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The Best and Most Admired

C. William Pollard

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FORTUNE SUMMIT
THE BEST AND MOST ADMIRABLE
NOVEMBER 3, 2000

First of all, as I share with you today on this important subject, I do so not as someone who has all the answers. The issues of commitment and loyalty are essential to the strength and growth of any organization. As I talk about them, I am keenly aware of our shortcomings as well as some of our successes. We are always learning, changing and adapting at ServiceMaster as we seek to meet the many changing dynamics in the markets we serve and the people we employ. We are seeking to understand and respond to what is and will be the social contract between the employer and the employee as we begin this 21st Century.

For our company this involves over 250,000 people that we employ or manage who, this year, will make over 45 million service visits to 12 million customers. For the most part these people do their jobs in our customers' locations without any direct supervision or control.

Our task is to train and motivate them to serve in the workplace that extends beyond the walls of the firm. As we seek to nurture their commitment and loyalty in this highly decentralized work environment, we have found that:

1. People work for a cause not just a living. They want purpose and meaning in their work.
2. People respond and are motivated by having a meaningful participation in decisions affecting their jobs. They want to own and participate in the results of their work.

3. People want to know and trust their leaders.
4. People want to learn as they work and align their continuing educational objectives with their employment opportunities.

For us, mission has been an organizing principle. It has provided a purpose or cause that transcends the rapid changes of the marketplace and focuses on the caring and nurturing of the whole person.

In so doing we are seeking to respond to the question of who people are and why they work, not just what they do and how they do it. Henry Ford was quoted as saying, “Why is it I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands”. We have found that it is the person not the hands that are loyal.

Our company objectives are simply stated.

To Honor God in All We Do.

To Help People Develop.

To Pursue Excellence.

To Grow Profitably.

The first two for us are end goals. The second two are means goals. It's a mission statement that is short enough to be remembered. Controversial enough to always raise questions and test its meaning and significant enough to be lasting.

It provides a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoid that which is wrong in running a business and provides a focus on the dignity and worth of every person.

In our pluralistic society, some may question whether that first objective is an appropriate goal for a public company. However, we do not use it as a basis of exclusion, and, in fact, it is the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all part of God's mix.

They, of course, do not mean that everything is done right in ServiceMaster. We make our share of mistakes. Because of a stated standard like this, we can't hide our mistakes. They are brought out into the open for correction and in some cases for forgiveness.

As we recognize the dignity and worth of people, we also recognize that they should have something to say about the decisions affecting their work and their job. Right now, for example, we are in the middle of a long-range planning process for our company. This has involved cross-functional teams among our leadership and will include over a thousand of such teams among all levels of our organization. These teams are addressing subjects like how we can be a better place to work, improve our communications among our various business units and provide a level of higher customer satisfaction.

The first question that these teams addressed was whether or not the mission statement of the past should be the mission statement of the future. As we encourage participation on that fundamental question, there was a ring of genuineness to the whole process and as people participated and were heard in an open environment they bought in and were more committed.

I realize that this question of loyalty and commitment comes within the context of what has occurred in the last 12 to 18 months regarding

retention issues, especially those involving people moving to dot coms. Now, for some people, the grass is always going to look greener on the other side of the fence and sometimes the firm may be better off if they go ahead and graze.

During the past 12 months, we launched our own dot com company to provide easy access to and from our customer for all of our services in and around the home.

This initiative reflected both the innovation and participation of our people.

The idea came from them, and also as we formed this new business initiative, we did so in a way that provided opportunities for separate ownership in it by our employees and those making it happen.

Over the years, this ownership factor for our employees has been an important part of commitment.

We have also found that for people to be committed, they must know and trust their leaders. Leadership must be out and about, willing to serve, never asking anyone in the organization to do something that they wouldn't do themselves. As part of this servant leadership principle in ServiceMaster, we ask our leaders to be examples, to spend at least one day a year out directly serving our customers. We call it our "We Serve Day". It is just one of the ways which we seek to tangiblize the commitment of serving as we lead people. Commitment is a two-way street.

Learning is a life-long experience, and if the firm is interested in developing the whole person, it must provide a variety of ways in which the person can learn – not just the skills for doing the job but also the skills for getting along with others and understanding the reason for work and its meaning as part of fulfillment and life.

For us, this means a teaching process that starts with learning how to mop a floor and extends to the equivalent of an MBA course of instruction that extends over a four year period.

While we work with many accomplished people, seeking new ways to contribute, we also have many people coming to us with little or no formal training, social skills or even an understanding of standards of civility. As a result, our workplace is increasingly becoming or must become not only a place of training but also a place of education. What I often refer to as a University of Work. The distinctions we once made between going to school during part of our life and then working the other part are no longer meaningful. The lines between school and work are, in fact, blurring.

So these are just a few of the ways in which we seek to inspire loyalty and commitment. Our failure to discuss the economic or compensation side of the equation is not to suggest or minimize its importance. It is, however, to remind us of a truth I learned from Peter Drucker many years ago, and that is simply compensation is rarely a motivator. It can become, however, a significant demotivator.

Thanks for listening.