

Reflections on Leadership



Looking Forward – Looking Back

January 2012

Like many other people, I am a great believer in maintaining lists to remember the things that are important and to help to organize my time and attention. This is not just a habit I follow at work. Every Saturday I start with a list of things I would like to accomplish around the house, and as I complete each task I cross out one more item on my “to do” list. The list is constantly changing. Recent lists have included putting up outside Christmas decorations, putting away patio furniture, or cleaning the gutters.

For a long time I believed that this was just a time management tool. I was busy and had a lot of things to get done in a limited period of time. Over the years I have come to understand that my focus on making a list is as much about looking back as it is about looking ahead at what I need to do next.

This realization occurred one Saturday morning when I was crossing several items off my “to do” list after they were completed. While doing the tasks on my list earlier in the day I noticed a couple other things that I needed to attend to, and fit them in to my schedule. Even though they were tasks that had just been completed, I added them to my list just so I could cross them off. Then it hit me. In addition to reminding me of what I needed to do next, the list was also an opportunity to review what I have accomplished at the end of the day.

On a broader scale, the start of a new year is when I look back on the list of resolutions from last year to gauge my progress and make up a new list. If you took a look at my list of resolutions over the past several years, you would think that I was in a serious rut. Many of the same things appear year after year. Losing weight, devoting more time to family, developing a better sense of work / life balance, reading and educational goals, all seem to reappear when the new list is made.

I take comfort in knowing that I am not alone in this tendency to look ahead to a new year with good intentions. The following is a compilation of the most common New Year’s resolutions taken from several sources (listed in no particular order):

- Spend more time with family and friends
- Enjoy life more
- Drink less alcohol
- Learn something new
- Get fit
- Lose weight – tame the bulge
- Reduce debt
- Manage stress
- Quit smoking
- Reduce, reuse, and recycle

- Save money
- Travel to new places
- Help others
- Get Organized

These items appear as the most common New Year’s resolutions and the most frequently broken resolutions.

If resolutions are so hard to keep, why do we insist on going through the exercise? I think it is because we know that goals are needed in every phase of life if we are to move forward. The process of self examination and goal setting is the path to improvement. One author suggests that resolutions are most likely to be kept if you create a plan, write down your resolution and plan, think about the goal as a year round activity, and remain flexible. This is good, common sense advice.

I believe that it is healthy for leaders to reflect and resolve to do better. Some resolutions are general in nature, while others may be focused challenges specific to our individual work situation. With that in mind, I have a few general New Year’s resolutions for those in leadership positions:

Reexamine your attitude. In her book “God never Blinks”, Regina Brett tells the story of Frank, a house painter who lives by two simple words – “Get to”. *Instead of saying I have to go to work today, Frank tells himself, “I get to go to work”.* *Instead of saying “I have to get groceries,” he gets to.* *Instead of saying, “I have to take the kids to baseball practice,” he gets to.* *It works for everything.* This positive approach to life turns burdens into opportunities. Think of how this approach could change your leadership style. I get to do performance reviews today. I get to hire a new person to add to our team. I get to work on new ways to help the people we serve lead happier and healthier lives.

Focus more attention on positive reinforcement. One way to make the “get to” attitude contagious is through the power of encouragement. Most people (myself included) have a keen eye for what falls short of expectations, and are less aware of the positive things that happen around us. Decide to change this balance in your relationships at work and at home. I have a simple phrase that I have taken from a dog lover’s bumper sticker to help remind me of the need to focus on positive reinforcement. **Less Bark, More Wag.**

Resolve to tackle problems head on whenever possible. Leaders can reduce anxiety and stress by dealing with problems as they arise. Procrastination almost always results in having to deal with a larger

problem later. More importantly, unresolved issues can damage relationships and create a negative undertone that will reach far beyond the original problem. When faced with the question of “Should I do it now or later?” - strongly lean toward doing it now.

Keep your composure. Avoid overreacting to the heat of the moment. As human beings we are at our very core, emotional creatures. This is not a bad thing. It is the way we were created by God. Our emotions enable us to love deeply and take on seemingly insurmountable challenges. However, the ability to temporarily set aside emotions and think clearly is the mark of a true leader, and will cause others to follow you when the going gets tough.

Shed the illusion of perfection. If you believe that you are nearly perfect, you are likely to expect perfection in others. In terms of leadership, this is the most direct path to mutual disappointment. Freely offering an apology for making a mistake or misjudgment will cement the relationship and enhance the respect between the leader and his or her team.

Take every opportunity to narrow the gap between what you say and what you do. While imperfection is our lot as human beings, the desire to provide a consistent message with our language and behavior is central to a leader’s credibility.

Share the mantle of leadership. Consciously develop the leadership skills in other members of your team, and engage them in the process of leadership throughout the year. It will provide a sense of growth and achievement for future leaders of the organization and lighten your burden as the leader.

Finally, find someone you trust and share your resolutions with them. Meet at regular intervals to discuss how you are doing in keeping your resolutions and how to get back on track when you fall short. Leaders need this because we are all amazingly adept at rationalizing our shortcomings. Having an honest person to hold us accountable is one of life’s true blessings.

Good luck with your new list! It is my hope that a year from now you will be able to look back on your resolutions with a sense of accomplishment and growth.



Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Asking Questions and Throwing Softballs

February 2012

One of the most important skills a leader can possess is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time. This sounds fairly simple, but it is really one of the hardest things for a leader to master. One of the reasons for this is that there are many different types of questions that can be asked. Here are just a few of the types of questions that come to mind:

Factual questions – (My 11 year old grandson is famous for these) - *Grandpa, do you know that the moon is an average of 238,855 miles from the earth?*

Profound questions - *Why am I here? What is my purpose?*

Penetrating questions – *Why did you decide to do it that way?*

Hardball questions – *Tell me again - why you think this policy is a good idea? What would you say to your critics that claim that this will wreck the economy?*

Softball questions – *Tell me about your work. What you like best about working here?*

Rhetorical questions – *Why me God? or How could I be so stupid?*

Accusatory questions – *How could you do such a thing?*

Trick questions – From parent to child – *Didn't I raise you to know better than to do that?*

Questions that provide perspective – (God's question to Job after his complaint about unfair treatment). – *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

Hypothetical questions – *If you knew for certain that you only had one year to live, what would you change from the way you are living your life now?*

Distracting questions – The type questions that sidetrack the conversation. – *Did you see the color of that car?*

Dangerous questions – Taken from a list of questions titled, "*Some questions that could be interesting enough to ask your guy*" - *Who was your prettiest girlfriend? Is there anything you would like to change about me?*

Sometimes being able to ask the right question is even more important than getting the right answer. Many organizations have failed because they had the right answers to the wrong questions. This was behind Peter Drucker's observation that "*The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong questions.*" Asking the right questions is not just for leaders who are charged with mapping out the

strategy of the organization. It also applies to conversations that take place between leaders and their team members and colleagues at every level of the organization.

This first step is to create a climate that is conducive to asking the right questions. This starts with reflecting on how we as leaders react when someone questions us about something we are doing. Our response to questions directed toward us will set the tone for everyone else. If the goal is to create an open and transparent environment we cannot become defensive when someone questions what we are doing or why we made a certain decision. Truly innovative and dynamic organizations are marked by a culture that embraces questions as a way to create clarity, challenge assumptions, and explore creative solutions. Once an open and free flowing environment has been created, the next step is to figure out the best questions to ask in a particular situation. This is a lot harder than it sounds.

Most good leaders are fairly comfortable with what could be called "hardball" questions. Some authors have called it interrogating reality or discovering the truth, but these are all descriptions for questions with a decidedly harder edge. These questions can be necessary and useful – even essential to achieving the mission of the organization. However, sometimes what is needed is a different approach – something we could call a "softball question".

