The Promise of Social Innovation: Enterprises as a Source of Social Good*. Daniel Truran has taught a number of courses in MBA programs in Madrid, is actively involved in HUB Madrid, and developed the related knowledge center on the EBBF website. EBBF member Peter Spiegel has made important contributions to Social Entrepreneurship in Germany.

#### ETHICAL BUSINESS PRACTICES

The last area I would like to mention is that of ethical business practices, a theme that underlies every EBBF endeavor, core belief, and action undertaken by EBBF. The members of EBBF have explored the topic in articles, have facilitated national workshops with AIESEC students, and have spoken at numerous conferences regarding this central theme. More importantly, every EBBF member through their involvement with the network receives inspiration and courage to behave in the workplace in a manner that is congruent and in accordance with the core principles of EBBF. In so doing, they become ambassadors in their places of work and exemplars of the axiom that it is possible to behave ethically at work, to align with one's own spiritual values, and to simultaneously excel according to even the most mundane sort of metrics. Here are a few testimonies from members:

“What is important for me is to really live and enjoy my life to the

max and to acquire as many qualities during my lifetime as I can. What I do is less important to me than how I do it. When I would be a shoe polisher, I would try to be the kind of shoe polisher that not only lets your shoes shine, but also gives you a piece of wisdom, or cheers you up” (<http://ebbf.org/about/people/inspirational/bderoos/>), Barbara de Roos, editor and publisher, Netherlands.

“We are now doing a project in Malawi, in Southeast Africa for a company who is producing sustainable energy—they squeeze oil out of seeds from trees. We travelled to Malawi and then went into how the client works, how their culture functions, and observed how they would use a building. We considered all those local issues before we started the design. Our approach was to get the best out of the building materials to achieve a level of energy efficiency you would find here in Europe and yet create an environment which is a reflection of the local life in Southeast Africa. We wanted the workers to have a better atmosphere and for the building to have a special kind of character” (<http://ebbf.org/about/people/inspirational/llie/>), Liong Lie, architectural firm owner.

#### DEVELOPING CAPACITIES

One important capacity being fostered by EBBF is that of reading the current business reality and the needs of society. This ability, and the capacity to develop expertise in certain areas, is very much influenced by the life experience



of its members. They are not mere theorists; they are practitioners in their fields. They have a close connection to the concrete demands of their work. Starcher notes, “[The European Commission] had a very positive point of view on the EBBF . . . because we were a network of businesspeople and not just an NGO with a bunch of ideas” (*History*).

There are many examples worth citing in conjunction with this ability to identify opportunities to contribute to discourse. In the early years of its existence, EBBF was one of the first organizations to identify the needs for education in responsible business and entrepreneurship in former Soviet satellite nations. It was also an early thought leader in defining the principles of corporate social responsibility and sustainability and in promoting best practices in public forums all over the world. Recently, EBBF has adapted its own business model to stimulate exchanges of thoughts among its members by employing the tools of social media.

A second capacity that EBBF attempts to develop is the inspiration or empowerment of its members. The annual EBBF conference has become a powerful means by which EBBF can share ideas and get re-energized.

A third capacity EBBF is striving to develop is the ability to cultivate partnerships and cooperative influence, a process facilitated by the active involvement of senior practitioners with deep and broad networks, together with an ability to interact effectively

with other individuals of influence. EBBF members have been supportive of the activities of other organizations, often providing volunteers to organize meetings, publicly supporting and sponsoring such events without seeking credit for themselves. This humble posture of learning has contributed to positioning EBBF as a very desirable partner for other like-minded organizations and collective efforts.

A fourth capacity is that of researching and presenting information in a way that promotes the principles of EBBF and is still accessible to a business audience that tends to be turned off by concepts that do not directly contribute to financial growth. For example, the EBBF publication *The Promise of Social Innovation: Enterprises as a Source of Social Good*, while capturing best practices from various sources, inserts the tenets of EBBF in a manner that touches individuals’ search for meaning.

