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Mission as an Organizing Principle (or A Leader's Ethical Responsibility for the People We Lead)

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**THE LEADERSHIP EXPEDITION
SODERQUIST LEADERSHIP CENTER
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**“MISSION AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE”
OR
A LEADER’S ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PEOPLE WE
LEAD**

**C. William Pollard
Chairman
The ServiceMaster Company**

Thank you, Don. I have looked forward to this time with you today. The subject of ethics and leadership fit like hand and glove. I realize that many of you were looking forward to hear Chuck Colson? and I am a fill in but (the rest is just too hard to decipher, but I don’t think you need it for purposes of future speeches.)

Several weeks ago I was visiting with my old friend and adviser, Peter Drucker. He had asked to meet with me and discuss my leadership responsibilities as I had come back as Chairman and CEO of ServiceMaster. Peter had recently celebrated his 90th birthday and he reminded me of the talk I had given ten years earlier at his 80th birthday party.

My assignment then was to speak about the characteristics of the effective executive of the 90’s.

My talk centered on issues relating to the people that would be led – not just on the attributes of the leader. I suggested that the 90’s would be a period of

accelerated change and choice. The leader would have to be more aggressive in initiating change in order to manage it and the organizations being led would have to be more flexible and adaptable.

However, I also pointed out that the people who made up those organizations were not built for rapid and continuous change. I suggested that in the absence of a meaningful mission and purpose that transcended the change and that included a caring and nurturing of people, rapid change could bring discontinuity, dislocation and uncertainty, and could be a demoralizing force. People needed a hope beyond the change. Leaders would have to be champions at promoting the mission of the firm and, more importantly, living the mission of the firm and being committed to the people they led. They would need to be more transparent and their values and character would be tested. Peter's point was simple and direct. I needed to reflect on what I had said ten years ago. The message in his mind was even more relevant today as I came back to lead and manage in the 21st century.

People today are more healthy physically than they were 50 years ago and they can expect to live longer than their parents. But are they as healthy emotionally? The subjective diseases involving well-being, such as depression, substance abuse and behavioral disorders with _____ are multiplying at a rapid rate. There are no clear scientific answers to these problems in our society. There is a growing spiritual vacuum – a **lack of meaning and purpose in life and in work.**

Samuel Beckett and James Joyce were friends and confidants. Although the writings of Joyce have received more fame and publicity, Beckett won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. His essays and short stories, novels,

plays, radio and television scripts are generally obscure esoteric works stressing the absurdity and despair of life. His characters are typically engaged in meaningless habits to occupy their time, but they have no purpose or mission and accomplish nothing. As he spoke with unflinching honesty about the emptiness of life without purpose or meaning, he may well have been describing the modern day worker in an environment of accelerated change and choice with no anchor or meaning in what occupies his or her time or in his or her work.

So, what is the role of our organizations in responding to this need for meaning and purpose in life? What will be the social contract between an employer and employee as we move to the 21st century? Have we defined the mission of our organization in such a way to include bringing purpose and meaning to those who are fulfilling the mission?

How do we measure the effectiveness of our organizations? Can our organizations become moral communities to help shape the human character and behavior of our people? Can our mission be an organizing principle? What is our role as leaders? What is my posture of indebtedness to whose I lead?

Now as I ask these fundamental questions about the role of mission and purpose in the life and work of an organization, I do so not as a philosopher or an educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a businessperson - someone who is seeking to lead, with my colleagues, a large and growing service company that we call ServiceMaster.

Our system-wide revenues now exceed over \$7 billion. We have had a track record of doubling in size every 3 to 4 years for over 25? (looks like 35) years. And yes, we have experienced change during this period. In fact, over 75%

of our current business involves lines of service we were not doing just ten years ago. I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where revenue and profits must be reported quarter by quarter, and while revenues and profits have been up every quarter for over twenty-five years, during the last 18 months we have had several quarters where we have missed that pace. The shareholders that I am responsible to as a leader vote every day on my leadership - they have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting here today goes beyond a stock price quoted on the New York Stock Exchange or a record string of profits. The issue of purpose and meaning and the responsibilities we have as leaders to develop the whole person starts with a fundamental belief in who people are and why they exist. Who really are the people I work with - the over 240,000 people who are a part of the ServiceMaster team? How do they find meaning in their work?

Much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air-handling units, serve food, kill bugs, care for lawns and landscapes, clean carpets, provide maid service, and repair home appliances. The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve so they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work and, yes, even be better people.

But how does one go about motivating this many people – most of whom, by the way, are doing their work scattered about among the locations of our 12 million customers. Although we work hard at developing and implementing our training programs and although we work hard at implementing our management systems, there is no amount of training and no amount of management that could effectively motivate our people to serve. Unless we can align the values of our

people with the mission of the firm and continue to develop and care for them in the process, we will fail, not only in serving our customers, but also in doing what is right for our people.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm located west of the city of Chicago, you walk into a large, two-story lobby, and on your right is a curving marble wall, **90 feet long** and **18 feet high**. Carved in stone on that wall in letters 8 feet high are four statements that constitute our mission: To Honor God In All We Do, To Help People Develop, To Pursue Excellence, and To Grow Profitably. A mission statement simple enough to be remembered – controversial enough to raise questions requiring a continuous process of explaining and relating - and profound enough to be lasting.