Why is it necessary for leaders to use both hardball and softball questions? Think of it this way – using a hardball question as a direct effort to discover the truth is a bit like a hunting dog trying to flush a pheasant or rabbit from heavy cover. This can be a very effective approach. But what if you are uncertain about what your dog is likely to find when you unleash him? Or worse, what if what you thought was small game turns out to be a bear? In that case carefully gathering information becomes much more important and a more positive and less direct approach may work better. This is the time for the leader to use a softball question – something that is open ended and designed to encourage another person to talk. Essentially these questions provide a way to listen to what others are really saying. A wise friend of mine with decades

of leadership experience in education puts it this way, "*Good listeners ask good questions. Sadly we have lost the art of asking good questions.*" The following are a few examples of open ended questions:

What do you think about....?

What did you learn....?

How does this relate to....?

How else could we....?

What is the most important thing about....?

Why do leaders find it hard to shift gears and use more softball questions? I think it is because many of us have what I would call an Eddie Feigner complex. In the late 1940's a softball team called the King and his Court traveled from town to town across the country challenging local all star teams. They were famous. Just think of the Harlem Globetrotters in baseball uniforms. What made this team different was that they only had four players - a pitcher, catcher, first baseman and third baseman. Their star pitcher was a man called Eddie Feigner, who could throw a softball that was virtually unhittable. He could pitch blindfolded from second base and still strike out batter after batter. From the late 1940's through the 1990's they played 10,000 games, recorded almost 9,500 victories with over 140,000 strikeouts, 930 no hitters, and 238 perfect games. Maybe the most remarkable feat was a celebrity charity softball game in 1967, where Feigner struck out future hall of fame baseball players Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, Brooks Robinson, Roberto Clemente, Maury Willis, and Harmon Killebrew all in a row.

Many of us are like The King and his Court. We may want to throw a softball question, but it ends up looking like one of Eddie Feigner's rising fastballs. We want to do better, but it goes against our critical and competitive nature.

You may be amazed to discover what can be learned when you ask the right kind of questions. Resist the impulse to be Eddie Feigner. Learn to throw a good softball question. You might even find yourself cheering when someone you work with hits one out of the park.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



The Importance of Being in the Moment

March 2012

I must start this issue of Reflections with a confession. While I firmly believe that the need to give the people around you your undivided attention is absolutely essential, I have been slow to address this topic. My procrastination is mostly the result of a conviction that it is one of my major shortcomings as a leader and as a person. It is hard to write about something that represents a personal area of weakness that requires constant attention. Sometimes I am better at being in the moment, but it is hard for me to claim that I am leading by example in this area.

Being in the moment or consciously present with those around you is not just a leadership problem, it is a societal problem. We live in a world where there are more and more ways to be physically present and mentally absent. Drive down any highway, walk down any city street or sit in any restaurant and you will see people who are physically present with each other, but completely engaged in some other activity – texting, e-mailing or talking to someone else. Even young people who seem to be on a date are mentally absent. This begs the question, “Are they really together, or are they just in the same place?” How is being together at this time strengthening their relationship? While technology may make their mutual distraction more obvious, the underlying problem crosses generational boundaries.

While it is possible to blame technology for this state of distraction, we all have the tendency. When we were first married, Rhonda could tell if I was distracted and not listening to her. Every once in a while she would ask, “What did I just say?” This would bring me back to the moment. Eventually I developed a skill that is common to many men. I trained my mind so that, in spite of being completely distracted and thinking of something else, I could repeat anything said in the last 30 – 45 seconds. Of course when I repeated it back to her it was like I heard it for the first time. It is a bit like a recording that keeps looping back and recording new material over old information. It took her a few years to completely figure this out. Now she waits beyond the 30 – 45 seconds and asks, “Do you recall what we were talking about?” I’m busted! It is harder to get away with not listening when you have been married for 40 years.

The need to be in the present and give the people you care about your undivided attention is well understood. I have been a part of a number of leadership programs that have emphasized this quality. Whether it is expressed as “Be there”, “Being fully present” or “Be here, prepared to be nowhere else”, the message is the same. When you are distracted you are falling short as a leader. I think the lessons of being in the moment can be best understood by answering three questions:

What are you giving up when you are mentally somewhere else?

- **Accuracy.** Multi-tasking is the most efficient way of messing up more than one thing at a time.
- **Problem solving resources.** When you don’t pay attention to others you are, as a practical matter, counting on having all of the answers yourself. This is a dangerous assumption, and will likely lead to trouble in the future.
- **Innovation.** If you are known to be distracted and mentally unavailable, the people you work with are less likely to share a good idea. The seeds of innovation are often found in unlikely places – and every conversation has the potential for an “outside the box” solution.
- **Relationships.** When someone you are with knows that you are not paying attention, you have lost the opportunity to strengthen your relationship with them. Worse, your inattention may inadvertently communicate that you do not value them as a person or as a colleague, damaging their self esteem. Being there is about depth of communication and deepening relationships. If you are always distracted your relationships will be shallow - a mile wide and an inch deep.
- **The potential to influence others in the future.** The power of your presence is your most valuable resource as a leader. When that resource is wasted, it diminishes your ability to influence your team in the future. Simply stated - Why would someone pay attention to a leader who does not pay attention to them?

What can you gain by always being in the moment?

- **Respect.** Respect is not a right, it is earned. One way to earn the respect of someone is to show them that you value them as a person by being fully with them and paying attention to what they are saying. Mutual respect is enhanced by paying attention just as not paying attention conveys a lack of respect.
- **Cooperation.** When people know that you have paid attention and heard their point of view, they will be more willing to follow your lead, even if you have decided to go in a direction that they may not fully embrace.
- **Peace of mind.** Being fully in the moment helps you to escape the tyranny of the urgent and free you from racing from one fire to the next. Piece of mind comes from being in control instead of being controlled by circumstances.
- **Productivity.** When you are constantly distracted, you have lost control of your agenda and will spend your time on things of lesser value. If you want to be productive, stay focused!

- **An improved memory.** Your memory may be better than you think. However, in order to remember something, it has to get into the memory bank in the first place. If you are distracted, your memory will always be hazy.

How can I stay focused?

- **Always remember** – The person you have in front of you at this moment deserves your undivided attention. Do not assume that the persons who may be calling, e-mailing or texting you are more important than the human being that is looking you in the eye. Interruptions can sever the contact you have with the person in front of you.
- **Keep distractions out of your line of sight.** This includes computer screens, open windows, cell phones, iPhones, and the like.
- **Keep distracting sounds to a minimum** – phones, radios, televisions, etc.
- **Plan ahead.** Organize your thoughts before you meet with someone. It will make it easier to pay attention to the subject at hand.
- **Schedule enough time.** The time allocated to discuss a subject reflects the value of what is being discussed.
- **Do not give the appearance of being rushed.** Work at making people feel that you have time for them. If people think you are too busy, they will not bother you. Keep this up and you will be isolated from the world, and ineffective as a leader.

For those of us who are called to serve seniors, being in the moment has a special significance. It is difficult or impossible to achieve person-centered care without first establishing a culture of person-centered leadership. If you don’t pay attention to your team, you cannot expect them to be in the moment with the people we serve.

The life of Jesus is full of examples of being in the moment – even in the middle of the confusion and the crush of people looking to be healed or to hear an important message. Whether it was healing a sick child or a woman with a chronic illness, engaging one of his disciples in a teachable moment, or calling the tax collector Zacchaeus from his perch in a tree, Jesus could focus his full attention on a single individual.

There is a sense of calm that surrounds leaders who are fully in the moment. If you have had that experience it is like finding an oasis of calm in the middle of a sandstorm. It is the kind of leader we admire, and it should be the kind of leader that we aspire to become.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership Lessons from a Garden

April 2012

With the arrival of springtime, my thoughts naturally turn to gardening. Over the years, my gardens have taken different shapes. These days they are more focused on flowers and landscaping, but when our children were at home, our gardens were more utilitarian. I guess we were early advocates of local and organic foods. It is hard to get more local than a vegetable garden that is less than 50 feet from your back door, or more organic than the search for ways to naturally add nutrients to your soil. The many hours of working in a garden also provided opportunity to think about how the lessons from a garden may apply to the work of leadership. The following represents a few random thoughts that connect tending a garden with the work of leadership.

