

Reflections on Leadership



January 2014

Perfection Paralysis

One of the most difficult dilemmas in leadership today is the collision between two virtues – perfection and speed. Like most aspects of leadership, this is not a new problem. About 35 years ago I attended a conference where the keynote speaker was a well known physician. His premise was that the drive for perfection was harmful, because it was the excuse leaders used to miss deadlines, procrastinate, and ultimately fail to implement solutions that were good, but not picture perfect. His byline – “anything that is worth doing is worth doing”. (This would be translated into Blue Collar comedy language many years later – “Git-R-Done”). His message was delivered in a way that was designed to shake up a group of decision makers. In the seminar discussion there was a lot of push back. Should we as leaders advocate for average results? Isn’t it hard to inspire your team to strive to be mediocre?

I have to admit that hearing the message from a physician made me a little nervous.



As a nurse I could not see myself scrubbing in for surgery with a physician who is comfortable with less than an exacting standard of excellence. At the conclusion of surgery, we do not want to hear the Dr. or surgical nurses say that almost perfect is good enough. “I think things look OK. Let’s go ahead and close and see what happens.” Or “I think we may have all of the sponges and instruments accounted for.” There are some situations where we have come to expect a perfect result.

In more recent years the conflict between perfection and speed has taken on a new dimension. With the advent of e-mail, cell phones, and text messages, the speed side of the equation has changed. There is increasing pressure to make decisions more quickly, with less time for reflection. I know an older attorney who laments the change in time pressure, remarking that clients want an immediate answer, regardless of the complexity of the issue. The time that he used to take reflecting on a problem on his commute home from work is gone, and he fears that the quality of legal advice has suffered. In some respects speed has become the primary virtue.

There is also a parallel expectation that organizations and leaders get things right the first time. In the recent congressional hearings related

to the computer glitches in the health exchanges for the Affordable Care Act it was evident that the problems have been so severe that even the staunchest supporters of the main objectives of the Affordable Care Act are appalled at the barriers in the process that is the entry point for consumers. It appears that in response to the pressure of a fixed deadline that decisions were made in terms of program structure and shortcuts in testing that resulted in a terribly imperfect product being released for public consumption. Only time will tell if these problems will cause any permanent damage, but it is an understatement to say that there is a lot of unhappiness at the shortcomings in the implementation process.

The friction between perfection and time pressure is more evident in some kinds of activities – like architectural and engineering design work, technology applications, and the medical profession. Ask any nurse about the routine for dispensing medications in a health care facility and you will get a lesson in the stress associated in high expectations in both areas. But in reality, every leadership position has some element of this conflict.

Whether the issue is budgeting, financial projections for new projects, design of new buildings and

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programs, whether or not to launch a new type of service, or the more operational aspects of leadership – how quickly to implement a new solution to correct a persistent problem - the friction between speed and perfection is present.

To further complicate matters, we have our own natural tendencies that enter into the equation. No one wants to make a mistake, especially in the presence of others that we respect and admire in the workplace. We also have different perceptions of risk taking. For some, the safest course of action is caution – to slow things down until everyone involved is completely convinced that the execution of a change is going to be flawless. Others have a higher tolerance for imperfection, and see the primary risk in being perpetually on the sidelines, paralyzed by inertia and fear. Both approaches have their valid points. The key is to strike a balance between both positions.

There are a number of questions that may be helpful when trying to strike a balance between speed and perfection:

- How close am I to completing the project or change before me at this time? (Holding out to make sure that the last 2% is perfect may become an ever receding goal line that can never be reached.)
- Is the specific issue that is causing a delay essential to the final outcome, or is it a feature that may be good but not critical for success? Can this feature or potential improvement be added later?
- Are there any significant safety, security, legal, or regulatory dimensions to proceeding immediately?
- Will the person we are trying to serve be more harmed by a delay in implementation or by the imperfections that remain in the change we are working on at the present time?
- To what extent does a delay or a launching an imperfect solution have an impact on other individuals or departments, causing great anxiety, inconvenience, or make it difficult or impossible for them to do their work?
- Can we quickly repair any mistakes in our implementation plan, or will pushing forward result in living with a poor outcome for an extended period of time?
- To what extent will a failure in execution damage our reputation, now and in the future?
- At what point will a delay result in missing an opportunity altogether – either to a competitor or to a shift in the marketplace?

Finally, as leaders we must acknowledge that everything we do shapes the culture of the organization around us. How we encourage and reward risk taking and handle our own mistakes and the mistakes of our coworkers when things do not turn out as planned will affect the speed – perfection balance.

