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Eastern University PhD Program
St. David's, PA
May 19, 2010

“The Awesome Responsibility of Leadership”

C. William Pollard

I have looked forward to this time together and the opportunity to share some thoughts about leadership. I commend you for the time you are taking to further study this subject. In so doing you are fulfilling in part your responsibility as a leader. It is this “responsibility” of a leader that I want to discuss with you. It is an “Awesome Responsibility.”

Now the context for my remarks on this subject reflects, for the most part, my experience in business and the marketplace. The principles, however, are equally applicable to leadership responsibilities in any organizational effort that involves people.

During the last 24 months we have experienced a collapse in our financial markets, a domestic and global economic meltdown, foreclosures and unemployment at record levels, and an unprecedented involvement of government in an attempt to correct the situation. While more recently there have been signs of improvement, there is still much uncertainty about sustainability and the predictability of our markets.

We continue to seek an understanding of the causes for this collapse. Was it the self interest of profit seekers compounded by forces of unrestrained greed? Does it reflect a lack of a moral compass and duty of care in the underwriting, packaging, and selling of innovative securities? Was there a lapse or failure in sufficient government controls? Or was it the result of some combination of these factors and maybe others, including the inevitable up and down cycles of the market?

I believe that as we try to answer these questions, we should recognize the reality that it is people who make markets work; people who make governments work; people who make organizations work; people who can be right or wrong, good or evil, honest or dishonest, prudent or selfish. People who, in Peter Drucker's words, are imperfect, weak, sinners, and yet made in God's image and responsible for their actions.

President Obama, in reviewing what has occurred in our economy, suggested that “we have arrived at this point as a result of an era of profound irresponsibility that engulfed both private business firms and public institutions, including some of our largest corporations and the seats of power in Washington D.C.”

If he is accurate in his conclusion, what does responsible leadership look like? How do we implement it? Does responsible leadership also involve moral leadership? Can the ethical and moral judgments that are required in a dynamic and changing world be determined solely by more rules and regulations?

While legislative actions may bring a higher standard of accountability and provide a “stick” of more penalties for violations, they cannot assure the honesty, character, or responsible actions of a leader.

Drucker would say that responsible leadership first starts with understanding what leadership is all about.

He would then point out what leadership is not. It's not about “leadership qualities” or “charisma.” It's not about title or position. It is not in and of itself good or desirable. And then he would say that leadership is just a means – to what end is the crucial question – and Drucker would remind us that the end of leadership involves: the

people who follow, the direction they are headed, their growth and development, and the importance of achieving a beneficial result from their combined effort.

Drucker also would say that leadership should recognize that the management of people is not just the science of organizational structures, processes, and procedures, but it is also a liberal art. He would suggest that as we lead and manage people, we need to understand the nature of the human condition and recognize that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but also has a spiritual dimension. It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good and evil, and to make moral judgments. It is the driver for developing a philosophy of life and a world view that can provide a moral and ethical standard that is not relative and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. For Drucker, faith brought meaning and purpose to life. In his essay entitled “The Unfashionable Kierkegaard”, he quoted Kierkegaard as saying:

“Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy, but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him, time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature – not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center – and yet responsible and free.”

Thus, the learning and understanding of what it means to responsibly lead and manage people should not be divorced from questions of faith or the question of God. For some in the secular academy or in our secular society, this conclusion may be difficult to accept, but others are ready to recognize its validity.

In his book, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and a Nobel Prize winner, traced the history of religious faith in America and its effect on our society and economy. In so doing, Fogel concluded that a major issue in our culture today was simply a lack of a distribution of what he referred to as “spiritual assets”. There was, he said, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs. He also went on to say that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexities of ethical issues, it will have to acquire more “spiritual capital”. He wrote this, by the way, several years before the current economic collapse.

For us at ServiceMaster, we decided to be overt about the issue as we raised the question of God in our mission statement.

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 world.

As a business firm, 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 ball game. But also, we tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be 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. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

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.

Fortune Magazine has described the soulless organization as suffering from an enemy within and cites a quote from Henry Ford as being descriptive of many business leaders when he said: “Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?”