Soil preparation is essential. My original garden plot contained a soil that was mostly clay and lacking in nutrients. I struggled for a couple of years trying to loosen up the soil, but nothing seemed to help. Then one day a friend called me to tell me that one of his neighbors had a sign by his barn that said, "Free Manure." As an experienced gardener, he was convinced that the combination of straw and well rotted cow manure would work wonders for my garden. What we discovered was a barn that had not been cleaned in over 20 years, with organic material three to four feet deep. We spent several hours in 90+ degree heat filling two trailer loads to spread on both of our gardens. It was incredibly hard and unpleasant work, but the transformation in my garden was unbelievable. Everything grew beyond my wildest expectations, including over 100 cantaloupes, some as big as footballs.

This is not a new thought. In Matthew, Chapter 13, Jesus teaches a parable of someone sowing seeds in various types of soil. Jesus uses the image of soil to illustrate why the message is received well in some places (where the soil is good) compared to rocky soil or a compacted path. It seems that what is true for plants is true for ideas as well. As leaders, we need to create the right environment. Our soil is the culture of the organization, enriched by strong and positive values that are consistently reinforced by the behavior of the leadership. Poor soil yields poor crops. Poor corporate culture yields poor results.

Plant the right seeds. The only way to a rich harvest is to plant the right stuff. If you get the wrong seeds or inferior seedlings the results will not be there, even if the soil is perfect. I have tried the route of using seeds left over from last year or searching for bargain basement seeds, and have been sorely disappointed. For an organization, this means that the mission matters – you can only get the variety of fruit that is planted. A noble mission that appeals to the highest calling to serve others will produce satisfying fruit. A mission focused on self centeredness and greed may grow quickly, but will not last. The Apostle Peter expresses it this way, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of a perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." The quality of the seed matters. Leaders plant seeds that are not short lived and perishable.

Watch the weeds - the bane of every gardener's existence. Weeds seem to have the ability to grow almost anywhere, even in the most adverse conditions. Weeds rob the ground of water and nutrients and choke even the healthiest of plants. Pull the weeds or they will overtake the plants you intend to nurture. Delaying the task of pulling weeds can be dangerous. At some point removing the weeds will cause irreparable damage to the plants, and must be left in place until the crop is harvested. (Matt. 13: 24-30)

There is a great lesson in this. Leadership is not just about strategy and planning. It is about tending to the mission and executing the little things every day. Great strategy and careful preparation can be wasted through inattention. Leaders often ignore the little problems through laziness or the discomfort of dealing with the unpleasantness of other people. But problems, like weeds, never seem to go away by themselves. When you see weeds pull them. When you find problems, solve them.

Water generously. Water is the life blood of any garden. Sometimes there is enough rain, and other times you have to water the crops. Leaders who recognize the efforts of others and compliment them on a job well done are like a gardener watering the garden.

Compliments provide the encouragement that everyone needs to lift morale, inspire growth, and strengthen relationships. It is possible to overwater, just like it is possible to compliment so freely as to cheapen recognition and make it seem insincere. Great leaders know when and how to compliment others for the best effect.

Control the pests. Even a hardy plant can be weakened by pests. A pest may not eat the entire plant or all of the fruit, but it can consume enough to spoil it for the rest of us. As a leader our job is to protect the team and keep the distractions to a minimum. Even small distractions can have a big effect. If you have ever been camping in a tent with a single mosquito, you know that this is true.

No root – no fruit. For everything you see above ground, there is much more happening below the surface. Plants with deep roots can survive a drought. Leaders who are clear about their values and the values of the organization and invest time and energy in the human side of the enterprise are creating a strong root system that will enable the organization to weather tough times.

Let the sunshine in. While some flowers and plants will grow in the shade, the most productive gardens thrive on full sunlight. In some northern climates where the growing season is short, the presence of sunlight for over 20 hours a day can produce amazing results. There are many leaders who need to be the center of attention. The drive to be well regarded, receive credit for the organization's success, or even be famous can cast a shadow that can stunt the growth of the rest of the organization. Don't be that kind of leader. Let the sunshine of success reach everyone on your team.

Strong organizations, like good gardens, are not an accident. For those who share a love of plants, gardening can be a vivid reminder of how leadership works.

Have a happy spring!

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



The Practice of Leadership – Making Decisions with Imperfect Information

May 2012

One of the most difficult realizations in my leadership journey is that most, if not all, of the decisions that leaders are required to make happen with imperfect information. Whether the decision involves hiring new staff, constructing budgets, planning new programs, changing the process of delivering services, or building new buildings, every leader wants the assurance that the decisions we make will work out exactly as planned.

Having to make a decision in the face of uncertainty can cause a leader to be a timid or slow decision maker. In an attempt to avoid making a mistake, the leader collects more and more information until the right decision becomes obvious. Unfortunately by that time, the deadline for making the decision may have passed or conditions have changed that render the decision moot. Some examples of the consequences of slow decisions:

- Someone else has launched the new program that you were considering, and will have a competitive advantage in the market place that will be difficult to overcome.
- A competitor has just hired the person that you finally decided was perfect for the job opening in your department.
- The reputation of your organization has been damaged because of a delay in making a decision to improve the way services are delivered. Customers have become so dissatisfied that they will no longer recommend you to their friends.
- Decisions regarding cost reductions appear necessary, but the question is where those reductions should occur to have the least effect on service levels. Each day of delay means that the steps that need to be taken will be more drastic than making the decisions now. Not making any decision may eventually threaten the viability of the entire enterprise.

When faced with a lack of clear and convincing information, leaders must become more comfortable relying on intuition as part of the decision making process. Some particularly innovative leaders, like Steve Jobs, have an unusually high degree of comfort with relying on their instincts. Under his leadership, Apple had risked millions of dollars to produce products before consumers realized they needed it. While few leaders ever develop that level of insight or confidence, some level of comfort with what we can call “fuzzy circumstances” is present in every good leader.

Being decisive in the face of uncertainty does have a downside. For example, leaders who rely primarily on their gut to quickly fill an open position may think they are being decisive, but may just be taking a lazy shortcut or willing to settle for mediocrity when excellence is required. Setting high

standards and getting the opinions of others are important parts of the hiring process. Ignoring these well tested steps will dramatically increase the likelihood of hiring the wrong person. Also, there is danger in making quick decisions that can go beyond making the wrong choice. A leader who acts decisively with a belief that they always know more than those around them can damage relationships in the workplace and drive thoughtful and intelligent people from the organization - which can cause a brain drain that can be fatal in the long run. Decisiveness and inclusive decision making are not mutually exclusive.

Developing a balanced outlook

The best way to strike a balance between the desire for perfection and the need for speed is to consult individuals or form a team comprised of individuals with different approaches to problem solving – those who value process, and those who focus on action. Most people fall in one camp or the other, and both points of view are important. Thoughtful analysis, seeking the opinions of others and the process of engagement is essential. Reaching a conclusion and executing the decision on a timely basis is equally critical. A simplified description of a balanced approach is part scientist and part Larry the Cable Guy (“*Git er done*”). As a leader you may find that you are inclined to be a process person or lean toward taking swift action. The key is a healthy respect for both views and acquiring opinions that compliment your natural tendencies.

Even large and sophisticated organizations understand that they need to change the balance on the speed and process scale. SAP is a multi-billion dollar German software company that develops systems that enable companies to deal with large amounts of information and swiftly analyze business data. Recently they established a “skunkworks” – a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules. SAP recruited a group of university students and set them up in an isolated environment to work on a radically different and innovative solution to processing business data. The reason given for taking this step was articulated by their Chairman, Hasso Plattner. “*It is not easy to break out as a large company and do something different*”. I think it is because larger, more stable organizations are better at the process side of the decision making equation and less adept at the speed and agility that is focused on getting something done quickly with a more creative approach.