There is a larger truth that undergirds the drive for perfection. In spite of our best efforts, and the efforts of our teams, absolute perfection is ultimately unattainable. This is reinforced by the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5-7, as he outlines the standard of perfection required by a Holy God “*You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*”. The understanding that we cannot be perfect by our own effort causes us to understand our own failings and the shortcomings of every human being. This should inspire a sense of personal humility and an appreciation of our universal need for grace. It is also a reminder of our need as leaders to extend grace to those we work with, even as we advocate for excellence in all things.



Reflections on Leadership



Leadership – A Personal Journey

February 2014

Most of the time the study of leadership is about what a leader should do in his or her relationships with others to inspire, organize, and work toward a common goal. However, there is an important first step that precedes the “how” of leadership which involves personal reflection. Matthew Stewart in his book, **“The Management Myth”**, states that *“The key to success in organizations has never been the study of human relations in a formal or scientific way. It is to become a better person.”* This is a profound observation.

One of the basic tenets of leadership is the concept of leading by example. Absent the desire to become a better person, leading by example becomes an exercise in creating the illusion of virtue for the purpose of influencing the behavior of others. Leaders who knowingly take that approach seldom fool their team members and are rightfully held in low esteem for their insincerity.

From my perspective, there is no escaping the need for leaders in every walk of life to begin their leadership journey with a period of introspection,

and to return to personal introspection as a touchstone on a regular basis. This approach is supported by a growing body of evidence.

Daniel Goleman – has focused on a number of key areas in his work on Emotional Intelligence:

- Self-awareness – the ability to know one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals and recognize their impact on others.
- Self-regulation – controlling or redirecting one’s disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.
- Social skill – managing relationships to move people in the desired direction
- Empathy - considering other people’s feelings especially when making decisions
- Motivation - being driven to achieve for the sake of achievement.

Best selling authors Kouses and Posner – in their book **“Credibility”** use terms like *“discovering yourself, clarifying what you believe, and defining and using values as guides”* They even have an exercise they call *“writing your credo”* as a way to articulate the process of self discovery. Boyatzis and McKee talk about renewal in their book on **Resonant Leadership** – and focus on mindfulness, hope and compassion as leaders attend to themselves and others in mind, body, heart and spirit.

One could argue that almost all of these thoughts could be summed up in a single sentence. The pursuit of excellence in leadership starts with a desire to become a better person.

But what questions should be a part of the reflective process of becoming a better person and leader? I have a few suggestions to use as starters:

- Do I consider myself an optimist or a pessimist by nature? What is the source of my optimism or pessimism?
- Would I describe myself as a thankful person? Where does that gratitude come from?
- To what do I attribute any successes I have had in life?
- What is it that makes me persist in the face of hardship?



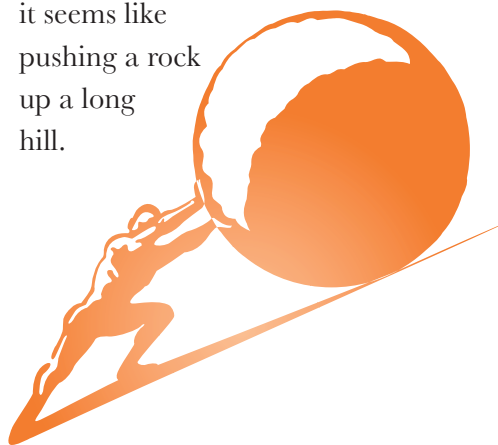
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- How does failure affect my self image?
- Am I inclined to be prideful when I experience success? Am I truly happy when others succeed?
- Do I expect perfection in myself and others? What is my response when other people disappoint me?
- What is the most important influence on my behavior and the behavior of those I work with - financial reward, acceptance by others, encouragement, honest feedback, other?
- Do I view others as inherently good – who can be implicitly trusted; as inherently bad, who must be watched; or as human beings subject to the same virtues and imperfections as are common to the human condition?
- Do I easily trust others? In what ways do I let other people know that I trust them?

How these questions are answered may highlight areas that need attention in our journey to become better persons and leaders.