If you were to tour the rest of the building, you would notice that nearly all of the work spaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach to the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable, just like the marketplace we serve with its changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth and great potential. We do not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It is, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity, as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix. For me as a Christian – follow _____ .

And it does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that can be used as a simplistic reason for financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation, a reference point for action. It is a living set of principles that allows us to confront the difficulties and failures that are all part of running a business and serving our customers, with the assurance that our common starting point never changes.

We have found that people want to work for a cause, not just a living and when there is an alignment between the mission of the firm and the cause of its people, a creative power is unleashed that results in quality service to the customer and the growth and development of the people serving. People find meaning in their work. The mission becomes an organizing principle of effectiveness.

Why is Shirley, a housekeeper in a 250-bed community hospital still excited about her work after fifteen years? She certainly has seen some changes. She has moved from 2 West to 3 East and actually cleans more rooms today than she did five years ago. The chemicals, the mop, the housekeeping cart have all been improved. Nevertheless, the bathrooms and the toilets are still the same. The dirt has not changed nor have the unexpected spills of the patients or the arrogance of some of the physicians. So what motivates Shirley? Does she have a mission in her work? Is her job just cleaning floors or is she part of a team of people that helps sick people get well? Is she recognized not only for what she does but also

for what she is becoming? Does she know that she is needed and is providing an important contribution?

As I talked with Shirley about her job, she shared with me her “cause” when she said: “If we don’t clean with a quality effort, we can’t keep the doctors and nurses in business. We can’t serve the patients. This place would be closed if we didn’t have housekeeping.” Shirley was confirming the reality of our mission at work.

People are not just economic animals or non-personal production units. Every person has their own fingerprint of personality and potential and wants to accomplish something significant and find meaning in their work.

Frankly, when you view the person as only a production unit, or something that can be defined solely in economic terms, motivational or even incentive schemes have a tendency to be mechanical and manipulative. In so doing, there is a drive to define a system that will idiot-proof the process which can in turn make people feel like idiots. *Fortune* magazine recently described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within and cited Henry Ford's quote as descriptive, "Why is it that I always get the whole person when what I really want is just a pair of hands?"

When the mission of the firm involves the whole person, the performance of the task is linked with the development of the person, and the firm and its leadership assume responsibility for "what is happening to the person in the process?" "What are they becoming in their work?"

The responsibility of leadership- the responsibility to do right by the people we lead – _____ – our posture of indebtedness.

Story of stork.

This responsibility to do what is right also involves a commitment to serve and relate – to walk the talk not assume a posture or hold on to _____?

My story – Ken Hansen & me

As a leader in such an environment, I should always be ready to be surprised by the potential of people.

A colleague of mine tells of an experience that has been a great reminder to me of this point. It is often the custom for firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. As my friend was involved in such an event, he was surprised by the response of one of the recipients. The young man opened the box, took out the beautiful sterling silver tie tack, said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not on his lapel.

People are different, and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or lifestyle. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. It is a leader's responsibility to set the tone; to learn to accept the differences of people and seek to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of the whole and achieve unity in diversity.

As leaders promote and live out the mission, they must make themselves available. Their door should always be open. They should be out and about

talking and listening to people at all levels of the organization. At our headquarters building in Downers Grove, we have designed our executive offices as a reminder of this principle of listening, learning, and serving. Nobody works behind closed doors. Glass is everywhere, confirming our desire to have an open office and open mind. No executive office captures an outside window. The view to the outside is available to all working in the office.

As the mission becomes an organizing principle of the firm, people become the subject of work, not just the object of work.

Several years ago I was traveling in what was then the Soviet Union. I had been asked to give several talks on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city then called Leningrad, now renamed St. Petersburg, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in a large hotel which, at that time, was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in her and her task. I engaged her in conversation through the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to do her work. Olga had been given a T-frame for a mop, a filthy rag, and a bucket of dirty water to do her job. She really wasn't cleaning the floor. She was just moving dirt from one section to another. The reality of Olga's task was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over. Olga was not proud of what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the result.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I am sure you could have eaten off the floor in her two-room apartment--but work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a

system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done. She was the object of work, not the subject.

I contrast the time spent with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Kamala, as the chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me, gave me a big hug, and thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patients' rooms, providing a detailed before-and-after ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, and their race, language, and nationalities were different. But, their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited financial resources. One was very proud of what she was doing. Her work had affected her view of herself and others. The other was not, and had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference, I suggest, has something to do with how they were treated, loved, and cared for in the work environment. In one case, the mission of the firm involved the development of the person, recognizing their dignity and worth. In the other case, the objective was to provide activity and call it work.

The story of Olga and Kamala is retold many times in the lives of people in our company. Listen to another such story told by James Smith – who was one of

our housekeeping supervisors - in his own words as he talks about the meaning in his life.

Show video of James.

When the mission becomes an organizing principle – our organizations become communities of people caring for each other and for the people they serve – moral and ethical communities that will help shape the human character and behavior of people. I conclude my remarks today with some lines from T. S. Eliot’s *Choruses from a Rock*:

“What life have you if you not have life together?
There is no life that is not in community.
And no community not lived in praise of God.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people.
Their only monument the asphalt road,
And a thousand lost golf balls.
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.
When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?”
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
What will you answer? We all dwell together,
To make money from each other? Is this a community?
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.

Oh my soul be prepared for the coming of the stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

Revised: 8/30/01