Here are a few thoughts on striking a balance between process and action:

- If you are a perfectionist – recognize that

you are not going to find perfection in this life – in yourself, in others, or in situations that require a decision.

- If you are a “*Git er done*” person, understand that the ready, fire, aim sequence is both lazy and impulsive as a leadership strategy, and the equivalent of flipping a coin. Disaster awaits – it is just a matter of time.
- In the long run, not making a decision is a decision. Deciding not to decide may be the worst decision of all.
- Decision making and regret - You can learn from your mistakes without wallowing in regret. Making a mistake is not necessarily a bad thing, if it leads to a learning experience.

A lesson from the practice of medicine

One of the best ways to understand the decision making process in effective leadership can be taken from the field of medicine. We all want our personal physician to make timely, informed decisions regarding the treatment of illness, even though we recognize that the information on which they make their decision is never perfect. The variables are extremely complex – the uniqueness of every human body, conflicting or inconclusive test results, past medical history, familial tendencies, interaction of medicines, allergic reactions to substances of all kinds, and a host of other factors make it virtually impossible to be 100% certain of anything.

The tension in this situation is obvious. There is a need for swift action to treat an illness that may be damaging our body, inflicting pain or discomfort, threaten our long term health, or even shorten our life span. On the other hand, we want these important diagnostic decisions to be handled with thoughtfulness and care, with as much evidence as possible to make sure that the treatment that is prescribed is effective. It is important to know what questions to ask and when enough information is collected to make an intelligent decision.

Every person in a leadership position is called to make decisions – some are important and complex, while others are more routine and obvious. In either case, striking the right balance between thoughtful analysis and speed is often what separates a good decision from a hard learning experience.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Generosity and Leadership

June 2012

Generosity is one of the virtues that we admire in leaders. I have to admit that when I consider a candidate for political office, I usually look at whether or not they are generous with their own money in meeting the needs of others. For me, this follows the words of Jesus in Matthew 6 – “*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*” We want our leaders to have a generous spirit that reflects compassion at a personal level.

Whenever the subject of generosity is discussed, a question that usually emerges is this – Why are some people naturally more generous than others? We know from experience that there does not seem to be a connection between wealth and generosity. The story of the widow’s mite in the first verses of Luke Chapter 21 is clear evidence that throughout history some of the most generous people have had less of this world’s resources. I believe that there are three possible explanations to the question of why some people are more generous than others – cultural expectations, what we learn from the example of others and how we are created as human beings.

Some years ago when China was emerging from a long period of isolation, I met with a study group of young Chinese leaders who were touring retirement communities. In the tour of one of our communities, the concept of charity was introduced. These young people had many questions – Why would someone give money to help an individual who is not a member of their family? Even more puzzling - Why would someone give money to care for a person they may not even know? They did understand the benefit of a tax deduction, but it was beyond their comprehension for someone to give money for what they considered no good reason. Their culture had conditioned them to only give when they were certain that there was the potential for some personal gain in the future. We are blessed in the United States to have a strong cultural tradition of voluntary giving to help others.

Like almost all of life’s virtues, the roots of generosity are often learned on the home front. Children learn from the example of parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers and other people in the community. While we did not have a lot of money when we were growing up, my parents were clear about

the need to give generously to those in need. They did more than talk about this idea. We knew that they were faithful in giving a tithe of their income to the church. I remember my mother telling me that I should see to the needs of others, because there were no pockets in shroud. Since you could not take wealth with you, you might as well use it to help someone else when you have the opportunity.

One of the most surprising sources of generosity may be found in our makeup as a human being. In his recently released book, **The Moral Molecule**, Paul J. Zak suggests that research now shows that an increase in oxytocin in the blood stream can be correlated with an increase in a person’s generosity or willingness to share. This surge in oxytocin is also identified as a response to situations where trust is extended by another person. It seems that there is a link between trust and generosity. He further states that activities like, singing, dancing and praying result in the same chemical reaction that promotes a connection between people and a sense of caring. The long and the short of it is that some of us may be naturally more inclined to be generous, either by our chemical make up or the things we do to create connections with other people.

All of this makes sense to me, because the essence of generosity is counter intuitive – it is not self serving, calculating the potential for personal gain, or an insurance premium paid for a future benefit. It is a pure expression of care and concern for others that proceeds from a giving spirit.

Why is the subject of generosity important to the study of leadership?

- Generosity is not just a financial matter. A spirit of generosity penetrates into every corner of a person’s life. How we use our time, the motives we assume in other people and how we react under stress is affected by who we think of first – ourselves or the needs of someone else.
- It has long been recognized that a leader’s assumptions about human behavior will shape the way they treat other people (See Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y). I believe that generosity is one of the key indicators in a leader’s world view. People who are self focused are

not inclined to be generous. Self focused individuals rarely make good leaders.

- Generous people are more sensitive to the needs of others, and are more likely to connect on a personal level with other people. The relationship between a leader and his or her team is an intensely personal experience, and loyalty is most often built on the foundation of a personal connection. Conversely, the lack of a personal connection can severely limit a leader’s effectiveness.
- Trust – an essential for all leadership, seems to be connected with generosity (see **The Moral Molecule** comments above). Trust is the basic building block in the relationship between a leader and his or her team. The absence of trust can be fatal to an organization (**The Speed of Trust – Covey**).
- Generosity can take many practical forms that are critical to a leader’s behavior. A leader who cares for their team members will be generous with feedback. It takes time and thoughtfulness to give praise and constructive criticism.
- Good leaders also freely encourage individual creativity in their team member’s approach to problem solving. Micromanagement is the antithesis of a generous spirit.

It is my belief that great leaders have a generous nature, which may come naturally or is recognized and cultivated as are other virtues that are critical to successful leadership.

As leaders we have some advantages in the quest for a generous spirit. We are blessed to live in a society where being generous honors our cultural legacy as Americans. We have the example of prior generations who have given freely to make our society a better place. Some of us have had the personal experience of mentors who have set a standard for us and future generations to follow.

So, focus on cultivating a generous spirit. Your team members will appreciate it, and you may actually change your body chemistry for the better.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Mission • Vision • Values

Special Edition Summer 2012

Almost every organization has a mission statement that defines the entity's reason for existence. This mission statement is usually complimented by a vision statement and an expression of values. Taken together, they describe the core of the organization and what it represents.

- **Mission** - A mission statement defines the boundaries of corporate activities to make sure that the resources of time, talent and money are properly applied to fulfill the central purpose of the enterprise. A well written mission statement embodies the advice I received from a wise southern gentleman, "Son, never forget that the main thing is the main thing."
- **Vision** - We live in an ever changing world, and change requires vision. A vision statement helps to chart the path of change by expressing what we hope to become, and to challenge us to reach out to do more, even if it is not easy.
- **Values** - There are many stories of unprincipled persons who achieve fame and fortune. Outcomes are important, but they are not the only way we measure success. Articulating values underscores expectations in terms of how success is achieved.

Mission statements come in all shapes and sizes. Here are a few mission statements of well known organizations:

Apple: Apple is committed to bringing the best personal computing experience to students, educators, creative professionals and consumers around the world through its innovative hardware, software and Internet offerings.

Johnson and Johnson: The mission of Johnson & Johnson is to provide scientifically sound, high quality products and services to help heal, cure disease and improve the quality of life.

Nike: To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world.
* "If you have a body, you are an athlete."

Starbucks: To inspire and nurture the human spirit - one person, one cup and

one neighborhood at a time.

Wal-Mart: Saving people money so they can live better.

Do mission statements make a difference? How about this example:

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

These words of Jesus in Matthew Chapter 28 are usually referred to as the **Great Commission** - and could be considered the mission statement of the early Christian church. One could say that this is the most effective mission statement in human history, inspiring a small number of disciples to change the Roman Empire and the history of the world.