Through social innovation, businesses can help achieve this vision by building long-term value for their shareholders, while contributing to addressing some of society’s greatest challenges and meeting their employees yearning to do meaningful work. This call for greater social engagement is firmly grounded in ethical values and the inherent need of individuals to do good. Striving to live our lives according to high moral standards often creates dissonance in our professional

lives. Enterprises that stand for something other than profits create work environments where employees feel fully engaged. (Couillard)

#### METHODS EMPLOYED AND INSTRUMENTS DEVELOPED

EBBF adopted a governance model inspired by the model of Bahá'í administration. The governing board of EBBF is made up of seven members who are elected annually by all eligible members. Electioneering is not allowed: every member may vote for any other member in good standing whom he/she feels has the best qualities, experience, and commitment to serve on the governing board.

As noted earlier, since its inception EBBF has understood the importance of welcoming non-Bahá'ís into the organization. These individuals currently constitute a significant proportion of the membership and have served on the governing board at both national and international levels. Indeed, non-Bahá'ís are often among the most active volunteers.

Because this article is written primarily for a North American audience, it is worthwhile to highlight the experience of the Bahá'í Business Forum of the Americas (BBFA). This organization operated successfully in the early 2000s for a few years and organized conferences that were initially very well attended. It was independent from EBBF and its membership was restricted to Bahá'ís. It is beyond the

scope of this paper to contrast the two organizations, but having participated in activities of both groups, I feel that the openness of the EBBF model was conducive to creating the extra energy required to sustain the work of volunteers in the long run.

EBBF members do not rely solely on their work knowledge, experience, and networks to participate in business discourses. There appears to be a direct correlation between the volume of research and publications by individuals and their impact. For example, George Starcher, Arthur Dahl, and Giuseppe Robiati all joined EBBF when they were accomplished professionals at the peak of their careers. Nevertheless, they pursued the creation and sharing of knowledge with passion and humility, writing small publications and sometimes full-length books related to the principles of EBBF. This collaboration enabled them the confidence and authority to participate in meaningful conversations in a variety of international forums.

As discussed earlier, EBBF is striving to develop the ability to "read" the current business reality and thereby discern the needs of society. With the guidance of its governing board, its members then focused their efforts in those areas where they felt they could make a difference, where their voice would be heard. Their early efforts in Albania and Bulgaria to educate would-be entrepreneurs in ethical business practices are examples of the attempt to implement and utilize this capacity. A core EBBF group focused

on participating in high-profile international meetings to which they had been invited, one indication of the positive profile and credibility these individuals had acquired. Participating in these events created a “virtuous cycle”—reinforcing the credibility of the organization, multiplying the contacts, and providing new opportunities to participate in business discourse.

EBBF is fundamentally action oriented; its publications are supports to further a single goal: constructing a body of knowledge that can promote in the workplace the principles espoused by EBBF. It is in this light that members of EBBF are constantly reflecting on their day-to-day work to assess whether they are aligned with the principles they espouse: they attend meetings, participate in social networks, and mentor one another. In this same vein, the EBBF website has a section devoted to helping members implement concepts learned from EBBF resources and events. For example, it promotes local Action Labs, “a specific format of local events, that are designed in a series: starting with meaningful conversations they focus on taking action, while creating a cycle of consultation, action and reflection” ([ebbf.org](http://ebbf.org)). EBBF also offers resources to “create your own dream enterprise.”

#### IDEAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

From what we have observed in the efforts of EBBF we can derive several prerequisites for other organizations seeking to engage in the discourse of

society. First, ensure that a core group of dedicated, motivated, and steadfast individuals is available. Second, develop a unique voice and a relevant message. Third, adopt an appropriate framework to guide the methodology. Fourth, create useful content that can be disseminated at conferences and events. Fifth, if possible, utilize the resources of a dedicated organizer. Finally, support the activities of like-minded individuals and organizations.

When one examines the major successes of EBBF, it becomes clear how important it is to have a dedicated core group of capable volunteers. Indeed, volunteers have made the EBBF venture possible. The challenge is then to find ways to nurture and motivate a core group of volunteers.

