

We need to get back to the essence of the company

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I have long known of the etymology of the word company, but it came up in conversation yesterday and I thought it worth sharing. This is from [the Online Etymology Dictionary](#):

*From Late Latin *companio*, literally "bread fellow, messmate," from Latin *com* "with, together" (see *com-*) + *panis* "bread," from PIE root **pa-* "to feed.*

As it was explained to me by someone with rather more Latin training than I have, 'com pani', means 'to share bread with'.

The image is powerful. For those familiar with the Christian tradition this may be particularly so: the sharing of bread is part of a sacrament.

However, relatively few partake in that sacrament now, so think instead of this understanding as it relates to a social construct. Bread is for many the basic food of subsistence. To share it is to provide in an essential of life. But it is more than that. By sharing that essential we recognise the importance of the other person. That is why shared meals are so important in so many cultures.

A few are, of course, symbolic and are statements of power. But they, surely, miss the point. The real essence of eating together - sharing our bread - is to get to know a person; to converse with them; to indicate our commonality and respect and to make clear our mutuality: in the act of eating we are equals even as the essential individuality of the act - we fuel ourselves, of course - is acknowledged.

There is then much that com pani implies that should be embodied in our notion of a company. Forget the statements of power: they are an obvious corruption of the essential nature of the sharing of bread. Companies need to be built on the idea of sharing, of mutual respect where differences are combined and valued for a common good. And communication is key. After all, very rare exceptions apart, the sharing of bread is very rarely an occasion for silence.

We need to better embrace the idea of com pani. Companies are places where people

work together for a common good - which is the essential sustenance of all who partake, whoever they might be. It's an understanding too many have forgotten.