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Responsible Leadership - The Ethic of Right Behavior (Chicago)

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**Rotary One Luncheon
Chicago Athletic Club
Chicago IL
December 14, 2004
C. W. Pollard**

“Responsible Leadership – The Ethic of Right Behavior”

I am delighted to be with you today and have the opportunity to share some thoughts on ethical leadership. This is, I understand, your centennial year. It is a special time to celebrate but also a time to look forward, especially for this club as Rotary #1.

Thank you for the many ways you have and are influencing our society in this community. Thank you for what you stand for as embodied in the Four Way Test.

I was first introduced to the Four Way Test and its application over 40 years ago. I was a young attorney working on a transaction with Herb Taylor, who was then Chairman and owner of Club Aluminum. Herb was a Rotarian and he also might have been a member of this club. The transaction we were working on took a difficult turn and there developed questions of truth, fairness, and disclosure. Mr. Taylor called all the parties together in his office and required all involved to carefully review the transaction and their actions in light of: Was it truthful? Was it fair? Would it build good will? Was it beneficial to all involved?

After several hours of open and honest discussion, the parties finally overcame their impasse and made a deal – a true deal, a fair deal, and a deal that would benefit all those involved.

The title of my talk today is: Responsible Leadership – The Ethic of Right Behavior. I realize that what has occurred over the last several years in the leadership of some businesses is a long way from the Four Way Test. Some may wonder whether someone from the business world has anything useful to say about what is right or ethical.

Frankly, our American culture has recently produced too many failed examples of ethical leadership. People have reason to be skeptical, yes, even cynical. The examples are not limited to business. They include failures of political, religious and other leaders.

As Peter Drucker would suggest, ethical standards do not vary by vocation, profession, specific functions or institutions of a society. There is not a business ethic, a government ethic or a church ethic. The same standard should apply to all.

The Financial Times ran an article – now over a year ago - on what they called The Barons of Bankruptcy, a privileged group of top American business leaders who made extraordinary fortunes even as their companies were heading

for disaster. They examined 25 business collapses since the start of 2001 and, according to their figures, the executives and directors of those doomed companies walked away, while their companies were heading into bankruptcy, with over \$3.3 billion in compensation and proceeds from stock sales.

How do we explain such a result? Was it an explosion of corporate greed? Was it a lack of moral leadership? Was it the result of gross negligence by a governing board? Was it incompetence by the outside auditors or a broken auditing system? Did the incentive systems, including stock options or the way they were accounted for, contribute to this result? Was the penchant for quarter-by-quarter performance based on the assumption that business growth and value can be accurately reported and measured within a three-month time horizon also a contributing factor?

The reality is that all these forces and more have converged into what we might call “The Perfect Storm.” Many people were hurt by the actions of a few. Savings and provisions for retirement plans were extinguished. Jobs were lost. One of the world’s largest accounting firms that made its home in this city and whose reputation was once like sterling on silver is gone.

Do these recent experiences involve more than just a blip in the evolution of understanding how best to manage and balance those ever-present human

factors of greed, self-interest, bias, power and deceit with appropriate checks and balances of government supervision, control and, yes, more rules and regulation? Or, as we seek a solution, is there something more at work that is fundamental to understanding human behavior and that is essential to the development of moral and ethical leadership - a reformation of our thought and action – a call for a renewed focus on the development of the character and integrity of the leader?

Now, as I ask these questions, I realize that we are currently running pell-mell down the road of seeking to solve many of these ethical issues with more legislative answers and more rules of compliance.

From my experience of serving on the board of directors of several public companies, I can tell you that senior management and board members are currently consumed in seeking to understand and respond to all of the new rules and issues of process, structure and compliance that are being added by these new legislative initiatives. There is a need for better corporate governance, but legislation or more rules will not provide a complete answer.

Effective and responsible leadership starts with the ability of a leader to define reality and, in so doing, to understand the essence of their own human nature and the human nature of the people they are leading. It is important for a leader not only to be concerned about what people do and how they do it, but also

to ask the deeper question of why people do their work and who they are becoming in the process.

Our humanity cannot be defined by a set of rules or solely by examining our physical or rational nature. Our humanity is unique in that it also has a moral and spiritual side. It is the spiritual side of humanity that influences character – our ability to determine right and wrong - to recognize good and evil – to make moral judgments – to love or to hate – to develop a philosophy of life – a world view, if you will, that can provide a leader with a moral and ethical framework and standard that is not relative and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Henry Ford once said: Why do I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands? Often, that is the way we look at people in business. We talk about people being units of production or the cost of labor in a P & L. As we downsize or re-engineer an organization, can we downsize or re-engineer people? In fact, people do not come to us as just a pair of hands. They come to us as whole people and they must be understood and led as such.

Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and 1993 Nobel Prize winner, recently authored a book titled *The Fourth Great Awakening*, in which he traced the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present. As he analyzed the effect of religious

faith upon the history of our society and economy, he concluded that the biggest issue today in our culture is not the lack of employment opportunities or even the distribution of economic resources. Nor, in his judgment, is it a lack of diversity or equal opportunity. In his opinion, the major issue is simply a lack of the distribution of what he refers to as spiritual resources or spiritual assets. There is, he concludes, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs.

