


October 13th, 2000

The Leader Who Serves (Duluth, MN)

C. William Pollard

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard_papers

 Part of the [Business Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Health and Medical Administration Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pollard, C. William, "The Leader Who Serves (Duluth, MN)" (2000). *C. William Pollard Papers*. 125.
https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/pollard_papers/125

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Work and Faith at Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in C. William Pollard Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

**Benedictine Health System
Duluth MN
October 13, 2000**

“The Leader Who Serves”

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

I count it a special privilege to be with you today and participate in your Trustee Leadership Conference. As trustees of hospitals and long-term care facilities that are part of the Benedictine Health System, you represent organizations with faith-based philosophy that, over the years, have consistently added dimension to our health care delivery system. A dimension of mission and purpose that extends to the spiritual welfare as well as the physical welfare of your patients. A recognition that it is the whole person that you are serving.

In one of his many essays defending and explaining the Christian faith, C.S. Lewis, the famous author and scholar from Oxford University, concluded “Nothing seems more obvious than that religious persons should care for the sick; no Christian building, except perhaps a Church, is more self-explanatory of our faith than a Christian hospital or care partner.”

But is that statement still relevant today? Does this added dimension fit with the growing requirement of running your care facility as a business? Does it fit with the added regulatory environment that you all face? During the past 20 years, the health care delivery system in this country has gone through a series of “cost control” programs designed to make it more efficient, if not more effective.

These programs have had different labels: DRGs, HMOs, PPOs, managed

care, compliance audits, but they all have the same objective, i.e., to control costs on a central, uniform basis. As these forces of regulation continue to squeeze the turnip, with the hospital or long-term care facility being the primary target because it is often the easiest for government to grab and squeeze, is it still possible to keep the light on of mission and purpose in our faith-based health care facilities?

How do we continue to motivate our nurses, our doctors, our employees and our managers to care for the whole person?

The Benedictine way of living recognizes that attending the sick provides an opportunity for us to enter into a fuller dimension of a fruitful life. St. Benedict set the standard when he said: “No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself but instead what he judges better for someone else.” But how do we make these words, these fundamental principles of life and service work in our highly sophisticated and complicated organizations that are experiencing extraordinary pressures of change?

In response to that question, I want to share with you today some thoughts on leadership. Leadership that is value-driven and service-focused. Leadership that develops the soul of this organization. Leadership that cares for the people being served and the people providing the service.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first understand one’s self as a means of making contributions to others. **Know thyself** was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers, to use one’s talents to the utmost, one must have discretion and direction. His advice was **control thyself**. But another great thinker suggested service to others, especially those you seek to lead or are responsible for – **give thyself** were words spoken by Jesus as He washed His

disciples' feet. In so doing, He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

But does this example fit in today's world 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash and towels are always available. The only limitation, if there is one, involves us. Are we willing to be on our hands and knees, to compromise our pride and status, to be involved and to have compassion for those we lead, those we work with, and those we are responsible to govern?

Will the real leader stand up? Not the president or the person with the most distinguished title or the longest tenure, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the group, but the risk taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself or herself but the promoter of others. Not the taker but the giver. Not the talker but the listener.

Now as I share with you this principle of servant leadership, I do so not as a philosopher or an educator, a political or religious leader, but simply as a business person – someone who is seeking to lead a fast growing, dynamic service company we call ServiceMaster.

We have experienced rapid growth over the last 25 years with system-wide revenues now in excess of \$7 billion. We employ or manage over 250,000 people providing services in hospitals, long term care facilities, educational institutions, businesses and over 10 million homes. We are located in the United States and in over 40 foreign countries. We are a public company and our shares are listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange. And yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter. The shareholders that I am responsible to vote every day on my leadership

and have a choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting to you today is that the measure of our business success, or my success as a leader, is not just in the value of our shares or the profit we produce. It more importantly relates to the people we work with and serve. People who are looking for opportunity. People who are looking for leadership. People who are looking for leaders who will serve and leaders they can trust.

Although most of my experience has come from the market place with its own litmus test of the bottom line, there are certain principles – people principles if you will – that are universal - that are also, by the way, cross cultural. They apply to any organization of people working together, whether that organization is a business, an educational or a health care institution.

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, repair home appliances. Over 2/3 of what we are doing today we were not doing 10 years ago. We are an organization in constant change.

The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve 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. In ServiceMaster, it is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is, in fact, our mission of developing the soul of our firm.

The headquarters of our firm is in a low, long tan-colored building in Downers Grove, Illinois, just west of Chicago. When you walk into the large two-

story lobby, on your right is a curving marble wall - 90 feet long, 18 feet tall. Carved in the stone of that wall in letters 8 feet high are four statements that constitute our objectives:

To honor God in all we do;
To help people develop;
To pursue excellence; and
To grow profitably.

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 don't 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. It is our mission statement - short enough to remember - controversial enough to cause one to stop and think - and significant enough to be timeless.

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 avoid that which is wrong.

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 the differences, potential, and worth of every individual.