The principal struggle for any organizations is to discover a unique contribution it can make, an objective that will motivate people to join them, fund them, and, in the case of businesses, pay for their products and services. EBBF has not been immune to this existential quest. As a Bahá'í-inspired organization, it has tried to focus on the unique contribution and perspective of the Faith. This challenge applies to both the content, or message being conveyed, and to the method proposed for purveying this information. As concepts like corporate social responsibility, sustainability, the advancement of women in all spheres of work, social entrepreneurship, and microcredit have become more mainstream, and consequently more specialized

organizations focused on their promotion have emerged, EBBF's ability to remain relevant has been impressive. I would suggest that reliance on the universal appeal of Bahá'u'lláh's message is what makes EBBF unique. For example, when contributing to the discourse on microcredit:

One of the significant and somewhat unique contributions of EBBF to the microcredit movement has been speaking and writing about the importance attached to spiritual principles as the basis for social and economic development in general, and microcredit in particular. From such universal principles as human dignity, trust, unity, service to others, and the equality of women and men emerged practical measures that became the methodologies of successful microcredit programs throughout the world. (Starcher, *History*)

In a recent letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada speaking about the Association for Bahá'í Studies, the Universal House of Justice proposed a series of constituent elements of a framework for social discourse, many of which would seem to be already being applied through EBBF:

It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can

be consciously and progressively clarified. In this respect, it may be useful to give consideration to insights that have contributed to the community's progress: the relationship between study and action, the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity, the challenge of fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service, the dynamics of organic development, the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity, the coherence required among all areas of endeavour, and sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions. Perhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time. (Letter, 24 July 2013)

Coherence among all areas of endeavor represents probably the greatest challenge in such an organic and decentralized organization.

Another area worth pursuing would be to assess the effectiveness for others wishing to engage actively in social discourses of society to emulate EBBF and, at the outset, establish thought leadership and credibility through publications and participation in high-profile events.

Finally, engaging in the endeavors of like-minded non-Bahá'í individuals and organizations has successfully enabled EBBF to create opportunities to participate in social discourse, and I feel such initiatives should be pursued enthusiastically.

#### HOW HAS EBBF LEARNED ABOUT BEING SYSTEMATIC?

While many factors have contributed to the systematic nature of EBBF's activities, foremost among these is perhaps its model of organizational governance. The EBBF governance model includes a director general, a governing board, an advisory council, and various committees (finance, research, events, communications, member services, external affairs). This model ensures ongoing sharing of learning among members and efficient coordination of major projects.

The nature of membership itself has also helped instill a systematic learning environment: most members are business-minded and tend to have a predisposition to systematic solutions to business-related problems. Publications, conference presentations, and education initiatives encourage authors to give careful reflections on their ideas and to articulate them with clarity. The creation of a research team responsible for the systematic creation of content and review of contributions has also enhanced strategies of EBBF. Finally, participating in highly professional world-class events with other leading organizations has compelled

EBBF to continue evaluating the most efficacious methods with which it can make meaningful contributions.

#### EBBF—THE NEXT 25 YEARS

As the members of EBBF assess the first quarter-century of its accomplishments, they should feel proud of the influence this organization has had. The challenges ahead, however, will be daunting. How will it stay relevant as some of its key principles become mainstream? How will it continue to attract non-Bahá'ís? How will it ensure that its work is coherent with the conceptual framework for community building created by the Bahá'í World Center? Like most nonprofits, it must confront how it will face its resource challenges, such as the need for financial support and increasing numbers of volunteers. Finally, how will it compete for Bahá'í talent with other areas of service?

On April 23 2013, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the EBBF governing board a message of encouragement to “express its admiration for the dedication you have shown in striving to ever more closely align your thinking and activities with its guidance, including on the subject of participation in the prevalent discourses of society.” In the same letter, it suggested formally removing the word “Bahá'í” from the title of the organization so as to eliminate any confusion between contributions of the Bahá'í International Community to discourses on the international

stage and the views of Bahá'í-inspired groups. After an extensive consultation process, the EBBF governing board announced in the fall of 2014 that the name of EBBF would change to Ethical Business Building the Future. It also removed the formal link with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of France.

These changes could potentially open up many more opportunities for EBBF. For example, it is now officially global rather than solely "European" in its orientation and organization. Likewise, although still Bahá'í inspired, the word "Bahá'í" is no longer in the name, a change that, some believe, might remove barriers to engaging in discourse with other business organizations. It is my personal feeling that as long as EBBF remains loyal to its core principles, and the same stimulating, dynamic, and caring atmosphere continues to permeate all its activities, it will continue to attract new members and remain a sought-after contributor to the discourses of society.

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