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Letter to the Editor of Harvard Business Review (Re: Businesses Being Dependent on People)

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



C. William Pollard
Chairman
ServiceMaster
Downers Grove, Illinois

As Peter Drucker reminds us, the events or forces of the future are already present. Can we identify and understand them? And if we can, how must we change and adapt? How shall we lead?

In all discussions of the future, there is one constant. Our businesses have been and will continue to be dependent on people—people who need to be trained, motivated, and productive. People who have the potential to innovate and improve. People who are both individuals and members of groups.

The challenge for leaders will be to understand and respond to how people are reacting, working, and thinking as the currents of change swirl around them. Companies will have to be much more than profit centers; they must also become social and moral communities for the development of human character and behavior.

Here are some of today's forces that we at ServiceMaster are seeking to understand:

■ Economies are becoming more global than national. The nation-state is becoming less relevant, but people are becoming more tribal. The tensions between individual rights and privileges and group benefits seem to be intensifying.

■ The lines between work and education are becoming increasingly blurred. The explosion of knowledge and access to information in combination with rapidly changing job requirements reinforces the need mentioned by Peter Senge for continuous learning.

■ Mobility and flexibility of access to information have dramatically changed how, where, and when work can be accomplished. As we are able to move work to where the worker is, leaders are confronting new challenges in connecting and managing a highly mobile and dispersed workforce.

■ Technology is turning our homes into on-line centers for work, entertainment, education, and purchasing. As the peace of the worker's castle dwindles with each new onslaught of technological innovation, people will need more solitude and security from other sources—including their employers.

■ Continued improvement in the processing and analysis of information should improve productivity in thinking and decision making. But leaders must understand the routine aspects of problem solving that can best be done by computer. And to identify the forest from the growing variety of trees, leaders will need a framework for direction and decision—Charles Handy's "consistent set of values."

■ The availability of information will make organizations and their leadership increasingly transparent. As Esther Dyson points out, candor will be the best way to earn credibility. A leader will be an open book—whether he or she walks the talk will be known by all.

■ The demand for more flexibility in production, distribution, and service may lead to a time when "jobs" and "titles" as we now think of them are no longer relevant. In a post-job world, a leader's responsibility will be to provide workers with the opportunity to contribute to a company's mission.

As change accelerates and more information and choices become available, leaders will be called on to understand more about who people are and why they work, not just what people do and how they do it. Leaders will need a philosophy of life and work, a generous heart, resiliency and vulnerability, a passion for excellence, and a penchant for productivity. Organizations will need to have a mission that extends beyond the bottom line even as they continue to emphasize it, and they will have to care for people as the subject of work, not just its object.