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# The Leader Who Serves (Colorado Springs, CO)

C. William Pollard

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**Christian Management Association  
Rocky Mountain Regional Christian Management Institute  
Colorado Springs CO  
September 12, 2001**

**“The Leader Who Serves”**

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

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To serve as one leads, does not come naturally nor does normal organizational behavior encourage it. The perks, hierarchy and perception of title and position and the ambition of the leader to succeed often get in the way. A leader who feels he or she has arrived in understanding or implementing the role of a servant more likely than not has failed to understand the scope and depth of the subject.

Now the context or reference point for my comments today come from my experience in ServiceMaster. For the last 25 years, I have participated in the leadership and growth of our Company. Annual revenues now are almost \$8 billion and we serve more than 12 million customers in the United States and 44 foreign countries with the responsibility to manage and employ over 250,000 people.

We have experienced a lot of change over this period and as part of the dynamics of our market, we can anticipate more change in the future. Eighty-five

percent of the services we are delivering today we were not doing just ten years ago. But there is one thing that hasn't changed during this period and that is our purpose for being in business. Our Company objectives are simply stated: To honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably.

The first two objectives are end goals; the second two are means goals. They are the reason or purpose for why we are in business.

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, regardless of title, position, faith, choice or label, has been created in the image of God, with dignity, worth and great potential. They have become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals, not just with economic and physical needs, but also with intellectual and spiritual needs. It requires us to ask the basic question: Who people are and why they work, not just what they do and how they do it.

We do not use our first objective as a basis for 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. 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, forgiveness.

These objectives cause us to think and rethink about who we are and why we work, not just what we do and how we do it and to seek a purpose and meaning in it all.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first understand one's self as a means of making a contribution to others. "Know thyself" was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers that to use one's talents to the utmost, one must have discernment, discretion and direction. His advice was "control thyself." Another great thinker suggested service to others. "Give thyself" were the words spoken by Jesus as He washed His disciples' feet.

Does this example fit into 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, is with the leader. Are we willing, figuratively or actually, to be on our hands and knees, to compromise our pride and status, to be involved and to have compassion for those we lead and those we work with?

Now I realize I come from the environment of a business firm. We want to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we don't want to play by these rules, we don't belong in the ballgame. I am also a person of faith, I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. The definition brings clarity and allows for order and a systematic way of thinking. It can, however, also set boundary lines, determine limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive in shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How, then, do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace? As a leader in business, as a leader of large public company, how do I integrate my faith and my work? How do I touch the spiritual side of people within my community and business?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive, tolerant and acceptable? Water it down so as to be not so offensive? Or do I maintain that old separation between the sacred and the secular and simply accept the premise that religion and business don't mix? Or do I use my leadership to impose my faith or propagate my faith? Or simply do I live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and yes, even be embraced by some, all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generates a profit.

I have chosen the latter, and one of the best ways that I have found for me to live and share my faith is to serve as I lead and seek to reflect the principle that Jesus 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.

Does this principle fit your leadership? If it is working in the context of a business firm, should it work within the context of a Christian organization? It requires of a leader a mindset and commitment of never asking someone to do something that the leader is not willing to do himself or herself. In our company, we use a simple practice to help remind every leader of this principle. (Here explain WeServe Day.)

I learned an important lesson about service and contribution when I first joined ServiceMaster. My predecessors, 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 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 the details and the 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 in the middle of the meeting and said “Bill, the interview is over.” Ken Wessner then 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 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 job, then you will be disappointed. It is up to you.

His point was very simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Leaders, to be successful in our Company, must have or develop a 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. I needed to walk in the shoes of those I was going to lead and to experience what it was like to do the hands on service work and to feel the emotions and difficulties of the task. To me, it was a great learning experience and helped to identify with the needs and concerns of our service workers.

Leadership should never be confused with a position or title. It cannot be appointed. The trust and confidence of followers must be earned. The leader, as

an example of a servant and contributor, is a significant part of that process. For me, this is an area where I am always learning. I can never become complacent.

We should believe in the people we lead and always be ready to be surprised by their potential and to be ready to accept their difference. 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 servant leader's 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.

We should make ourselves available. Our door should always be open. We should be out and about, talking and listening to people at all levels of the organization. We should always be willing to do whatever we 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.

We must be committed, not a bystander or simply a holder of position. 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 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".

One of the best ways I have found to communicate the extent of this obligation is to picture it as a debt, a liability if you will, on the balance sheet of a leader. (Here tell story of leadership and stock ownership.)

We must develop and nurture an environment where people are the subject of work and not just the object of work. (here tell the story of Olga and Nisha)

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 will the real leader please 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 administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener.

Leadership is both an art and a science. The results of servant leadership will be measured beyond the work place. The story will be told in the changed lives of people. In developing the social contract for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the business

firm must increasingly become a community - a community that seeks to develop human character and moral behavior. Leadership - servant leadership – can make the difference.

Listen as I close with these words from T. S. Eliot:

“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.”

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