Mission statements are not changed very often, and when they are, a great deal of time and effort is placed in the wording. The mission statement of Presbyterian Senior Living was last revised in 1983, nearly 30 years ago. It was as follows:

The mission of Presbyterian Senior Living is to offer Christian understanding, compassion and a sense of belonging to those whose needs may be physical, psychological, social, financial or spiritual in nature, by providing a full range of high-quality health care, housing and other related community services directed primarily to seniors and which contribute to the wholeness of body, mind and spirit.

It consisted of 62 words, describing the exact activities of the organization. It was written in a time when brevity was not in style. At that time strategic plans for organizations like Presbyterian Senior Living were often well over 200 pages long (our current strategic plan is 14 pages). Over the years, the mission statement of PSL has been read thousands of times at staff meetings, board meetings - any time the PSL family was gathered. It was our touchstone to remind us what we were all about.

Earlier this year the Presbyterian Senior Living Board of Trustees met to consider changing the mission statement, and concluded that it needed to be revised. The goal of the revision was to retain the language of the current mission statement that best expressed the essence of the organization, but to make the language more concise and reflect a broader, more aspirational tone. It was also decided that the vision and values statement would be revised to compliment the mission statement, so that when taken as a whole, they would encapsulate the character of PSL as an organization. Using these principles as a guide, the Mission, Vision and Values of Presbyterian Senior Living were revised.

The new mission statement is shorter, only 25 words. Since our name was changed from PHI to Presbyterian Senior Living in 2008, it was decided that the body of the new mission statement did not need to repeat the focus on seniors. The entire Mission, Vision and Values statement fits on a single page. (See next page)

It is critical that every person in the Presbyterian Senior Living family have an awareness of the mission statement and how their work contributes to the overall purpose of the organization. Nursing assistants, nurses, cooks, social workers, housekeepers, therapists - every position at every PSL location is focused on making this mission come to life. As we roll out the new mission statement, it is our intention to have a thorough discussion of how every person in the organization can fulfill the mission, vision and values in our daily work.

Because we are blessed to have work that makes a difference in the lives of those we are called to serve, it is only right that we pay special attention to the mission that describes and inspires that work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Steve".

Steve

(New statements on next page)

MISSION

The mission of Presbyterian Senior Living is to offer Christian understanding, compassion and a sense of belonging to promote wholeness of body, mind and spirit.

VISION

To express the love of Christ and the understanding of scripture concerning the divine purpose in creation and the dignity of humankind.

ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

1. **Christian** - PSL strives to provide services and living arrangements in a caring, and compassionate manner that is consistent with our Christian faith.
2. **Inclusive** - Reach out to include all persons in the communities in which we serve, as recipients of service, employees, and volunteers, including being involved with the diverse communities we serve.
3. **Quality** - To enhance the quality of life of those we serve through the provision of exceptional services, maximize the options available to seniors, and empower them to choose the services that best meet their needs.
4. **Stewardship** - To be good stewards of the resources available to the organization with the goal of achieving the greatest good to the greatest number of seniors in the most cost effective manner possible.
5. **Integrity** - Adhere to the highest standards of honesty, integrity, and impartiality to assure the public trust in the organization and its mission.
6. **Transparency** - Create a transparent environment for the PSL leadership and all constituent groups regarding the organization and its mission.
7. **People** - Provide employees with a supportive, rewarding and challenging environment that gives opportunity for a satisfying work experience in the service of others.
8. **Volunteers** - Create a supportive environment in which volunteers can exercise creativity in serving others with enthusiasm and energy.
9. **Innovation** - apply innovation and state of the art technology to meet the needs of current and future residents.
10. **Collaboration** - Encourage the development of relationships with like minded organizations and individuals to meet the needs of seniors.

Reflections
on Leadership

Reflections on Leadership



When Mission, Vision, Values Become Personal

July 2012

Almost every organization has a mission statement that defines the entity's reason for existence. This mission statement is usually complimented by a vision statement and an expression of values. Taken together, they describe the core of the organization and what it represents.

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Mission statements come in all shapes and sizes. Do mission statements make a difference? How about this example:

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But mission, vision and values are not just for large organizations or great causes. There is a school of thought that advances the proposition that every person needs to have a mission statement. In her book *The Path, Creating Your Own Mission Statement for Work and for Life*, Laurie Beth Jones observes, "A personal mission statement acts as both a harness and a sword – harnessing you to what is true about your life, and cutting away all that is false".

There are web sites that provide tools to help write a personal mission statement. There is even a

web site that will write a mission statement or a statement of purpose on your behalf. This service is marketed as being especially handy when filling out a college or employment application. This reminded me of the 60 minutes interview of the founder of MAD magazine, who explained how he adjusted to the annual executive physical examination requirement when MAD magazine became part of a larger publishing enterprise. As CEO, he simply delegated the task to his assistant, who was happy to take the physical exam in his place. When he died of a sudden heart attack a few years later, I was not surprised. There are some things in life that you have to do yourself. In my opinion, articulating your mission, vision, and values is not a task to assign to others.

There are some bumper stickers that seem to indicate a sense of mission, like "He who dies with the most toys wins". It does reflect philosophy of life, but it is hard to think positively about a person whose last thought in this life is being focused on getting one more toy.

What does a well considered personal mission statement look like? Here are a few examples:

Louise Morganti Kaelin - Life Success Coach
- MY MISSION IN LIFE IS TO SERVE GOD
BY BEING: A beacon of light, A bridge of understanding, A tower of integrity, and A castle of realized dreams.

Marianne Szeto (who happens to be a Type 1 Diabetic) - My mission is to make a difference in the lives of others by sharing my life experiences and knowledge about diabetes.

(A CEO example from The Path by L.B. Jones)
- My Mission is to foster innovation, enhance cooperation, and create prosperity for all whom I serve.

It is my belief that a personal mission statement is especially important for people in leadership positions. This is because those who choose to follow a leader are under the impression that the leader knows where they are going. This sense of direction is more than understanding the tasks that need to be performed in a given situation. It is about respect that is based on an awareness of and confidence in the character of the person who is leading them. This is why few people are willing to take risks to follow a smart but unprincipled leader. We expect more from our leaders because we know that there are likely to be times that we have to trust that leaders are going to do the right thing and follow them even when we do not have a complete

knowledge of the facts and circumstances.

Those who follow our lead also expect consistency. Leaders who have articulated their purpose in life and the values that shape their behavior are likely to be more consistent than those who have not gone through a process of reflection. The connection between a personal mission statement and consistency is best expressed in Stephen Covey's observation that, "A personal mission statement becomes the DNA for every other decision we make."

So I would encourage all leaders to take the time to articulate a personal mission statement, outline a vision for the future and briefly write out the values that are important in your life journey. It will give you a point of reference when making decisions and help to determine if your actions are in sync with what you claim is important in life. It will also provide a basis for self examination as you think about those who are watching you and for whom you are an example at work, at home and in the community.

The question arises – what does a leader do with a personal mission once it is written down? The answer, to that question is like many things in life, "it depends". Some people print and distribute their personal mission statement. However, when personal mission statements are created and used for wide distribution, there is a danger that playing to a wider audience will impair the honesty and authenticity that a personal mission statement requires. Those who look for honest feedback on how they are fulfilling their personal mission may decide to disclose it to someone who is trustworthy and honest enough to keep them accountable. From a personal perspective, I lean toward a mission statement that is designed for internal consumption and used frequently for personal reflection. All other uses are secondary. In the final analysis, the effectiveness of a mission statement is measured by how you fulfill your mission by your actions.

Finally, as leaders we can consider ourselves blessed when we work in a place where the mission, vision and values of the organization are in step with our personal goals and values. When this alignment occurs, the result is a consistently high performing organization and a personally satisfying work experience.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



August 2012

Innovation and Change

I recently heard a speaker talk about change, and how the common belief is that all people have an intrinsic resistance to change. While he said that there was evidence to support this assumption, there was also evidence that people are inclined to change, even when they know that the change before them is profound. At this point in his speech, I could tell that everyone in the audience seemed a bit skeptical - until he flashed two photographs on the screen. The first was of a couple posing for wedding pictures. The second was a photo of a parent holding a newborn baby. Everyone got the point. These photos represented what many believe are the most significant changes that happen in a person's life. Literally millions of people across the world volunteer for these changes to happen to them every year. This is even more astounding when you realize that a lot of families choose to have more than one child, and a high percentage of widowed or divorced individuals choose to remarry.

