


February 18th, 1999

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Pollard, C. William, "Mission as an Organizing Principle" (1999). *C. William Pollard Papers*. 65.
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**THE CONFERENCE BOARD AND
THE PETER F. DRUCKER FOUNDATION FOR NONPROFIT
MANAGEMENT
New York City
February 18, 1999**

“MISSION AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE”

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

In the fall of 1989, I was asked to participate in Peter Drucker’s 80th birthday party. My assignment was to speak about the characteristics of the effective executive of the 90’s. My task seemed larger than life, especially in view of the distinguished audience and my respect for the wisdom of my friend and counselor, Peter Drucker.

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. They would need to be more transparent and their values and character would be tested.

While I said this almost ten years ago, I believe it is even more relevant today as we look to the future – to the coming of the 21st century.

A quick look back reminds us that we have come through a decade of dramatic change. Just look at what has happened in the politics and economies of what was the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and what has emerged in China. These changes have affected the lives of millions of people. Everywhere one looks, there is more freedom – yes, more freedom and certainly more choice, but also more confusion and uncertainty. The current speculation and dire predictions swirling around the Y2K issues may be only a symptom of a far deeper problem – namely, the need of people to have an anchor, a purpose if you will, that does not change and relates to a meaning for their life and for their work.

Recently, I listened to a futurist describe some of the issues ahead of us as we move into the 21st century. In his review of the healthcare issues before us, he concluded that we were responding to the problems relating to two of the biggest healthcare issues of today, i.e., cancer and heart. He suggested, however, that we do not have the answers to some of the growing health care issues of the future which he described as the subjective diseases of well-being, such as depression, substance abuse and eating disorders. There are no clear scientific answers to these growing problems in our society.

So, what is the role of work or 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?

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 mission that includes a way of understanding how to relate their personal values with the values of the firm.

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 partner Carlos Cantu, a fast growing, dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster.

We have experienced rapid growth, doubling in size every 3-1/2 years for over 25 years, with system-wide revenues now in excess of \$6 billion. And yes, we have experienced change during this period. In fact, over 75% of our current

business lines we were not doing just ten years ago when I gave that talk at Peter's birthday party. I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where revenue and profits must be reported quarter by quarter, and where revenue and profits have been up every quarter for the past 28 years. The shareholders that Carlos and I are responsible to as leaders, vote every day on our leadership - they have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting here today is that the measure of my success as a leader cannot be limited to the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the people I work with - the over 240,000 people who are a part of the ServiceMaster team and who are making it happen every day as they serve others.

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 10 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.

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.

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 our 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 Shirley sees her job as extending to the welfare of the patient in the bed and as an integral part of a team supporting the work of the doctors and nurses, she has a cause - a cause that involves the health and welfare of others. When Shirley first came to us over fifteen years ago, no doubt she was merely looking for just a job. But she brought to her work an unlocked potential and a desire to accomplish something significant. 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?"

As we recognize the importance of dealing with the whole person, we seek to link the performance of the task with the development of a person, and at the same time assume responsibility for "what is happening to the person in the

process?" "What are they becoming in their work?" Is the task as defined, the tools as designed, and the training as provided contributing or detracting to the work and the worker? These questions force a self-energizing and correcting process that is never over and is the basis for our quest of continuous improvement in how we serve.

Thus the scope of training must include more than teaching a person to use the right tools or to complete an assigned task within a defined period. It also must include how that person feels about their work and about themselves and how that person relates to others in the work environment or at home.

This means that if I am to be involved in the leadership process, then as part of my training, I should also experience what it is like to do the hands-on work and to feel the emotions of those I am going to manage. It is for this reason that every manager in ServiceMaster spends time as part of their training actually doing the tasks he or she will ultimately manage others to do.

So when I started with ServiceMaster over 20 years ago as senior vice president responsible for the legal and financial affairs of the company, the first three months of my training were involved in doing cleaning and maintenance tasks in hospitals, industrial facilities, and homes. It was, for me, a learning and serving experience and helped me to identify with the needs and concerns of our service workers. It was a great lesson in servant leadership and the role of a leader in implementing the mission of a firm. It has been a constant reminder that I must always be prepared to serve and should never ask anyone to do something that I am not willing to do myself.

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.

When the mission becomes an organizing principle – our organizations become communities of people caring for each other and for the people they serve. 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.

As we continue to define and refine the mission of our organizations and seek to lead in its fulfillment, let us not forget the people who are serving and making it happen – they are the soul of our organizations.

2/23/99