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Management as a Liberal Art

Putting people at the center.

IN GIVING ADVICE to leaders of both profit and nonprofit organizations, Peter Drucker often began by asking the question, "What is your business?" His purpose was not just to understand what the organization did and whether it was effective in so doing, but also to determine whether the organization's leadership understood its responsibility for the growth and development of the people producing the results. It was his way of introducing the subject of "management as a liberal art."

Yes, management is about getting the right things done through others. As a discipline, it involves the study and understanding of organizational structures, processes, and procedures for accomplishing common objectives and results. But at the center of it all are people. Every organization is a human community; therefore, the discipline of management also requires the understanding of the human condition. As such, it is truly a liberal art.

To be effective in managing people, a leader must draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities and social sciences. And as Drucker reminded us, the leader must also recognize that the human condition has a spiritual dimension. It is our spiritual side that influences the development of character and the ability to determine truth from falsehood, right from wrong, good from evil, love from hate, and to make the necessary moral judgments in life. Implementing management as a liberal art requires leaders to know their source of authority for determining moral behavior and a meaningful purpose for work

and life. In so doing, it raises the question of God and, for people of faith, the importance of integrating the claims of their faith with the demands of their work.

Christian leaders understand that our spiritual dimension also reflects the reality of our immortality and reminds us of our responsibility to provide a work environment that will contribute to the development of the whole person. The people in our organizations will spend most of their waking hours at work. How will our leadership effectively contribute to the people they are becoming?

To answer this question and fulfill our responsibility to the people we lead requires a focus on people as the subject, not just the object, of work. We must invest time and resources in the education, training, and development of people, not only to excel in their tasks, but also to grow into the people God wants them to be.

Management as a liberal art requires leaders to be transparent and willing to serve those they lead. We should practice what Jesus taught his disciples as he washed their feet. We should walk in the shoes of those we lead. We should never ask someone to do something we are not willing to do ourselves. The tone from the top should reflect and encourage a culture that recognizes and embraces the dignity and worth of every person regardless of rank, title, or position.

When management is practiced as a liberal art, the work environment becomes a catalyst for innovation, respect, and a performance level that often exceeds expectations.

What is your business? ●

C. WILLIAM POLLARD is chairman emeritus of the ServiceMaster Company and serves as a director of several other public companies and charitable, religious, and educational organizations. He is currently chairman of Wheaton College's board of trustees, and chairman of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's executive committee. He is the author of many books, including *The Soul of the Firm*.

Pollard was awarded the Christian Leadership Award at the 2007 Christian Leadership Alliance national conference in Dallas. This annual award honors individuals who have a proven record of excellence as a Christian steward in the areas of leadership, governance, best management practices, and resource development.