The same observations could be made about innovation and technology. I routinely use e-mails and computers as a part of my work. But I was always puzzled about the fascination young people had with text messages. It seemed like a waste of time and a lot of bother to me. My wife, who is inherently more tech savvy, was more adaptable. When my granddaughter, Hannah began to text me, I had a change of heart. What changed my opinion for good was a text that I received from her as she was just about to go on stage to try out for the middle school play. The text read, "Grandpa, I am going on stage to try out for the school play. I am very nervous. I hope I don't throw up. Hannah." I still text only occasionally, but I got the point of this new technology. It enabled me to be in the moment with my precious granddaughter in a way that mattered to me.

Innovation and change – Innovation is defined as the introduction of something new, a new idea, method, or device, a novelty. Innovation differs from invention in that innovation refers to the use of better and, as a result, novel idea or method, whereas invention refers more directly to the creation of the idea or method itself. Innovation differs from improvement in that innovation refers to the notion of doing something different (Lat. innovare: "to change") rather than doing the same thing better.

We tend to think that our time in history has

more innovation and change than any other. The truth is that there have been other points in history when innovation and change has been disruptive. In his book, *The Power Makers*, Maury Klein describes an era of astonishing innovation, invention and change. Starting in 1876 and moving through 1939, he traces the development of steam power and electricity that would quickly transform the United States and the rest of the world. The amazing part of this story is that scientists, inventors, engineers, and business people were all working on the same things, and in many cases, inventors exceeded the scientific knowledge of the day. Scientific discovery and understanding of heat, light, magnetism, and electricity was just emerging while inventors and engineers were creating things that would be immediately translated into industrial applications and consumer products.

The lesson is that while we tend to focus on resistance to progress, human beings have displayed a tremendous capacity for innovation and change. This does not mean that change comes easily. It does mean that if handled properly, change can be embraced, and that leaders can have an impact on how change and innovation is put into daily use.

What is the role of leadership in innovation and change? I have a few observations in this regard:

- When leaders personally embrace innovation and change they model the behavior that they expect from others. This means that leaders must be flexible enough to change directions when required. Deitrich Bonhoffer, the famous theologian observed that, "If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction." The implication – the only way to remedy the situation is to get off the train.
- Leaders recognize the creative abilities in all people. Great ideas come from every part of an organization. Where does most innovation actually happen? It happens more often in someone's garage or in a small business than in the executive suite or research laboratory of a fortune 500 company.
- Innovation and change is not a top down exercise. Innovation rarely follows a pre-defined script, and forced change rarely works in the long run. Leaders who think they have a special insight into exactly how others need to change are often out of touch with the views and needs of others.

Better messaging will not compensate for a leader being out of touch.

- Leaders create an environment where change is nurtured, encouraged, and rewarded. In *The Learning Organization*, Peter Senge identifies the roles leaders play in making this happen - designer (shared vision and long term orientation), steward (managing for the benefit of others), and teacher (fostering learning in everyone) as key elements in making an organization truly innovative.
- Innovation and change is not about technology or gadgets. It is easy to confuse the novelty of technology with innovation. Technology is a subset of innovation and may be an effective tool in achieving a desired result, but it is not the heart and soul of innovation or transformational change.
- There is a spiritual aspect to change. In **Matthew, Chapter 9**, Jesus talks about the futility of putting new wine into old wineskins. The fermentation process will destroy the skins and waste the wine. New wine must be placed in fresh wineskins. Sometimes change cannot be cosmetic or partial – but must be all encompassing.
- Finally, leaders effectively communicate the virtue of innovation and change and how it will benefit those whose lives will be disrupted by the change that is needed. Articulating the point of innovation and change and how will it make their lives better, now and in the future, is the key to success.

It is increasingly evident that we are living in a time when incremental change is not going to solve the problems before us. This applies to our society and to our work with seniors. Health care, energy consumption, economic growth, education – choose an area of concern, and the standard solutions will not be sufficient to overcome the obstacles that confront us. Remaining true to our personal and organizational mission, vision and values while we embrace innovation and change is the challenge of our time. If history offers any insight into the future, we can be optimistic, but it will require strong leadership from all of us.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



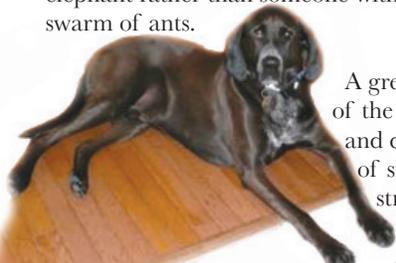
September 2012

Doing the Heavy Lifting – Creatures (and Organizations) Large and Small

Back in the dark ages when I was in biology class in high school, I remember wondering how certain insects had the capacity to lift up to 50 times their own body weight. The reason this question was such a puzzle to me was that larger creatures do not come anywhere close to such feats of strength. If a 200 pound man could lift 20 times his own weight, it would mean that he should be able to lift about 10,000 lbs. To put this in perspective, at the recently held Olympics in London, Om Yun Chol of Korea became the 5th man in Olympic history to lift triple his own weight (123 lbs) by lifting 370 lbs in the clean and jerk. Clearly there is something going on here that requires further study.

When I raised the question about insects being able to lift such large weights for their size, my biology teacher gave me a two word answer – short muscles. It turns out that the answer is a bit more complicated, involving the geometry and characteristics of muscles, mass and length, but when you boil it all down, his answer was essentially correct. It seems that ant muscles are no stronger than human muscles on a pull for pull basis, but the small size of ants gives them an advantage on how much force they can produce. As the size of an organism increases, its mass increases at a much greater rate than the sectional area of its muscles, so those muscles have proportionately more mass to lift. The reason an ant can lift so much is because of scaling. So, it looks like we will not be seeing anything that approaches insect-like strength at any future Olympic Games.

But being small is not necessarily perfect for every situation. There is a place for larger organisms. If you are in the jungle and need help to move a 1,000 lb. tree trunk, you may want to look for someone with a trained elephant rather than someone with a very large swarm of ants.



A great illustration of the advantages and disadvantages of size and strength is my dog Barney – a 95 lb. dog

with a ferocious bark. Barney absolutely loves my wife. He exhibits the closest thing to pure adoration I have ever seen, literally laying at her feet whenever she is in the house or yard. Having a big and protective dog is a great deterrent. I am never worried about Rhonda's

safety if I am traveling because he can and will protect her at all costs. But when it comes to squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, and other pests that destroy the flowers that my wife so carefully tends throughout the year, he is utterly useless. It is not that he does not make the effort. He has the raw speed and intention to protect the yard from these intruders. Every day for the past several years he has chased squirrels and chipmunks in our yard. It is almost like watching a Roadrunner cartoon. He just cannot change directions quickly enough to catch anything that small.

My daughter on the other hand has two dogs, a mixed breed which is mostly Border Collie, and an Australian Shepherd. They are fast, but they also possess an ability to change directions in a flash. They keep the yard clear of pests with ease, but aside from making a lot of noise, they would not scare anyone.

How do these biological characteristics of bugs or the size and shape of family pets relate to the study of leadership and organizations? When it comes to the size and culture of organizations and their leadership teams, there are distinct advantages to being and thinking small, and there are advantages that accrue to organizations when they become larger and more sophisticated.

Advantages of relatively small size

- Innovation and the ability to respond to a changing environment.
- Personal, customer focused service. Anticipating customer needs and swift recovery when service is not up to par.
- Flexibility - less red tape or restrictive policies.
- Intuitive approach to problem solving.
- Speed of decision making and execution once a decision is reached.
- Openness to abandoning unsuccessful methods to try new approaches.
- Immediate awareness of changes in customer needs and the ability to anticipate trends.
- Ease of informal communication with team members.