In responding to that whole person who comes to work every day, the responsibility of the leader must go beyond getting the right things done through others. He or she also must be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. Those people who are getting jobs done, who are accomplishing the mission of the organization, are also human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. In their work, they are in the process of becoming as well as doing. People need to be treated as the subject, not just the object of work. Let me share with you a story to illustrate this point.

Several years ago, I was traveling in Russia. I had been asked to give several talks on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city 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 task. I engaged her in conversation through the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to do her work. Olga had been given a T-frame for a mop, 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 another. The reality of Olga's task 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 result.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I am sure you could have eaten off the floor in 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 the 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, England. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Nisha, as the 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 job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patients' rooms, providing a detailed before –and–after ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next accomplishment, and she was thankful. You would have thought she owned the company.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, and their race, 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 proud of what she was doing, and she had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference had a lot to do with how they were treated and cared for in the work environment. In one case, the mission of the organization involved the development and recognition of their dignity and worth. In the other case, the objective was to provide activity and call it work.

Yes, regardless of the task, people can find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. They can develop a strong ethic that extends to the care for others; a sense of community and a willingness to give back and practice charity. Yes, they can develop a respect for the dignity and worth of their fellow workers and a willingness to serve as they have an opportunity to lead.

These are some of the values of character development.

But for this to occur, there must be leadership that is both responsible and moral. Leadership that is transparent and willing to lead and serve by example. Leadership:

- that knows what they believe and why they believe it;
- that knows where they are headed and why it is important for people to follow;
- that seeks to understand who people are and why they work and not just what they do and how they do it;
- that is willing to be an example in their private and public life of the reality of their faith and beliefs.

Our workplace is not just a place where we get things done; it also is a place that can be a moral community for the development of human character. A community that reflects a responsibility for the people within the community and the people served by the community. A community where it is okay to raise the question of God as the source for meaning and purpose in life.

As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a return for our shareholders that on average was 20% per year. 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 seen in the changed and improved lives of people I have led.

One of the best ways that I found to share and lead in the development of our firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – namely 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.

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 senior management team and spent the first two months of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. In so doing, I was beginning to understand what would be my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

Later on in my career, as I became CEO of the firm, 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.

Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person. In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

Unfortunately, there are often trappings around the position of leadership – the perks or prestige of the office and the arrogance of success can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers rather than focusing on their responsibility to others. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment unless it is nipped in the bud.

Let me share an example about learning a lesson from Peter Drucker that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and reflects the continuing need to be aware of the subtle effect of hubris.

One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter is that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in attendance, it would have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that our partner was upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason its leaders did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye. “Bill,” he said, “you are suffering from hubris. It’s time for you to eat some humble pie.” He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility when they think their pride is at risk. He pointed out that my job as leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild a relationship of trust. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide the people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was something that I could not delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka, and my meeting there accomplished the right result for our business and for our people. I did have to eat some humble pie. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and our people.

(Give example of 6 months later – Komai funeral)

For me, the world of business has become a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that has reached from a janitor’s closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. It has provided the opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

Now for me as a Christian, I characterize this as a Cross-Eyed view of leadership. The people I touch and lead should be able to see beyond me, beyond my accomplishments and knowledge, and become aware of who God is.

There always is a level playing field at the foot of the Cross. As the Apostle Paul reminded us, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. The often too-human distinctions, labels, and titles we place upon people are never a basis for preference when we serve as ambassadors of God's love. It is the world that He so loved with all of its differences and diversity.

A world that is looking for answers. Answers that you have been uniquely trained and prepared to give. Answers that, in my view, only the grace and atonement of the Cross can ultimately provide. Answers that relate to the unmet needs of people – people who are experiencing the pain of poverty – poverty of the mind, the soul, or the pocketbook. Answers and guidance that will help people to know and understand their faith, not only in terms of truth claims, but also to grasp the need to live and share those truths in a way that will engage, not alienate, those who do not believe the same way they do.

Such a Cross-eyed view of leadership will encourage people of faith to be both salt and light in the world of their families, their communities and their work.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated “serve” is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that’s right – our work, whatever it is, can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. Our work can become a center of our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

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