

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership in Times of Tragedy

January 2013

There have been a number of events in recent months that are accurately described as tragedies. Some of them are “natural” disasters, while others are acts of violence at the hands of individuals who are either demented or evil, or both. Given the young age and innocence of the victims, the shooting at the elementary school in Sandy Hook, Connecticut may have been the most horrific of all of these events. Seeing each of these situations on the television screen leaves an indelible mark on each of us, especially if children or the elderly are involved. As hard as the images are to see on television, the effects of tragedy can be much more difficult when viewed up close.

Several years ago my wife and I were on vacation with a tour group of about 25 people. Our first morning traveling we had breakfast with a husband and wife who were from another part of the country. Making small talk at breakfast, we inquired if they had children. The husband said yes, but the wife said no. This was puzzling to us. Later we discovered that they had a child, a college age daughter who had been a student at Virginia Tech. She had been killed just a few months earlier in the mass shooting that is still the largest loss of life of any similar incident of its kind in this country. Sensing their grief up close was something that I will never forget. I am not certain if they will ever recover from the experience of losing a child in such a violent and public manner.

Leaders play important roles during every tragic event. Starting with the emergency response, the collective expressions of grief, the investigation of how and why something happened, to the steps taken to prevent a similar situation happening in the future, leadership is critical to recovering from the trauma. Sometimes leaders are captured on camera, sometimes they are invisible, but they are there nonetheless.

Recently I had the opportunity to watch the movie **Lincoln**, which highlighted a short period of time in the life of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States. From the film and the books I have read on the life of Lincoln, it is my opinion that there is no leader in the history of our country that had to deal with the combination of personal loss and tragedy in his work life as this remarkable man. The battle reports of the civil war chronicled over 600,000 American deaths on both sides of the conflict. The awareness that his decisions could result in the death of thousands of

others was always in his thoughts, especially as he visited with soldiers who were wounded on the battlefield. In the middle of this national tragedy, he suffered the loss of his young son to typhoid fever – a loss so profound that he and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, never fully recovered. The strength of his character in the face of such hardship is one of the greatest stories in history of leadership.

If we are lucky our leadership skills will never be tested in any truly horrific event, either behind the scenes or in front of a podium filled with microphones and television cameras. But make no mistake, horrible things happen every day, and sometimes they can happen close to us, at work or in our neighborhood. It is more likely to be a car accident, debilitating medical condition, or the sudden death of a friend or co-worker than a history making calamity. Some of these things have happened within the Presbyterian Senior Living family over the years.

What are we to do if we find ourselves in a position of leadership when a tragedy occurs close to us? I have a few simple thoughts to offer:

- Focus on people first. Things can be fixed or replaced.
 - Resist the impulse to try to explain the unexplainable. It is not up to you to try to sort out circumstances that appear to be entirely senseless.
 - Avoid platitudes. Giving someone a hug and saying nothing is far more comforting than empty words.
 - Don't say that you know how someone else feels. Even if you have had a similar experience, everyone reacts differently.
 - Be human enough to grieve with those who are grieving. The absence of emotion does not engender respect. On the contrary, keeping a stiff upper lip may appear to be cold and uncaring. There is something reassuring in our shared grief when it helps us to realize that we are not facing the cold hard world alone.
 - When in doubt, do something constructive to help. Find the most pressing needs and take action. If possible, enlist others to join you in a concerted effort.
 - Sometimes sustained help is needed. Look beyond the immediate rush of the moment to offer ongoing assistance.
- Unless there is an immediate and present danger, avoid making permanent changes when in an emotional state. Long term solutions are best handled with clarity of thought.

We can learn a lot about ourselves and forge stronger bonds with our fellow human beings in difficult situations. We can also gain a fresh perspective on what is important in life. In addition, the strength or weakness of the foundation stones of our lives can be exposed in times of tragedy. When tested, we may be surprised by our strength, or troubled enough by our weakness to make significant changes in the way we live.

Finally, our faith can be strengthened, even when we have no words to express the grief that surrounds us. Faith can be the last refuge in the storm or lift us from the depths of despair.

God of Tears

God of tears who weeps with us
And holds our trembling hands.
God of fears, embraces us
When we're too weak to stand.

God of worried restless nights
Has eyes that never sleep.
God of sorrow, sighs with us
When visited by grief.

The times when we are most alone
Is when He is most near.
And when we are engulfed by fog,
His vision crystal clear.

God's with us in each darkened hour
And suffers every loss.
Because He gave up heaven's realms
For nails upon a cross.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



I Heard it Through the Grapevine

February 2013

Growing up not far from Detroit in the 1960's, my musical tastes were shaped at a very young age by the sounds of the region. Marvin Gaye, one of the iconic singers of the time had a hit song in 1968 with the title "*I Heard it Through the Grapevine*" that told a story of a romance in question because of talk heard through the "grapevine".

According to The Phrase Finder, the term grapevine has a much older history. When Samuel Morse sent a message from Washington to Baltimore in the first practical demonstration of the telegraph in 1844, the era of rapid communication was started. "It soon became clear that close communities already had effective word of mouth communications. Soon after the telegraph was invented, the term "grapevine telegraph" was coined – first recorded in a US dictionary in 1852."

When I began working as an orderly in a hospital, the term "grapevine" took on a more vivid meaning. I quickly learned that any group of employees had an informal network that was swift, highly variable in terms of accuracy, and amazingly creative. Because of the grapevine, working in a health care facility was like living in a fishbowl. There were few secrets.

Sometimes the grapevine has a destructive nature – reputations have been ruined by offhanded remarks, and the most innocent situations have been exaggerated into harmful gossip. To further complicate matters, we now have confidentially requirements for employment and medical information that are rooted in law and regulation. Severe penalties can result if the wrong information gets into the grapevine.

I think the concept of the grapevine is driven by the natural curiosity of all human beings. Anyone who has been in a "gaper block" on a highway knows how curiosity can affect human behavior. A gaper block is a traffic jam caused by cars slowing down around the scene of an accident, even when the traffic lanes are wide open. It seems that everyone driving by has to pause to look at what happened. The same curiosity that causes a gaper block inspires people to seek out information from any source that will satisfy a need to be "in the know."

Over the years, new layers of technology have only enhanced the speed and variability of communication in the grapevine. The internet, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, cell

phones, texting, and e-mail have added to the speed, but not necessarily to the accuracy of person to person communication. News accounts offer examples of how ill advised posts on Facebook can lead to unintended consequences.

Not everything about a grapevine is negative. Whenever anyone in business talks about word of mouth referrals today, the term "social media" is the description of the way the grapevine is most likely to travel. Many businesses today have a social media strategy. I don't think it is a stretch to observe that no matter what technology is adopted in the future, that the grapevine will always be with us. As leaders, we are compelled to understand this phenomenon and adjust our communication style to take this into account.

So from a leader's perspective, what should we do about the grapevine in the work place?

- First of all, accept the grapevine as a fact of life that will not go away. The observation that nature abhors a vacuum can be directly applied to communication. The grapevine will kick into overdrive when tensions increase and there is an absence of information.
- Leaders need to deal with perceptions as well as facts. Fears do not have to be based in reality to drive human behavior. If someone is financially insecure, the fear of losing their job may come to the surface before there is evidence to support that fear.
- A leader's words need to be chosen carefully to avoid misinterpretation. Think about how someone might receive your words before committing them to paper, leaving a voice mail, or speaking directly to someone. When in doubt, use someone you trust as a sounding board if you are unsure of how your message will be interpreted.
- Cultivate a reputation for honesty. The best way of getting a reputation for honesty is by being honest in everything you do. Never mislead someone with carefully chosen words. In Biblical times certain people attested to the honesty of a statement by taking an oath. In **Matthew Chapter 5**, Jesus advocated for honesty at all times, "*And don't say anything you don't mean.... Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.*" (The Message)
- Having a reputation for transparency is a virtue that can limit the negative

consequences of the grapevine. Being secretive invites speculation. If you are known for openly sharing information, your team members will be less likely to believe an untrue rumor, and will keep you informed of what they are hearing on the grapevine. Sometimes transparency is not possible, especially when confidential medical or employment related information is involved. Even in these situations a lack of transparency can be overcome if you are known to be fair and honest in all things.