Advantages of being larger

- Greater breadth of knowledge and expertise.
- More finely developed quality control systems.
- Access to capital for expansion and growth.
- Policy and procedure development to control risk in complex legal and regulatory environments.

- Financial security for staff and business partners.
- Ability to afford and deploy technology.
- Efficiency and lower costs with economies of scale.
- Potential for greater depth of research and understanding of markets.
- Ability to provide more cost effective benefit programs for staff (health insurance, retirement plans, etc.).

The challenge for today's leader is to realize the advantages of being small and large. This means that there needs to be a constant shifting of gears. Great leaders have the ability to "think small" – to focus on personal relationships so that everyone – staff, various constituent groups, and those we serve clearly understand how important they are, to encourage creativity and initiative and foster a sense of ownership in every person to achieve the mission of the organization.

Leaders also need to "think large", by focusing beyond the moment to anticipate the needs of the next generation of people we intend to serve, to effectively communicate what that future will look like, and what we need to do to get there - to prepare for the unexpected so that the mission of the organization will survive to serve well into the future.

When faced with the heavy lifting that is required to make an organization successful, the ability of a leader to move between small and large paradigms is paramount. Leaders who can only think big will be ineffective dreamers. Leaders who can only think small will only achieve fleeting success as the world passes them by. We need to understand whether today's circumstances require us to be ants or elephants, or physically imposing or nimble canines. Knowing when to think small or large is not easy, but recognizing and making this critical adjustment can be the difference between success and failure.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



October 2012

Searching for the Truth

The need for leaders to be truthful is an attribute that is referenced in nearly every book written on leadership. Sometimes it is expressed or implied in the title of the book – *Credibility* (Knouzes and Posner), *The Speed of Trust* (Covey), *True North* (George and Sims). At other times it is less obvious and imbedded in the pages of the text. When describing the qualities of effective leaders, words like integrity, honesty, truthfulness, or phrases like “being a straight shooter” or “keeping your promises”, appear at the top of the list – usually coming well before the virtues of intelligence, creativity, or being a visionary.

We also know that when the failures of leadership are chronicled, the lack of truthfulness or honesty is almost always a part of the story. Sometimes it involves a lack of truthfulness in relationships with others, but sometimes it is a lack of honesty as evidenced in self-delusion – failure to acknowledge the reality of the environment.

In a recent Wall Street Journal article entitled *Why We Lie* – adapted from the book by James B. Duke, *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone – Especially Ourselves*, the author provides empirical evidence on how everyone has a tendency toward dishonesty. Through a series of experiments he challenges the idea that people are either honest or dishonest, concluding that, except for a few outliers at the top and bottom, everyone has the capacity to be dishonest, and almost everyone cheats just a little. He outlines the forces that shape dishonesty – factors that make people behave in a more or less honest fashion:

Factors that encourage dishonesty:

- Ability to Rationalize
- Conflicts of interest
- Creativity
- Previous immoral acts
- Being mentally depleted
- Others benefiting from our dishonesty
- Watching others behave dishonestly
- Culture that gives examples of dishonesty.

Factors that encourage honesty:

- Honor pledges
- Signature placement (at the top of a tax or insurance form before the form is filled out)
- Moral Reminders (like the 10 commandments)
- Supervision

One can look at both of these lists and see how leadership can have an impact on the level of honesty or dishonesty around them.

Getting Personal

When looking at the subject of honesty, it

is always important to start with a personal reflection. This begins with an understanding that leaders (ourselves included) are not immune from the human tendency to be less than truthful or honest. Anyone who starts with the assumption that they are entirely beyond reproach - truthful 100% of the time - is either clueless or delusional.

Secondly, it is important to understand that honesty is an important quality in leaders because our behavior casts a long shadow and can influence the conduct of others. The way we behave creates a climate that encourages a higher level of truth and honesty in those around us.

Being truthful is also more than just saying the right things. Leaders often find ways to obscure the truth without lying. Creating a diversion, attacking the messenger, and answering a question with talking points that are designed to get out a standard but unrelated message are common tactics designed to avoid a truthful response.

Because truth is usually filtered by a personal point of view, it is possible to take the same facts and draw different conclusions. Almost every week different economists view the same economic data and infer that the future is likely to be positive or negative or that those responsible for managing the economy have done a credible or a poor job. It is entirely possible for two individuals to look at the same facts and have a different view of what is true.

Truth with others – Truth with ourselves.

In my experience, the first place where truth becomes a casualty is not in our relationship with others, it is when we lie to ourselves. Before any dishonest act, there is almost always a period of rationalization – The excuses are all too familiar – “Everyone else is doing it; No one will notice; It really does not hurt anything; Just this one time” – the list can go on and on.

From a leadership perspective, an unwillingness to acknowledge or confront the truth is the root cause of many business failures. In *Good to Great*, Collins writes about level 5 leaders “confronting the brutal facts”. In *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott talks about “ground truth” and “Mokitas – that which everyone knows and no one speaks of.” In my view, all of this boils down to whether or not you are honest with yourself as a person and a leader.

Another common way of avoiding the truth is to look for facts that tend to support your point of view, and to ignore facts that contradict what you believe. A number of years ago a congressional

staff person called me about a story they were working on related to hospital discharge practices. He was looking for evidence to support the assumption that hospitals were discharging people prematurely. When I explained that we were working with other health care providers to prevent that from happening, he quickly lost interest. He concluded the conversation with an invitation. “If you can identify a situation where someone died in the ambulance between the hospital and one of your facilities, I can get you on the 6:00 news.”

Absolute Truth

I am always worried when I run into someone who is convinced that they have a corner on the truth – they alone understand what the truth is in any given situation. That being said, I am even more concerned about those who think that in any given situation that the truth is simply a matter of differing perceptions.

When under pressure and faced with a situation where facts may be hard to sort out, leaders can be tempted to conclude that the truth is so elusive that it is irrelevant. The danger of subscribing to this point of view is illustrated in chapter 18 of the Book of John – the trial of Jesus. As Pilate examines Jesus to determine his guilt or innocence, he asks the rhetorical question “What is truth?” In this statement he implies that truth is essentially unknowable, and is really just one person’s point of view. Based on this assumption, Pilate states “I find no fault in this man”, but ultimately decides to turn Jesus over to be crucified as the crowd demands. When a leader’s view of the truth is reduced to a point of view, poor decisions ultimately follow.

Truth and Love

Finding and expressing the truth does not have to be harsh or divisive. I like the words of the Apostle Paul, who in Ephesians chapter 4 – refers to “speaking the truth in love”. When it comes to finding and articulating the truth, that simple phrase should be the touchstone of our personal and professional lives.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



November 2012

Contagious Leadership

As many of you know, my family has spent a good part of the past several months focused on my daughter's recovery from a rare form of Non Hodgkins Lymphoma. A significant part of her treatment took place at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York where she received intense chemotherapy and an adult stem cell transplant. Her room was just down the hall from Robin Roberts, one of the co-hosts of Good Morning America who was undergoing a bone marrow transplant. Those following Robin's story have a pretty clear picture of what my daughter was going through.

Due to my daughter's suppressed immune system, our visits to her involved everyone donning masks, gloves, and gowns to protect her from infection. Breathing through a mask was especially bothersome, and at times claustrophobic. My dear wife, who was in Michelle's room day and night for twelve straight days as Michelle's caregiver, endured this condition in order to give Michelle's husband a much needed break. My visits were shorter in duration, but still required masks, gloves and gowns. As we washed our hands for the umpteenth time and scrubbed down with hand sanitizer, our conversations naturally drifted to germs and the spread of infectious disease - behavior that one would expect from two nurses.

At that same time, as a part of the renewal of my nursing license, I decided to study the prevention and treatment of Clostridium Difficile - which is often referred to as a superbug because it is resistant to treatment. If I was not paranoid about transmission of infection before studying this material, I certainly was afterward. Even now I find that I am washing my hands much more often and am less inclined to touch handrails and other high traffic surfaces.