It does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our

share of mistakes, but because of the stated standard and reason for that standard we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out into the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that should be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It is a living set of principles that allows us to confront the difficulties and failures that are all a part of life and running a business with the assurance that our starting point and mission never changes.

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a purpose statement of any public company or organization. But regardless of a person's starting point, the principle that can be embraced by all is where it leads us and that is to the dignity and worth of every person. It can become a living principle in the mission of any organization. It is fundamental to the understanding of serving as you seek to lead – of motivating people to serve and care as they also seek to become more effective and productive in their work.

So for us, people are not just economic animals or non-personal production units. Every person has their own fingerprint of personality and potential. And we believe that the work environment can become a place where the spirit and soul of a person is enriched by what they do as they learn and as they serve and contribute to others.

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 plan have a tendency to become mechanical or manipulative. In so doing, there is a

drive to define a system that will idiot-proof the process which in turn can make people feel like idiots. Fortune Magazine recently described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within, and sighted Henry Ford's quote as descriptive: "Why is it I always get the whole person, when what I really want is just a pair of hands?"

For servant leadership to become a reality in any organization, leaders must **first** be prepared to walk in the shoes of those they lead. In ServiceMaster this means that as part of leadership training, we should experience what it is like to do the hands-on service work and to feel the emotions of those I'm going to lead and manage.

Let me share with you some very practical and real life examples of just how this has worked in my life.

At the time when I first joined ServiceMaster over twenty years ago, my predecessors, Ken Hansen who was then Chairman of the company, and Ken Wessner, who was President and CEO of the company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to come and head up the legal and financial affairs of the company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

In the selling of the job, they 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 was 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 said the interview was over. Ken Wessner led me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster, 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 the interview. I accepted the offer and at breakfast he made clear to me his teachable point of view. 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 upon a title, position or ultimately the CEO position, then you will be disappointed. It is up to you.

The point was simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Leaders in ServiceMaster, to be successful, must have or develop a true servant's heart. I took the job and Ken, in his own way, tested me at the front end. I spent the first six weeks in ServiceMaster out cleaning floors and doing maintenance work, which are all part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was – as a leader I needed to be a servant, and that I should never ask someone to do something I was not first willing to do.

Second, a servant leader believes in the people he or she leads and is always ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine tells of an experience that has been a great reminder to me of this point. It is often the custom of 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 and said thanks, and with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his

earlobe 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 the leaders responsibility to set the tone, to learn to accept the differences of people, and to seek to provide an environment where different people contribute as part of the whole and so to strengthen the group, and achieve unity in diversity.

Third, servant leaders should 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. They should always be willing to do whatever they ask of others. 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.

Fourth, the servant leader must be committed, not a bystander or simply a holder of position. He or she is there for the long-term. No enterprise can function to its capacity nor can its people expect a healthy organizational culture unless they can rely upon the covenants and commitments of their leaders. This goes beyond the covenants usually contained in an employment agreement or in a legal document. It extends to the people who day-by-day are relying upon the leader for their future. It is fulfilling a leader's campaign promises. It is the leader's obligation or, as some have described it, "their posture of indebtedness".

Fifth, servant leaders have a love and care for the people they lead.

Several years ago, I was traveling in what was then the Soviet Union. I had been asked to give several lectures at major universities 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 tasks. With the help of an interpreter, I engaged her in conversation and noted the tools she had to work with.

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 the other. The reality of Olga's job 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 results.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I'm sure you could have eaten off the floor of 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 its 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, Kamula, as 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 work. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning

patient rooms, providing a detailed before and after description. She was proud of her work. She owned the result. Why? Because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her for her accomplishments. She had dignity in her work. She was looking forward to her next accomplishment. She was thankful.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow, the other New Dehli, and their race and 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 she 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 their work environment. In one case, the mission of the organization involved the development of the person. In the other case the objective was to provide activity and call it work.

So can an organization be a moral community for the shaping of human character and behavior and also deliver a service with a human touch? This, I suggest, is the greatest challenge we have as leaders of organizations that stand for a mission and purpose that extends beyond the most efficient task or lowest cost procedure. Where do people fit in the delivery of health care? The people who serve and the people being served in your hospitals cannot be measured solely in economic terms. There is no outcome determinative or measurement standard that goes to the feelings or spiritual side of a sick patient. When you limit your outlook to economic motivations, patients and health care workers are viewed as subhuman, with the resulting abuses we have all read about.

Leadership is both an art and a science. The results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace. The story will be told in the changed lives of people. As we seek to lead our organizations as moral communities, we should recognize that it is not always comfortable. At times it feels like you are in a rowboat in the middle of an ocean. There is an audience of skeptics with questions raised regarding the appropriateness of mixing our faith standards with our work environment.

For me, the common link between my faith and my work is people - people created in God's image. It was C. S. Lewis who said: "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 business without people? What is health care without people? What is a world without God? I conclude my remarks 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.

You have a tradition of adding an extra dimension to the delivery of healthcare. As trustees responsible to govern, I encourage you to continue to nurture and lead the Christian-based mission and purpose of your organization. In times of change it provides hope, a light, a beacon if you will, that guides people to do the right thing in serving others and to grow and develop in the process.

10/10/00