- When you hear a story or gossip that is traveling on the grapevine, do not repeat it. But if you are a leader, silence is not enough. You must combat untrue or harmful communication whenever you can.
- Focus on work by tempering your curiosity about extraneous things. My mom would call this minding your own business. This is illustrated by a story I heard some time ago entitled, "***How I learned to Mind My Own Business.***"

One day I was walking by a schoolyard surrounded by a very tall fence. On the other side of the fence I heard a group of children chanting in unison, "Twelve, Twelve, Twelve, Twelve..." Coming to a knot hole in the fence, I decided to look through the hole to see what was going on. Before I was able to see anything on the other side, I was immediately poked in the eye with a sharp stick. As soon as I felt the pain from the tip of the stick, the chant changed to "Thirteen, Thirteen, Thirteen..." And that is how I learned to mind my own business.

One final note – It is possible for the grapevine to work for you. Positive reputations are also the subject of grapevine chatter. If you are known to be a fair and competent leader and a caring person, the word will get out, and like minded people will flock to you. Building a high performing team can be much easier with a positive reputation. How do I know that? I heard it through the grapevine.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



The Art of Paying Attention

March 2013

Recently my wife Rhonda visited the eye doctor for discomfort in her right eye, and was given eye drops and scheduled for a follow up appointment in seven days. Four days later, her right eye was somewhat better, but she was experiencing pain in her left eye. With my encouragement, she called the doctor back to report this change in condition, and asked if he would like to see her before her next scheduled appointment. Communicating through the office nurse, the doctor instructed her to make sure that she was shaking the drops vigorously before applying them to her eye. When Rhonda asked the nurse how doing this would help her left eye, the nurse said that she was not sure, but the doctor would see her at her regularly scheduled appointment. While the final outcome was uneventful, there remains an unsettled feeling about the way the situation was handled. It was clear to both of us that the office was so stuck in a routine that they were not paying attention to which eye they were treating.

I am afraid that this is not an isolated incident, and may be a symptom of a larger problem. Many of the people we come into contact with are so distracted and unfocused that they miss important clues about what is going on around them. But if we are honest, we have to admit that the story of the doctor not paying attention describes each of us at one time or another. Realizing this about myself and other people I know, I have come to the conclusion that if we did a better job of living in the moment and paying closer attention to what is right in front of us we could provide better service, foster stronger relationships and create a kinder and gentler world.

In his book "Second Innocence", John Izzo tells the story of when he was a graduate student studying for the ministry and completing an internship at a large nursing home on the south side of Chicago. As an intern he spent most of his time visiting from room to room with elderly residents. Late one afternoon he was visiting an elderly man and listened to the story of his life. After an hour or so, the man said, "Do you want to know, son, what I appreciate most about you? You are the only one of the people who visit me who doesn't look at his watch." John accepted the compliment, but confessed in the book that his watch had stopped working that very morning. Not having his watch on allowed him to be fully present and made that man feel loved.

The encounter affected him so profoundly that for several years he did not wear a watch when he was visiting people as a way to brush away all other matters and be fully present.

When we are fully present we have the opportunity to learn things that we will miss when we are distracted. Over the years, I have had several encounters that have been helpful in teaching me the value of being in the moment. Those experiences have changed the way I look at those around me. I now expect that given a chance to have a focused conversation, it is possible to discover a connection with almost anyone.

Paying attention is a critical skill for leadership, and can make the difference between an effective and an ineffective leadership style. Paying attention communicates how much you value the other person, and the respect you have for the contribution they can make to the mission of the enterprise. It also strongly implies that you understand that you do not possess all of the answers: that knowledge and wisdom come from many sources, and you are open to learning something new. It is also a way to attract people to work with you to build a strong team. It should come as no surprise that people are attracted to leaders who are good listeners.

One of the barriers to maintaining focus on the present is that technology in its various forms can easily interrupt us and take us "out of the moment". It takes a lot of discipline to avoid the cell phone, e mail, text messages, television, radio, and a host of other distractions that are common in our environment. John Izzo, who struggles with being distracted, uses a technique that makes a lot of sense to me. When he is concentrating on something or someone he imagines raising his hand and brushing the distraction aside, as if to say "not now." He states:

"In that moment I must ask myself the important questions: Is this important in influencing what I do right now, or is it a distraction? Is there anything I can do about this right now? If in both of these cases the answer is no, it is a distraction....that has only one real potential: to rob the present moment and those who are participating of my full engagement. When this occurs, I simply imagine that hand gently brushing aside the thought... as if to say, 'Not now'. I am now able to bring myself back to the present moment in a matter of seconds."

Susan Scott expresses this idea in her book "Fierce Conversations", as principle #3 - "Be here, prepared to be nowhere else." This phrase is packed with meaning. It acknowledges the reality that many of us go through life always prepared to be somewhere else - ready, willing and able to be distracted from what we are doing now. If we are only prepared to be in the present it is harder to shift away from the conversations we intend to have right now. It also suggests that we should work on being prepared to address what we are doing now rather than simply reacting to our surroundings.

We live in a world of loud voices and polished presentations that compete for our time and attention. In such an environment we are drawn to the dramatic event when many of the important things of life happen under more ordinary circumstances. There is a great example of this in the Bible. First Kings, Chapter 19 recounts the story of the prophet Elijah as he was being pursued by wicked king Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who were intent on killing him. Chased out into the wilderness, Elijah is discouraged to the point of giving up, and is looking for a message from God about what to do next. He is instructed to stand on the mountain before the Lord, where he is exposed to a series of impressive displays of power - first a great and strong wind that tore up the side of the mountain. This was followed by an earthquake, and finally a fire. But the Bible says that God did not speak to him in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. Eventually God speaks to Elijah in what scripture describes as a still, small voice. One translation (ESV) describes it as a low whisper. The lesson is clear - we tend to appreciate the grand gesture, but the most profound lessons often come to us in quiet moments - but only if we pay attention.

So the leadership challenge is this. How can we remain focused and in the moment when the rest of the world is competing for our short attention span? The answer may be different for each of us. But the art of paying attention must be cultivated if we are to fulfill our potential as leaders.

Steve

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Steve", written in a cursive style.

Reflections on Leadership



Servant Leadership – The Art of Foot Washing

April 2013

Since this issue of Reflections on Leadership coincides with Easter week, it is only fitting that the subject be Servant Leadership, one of the four essential elements of PSL's leadership culture (the other three being Stewardship, Transparent Leadership, and Striving for Excellence). As a Christian organization dedicated to serving older persons, there is no aspect of leadership that is more central to our success as an organization.

The term Servant leader was coined by John Greenleaf in the 1970's and he wrote extensively on leadership from that perspective. Greenleaf defined Servant Leadership as "a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions". To many people this idea of a servant leader seemed revolutionary. For those with a Christian worldview, it was a revolutionary idea that was nearly

2000 years old when Greenleaf began writing on the subject.

