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Surviving Selfishness

C. William Pollard

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**GREATER ORLANDO LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION
(GOLF)
ORLANDO FL
March 4, 2004
C. William Pollard
“Surviving Selfishness”**

Recently there was a series of articles in the Chicago Tribune on the state of business leadership or the lack thereof in America. The headline of the feature article was “Have We Sold Our Souls?” After reviewing the recent history of business scandals and examples of excessive greed, arrogance, deceit, and fraud, the author concluded that many business leaders were simply no longer able to define reality or discern truth. They had become so self-oriented that they were detached from a life of genuineness and caring for others – looking out for their self-interest instead of the interest of their employees, customers, and shareholders.

The title for my talk today is Surviving Selfishness. How do we then lead in our businesses and not lose touch with the reality of the needs and cares of our employees, our owners, and our customers? How can we serve as we lead?

What is business after all? What is your business? Here give example of Peter Drucker’s time with our Board of Directors.

Our business at ServiceMaster – your business – is people. They make it happen. Henry Ford was quoted as saying: “Why is it I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?” Too many times in the work environment people are viewed as just a pair of hands -- the object of work and not the subject of work.

So will the real leader please stand up? Not the person with the title of president, but the person who is a 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 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. People want effective leadership – leadership they can trust – leadership that nurtures the soul.

The example before us, that of the life of Jesus who, as He sought to lead the disciples, took a towel and a basin of water and washed their feet. In so doing, He taught them that a leader is never greater than the people he or she leads and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do. He was showing them and us how to survive selfishness.

I raise this example of Jesus, not as a philosopher or an educator or a religious leader, but simply as a business person – someone who over a 25-year

period participated in the leadership of ServiceMaster during a period of time of rapid growth and expansion.

As I have now retired from those leadership responsibilities and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers served, and a premium return for our shareholders. 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 result of my leadership can be told in the changed and improved lives of the people I have led.

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 game. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the workplace could be a community to help shape human character. I wanted 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 their faith and work to the work of the firm were issues of discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. The people of our firm were the soul of our firm and we were about the process of soulcraft.

Our corporate objectives reflected Drucker's conclusion that people work for a cause not just a living. There were: 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 of exclusion of people. 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 mix. The fact that we had these goals did not mean that everything was done correctly. 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. They were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and sometimes for forgiveness. Leaders could not protect themselves and their own interest 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.

Now for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, this environment provided an opportunity to live my faith in such a way so that it was not imposed upon my colleagues and fellow workers but instead could be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, embraced by them as they sought not only to do things right but also the right thing. By seeking to follow the model of Jesus as a servant leader, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did. My ethic became a reality as I was able to serve those I led.

But let me stop here and clearly say that servant leadership has been and continues to be a learning experience for me. It does not come naturally. I have made my share of mistakes and at times have allowed self, not service, to rule in my life. It has been a continuing process of learning. 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 I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster team.

Here tell the story of being recruited into ServiceMaster.

There were lessons for me to learn, most important of which was my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Experience also reminded me of the reality of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

Later on in my career, the faces of our service workers would 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. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as 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 and that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise, I was deceiving myself and those whom I was committed to serve. Drucker has referred to this type of leadership as reflecting the ethic of prudence - a prudence that demands of a leader to be an example by what he or she says and by the way they live. In Drucker's judgment, the leader has only one choice – to lead or to mislead.

Another lesson I had to learn was to accept people for their differences and to be ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine tells of an experience that has been a great reminder to me of this point. It is often the custom for 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 sterling silver tie tack, said thanks and then with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe not in his lapel.

People are different and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or life style. The firm at work is a place where diversity should be promoted. The leader's responsibility is to set the tone and to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of a whole and so to strengthen the group and achieve unity and diversity.

Third, servant leaders should make themselves available. Their door should always be open. They should be out and about, talking and listening to people at all levels of the organization. They should always be willing to do what they ask of others. One of the things I tried to do at our headquarters building was to design the executive offices as a reminder of this principle of listening, learning, and serving. Nobody worked behind closed doors. Glass was everywhere, confirming our desire to have an open office and an open mind. No executive office captured an outside window. The view to the outside was available to all who were working in the office.

Another point that I had recognized was that if I was going to lead others, I needed to be fully committed to them - not a bystander or simply a holder of a position. Not there just for the short term for my own financial gain. I don't think an enterprise can function to its capacity nor can its people expect a healthy organizational culture unless they can rely upon the covenant and commitment of their leaders. This goes beyond the covenants usually contained in an employment

agreement. It extends to the people who, day by day, are relying upon their leaders for the 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.

Here give story about officer learning what his obligation was.

It is also important for a servant leader to understand what it means to love and care for the people they lead – not only to embrace this idea as a concept or a leadership standard but also to develop, in the process, a servant's heart.

Here show video on James Smith.

Leadership is both an art and a science. The results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace. The story is really told in the changed lives of people. As one seeks to lead their organization as a servant leader, they should recognize that it is not always comfortable. At times, it feels like you are in a rowboat in the middle of an ocean. There will always be an audience of skeptics with questions regarding the appropriateness of such a standard for leadership or the mixing of faith standards with the work environment. What is there in

common between God and profit? For me, the common link has been people – people who are created in God’s image with dignity and worth. I am reminded of what C. S. Lewis said when he commented: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, and snub.”

Revised 5/20/04