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Leading by Serving - Renewal of Focus on Others

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HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL CLUB
OF CHICAGO
UNION LEAGUE CLUB
TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1992

"LEADING BY SERVING - RENEWAL OF
FOCUS ON OTHERS"

C. William Pollard, Chairman
The ServiceMaster Company
Downers Grove, Illinois

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice, dislocation and discontinuity.

Peter Drucker refers to it as the "Post-Business Society" where a growing number of unrelated micro-economic decisions of the firm and the individual have a cumulative international consequence with uncharted and many times unpredictable results for any one national economy or business society. Charles Handy refers to it as the "Age of Unreason," with what he calls a corresponding need for "upside-down thinking." Those in the liberal arts discuss our period of time in terms of Post-Modernism and deconstructionism, which for some of us is nothing more or less than intellectual anarchy.

But whatever the view or label for this rapidity of change and lack of predictability of the events that swirl around us, I would like to suggest that in a crucible of uncertainty there is great opportunity for positive direction, provided that those of us who have been trained to think, lead.

To lead in a way that recognizes rank or position does not confer privilege but instead entails responsibility and that as leaders the required standard of integrity always involves full disclosure and a pattern of behavior that is consistent with what is said or expected of others. To put it in a more simple way: if a leader doesn't live it, he doesn't believe it.

It is the business environment that such leadership matters, for people are looking for a mission and purpose in their work. They are seeking to understand the whys and purpose of their job, not simply the how-tos. They have a growing appetite for more participation and ownership in their work. People are increasingly looking at the work environment for security and in some cases relief from the confusion and discontinuity that may exist in their personal lives. It is these same people who need to be nurtured and encouraged, motivated--yes--even educated in their work.

The firm must become a learning environment as well as an organization of production. There must be an opportunity for the learners or workers, if you will, to own the results of their learning. There must be a continued focus on developing people's gifts and talents, not simply correcting their deficiencies. People are hired for what they can do, not for what they cannot do.

It is also in the work environment that people learn to accept and apply value systems as they relate to each other, and to the customers of the firm. Every day we ask these front line

managers or production people to make value judgments as they serve a customer or produce a product. As people they have the capacity to either love or hate, to care or to hurt, to detract or to contribute, to be a positive or negative force in the quest for quality improvement.

I believe that people all respond to a clear definition of the task and recognition for a job well done, and that they can grow in their self-esteem and well-being as they learn to serve and contribute to others. They can find dignity and purpose in their work.

As I come to this conclusion, I do so as from my experience as one seeking to lead in ServiceMaster, a public company with revenues in excess of \$3 billion, serving over 1300 health care institutions, 500 colleges, universities and public school districts, and 100 major industrial facilities; and providing a variety of specialty services to over 3.5 million home owners. A company that has experienced a dynamic growth rate, doubling in size every three years for the past 21 years. A company that has experienced and continues to experience accelerated change. Over two-thirds of our present volume represents new businesses that have been initiated or acquired within the last ten years. We have changed the form of operating our business from a traditional corporate form to partnership form, and we have over 50,000 partners with their partnership units traded on the New York Stock Exchange. We now compete in a global economy with operations located in 20 foreign countries stretching from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. Our future and survival is simply dependent upon over 150,000 people, most of them located in our customer's environment and with many different skills and talents, doing what is right in providing a quality service.

There is much about our business that may be classified as routine or mundane. We are often dealing with people in entry level positions, unskilled, many times uneducated and more often than not, unnoticed. The task before us is to train, motivate, and develop these people so that they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work, and--yes--even be better people. This is both a management and a leadership challenge. For us in ServiceMaster it is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is in fact a mission, a way of life.

Our company objectives are simply stated: to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably. These first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operations of our business, they provide for us a reference point for what we do and how we determine that which is right and seek to avoid that which is wrong. They in effect define our mission.

It means that in the first instance, we seek to recognize the dignity and worth of every person as being created in God's image. Thus our role as managers involve more than just what a person does on the job. We also must be involved in what that person is becoming as a whole person and how the work environment is contributing to the process.