In the book of Luke, chapter 22: 24-27, there is a description of a conflict among the disciples regarding who among them would be considered the greatest. As in any group, there was a sense of competition for recognition, honor, and authority. Jesus addressed this concern with the following words:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you shall be like the youngest, and the one who rules like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Other references to servant leadership include Luke 9:48 – *For he who is least among you all – he is the greatest,* and Matt. 20:16 – *The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*

But the most striking example of servant leadership is recorded in chapter 13 of the gospel of John as part of the celebration of the last supper during holy week, just before Jesus was crucified. Knowing that he would be leaving his disciples, Jesus provided a powerful example of his expectation of leadership by washing all of the disciples' feet. Jesus was so committed to teaching this lesson that he told the apostle Peter that "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." He followed this visual image of servanthood with an explanation, just so his disciples would not miss the point:

Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

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Servant leadership is exhibited by a sense of humility in the way we live, combined with action – tangible evidence – of serving other people.

How do we translate this activity into our daily leadership responsibilities?

Here are a few ideas:

- Eliminating real and symbolic trappings of rank and privilege in the work place.
- Articulating the virtue and honor in serving others by providing recognition to those who serve well.
- Look for opportunities to model the behavior of serving others, including tasks that are not in the typical leader's job description.
- Displaying an attitude of respect and humility in all personal relationships.
- Listening to and giving other people credit for ideas that advance the organization's mission.
- Engaging people at all levels of the organization in the decision making process.
- Encouraging and empowering people throughout the organization to take the initiative to do what is necessary to serve well.
- Embracing the many facets of diversity as a means of improving the quality of decision making and fostering a sense of fairness in the way the organization operates.

Being a servant leader does not mean that we lower our expectations of ourselves or those we work with on a daily basis.

It does not mean that we can transfer the responsibilities of leadership to others or shrink from making difficult decisions. Being a servant leader defines how we treat other people as we fulfill the obligations of leadership.

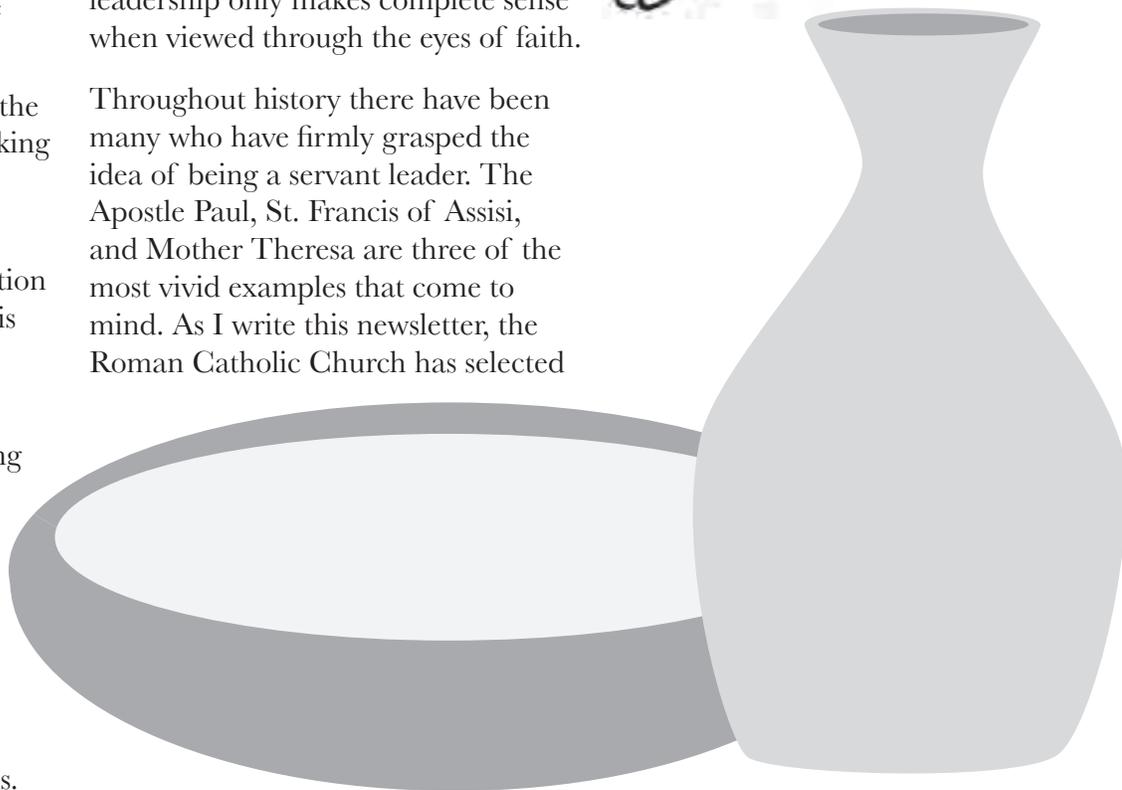
Servant leadership is not as popular as almost all of the other attributes that we equate with effective leadership, in part because it goes against the grain of our human nature. When Jim Collins identified humility as a part of being a level 5 leader in his book "Good to Great", there were many in the corporate world that viewed this approach as being soft or weak. Even those who may have agreed in principle with Collins did not embrace this as completely as other parts of his book. Since servant leadership goes well beyond the concept of humility, it is no wonder that the idea is underrepresented in leadership literature. The paradox of servant leadership only makes complete sense when viewed through the eyes of faith.

Throughout history there have been many who have firmly grasped the idea of being a servant leader. The Apostle Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, and Mother Theresa are three of the most vivid examples that come to mind. As I write this newsletter, the Roman Catholic Church has selected

a new leader whose life contains the attributes of servant leadership. It is no surprise that the descriptions of his approach to life and how he fulfills his leadership role are widely celebrated. While we may never approach such an exalted example of servant leadership, we can all aspire to follow their footsteps.

Those of us who have chosen to work in a ministry that includes the support of frail and vulnerable seniors should have a particular appreciation for the image of Jesus washing the disciple's feet. Some of our team members perform such acts of kindness and compassion on a daily basis, and we can clearly see the profound impact of their work. Our approach to leadership should be a reflection of this attitude of service to others.

Steve



Reflections on Leadership



No Excuses Leadership

May 2013

The tendency to make excuses for bad decisions or poor outcomes is as old as human history. In the creation story of Genesis, Adam and Eve tried to make excuses for their disobedience. (Adam) "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree". (Eve) "The serpent deceived me"— an excuse that the 1980's the comedian Flip Wilson updated to "The Devil made me do it". One of the most preposterous excuses was given when Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments and was greeted with the children of Israel worshipping a golden calf. What was Aaron's excuse? "The people were set on evil". "I threw this gold into the fire and out came this calf". It should be noted that none of these excuses worked out very well for the people who offered them as a reason for making a bad choice.



We seem to live in a time of excuses. No matter what happens to a person in life, there is always a corresponding excuse. There are even web sites that list the best and worst excuses for missing work. One of my favorites is "I am busy stalking my previous boss, who fired me for not showing up for work." Excuses are a reflection

of that belief that every bad decision or outcome can be explained by a circumstance that is beyond anyone's control. "Seriously – it's not my fault!"

Recently there was a cheating scandal in Georgia where teachers altered test results to create the impression that students were improving in their academic performance. When the cheating was discovered, there were those who placed the blame on the system that required the testing of students, where "educators feel pressured to get the scores they need by hook or by crook".

For generations governmental leaders have used excuses to avoiding responsibility for making progress in solving society's problems. Someone else created the problem or will not cooperate in finding a solution. Voters do not understand what needs to be done. The global economy is not good. The list goes on and on.