The journey to become a better person and a better leader must be authentic and free of posturing and self delusion. This is also not an easy task. Warren Bennis, a highly respected leadership author, has stated that *“Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult.”*

From my perspective, there are two fundamental ways that human beings aspire to become better persons. One is to struggle with the basic human impulse of self-centeredness in an attempt to be good. The motivation for this struggle is usually to avoid the negative consequences of bad behavior and to earn the respect and admiration of others. This effort is based on self discipline and persistence. Like Sisyphus from Greek Mythology, it seems like pushing a rock up a long hill.



The second approach involves what could be called a change of heart. The apostle Paul describes this transformation as *“Putting off our old selves and becoming a new creation.”* He compares it to removing an old garment and replacing it something fresh and clean. The real difference in this approach is the motivation. When we acknowledge our imperfection and claim the grace and forgiveness of God, the desire to be a better person springs from a grateful heart. Unlike the constant pressure to push the rock up a steep hill, we look beyond ourselves for the strength to become the person God intended for us to be.

My experience in leadership over the past 40 years would suggest that success in changing my own behavior and the behavior of others rests in the extent to which a change of heart occurs. Whenever I have engaged the hands and feet of my team members, we have been able to achieve average results. If through better education and clearer understanding I could more fully engage the minds of my team members, we achieve above average or excellent performance for a period of time. But the only way that superior performance is achieved over time is to engage the hearts of my team members. Based on this experience, I believe that the most effective way to become a better person is to have a change of heart. The best way to determine whether or not there has been a change of behavior or a change of heart is based on what happens when we believe that no one else is looking.

The intersection between becoming a better person and a better leader is unavoidable. Today’s leaders are expected to exhibit qualities that only emerge following a process of reflection –honesty, openness, respect, compassion, and humility. If you want to meet these expectations and become a better leader, start on the journey of becoming a better person.

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Reflections on Leadership



Leadership and Story Telling

March 2014

This is the 100th issue of Reflections on Leadership. Since many prior issues have been filled with stories that reinforce a message related to leadership, I thought it would be interesting to explore the idea of leadership and storytelling and highlight past issues as examples of how stories can convey ideas and evoke emotions.

The ability to communicate may be the most fundamental of all leadership skills. This does not mean that one needs to be a spellbinding speaker in order to be an effective leader. The ability to engage and entertain an audience is an advantage, but it does not compensate for the virtues of authenticity, integrity, empathy, and clarity. The style is important, but not more important than the message being delivered. Messages can be delivered in a variety of ways, including setting a personal example of the behavior that is expected in the work place. The words of St. Francis of Assisi concisely express the power of personal example – “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” But in leadership positions we know that setting a personal example is not enough. We need to find the words to reinforce the message we intend to communicate.

There is one truth about effective communication and leadership that makes a lot of sense to me. Effective leaders are often good storytellers – communicating a message in a way that connects with their team members. Ed and Steve Sobel, creators of NFL Films expressed it this way, “Tell me a fact, and I will remember. Tell me the truth, and I will believe. But tell me a story, and I’ll hold it in my heart forever.” As I get older, I am not as sure about remembering facts. I have also become a bit more cynical about those who tell me that they are conveying the absolute truth. However, I am completely convinced of the staying power of a story to engage the heart and mind.

As I write this piece, we are watching the winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Many years ago, the telecasts of the Olympics were completely focused moving from venue to venue to catch each athletic event. In more recent years, there has been an effort to provide background stories on the athletes – where they came from, details about their family life (usually focused on the Mom), and how the athlete overcame obstacles to reach the pinnacle of success. My wife, who is not a great sports enthusiast, watches more of the Olympics than I do. Like thousands of others, she is drawn in

by the power of the story behind the Olympic athletes.

Stories do not have to be long and involved to have a great impact. The parables of Jesus are classic examples of a short story with a powerful message. Just mentioning the Prodigal Son creates the image of unconditional love and forgiveness. The term Good Samaritan has become shorthand for compassion and kindness. The parables of the lost sheep, the mustard seed, and the farmer sowing seeds in different types of ground have conveyed compelling messages that have endured through the ages.



Communicating through stories is an essential tool for every leader who wants to connect with others. The use of stories in leadership situations covers an extremely wide range. Here are a few situations where a narrative can be very effective along with references to prior issues of Reflections in the PSL web site archives that provide specific examples of stories that convey a message:

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To introduce yourself: Disclosing something about yourself – your life journey and the defining moments in your life is a great way to convey how you think and what people can expect from you in the future.