In his book *The Death of Character*, James Hunter, a noted sociologist from the University of Virginia, concludes that while Americans are innately as capable of developing character as they ever were in the past, there are now few cultural or institutional guidelines in our society that call for its cultivation or maintenance. The reason, he suggests, is because there is no consensus of moral authority.

If there is a void in the development of character and a lack of consensus of moral authority, how do we then lead in nurturing and developing a spiritual and moral dimension and the practice of right behavior? Will the answer to this question have anything to do with how you promote and implement the Four Way Test in the future?

History has taught us that there is a definite association between the individual character of the leaders of a society and the collective well-being of those being led. Plato suggested that if the leaders were not people of character, eventually there would be social disintegration.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his classic work, *Gulag Archipelago*, recognized that a line between good and evil passes through every human heart. He suggested that even within hearts overwhelmed by evil there was one small bridgehead of good, and even in the best of hearts, there remained a small corner of evil. His conclusion was that it was impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it was possible to recognize it and constrain it. For Solzhenitsyn, that source of truth and constraint came from God, an authority beyond himself.

So where does the development of character and integrity, or the exercise of self-restraint of impulses of evil and greed, come from in our pluralistic society, especially in a business environment?

Can the business firm of the 21st century become a moral community to help develop human character? A community that is focused on the dignity and worth of every person? A community with a soul?

As we mix the skills and talents of people at work, and work becomes a place where we attempt to accomplish certain social goals as we seek to correct the imbalances in the mix of opportunity, culture, race, and gender, can't we also be about the process of developing the whole person and nurture their character and spiritual development? Why is this not also part of the social responsibility of the firm?

Now as I raise these questions, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader but, as I have already mentioned, simply a business person. Someone who over a 25-year period has participated in the leadership of a fast-growing and dynamic service company that we called ServiceMaster.

As I have now retired from those leadership responsibilities and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a premium return for our shareholders. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be told in the changed and improved lives of people I have led.

As a business firm, during my leadership we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these

rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be a community to help shape human character - an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of his or her faith with their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning and understanding. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

My experience confirmed Peter Drucker's conclusions: that people work for a cause not just a living and that mission and purpose were important organizing and sustaining principles for the firm. Our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated

standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

Now for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways that I found to lead in the development of our firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet - that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did. My ethic became a reality as I was able to serve those I led.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster team and I will close my remarks today with a story of that learning experience.

My predecessors in the business, Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of the Company, and Ken Wessner, who was then President and CEO of the Company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. In the selling of the job, it was suggested that I, along with others, would be considered in the future for the CEO position of the Company.

The interviewing process took several months and as we were coming to what I thought of as the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided that I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could become CEO, Ken Hansen stood up and told me the interview was over. Ken Wessner then ushered me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that it was over. I had blown the opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to have breakfast with him to discuss what had happened in his office. When we sat down for breakfast, he simply said: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent on a title or position or ultimately the CEO's position, then you will be disappointed. To be successful at ServiceMaster, you will have to learn to put the interest of others ahead of your own.

His point was very simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Determine at the front end whether the leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first. Know whether he or she can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

I took the job and Ken in his own way tested my commitment and understanding of what he had told me. I spent the first six weeks of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

Later on in my career the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights

and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon. A result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

In seeking to lead an organization as a moral community for the development of human character, one should recognize that it is not always comfortable. At times it feels like you are in a rowboat rowing upstream. There will always be an abundance of skeptics with questions raised regarding a standard that seeks truth, fairness and good will or which mixes the principles of faith and work or God and profit.

As you well know, the values and moral standards that I have referred to in these remarks are not new. They are timeless. They represent an ethic that can be applied to the leadership of any organization or institution of society.

We should never allow ourselves to be caught in that Machiavellian trap of concluding that the difference that sometimes exists between how people live and how they ought to live is so great that we should abandon standards of right

behavior and accept a result that excuses wrong and forsakes the responsibility to do good.

Rather, we should recognize that the leadership of people is truly a soul craft that involves both the moral and spiritual dimension of the leader and the people being led.

Character and integrity can be developed and learned. Leadership must set the example. People's minds and hearts need to be touched and, in some cases, transformed. It is not simply an issue of more legal process, structure, and mechanical rules.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - they are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit." What is a business without people? What is corporate governance without integrity? What is leadership without the example of service and an ethic of right behavior?

For me, seeking to serve as I have led has been the salt and light of what I believe – the reality of my faith.

As you look forward to the role of Rotary in this new century, I encourage you to continue your efforts in community service and promoting ethical practices. In so doing, I also encourage you to focus on the development of character with a quest for seeking to know and understand the source for moral authority. It will, I suggest, provide a lasting vitality for the Four Way Test.

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Revised 2/10/05