Leaders in businesses of all types are not immune from thinking of themselves as victims and finding excuses for substandard performance. It is the labor market, the overall economy, government spending cuts, consumer confidence, the real estate market, government regulation, the uncertainty of the future, or a host of other issues that are the reasons for the failure to achieve success. One of the most frequent excuses is the common victim syndrome. "It's tough

out there. Everyone in our sector is having problems. We are doing as well as everyone else."

There are a number of shining examples of those who had legitimate reasons to expect failure but rose above those circumstances to achieve stunning results. Ben Carson's rise from poverty in inner city Detroit to become chief of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University is one such story. As a child of single mother who could not read, in a school system that was one of the worst in the country, there were ample reasons for underachievement. The movie of his life "Gifted Hands" emphasizes his mother's heroic role in his life as she refused to let her sons see themselves as helpless victims of circumstance.

How does the temptation to make excuses intersect with our role as leaders? It has been observed that the difference between organizational success or failure is based on the extent to which a culture of victimization or a culture of empowerment prevails. The frequent use of blame or excuses by an organization's leadership is a strong indication of which way the culture is leaning. The problem of making excuses in an organizational context is that excuses become the reason to lower our standards, avoid changing behavior, or to resist looking

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for new solutions and take risks that are essential for success. This is not just about looking at the world from a glass half empty or half full perspective - it is accepting the mind-set that we are trapped by a larger environment or circumstances that are beyond our control. With that limitation in place, failure is likely, and the best an organization can hope for is mediocrity.

In the book, “The Oz Principle”, Connors, Smith, and Hickman, contend that “Individual and organizational results of people improve dramatically when people overcome the deceptive traps of the victim cycle to take Steps to Accountability.” They describe accountability as:

“A personal choice to rise above one’s circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving desired results to See It, Own It, Solve It, and Do It.”

Much of their effort is focused on getting leaders and organizations from what they call a “below the line victim mentality to an above the line focus on personal and shared accountability”.

One of the author’s most insightful observations is the difference between responsibility and accountability. Responsibilities are articulated in position descriptions (This is my job). Accountability reaches beyond individual responsibility (What else can I do to achieve

the desired result?). The joint accountability to satisfy the customer is broader than the confines of any particular position description.

While the broad concept of accountability applies to every person in an organizational setting, it is especially true of persons in leadership positions. One of the most vivid and tragic examples of this can be found in the Penn State – Jerry Sandusky scandal. Joe Paterno, the iconic head coach and revered leader of the football program may have fulfilled his responsibility in reporting the incident of suspected child abuse to his superiors, but the public perception of him as a leader was that he was accountable to do more.

The application of the Oz principle should not be used as a hammer by leaders as a reason not to listen (I don’t want to hear why this cannot be done). Nor should it be used as a way for a leader to avoid personal accountability (If only my staff was more accountable for results, things would improve). Some leaders have also tried to justify autocratic and disrespectful behavior under the

guise of holding their team members accountable for results.

The virtue of accountability must start with leadership if it is to penetrate the rest of the organization. Like every other virtue, it must be modeled to be taught. The question posed by the Oz principle is not focused on others - It is highly personal. “What else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the results I desire?” By asking this question, the leader takes a major step in moving from a culture of victimization to a culture of empowerment.

There is one other benefit to escaping the mind-set of victimization and excuses. On the job stress is not just a function from the pressure of the work being performed. Stress is often correlated with feeling trapped by circumstances and being unable to affect the outcomes that are critical to success. The Oz Principle authors contend that empowerment and accountability are two sides of the same coin. It is evident that the path to success and less stress involves both.

Steve



Reflections on Leadership



The Power of Self Control

June 2013

Recently I had the opportunity to watch the movie “42” – the story of Jackie Robinson’s heroic effort to break the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947. While the story was inspiring, in many ways it was a hard movie to watch. The abuse heaped upon Jackie Robinson by bigoted fans and players, and the societal conditions that were constant reminders of the injustice of racial prejudice were clear. I am certain that the movie did not capture the full extent of what Mr. Robinson had to endure.

Much of the movie is about the relationship between two men, Branch Ricky, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and Jackie Robinson. There were a number of gifted athletes that could have been chosen to become the first African American player in baseball. Ricky knew that being a great athlete was only the beginning. He was also looking for a person of character – someone with drive, ambition, strength, and determination.

Most of all, it would take a person who could see beyond the moment and resist the powerful temptation to retaliate in order to accomplish the objective of opening the major leagues to future generations of minority baseball players.

The ability to exercise self control is an essential ingredient for leaders. There are many ways this is expressed in leadership literature. Daniel Goleman in his book “Working with Emotional Intelligence” uses the term “self mastery” as the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check. He claims that people with this competence exhibit several attributes:

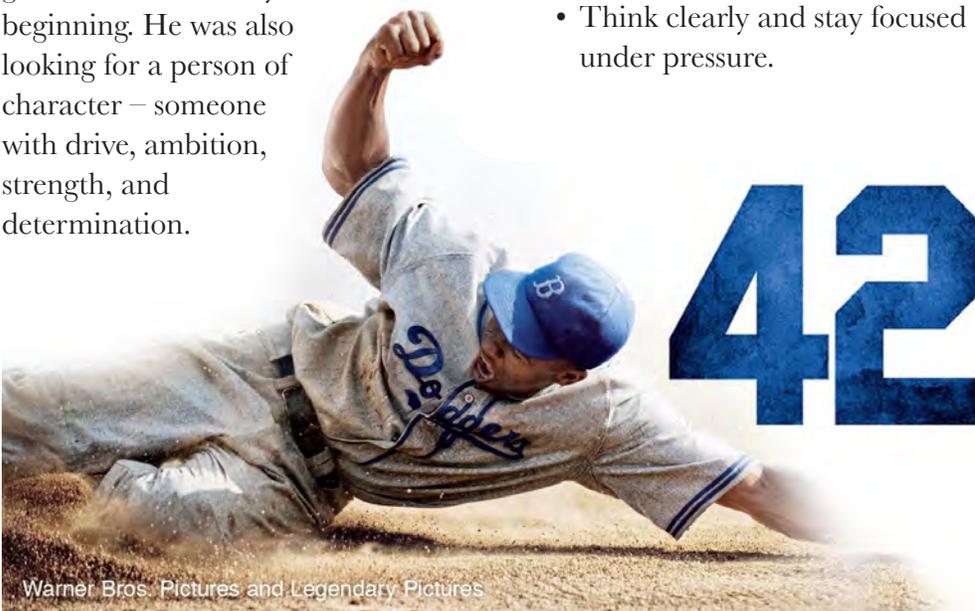
- Manage impulsive feelings and distressing emotions well.
- Stay composed, positive, and unflappable even in trying moments.
- Think clearly and stay focused under pressure.

Whatever the terms used to describe the virtue of self control, the underlying assumption is the same. Self control is the mark of an effective leader. Almost any human feeling can impair one’s judgment - fear, anger, envy- even love or compassion. The ability to avoid acting on impulse, think about the consequences of behavior ahead of time, and select a more mature course of action is the definition of strong leadership. There are many stories of flawed leaders who suffer the consequences of impulsive behavior, but fewer examples of how to cultivate self control.

A few years ago I had the privilege of serving on the board of a middle school for disadvantaged inner city boys. One of the extra-curricular activities that the school strongly encouraged was playing chess. In addition to playing chess with each other over the lunch period the school participated in chess competitions with other schools periodically. When I asked the principal why this was considered a part of the boy’s education, she explained it to me this way:

“One of the main problems we have with children is getting them to think beyond the moment. Boys of this age are inclined to strike back when they perceive an insult or slight of some kind.

