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The Awesome Responsibility of Leadership (Chicago)

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Booth Graduate School of Business

Chicago, Illinois

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“The Awesome Responsibility of Leadership”

In Peter Drucker’s words: “A leader has only one choice to make – to lead or mislead.” He would go on to say a leader must know what he believes and why he believes it. He must know where he is going and why it is important for people to follow. He would then conclude that when there is misleadership or an absence thereof, there will be detrimental results – a net loss to the people who are following. There is no middle ground.

For Drucker, leadership was not about what is often emphasized in many of the popular books on leadership, including “leadership qualities,” “personality traits,” “charisma,” or a list of the “seven or ten characteristics of a good leader.” Leadership was not about a title or position, it was not in and of itself, good or desirable. Drucker would then go on and say that leadership was just a “means”. To “what end” was the crucial question.

For Drucker, and for me, the end of leadership is the people who follow, the direction they are headed, and who they are becoming.

To accomplish this end objective, Drucker would emphasize that a leader must understand the make-up of the human condition and recognize that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but it 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, to make moral judgments, and to know God and understand His redemptive love.

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 said:

"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.”

One of the reasons why Drucker was so interested in ServiceMaster was our mission as incorporated in our four objectives: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. He saw us not just as a business firm making money by serving customers, but also as a moral community held together by a commitment to a common purpose of seeking to develop the whole person.

For us, leadership was not just a duty or a function of title or rank; it involved seeking to fulfill our obligation to develop the people who followed. Max DePree, in his book *Leadership Is an Art*, has referred to this obligation as the posture of indebtedness of a leader.

One of the best ways I found to communicate this responsibility and obligation of leadership was to picture it as a debt – a liability, if you will – on the balance sheet of the leader.

One of our customs at ServiceMaster, when a person was given the opportunity to assume a significant leadership position, was to provide that person an opportunity to purchase some ServiceMaster stock.

I can remember a time when I was discussing this opportunity with one of our newly appointed officers. He had asked to see me because he was unsure about whether he wanted to purchase more stock.

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How was he going to contribute to their growth and development as a person, who they were becoming, not just what they were doing? How was he going to honor God in his leadership – was he prepared to respond to their spiritual needs?

After this discussion, he asked for some more time – not only to think about whether he would buy the stock but also about whether he wanted to take on the obligation of the new assignment. For me, this was a positive sign. He was beginning to realize the awesome responsibility of leadership and the obligation he would be assuming to the people who would follow.

A few days later he called me and said he was ready to assume the obligation of leadership and he would buy the stock. A year later, his leadership was making a big difference in the lives of the people he was

leading and in the performance of his division. He was learning more about what it meant to be a servant leader.

Servant leadership is not a new idea. It has roots in the teachings of Jesus as he met with disciples the night before He was betrayed. It would be the last time He would be with them before He was crucified.

As He took a towel and a basin of water and washed their feet, he was reminding them of what would become a changing role for them in the future. They would no longer be disciples. They would become leaders in spreading the word of God's redeeming love and in building His church.

He was teaching them in a very practical and poignant way that to be effective as leaders of His church, it would not be about them - their titles, or positions of authority, or platform that they would assume. Instead, it was about the people who would follow and the nurturing and growth of those people in their faith and example of life so that they would be able to multiply themselves in the lives of others.

Does this example fit in today's world more than 2,000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash and towels are always available. I suggest that the only limitation, if there is one, is the ability of

people in leadership to exercise a spirit of being humble, to subordinate self, and to become engaged with compassion for those they lead. When we lead by serving, we assume a commitment to be an example in both our public and private life for others to follow, to be an initiator for change and growth, and to be always willing to do whatever we ask others to do.

Servant leadership has always been a learning experience for me. One of those lessons of learning occurred when I first joined ServiceMaster.

I had been recruited to join the company by Ken Hansen, who was then its Chairman, and Ken Wessner, who was then President and CEO.

The two Kens wanted me to come to the firm and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. During the recruiting process, they had shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided I

needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this company.

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There were lessons for me to learn, including: “never give a title or position to someone who can’t live without it;” “determine at the front end:

- whether a leader’s self-interest or the interest of others will come first;
- whether a leader is willing to do what they ask others to do;
- whether a leader has the heart and commitment to develop people.”

As I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a senior vice president, I spent my days out working with the service workers doing the service tasks that we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 10 million customers in 45 different countries. This

experience often reminded me of my own imperfections, the need to admit my mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and seek guidance from above.

When I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those I was committed to serve.

Unfortunately, there are often many trappings that go with a position of leadership, including the perks and prestige of the office and the arrogance of success that can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment and effectiveness unless it is nipped in the bud.

An example from my own experience may be helpful to illustrate this point. One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter Drucker was 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.

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“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 and be consumed by pride and self. He pointed out that my job as a leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild the relationship. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide to people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was not something I could delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka and my meeting there with the president of our business partner and his team accomplished the right result for our business and for our people as we renewed our relationship with them. 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 for our people.

There is another chapter to this story. Six months after this meeting, the president of our business partner in Japan suddenly died of a heart attack. Soon after I heard the news, his wife contacted me and asked me if I would come to Japan and participate in his funeral ceremony.

I was honored to do so but frankly I was somewhat perplexed about how I could do so in a way that would reflect the sincerity of our friendship and also to share the great hope of my faith and the truth of God's redeeming love. I knew it would be a traditional Japanese funeral ceremony led by both a Buddhist monk and a Shinto priest. I wanted to speak the truth of my faith but I did not want my words to disrupt or offend.

I decided to share some of what we discussed when we had our last meeting, including the importance of forgiveness in building relationships of trust. I then closed with a word of what God's forgiveness had meant in my life and His offer of forgiveness for all who would receive it. My message was well received. And once again God, in His wisdom, used the doing of business to cross the lines of culture and faith to honor the truth of His Word.

Actions often speak louder than than words. If I had not made that trip to Osaka six months earlier and eaten some humble pie, there would not have been the opportunity for me to speak and share my faith six months later.

Mistakes in leading people are often painful. Implicit in leadership is the power and authority to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but 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.

Sometimes in seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk that were influencing substandard performance of the individuals involved. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of seeking to serve as you lead and, yes, often results in a growing relationship of trust with those you lead.

Our objectives were a constant reminder that there was only one standard when it came to the treatment of people. It required both fairness and accountability. They became an organizing principle for the firm wherever we operated. They were a self-correcting tool. When we made mistakes or acted in a way inconsistent with them, the mistakes were typically flushed out into the open for correction and or forgiveness.

So will the leader please stand up? Not the person with the title of president, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the firm, but the risk taker. Not the person with the most perks, but the servant. Not the person who is the promoter of self, but the promoter of others. Not the maintainer, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener. People want effective leadership – leadership they can trust, leadership that will nurture their soul, leadership that will make a difference in achieving meaningful results.

For me, the world of business became a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that 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 provided me the opportunity to embrace and engage those who did not believe the way I did, but whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

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. The marketplace reflects the world that He so loved with all of its differences and diversity. A world that needs both the salt and light of our faith and witness.

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.

Your time here at Booth is a time of preparation for what will no doubt include a leadership role – the choice will be yours – will you lead or mislead? Will you assume that awesome responsibility of developing those who will follow? Will you choose to serve and worship God in your leadership and your work?