Peter Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. For us in ServiceMaster, we should not stop there but must take the next step and ask the basic question what is happening to the person is the process. Is she growing as an individual who can contribute, not only in her work environment but also in her home and her community? Do I

as a manager and leader have a positive influence on the growth of this individual or person? Stressing this value, as you might anticipate, affects one's view of the importance and scope of training. The task involved is more than training a person to use the right tools to complete the assigned task within a defined period. It also involves how that person feels about her work and about herself and her contribution to the well-being of the people being served, whether they be patient, student, or home owner. This means that if I am to be involved in the management 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 training and actually doing the task that she will ultimately manage others to do.

We are all born, says W. Edwards Deming, with an intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, and curiosity to learn. It is the recognition of that basic principle that has been the single most important ingredient of our growth and success. It is not unique to what we do, but instead is a common and consistent element that can be encouraged and developed in any firm.

For this people potential to be realized, the leaders of the firm cannot be just bystanders or hired guns there for the short term or for their own personal benefit. They must be committed and risk the investment of themselves in the people and mission of the firm. An enterprise cannot function to its capacity unless its people can rely upon the covenants and commitments of their leaders. This is more than just something formalized into a written agreement. It goes far beyond the covenants usually contained in any legal employment document. It extends to people who are relying upon the leader for their future. It is that group to whom the leader is truly bound, bound without any formal writing to provide opportunities to grow and develop. Momentum and growth of a business is a prime responsibility of the leader. It is momentum that builds the muscle of relationships within the firm. It is our "word" and promises to each other that provides a framework for those relationships to grow. So a leader must keep his promises to the people of the firm even if it is at her own personal risk and sacrifice.

To be effective in such an environment, the leader must always be prepared to serve. In simple terms, a leader must always be ready to do any of the tasks that are asked of others in the firm. To listen and learn before they talk. To walk the talk as role models and teachers for their associates and not to be caught up in the perks of office. To recognize the need for a flat organization so that they can keep themselves available and vulnerable to the most important person in the firm: the person closest to the customer. They must be frantic learners and not fall into the trap of some executives who seem to enjoy an arrogance of ignorance as they sit in the executive suite. They must be sure why their business exists and why it should exist in the future and realize that unless they are initiating and involved in creating new opportunities for others, they are not doing their job. They must be action oriented, doers, not administrators. They must be change makers, committed to be givers, not takers from the firm and those they lead. They must be prepared to be surprised by potential of those they lead and not allow appearance or unorthodox behavior to mold judgment. (Here cite example of ring in ear.) They must learn to be both an orchestra conductor and a missionary. A cheerleader and an interpreter. Such a leader must learn and apply the principle of subsidiarity. This principle simply means that it is an injustice or grave evil for a large and higher organization or a person with a more powerful

position to retain functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller or lower bodies or subordinates. In other words, to steal a person's ability or right to make a decision is wrong.

It is this type of leader who will recognize that the businesses of tomorrow will move work to where the people are, rather than people to where the work is, and will increasingly farm out or reduce those activities that are not essential to the core mission of the firm. It is also this type of leader who will encourage employment to be viewed as a continuing process of contributing one's skills and talents, not a job 9 to 5, not something that is over at retirement, not something that is measured by what you are paid or how big your office is, not something that is limited to a particular location or begins when I graduate from college or graduate school or is limited to one employer, opportunity, or career.

This type of leadership may be viewed by some as often mundane, unromantic, and boring. Its essence, however, is in the performance and results of the people who are being led.

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, short stories, novels, plays, and radio and television scripts are generally obscure and esoteric works stressing the absurdity and despair of life. His characters are typically engaged in meaningless habits to occupy their time but have no purpose or mission and accomplish nothing. As he spoke with unflinching honesty about the emptiness of life without a mission or purpose, he may well have been describing the modern day worker in an environment of accelerated change and choice, dislocation and discontinuity. This is not how things have to be. The leader who is willing to serve provides hope, not despair. An example for those who want mission and purpose in their work and are prepared to accomplish more than the defined task.

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