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They live in the moment and rarely think of the consequences of their behavior. Playing chess is all about thinking ahead, anticipating the next move or moves of the other player in reaction to what they are about to do. The player who is better at thinking ahead is more likely to win. The boys are under the impression that they are playing a game. In reality we are trying to change the way they think. Before they act impulsively, we want them to consider the consequences of what they are about to do.”



It is not easy for a leader to always think ahead. Human beings are more emotional than rational, and the tendency to act without fully thinking of the consequences is natural. Often the ability to overcome human frailty takes more strength than we possess. In his book “7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness”, Eric Metaxas describes how Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson understood this as they discussed what Jackie’s heroic journey would be like.

*Knowing that Jackie shared his Christian faith and wanting to reinforce the spiritual dimensions of what the two men were about to embark on, Rickey brought out a copy of a book titled “**Life of Christ**”, by Giovanni Papini. He flipped to the passage in which Papini discusses the Sermon on the Mount and refers to it as “the most stupefying of [Jesus] revolutionary teachings.” It certainly was revolutionary. In fact, it seemed impossible. In Matthew 5:38-41, Jesus said, “You have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That you resist not evil: But whosoever shall smite you on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man shall sue thee at law, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.”*

Rickey was betting that Jackie Robinson knew what he himself knew: although this was indeed humanly impossible, with God’s help it was entirely possible.

The respect that Jackie Robinson inspired during his time in baseball is unparalleled in all of sports. His number (42) is the only jersey number that Major League baseball has

retired from use for the entire league – no player on any team in the future will be able to wear Jackie Robinson’s number. However, on one day every year the number of every major league player’s uniform is changed to the number 42 out of respect for Jackie and what he stood for as a player and a leader. This illustrates the power of self control in leadership.

Few of us are called to display the kind of superhuman leadership that was required of Jackie Robinson. But leaders are often tested in many subtle ways. Those who depend on us for leadership expect that we will exhibit a sense of maturity and not give in to pettiness or retaliation, even when we are being treated unfairly. Leaders know that it takes greater strength to control a temper than to give in to anger.

So whenever you need a reminder to stop and think before acting impulsively, just pause and think “42”. If you can use that simple reminder in times of stress, you may find that you can be a better example of a leader and have a greater influence on those around you.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Creatures of Habit

July 2013

Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all creatures of habit, and that is not a bad thing. Habits which are incorporated into routines can be useful and efficient, saving time and keeping us on track. When I go to the grocery store I always carry a list. If I am looking for breakfast cereal it will take less than 2 minutes, even though there are more than 50 different brands and types of breakfast cereal. The reason is that there about 3 different kinds of cereal that I like, and I know exactly where they are on the shelves and approximately what they cost. Without this deeply ingrained habit, every trip to the grocery store would be a singular and unique experience, requiring me to look at every type and brand of cereal, evaluating and comparing each before making a final selection. Depending on the length of my shopping list, I could be gone for hours.

Habits can be positive or negative. Changing negative habits can be hard. Ask anyone who has tried to give up smoking or lose weight. I am reminded of the quote attributed to Mark Twain. "Giving up smoking is easy. I've done it a thousand times". Weight loss can be especially hard, since you cannot completely stop eating. Hunger returns, and eating

is a social experience that families share. It seems like it is easier to break a habit that is good for you – like a daily exercise routine.

As parents we know that lifelong habits are often taught at a young age. The timelessness of this truth is expressed in Proverbs 22:6 – "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." Brushing teeth, washing hands, doing school homework, and a host of other daily activities are about teaching good habits that we hope will become automatic over time and help small children to become responsible young people and adults. I came from a working class family with 5 brothers and sisters. But my parents taught us that you did not have to be rich to be generous. The habit of giving 10% of their income to church and charitable

causes was passed down to their children through their teaching and example.

There are times in our lives when we are more apt to change our habits. A 1984 UCLA study by Alan Andreasen theorized that people are more likely to change buying habits when they go through a major life event – like getting married, moving into a new house, getting divorced, losing or changing a job, or having someone enter or leave a household. This affirms the observation of a pastor I knew many years ago who shared his approach to growing his congregation. He said that over the years he could correlate growth in his church to the number of weddings and baptisms he performed, even when the people being married or baptized were not previously connected to the church. He viewed the preparation for each of these events as a window of opportunity to draw people into a life of faith at a time when they were open to change.

Effective leadership is all about habits. Stephen R. Covey made a fortune from his 1989 classic book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People". People in leadership and management positions are always looking for ways to become more organized and effective in carrying out their daily



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responsibilities. But leadership habits involve more than techniques to improve efficiency or get things done in a more organized way.

We may not realize it but we exhibit our habits as leaders every day. For example, do we show the same kind and courteous behavior to our staff that we wish them to show to our customers? Or do we—by habit—simply greet a coworker passing without really acknowledging them as a person? In a world where many front line staff members feel like they do not receive affirmation or recognition for their work, this simple change in behavior is a powerful leadership tool that can have far reaching effects.

Another leadership habit that can have big impact is listening. A major attribute of a good leader is being genuinely interested in the thoughts and opinions of others. With that intention firmly in place, the path to encouraging better communication involves actively seeking ideas and advice, maintaining eye contact and other affirming cues while talking to someone, and timely follow up to indicate that you have heard what they have to say. Like learning anything new, these habits will take conscious effort at first—but then will become natural and routine. There are literally scores of opportunities to

change our habits to become better, more effective leaders.

Even though in many respects we are the sum of our habits, the situation is never hopeless. It is possible to break bad habits and cultivate more positive habits. In his book “The Power of Habit, Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business”, Charles Duhigg studied habits in individuals, organizations, and society. Even after looking at destructive habits like compulsive gambling and alcoholism, he observed that:

- *Habits are not as simple as they appear... even once they are rooted in our mind, they do not determine our destiny. We can choose our habits, once we know how.*
- *To modify a habit, you must decide to change it, and once you know an (unhealthy) habit exists, you have the responsibility to change it.*
- *When you understand that habits can change, you have the freedom and responsibility to remake them. Once you understand that habits can be rebuilt, the power of habit becomes easier to grasp, and the only option is to get to work.*
- *Changing a habit involves identifying the routine, experimenting with rewards, isolating the cues that trigger the habit, and having a plan for change.*

A couple of final thoughts:

- Think consciously about your habits and intentionally work to make them an expression of the behavior that you want.
- Don't let your habits become superstitions. Habits should serve a purpose. Anyone who has observed a professional baseball player at bat can observe rituals that border on the superstitious. You should control your habits, they should not control you.
- Avoid situations that will tempt you to fall back into a bad habit.

Good habits are essential to achieving excellence in individuals and organizations. Name the field – sports, music, academic achievement, manufacturing, health care, or any other field of endeavor – you will find good habits at the core of every success story. If you want to be a better leader – make it a habit.

Steve



Reflections on Leadership



Adversity, Failure and Success

August 2013

Recently I had the privilege of hearing David McCullough, the widely acclaimed author make some observations on the nature of leadership. As someone who has written books featuring the towering figures from American history - from the founding fathers to Teddy Roosevelt and Harry Truman - McCullough has a unique perspective on what it takes to be a great leader. While I expected to hear about virtues like vision, courage, strength, and integrity, I was not prepared for a message that focused on the role of adversity and failure in preparing leaders for greatness.