As I was thinking about the various ways disease is transmitted from person to person, I was struck by the realization that, in some respects, attitudes are much like communicable diseases. Morale is the term we use to describe the collective attitude of a group of people, or more specifically "The emotional or mental condition with respect to cheerfulness, confidence, and enthusiasm, especially in the face of opposition or hardship." Good organizations are often said to have high employee morale, while organizations who struggle often are described as having morale problems - often evidenced by absenteeism, bad service, low productivity, and poor financial outcomes.

Negative attitudes are easily transferred from one person to another, and once a person is infected, may be difficult to change. This is a truth that has been demonstrated time and time again.

When Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, there were those who grumbled about his leadership. The unrest soon affected the entire company of travelers. Negative attitudes persist, even in the presence of the miraculous events of the exodus.

The presence of low morale is an interesting thing. Sometimes the people who complain most about their group having morale problems are the very ones who are quick to focus on negative thoughts, not realizing that they may be a part of the problem.

Apathy may be the most difficult attitude of all. Someone who is engaged but is unconvinced is still actively participating in the process and can make a valuable contribution. The apathetic are disconnected and have already checked out, becoming a drag on everyone around them. Some are merely passive. Others go a step further and become passive - aggressive. In my view, apathy is the Clostridium Difficile of attitudes - highly resistant and very hard to treat.

Positive attitudes are also transferred from person to person, and can have a powerful impact on others. The methods of transmission are relatively easy - a smile, a sense of humor, expressions of appreciation, acts of kindness, genuine warmth, a concern for others and just being courteous are just a few of the ways that people infect those around them. Leaders who display these behaviors seem to attract more positive people to work with them and infect everyone they touch.

Leaders who are concerned about creating and sustaining positive attitudes need to think about a few questions:

- As a leader, what are the attitudes that you wish to convey to your team?
- How does your behavior influence the people on your team - positively or negatively?
- Are you consistent or sending mixed messages?
- Do you overlook bad attitudes on your team - just hoping that they will go away?

Leaders bear a responsibility for the attitudes of those on their team. This often means taking action when necessary. A leader who tolerates bad attitudes or fails to communicate expectations is like a physician who is aware of a raging infection but does nothing to combat the underlying disease. Changing attitudes is not just about putting on a happy face. Not everything in life is a pleasant experience, and acknowledging a problem or difficult situation is often the first step toward recovery.

In a recent orientation program for new leaders, one of the participants observed that the tone of the day is often established within the first 15 minutes of the shift, and illustrated the difference in the following two introductions from the team leader at the start of the day:

"Today is going to be a terrible day, one person called off, and we know what that means. Just do the best you can, and don't complain!"

This was contrasted with a more positive outlook. *"It will be important for each of us to reach out to help each other today. You will notice that we have juggled assignments a bit. Let me know what I can do to make your day better. I will be touching base with you frequently to see how things are going."*

Sometimes we need to acknowledge that our own mistakes and shortcomings play a key role in shaping the attitudes of those around us. How we handle our own failures can turn the tide and create a more positive climate in the workplace. The process for doing this is fairly straightforward:

- Acknowledge the error;
- Ask for forgiveness;
- Repair the damage to the best of your ability;
- Make a commitment to avoid repeating the shortcoming in the future.

Finally, we need to recognize that as human beings, our outward attitudes are an expression of our inward thoughts. The Apostle Paul knew this to be true. In Chapter 4 of his Letter to the Philippians, he gave the following advice - *"Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*

As a leader we are a primary source of infectious attitudes. Knowing that attitudes are contagious should make us think about what people are likely to catch from us when we engage them in our daily work.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Peace on Earth

December 2012

We are approaching the time of year when we receive Christmas cards – electronic and hard copy – from friends and relatives that we rarely connect with throughout the year. In addition to the normal contact list, I am amazed at how many businesses send cards around the holidays. These cards usually fall into three categories:

- General holiday greetings – happy holidays, season's greetings, or some other nondescript message with reindeer, snow, birds, etc.
- Cards that acknowledge the religious significance of the season with a message accompanied by angels, wise men, Mary and Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds, or something related to the Christmas story.
- Cards with an image and words that can be taken either way – as a bland, feel good expression or a deeply rooted spiritual message - like a star or a snow covered church, with the inscription "Peace on Earth."

Who can argue with a message like peace on earth? It has been used as a cliché by beauty pageant contestants when asked what they would ask for if they could be granted one wish. In theory, everyone wants world peace.

For the more spiritually tuned individual, the term "Peace on Earth" is a distinctly Christian message taken from **Luke 2:14** in the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus to shepherds tending their flocks – "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...*" This message is also repeated in Christmas carols throughout the holiday season.

In reality, peace is not just a Christmas expression. Prince of Peace is one of the names for the Messiah mentioned in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Jesus often spoke of peace. Addressing his disciples near the end of his life he spoke words that are often used in a funeral message or at a memorial service. "*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*" But my favorite is taken from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew Chapter 5** - "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.*"

How does the idea of peace translate into the realm of leadership? Effective leaders

impart a sense of peace in confused and troubling circumstances. Whether it is a quarterback on a football team surrounded by 50,000 screaming fans, or a calm and reassuring response to a crisis at work, leaders provide assurance that everything will be OK. They seem to know what to do in the moment, and hold things together until the crisis passes and we can calmly move forward again.

Some leaders have confused peace with the idea of everyone living and working in perfect harmony. Using this framework they try to avoid conflict and admonish their team members to "just get along". From this vantage point, the absence of conflict must mean that there is peace. But we intuitively know that this is not true. Sometimes conflict can be healthy – even necessary to resolving deep seated disagreements. The absence of conflict may be a symptom of apathy – a dangerously unhealthy condition for any enterprise. Some authors, like the well known Bible teacher Beth Moore, have drawn a distinction between being a peacekeeper and a peacemaker.

Peacekeepers are about smoothing out the rough spots, making sure that everyone is happy, avoiding the underlying issues that are a source of tension. This is the veneer of peace without being the real thing. In terms of international relationships, the United Nations will send in peacekeeping forces as a buffer between warring factions. Everyone knows that the presence of these forces does not create peace. They just keep the two sides apart so they will stop killing each other. There may be a separate process that will deal with the issues and create a climate that is more conducive to peace, but the presence of peacekeepers will not fix the situation.

Peacemakers on the other hand are not afraid of conflict, and are committed to resolving issues so that good will and common purpose overcome or become more important than divisiveness or conflict. If you fancy yourself to be a leader, be a peacemaker, not a peacekeeper.

There are some practical steps to being a peacemaker as a leader:

- Establish a climate of respect – even for those with whom you disagree, and make sure that everyone understands

that is one of the basic ground rules of your leadership. Great leaders have plenty of room for differing opinions, but will not tolerate disrespect.

- Even the playing field by making sure that more forceful personalities do not intentionally or unintentionally trample on more timid team members. Every person on the team counts.
- Encourage your team members to see each other as people rather than obstacles in the struggle to get their own way. As human beings we are all capable of error and inspiration.
- Provide clarity of purpose that will appeal to the higher aspirations of individuals on your team. What is our mission? What is the right thing to do in this situation?
- Delineate the difference between core values and everything else that is subject to adjustment. Calm discussion often reveals that strongly held opinions are not always rooted in core values.
- Align the gifts and talents of your team members with their duties and responsibilities. People generally want to succeed, and when they are in the best position to succeed, they are more likely to be happy and productive.
- Provide affirmation for those team members who work hard to understand those with differing points of view, and who look to create success for the group rather than just for themselves.
- Even peacemakers do not seek peace at all costs. Sometimes hard decisions have to be made for long term peace to be achieved. History clearly shows that appeasement is rarely, if ever, the path to peace.

There are situations in the world and within organizations that defy every attempt at peacemaking. Even in such situations, leaders should make the effort to create a peaceful atmosphere. At Christmas and throughout the year, the words of Jesus still ring true – "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God*".

Have a Blessed and Peaceful Christmas.



Steve