McCullough observed that almost all of the great leaders in politics and business were shaped by struggles in life. It is his belief that adversity and failure prepared each of them to overcome great obstacles later in their careers, and became the springboard for success and greatness. McCullough cited Herbert Hoover as a person who had an outstanding background and had been successful at everything he had ever attempted. Because he had never failed at anything, McCullough theorized that Hoover was handicapped when faced with the circumstances of the great depression.

The examples of success borne from adversity or failure are compelling:



- *George Washington lost his father and brother at an early age. As commander in chief of the continental army he suffered many military defeats at the hands of the British, and lost much of his army to disease and the elements at Valley Forge before securing victory and ultimately American independence.*
- *Abraham Lincoln lived a hard life on the American frontier. His mother died when he was 9. He lost one Illinois legislative and two Illinois senate races. He failed in business and spent several years repaying the debt. At age 26 his sweetheart died. He lost in two attempts at the US senate, but his life in between these failures was marked by a number of successful endeavors. While he served as President of the United States from 1861-1865, over six hundred thousand Americans died in the Civil War. He is acknowledged as one of history's towering examples of leadership under stress.*

- *Teddy Roosevelt overcame vision problems and a very sickly childhood marked by severe asthma. Father died when he was 20 years of age, mother and wife died on the same day when he was only 26 years old. He was elected vice president at age 42, and became president upon the death of President McKinley.*
- *Franklin Delano Roosevelt was vice president on the losing Democratic ticket in 1920. In 1921 at the age of 39 he experienced paralysis in his lower extremities. In spite of this limitation, he was elected as Governor of New York in 1928 and 1930, and U.S. President in 1932. He is the only person to be elected as president for four terms.*
- *Thomas Edison is the 4th most prolific inventor of the 20th century with over 1,000 registered patents. Even after he suffered a significant hearing loss as a young man, he remained industrious and persistent as he endeavored to create inventions that transformed American society. He tested over 3000 filaments before he came up with his version of a practical light bulb. When asked about failure, he reportedly said "If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward...."*
- *Milton Hershey only completed 4th grade in school. He failed at his first candy business in Lancaster, Pa. and at selling*

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candy in New York City before founding the candy company that still bears his name. Failure played such an important role in the success of Milton Hershey that Hershey Chocolate features a "Failure to Fortunes" exhibit to tell the story.

- *Jackie Robinson endured a life of discrimination and hardship before breaking the color barrier in Major League baseball. Based on the quality of his character and athletic achievements on the field, was inducted into the Major League baseball hall of fame.*

Entire books have been written about overcoming adversity. Lest we think that these inspiring stories are rare or subject to exaggeration, they are supported by many first-hand accounts from less famous individuals who have achieved success in all walks of life.

But we all know of people who suffer from adverse circumstances and succumb to negativity throughout the rest of their lives. I believe that there are a few keys to turning adversity into achievement:

- **Making the connection between failure and success.** In their book, *Switch, How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath talk about the "growth mindset" - Expecting that failure will occur along the road to success and being prepared to pursue success by overcoming failure. This involves stretching yourself, taking risks, accepting feedback, and taking the long-term view. They contend that

"you can't learn to be an inventor, or a nurse or a scientist without failing." This attitude toward failure can be applied to any learning experience – like learning to dance or a new language.

- **Finding inspiration in unlikely places.** Recently I spoke to a woman who went back to college to get a PhD and have a successful career in academic research while being the caregiver for her disabled parents for more than 25 years. When asked what inspired her to persevere, I expected to hear a story about a gifted teacher or mentor. Instead she responded, "Because I had an alcoholic boss who was utterly useless, I came to the realization that I could keep things going in spite of him. When I discovered that I was a capable person who could do anything I put my mind to, it was a great boost to my self esteem."

- **Seizing opportunity that comes your way.** Thomas Edison observed that "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." But sometimes opportunity looks a lot like luck. In *Great By Choice*, Jim Collins and Morten Hansen examine the role of luck. This involves recognizing luck when it happens, applying wisdom to see when, and when not to let luck disrupt your plans, being prepared to endure a run of bad luck, and taking advantage of good and bad

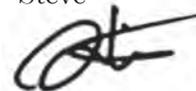
luck when it comes. They contend that everyone has both good and bad luck. The difference is in how you handle it.

- **Accountability and a sense of control.** Effective leaders acknowledge that the reason for their present situation may be due to the decisions they have made or lack of attention to the environment. Success never springs from a victim mentality, because the path to overcoming adversity and failure is the belief that our personal and professional decisions matter. Better choices will result in different outcomes.

Successful people in life have a clear picture of how success and failure are connected. Michael Jordan, acclaimed to be the best basketball player of all time, may have said it best - "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." Incidentally, as a sophomore in high school, Michael failed to make the varsity basketball team.

Finally, Michael Jordan understood that life's disappointments and the sweetness of success are connected by a single, unbreakable thread. In order to experience the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, you must be in the game.

Steve



Reflections on Leadership



Consider Your Calling

September 2013

As a young person I was raised in a Presbyterian church that was only four doors down the street from our house. One of the many benefits of growing up in that environment is that the concept of being “called” was always familiar to me. Pastors were called to serve a congregation. Lay persons were called to serve as elders and deacons. Some were called to teach Sunday school or lead a Bible study.

This was reinforced with the earliest memories of Bible stories that included people being called, or set aside for a special purpose. Moses and the burning bush, Samuel hearing the voice of God in the night, Jonah and the great fish, Gideon putting out the fleece, the chariots of fire that marked the call of Elisha to succeed Elijah, or the Apostle Paul struck blind on the Damascus road were all vivid stories that illustrated what it meant to be “called”. The language of the response to being called could be equally inspiring – from Joshua’s response, “All that you have commanded we will do, and wherever

you send us we will go” to the prophet Isaiah, “Here I am Lord, send me”.

But most important to the Presbyterian understanding of being called was that it was not confined to religious purposes or occupations. People were called by God into a variety of settings, and everyone was called in some way – to serve their neighbors or to a particular vocation. We knew people within our circle of friends who were called to be nurses, physicians, teachers, social workers, accountants, sales persons, engineers, architects, or any one of a hundred other jobs. The underlying idea was that everyone is given a unique set of gifts and we are responsible to use those gifts in a positive way.

While the call to an occupation or service was not expected to be as dramatic as the Biblical narrative, it was no less real, and no less anticipated. The concept of being called to a secular job had a spiritual dimension. If you were called to be a lawyer, or a business person, your

values and faith commitments were a part of the package. There was no separation between the secular world where you earned a living and the sacred world of values and faith. When a person is called into an occupation, they take their entire self into the venture.

What is the difference between just having a job and being called to a place of employment? I think the best way to understand it is illustrated by a John Izzo in his book, *Second Innocence*. John tells a story about working part time in a post office during college, a job that he found to be both tiring and irritating. While he was miserable and longed to do something important, his friend Joe Hughes, thoroughly enjoyed working there. One day a customer came into the post office and John absentmindedly inquired how she was. She responded that her daughter was in the hospital dying of cancer and she had to pay her rent by 5:00 p.m. or she would be evicted. The owners of her building would not take cash, so she was in the post office getting a

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money order when she should be with her dying daughter. Izzo continues:

Some 25 years later I cannot recall the specific words I said to her that day. I do know that for the first time in six months it occurred to me that I might actually have made a difference in the post office. After an exchange of kind and tender words she headed off, but at the door she stopped and turned around. Stepping back to my counter, putting her shaking, small, feeble hand on my young forearm, she looked deeply into my eyes: 'Son, I just want to thank you. Thank you for being so kind. You do know, you made my day.'

That night the sleep would not come. Her words kept ringing in my ears. 'You made my day.' For months I had seen my job at the post office as licking stamps and weighing things. Could it be that during that time that there had been a deeper calling? What would have happened if I had thought about my job as making people's days?

This experience was a revelation for Izzo, and he began to change his behavior. He also understood why his friend Joe Hughes saw his work in a much more positive light. As fate would have it, Joe Hughes and John

Izzo finished their work at the post office the same week. Izzo's leaving was hardly noticed, but the customers threw a going away party for his friend Joe. What was the difference? Izzo explains:

By then I knew why. For Joe, the post office was a part of his ministry. He knew that wherever people were gathered, whatever your job description said you were supposed to be doing, you were there to make lives better - and it showed. The job in the post office was not too small for me, I was too small for the job.

Izzo's writings are consistent with my own experience. In my life I have been called to do a number of things – I felt the call to be an orderly in a Sisters of Mercy Hospital in Michigan, to be a staff nurse and employee of Presbyterian Homes, and later as a Director of Nursing, Administrator, Executive Director, Chief Operating Officer, and Chief Executive Officer. In each case, I had a sense of comfort in knowing that in the moment, I was fulfilling the call of God in my life. Every one of those jobs was a labor of love, because there was a sacred component to my vocation.

It is my firm belief that you can always tell the difference when someone understands that they are called by the attitude they have about their work. The world desperately needs called people – dedicated to the proposition that there is a profound need for excellence, integrity, and values in every occupation.

There is a great lesson in this for us as leaders. We need to ask ourselves two questions:

- How do we view our work?
- How do we view the work of our team members?

If we do not see our work and the work of those around us as a sacred calling, how can we expect those we lead to find meaning in their chosen occupation? Izzo puts it this way, "A large part of leadership is to help others see the deeper possibilities in their own roles." To me that sounds like an extremely noble calling.

Steve



Reflections on Leadership



Sticks and Stones

October 2013

I remember coming home from the playground as a child and telling my mother about some hurtful things that had been said to me by another child. Like many of my generation, the model of parenting was by nature less sympathetic and more practical in terms of preparing us for the bumps and bruises of life. Her advice to me was to respond to name calling or hurtful words with a simple jingle - "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Hearing myself repeat these phrases many years later, it almost sounds like an encouragement for the offending party to change tactics and resort to violence in place of ineffective verbal harassment. But given the tenor of the times, the message was clear. "These are only words. There was no blood drawn. No permanent damage. Toughen up kid. Stop being so thin

skinned. Physical injuries are real, psychological injuries are imaginary." It was a message that I needed to hear at the time. I had to develop effective coping skills that would enable me to handle other tough situations in life.

In later years, however, a more mature reflection on the long lasting effects of words included the understanding that, in many ways words have an even greater potential for permanent injury than some physical mishap. I have known people in my life who can recall hurtful words 40 years after the fact, reopening wounds that have altered their entire outlook on life. The words of the jingle may have been useful in the moment, but were not entirely true. Words are powerful.

It is my opinion that we live in a time where many people witness verbal assaults with such frequency

that they have grown numb to the effect that it has on others. I am not referring to the textbook verbal abuse that would repulse the listener – like loud and obnoxious foul language. Sometimes the worst things are said with a humorous bite. Sarcasm is frequently used to mock, insult, or belittle another person. Sharpened by hours spent listening to the dialogue of movies and television comedies, the use of humor at the expense of another has become second nature. Some of the most corrosive use of sarcasm appears among people who claim the mantle of leadership, and is often used as a way to avoid an issue by changing the subject. Directing this language toward an opponent is not new, it just seems more frequent now than in the past.

Denny Hagel in her column "The Secret to Parenting" talks about the destructive effects of sarcasm on children. She has observed 4 major problems with the use of sarcasm:

- It is disrespectful
- It sends mixed messages
- It creates a sense of mistrust
- It models negative communication skills



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I would add to this list that sarcasm:

- Undermines the self esteem of the target of the attack.
- Damages interpersonal relationships
- Invites retaliation.
- Creates a small minded and petty image of leadership

Sarcasm may play well to an audience in a comedy club, but it has no constructive use in a leader's tool kit.

As leaders we know that every day we can use the power of words to build up those we work with. Words can be used in many constructive ways - to inform, reveal truth, inspire virtuous conduct, correct, convey affection, or express genuine human concern. Words can also be used in profoundly negative ways to injure, dispirit, beat down, trigger episodes of anger, or worst of all, create a sense of apathy that can immobilize an entire work force.



Some leaders use words liberally. I have a good friend whose children have observed that “Dad would never use 10 words when 100 would do.” Other leaders use words more sparingly, only saying what is absolutely necessary, knowing that when they do have something to say, everyone pays attention. Either style can work, as long as it is authentic.

The truth is that leaders are surrounded by people who are hungry to hear something uplifting and positive, often because they have been the frequent target of negative remarks. In this respect their work lives may be the bright spot in an otherwise difficult life experience. The image of well chosen words that I like the best is taken from Proverbs 25:11 – “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” Being able to say the right thing at the right time is truly a thing of beauty, and a gift to be treasured.

That is not to say that all a leader has to do is become the fountainhead of happiness and flowery compliments in order to be effective. Those we work with can tell when praise is deserved or hyperbole. A constant stream of undeserved happy talk will eventually damage the credibility of a leader so completely that the superior performance of the best team members will actually decline. On the other hand, being on the receiving end of a positive comment from someone who is not known for giving out accolades freely will be remembered and treasured.



When handled properly, even difficult conversations clear the air and strengthen relationships. Openness and honesty communicated with authentic concern creates trust. In the book of James the use of words is compared to the rudder on a ship - a rudder may be small, but it has the power to change the direction of a large seagoing vessel.

We all fall short in the way we use words in our role as a leader. In the give and take of communication in an organizational setting, mistakes will be made. Whether you are a leader in your home, community, church, or in the work place, your words have a tremendous impact on those around you. This realization should cause each of us to choose our words carefully. An altered version of the jingle may be a more accurate guide - “Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can hurt forever.”

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership with a Lighter Touch

November 2013

One of the common misconceptions about leadership is that the higher your position on the organizational chart, the greater one's ability to command others toward a vision or goal. This may be true in some situations, like a military leader on the field of battle, but in most places where leadership is required, the pure command approach to leadership is an illusion. The reality is that leadership does require decisiveness, strength, vision, high standards, and singleness of purpose. But these virtues must be tempered with an understanding that human beings follow leaders with their heart. High performing teams are comprised of team members who are completely engaged – head, heart, hands, and feet. Engaging the heart may be the most difficult part of leadership, partly because it reaches beyond the bounds of logic. But what may be harder to understand is when to use a lighter touch, or even give ground in the face of resistance that may be based on more emotional than rational arguments.

While some would have us believe that the need for a lighter touch to leadership has emerged because of a generational change in the attitudes of individuals in the workforce, history would suggest otherwise.

There are two examples that are perfect illustrations of this leadership dilemma taken from the ancient texts of the Old Testament recalling events that took place nearly 3,000 years ago.

According to the Book of First Kings, when Solomon, the son of King David ascended to the throne, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, *"Ask for anything and I will give it to you"*. To which Solomon replied, *"I am but a little child: I do not know how to go out or come in. Your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen... Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil."* So God said to him, *"Because you have asked for this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I will do what you have asked."* Solomon's life was marked by many shortcomings, but this humble desire to do the right thing was the foundation of a successful period of leadership.

Approximately 40 years later, Solomon died, and was succeeded by his son, Rehoboam. In his first days of leadership, he was approached by a group of elders with an observation and request. Solomon's many

public works projects had created a heavy burden on the country, and they asked for some relief. *"Please lighten the hard service of your father and we will serve you."* Hearing these words, Rehoboam's senior advisers recommended a conciliatory response. *"If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever."* The King's younger advisers recommended that he lay down the law and let them know who was boss, suggesting that he respond with the threat that *"If you thought my father's burdens were heavy, you haven't seen anything. I will add to your burdens."* As a young and inexperienced leader, Rehoboam took the advice of the younger advisors and responded harshly. The result was that 10 of the 12 tribes rebelled, and the Kingdom was split in two, never to be reunited again.

The contrast in these two situations is stark. Given the opportunity to have anything he desired, Solomon, referring to himself as a servant, asked for an understanding heart so he could be a better leader. Rehoboam, taking the mantle of the heavy handed, authoritative ruler, demanded obedience from his subjects. The lighter and more thoughtful approach to leadership is something that we

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refer to as servant leadership. From a practical standpoint this means that the leader's day to day conduct is marked by a number of distinct characteristics.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

For example, effective servant leaders:

- **Are not self righteous, arrogant or overbearing.**
- **Value the thoughts and opinions of others.**
- **Understand that integrity and values must override the ego and self interest that exists in every person.**
- **Can insist on superior performance without being disrespectful.**
- **May be intensely goal directed and clear about what needs to be accomplished, but have a sense of when to keep their foot on the accelerator and when to apply the brakes.**
- **Are able to make hard decisions in the face of adversity, and articulate the reasons they have reached an unpopular decision.**
- **Struggle with an awareness that all leaders are prone to errors in judgment, but make decisions and move forward without anxiety or regret.**
- **Acknowledge when they have made a bad decision and change course when it is clear that they have taken the wrong path.**



Adopting the servant leader model is not easy or achieved by adhering to a formula. In his book “Authentic Leadership”, Bill George stated that unless leaders understand their purpose they are at the mercy of their egos and vulnerable to their self centered impulses. He cites Robert Greenleaf as understanding the purpose of leadership as service to others, observing that *“If people feel that a leader is genuinely interested in serving others they will be prepared not just to follow you, but to dedicate themselves to the common cause.”*

For those of us who are nearer to the front lines of providing leadership in the face of pressing deadlines and increased customer expectations, talk of the lighter side of leadership may seem like nothing more than an interesting idea. When faced with the temptation to retreat when conditions become difficult it can be hard to tell if making midcourse adjustments based on changing conditions is the application of wisdom or a lack of courage.

While there is no easy answer to this dilemma, starting from the vantage point of servant leadership makes it easier to know when to press forward and when to lighten up. As I struggle with this question, I find hope in the prayer of Solomon - *“Lord, give your servant an understanding mind... that I might discern between good and evil”*, and the words of Jesus to his disciples - *“I am among you as one who serves.”*

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Reflections on Leadership



Anticipation

December 2013

Whenever I think of the Christmas season, I think about the anticipation people feel about the Christmas holidays. Of course, we all anticipate different things, depending on our stage in life. My most vivid childhood memories of Christmas involved sitting at the top of the steps with my brothers and sisters at 4:00 in the morning, wondering what was waiting for us under the Christmas tree. The five of us would speculate on what presents were awaiting for us and when my Dad would call us to come downstairs. My parent's bedroom was on the first floor, and about 6:00 a.m. my Dad would get up, make coffee, and generally wander around for a few minutes. At this point the tension was unbearable. However, we had been trained to remain in place until he would call to us – "Daylight in the swamp!" I am not sure how that

tradition came to be, but that was our signal that Christmas morning had begun. The anticipation was over. The race was on.

In later years, the anticipation changed somewhat – focusing on the traditions of Christmas Eve and Christmas day, seeing family and friends, wondering if the gift chosen for that special person would be received with the same enthusiasm that inspired its purchase. This type of anticipation was a little more sedate than the drama of childhood Christmas memories.

Some of the anticipation of the Christmas season is manufactured by the retail and commercial influences of society. It seems like every year there is a push to move thoughts of Christmas earlier and earlier in an attempt to ignite the desired shopping

frenzy. It seems that the older I get, the less I am influenced by these attempts to generate excitement.

The sense of anticipation at Christmas time is not entirely spent on children or an outgrowth of the retail trade. For people of faith, the core of the Christmas season is based on anticipation. On the Christian calendar, the Advent season includes the four Sundays prior to Christmas. The term advent is an anglicized version of the Latin word *adventus*, meaning coming. In this context, Advent has two parallel applications – a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of prophesy of the Old Testament. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Jesus as a baby in a manger. Advent also refers to the return of Jesus as prophesied in the New Testament - the Second Coming. Both applications involve a strong sense of anticipation.

But anticipation is not just a phenomenon that we experience at Christmastime. It is a part of the human condition that exists to some extent in every person. It often defines the kind of life we lead, or the type of leader we become - casting either a positive or negative influence on ourselves and everyone around us.

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For many people, anticipating the future is filled with dread. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that *“Fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil.”* Anxiety has been described as experiencing (or anticipating) failure in advance. This approach can rob us of the joy of living in the moment. There is a quote attributed to Mark Twain that expresses it best – *“I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.”*

Leaders who adopt a negative and fearful view of the future have an acute awareness of the “horror floor” – the worst thing that can happen in every situation. With this outlook, decisions are made from a defensive posture. Progress is nearly impossible under such leadership, because every opportunity involves some degree of risk. It goes without saying that lost opportunity is the by-product when avoiding the pain of failure is a leader’s primary goal.

But anticipation can also be a powerful tool for good. In the book, *Three Weeks with My Brother*, Nicholas Sparks expresses the positive effects of anticipation. *“Never forget that anticipation is an important part of life. Work’s important, family’s important, but without excitement, you have nothing. You’re cheating yourself if you refuse to enjoy what’s coming.”* Planning a

vacation, saving to buy a present for someone you love or looking forward to spending an afternoon with a grandchild can be a great source of joy. Sometimes the anticipation of an event is every bit as sweet as the experience itself. Instead of living life with anxiety and fear, anticipating something positive can be a reason to get up in the morning.

Most leaders know that there is a strong connection between superior performance and anticipation. Wayne Gretsky, nicknamed the Great One, is regarded by many as the best professional hockey player in the history of the National Hockey League. His key to success was an incredible sense of anticipation. In team sports, most great athletes seem to know where their teammates are at any given time. In addition to his acute awareness of his surroundings, Gretsky possessed a knack for knowing where the puck, and his teammates, would be next. When asked about this apparent gift, he simply stated “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it’s been.” From Gretsky’s point of view, opportunities unfolded every time he took the ice.

I think the key to anticipatory leadership lies in the realm of expectation and hope – the ability to look forward with optimism and

purpose. There are many things in life that might tempt a leader to convert anticipation into anxiety, but effective leaders do not succumb to negativity. Anticipatory leadership acknowledges the reality of today’s circumstance and eagerly looks ahead to embrace the possibilities of the future.

Where can we find the positive outlook we need as leaders, especially when we are surrounded by negative people and every nightly newscast is filled with critical and fearful comments? I think we need to look beyond ourselves to something deeper. For me, this is clearly stated in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* This is the type of confidence that is not easily shaken. The future does not seem as scary when you know who holds the future.

The Christmas season is a time of promise. Eagerly anticipate the joy of the season, and you will likely find it. Embrace the future with expectation and hope throughout the year and you will become a better leader.



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