[Link▶](#) (*Hear the Call – Be the Call Sept. 2011*) [Link▶](#) (*Courage Sept. 2008*)

To connect with your team: One paradox of leadership is that while people have high expectations of their leaders – they must be smart, creative, honest, etc. - they also expect to be able to relate to a leader as another human being. Leaders who fail in this regard are described as aloof, distant, or uncaring. Stories that illustrate a common humanity between a leader and those who follow convey the idea that the leader understands what other people feel and how they think. Stories of Sam Walton driving around in an old pickup truck (now on display in the WalMart Museum) while wearing clothing purchased from his stores provided a clear message. While “Mr. Sam” was a billionaire many times over, he could relate to the WalMart staff and customers. Stories that utilize self-deprecating humor or recount the experience of an embarrassing moment can be particularly effective in narrowing the gap. As my Dad would say, “We all put our pants on one leg at a time.” [Link▶](#) (*Gift Giving – Dec. 2010*)

[Link▶](#) (*The Pursuit of Excellence – March 2009*)

To define expectations: The great commandment – to love your neighbor as yourself, was illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke, chapter 10. The story is a description of the actions of three people who come upon a person seriously injured in a robbery. The first two were religious leaders - a priest and a Levite. Both pass on the other side of the road from man to avoid contact. The third person was a Samaritan – part of a group that was reviled by the religious community. The Samaritan stops and provides aid and comfort, making further arrangements to have the man restored to health. The lesson – The one who truly fulfills this commandment is the one who shows mercy.

[Link▶](#) (*Personal Responsibility – September 2009*)

[Link▶](#) (*Confronting Problem Situations – Aug. 2010*)

To express important values: The story of the prodigal son is about a wayward son who is disobedient to his father and irresponsibly wastes the family fortune. The son, living in poverty and hunger, decides to return to his father and beg to become a servant in his father’s house. When he returns the father, seeing him in the distance, runs to embrace him, rejoicing over the son who was lost, but now is found. The lesson – love and forgiveness go hand in hand.

[Link▶](#) (*Respect – March 2006*) [Link▶](#) (*Fairness- Jan. 2007*)

To cast a vision: Martin Luther King, Jr. in his historic I Have A Dream speech tells a story of a future where justice and equality are the norm – a time when slaves and former slave owners will sit down at the table of brotherhood; a time when Dr. King’s 4 children will be judged – not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character; a time when little black boys and black girls will be able to join with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers. The speech is among the most powerful and frequently quoted words in

the English language, painting a picture of what a future of justice and equality will look like.

Telling a great story is not just for someone else. We all have stories from our life experience or have heard stories that have had an impact on us that convey important truths about who we are, what we aspire to become, and what we expect from our team members as we pursue a common mission. Occasionally I hear the stories of parents, grandparents, or older neighbors who were the reason that someone decided to choose a career in health care or senior services. I also hear stories about the best (or worst) leader someone has ever worked for and how the experience of knowing them has changed the pattern of their life. These stories are rich in content and can have a powerful impact on the listener.

Conveying messages in a story form does carry some risk. It is possible for someone to miss the point of the story by filtering the message based on their own experience. To avoid misinterpretation, a story must be straightforward enough so that it is clearly understood. There is also the risk of embellishment. Many of the background stories used by aspiring political leaders have been found to exaggerate the truth in order to polish their image. This rarely works and, when discovered, can permanently undermine a leader’s credibility. Like all communication between people, honesty is the best policy.



Reflections on Leadership



April 2014

The Power of Forgiveness

One of the most extraordinary stories of forgiveness is illustrated in the New York Times best seller, "Picking Cotton, Our memoir of Injustice and Redemption". It is the true story of two individuals - Jennifer Thompson and Ronald Cotton. Their story begins in 1984.

Jennifer Thompson was a 22 year old white student at Elon College in North Carolina, with a life that seemed to be blessed in every way. All of that changed one night when someone broke into her apartment while she slept and raped her at knifepoint. It was a prolonged ordeal, and the face of her attacker was burned into her memory. She escaped and eventually was able to identify Ronald Cotton as her attacker, both from a photo and picking him out of a lineup of 7 men.

Ron was a local man in his early 20's with a limited education, working at a local food service establishment. He was African American, and had a juvenile history that made him a logical suspect. He closely resembled the composite sketch that was circulated by police based on Jennifer's

recollection. In the initial interview several days after the attack, Ron was confused about where he was on the night in question, so the alibi provided by the family later was discounted. A piece of foam rubber from the crime scene was consistent with the tennis shoes that Ron was wearing.

It was discovered that another middle aged woman in the same community was also raped on the same night. She could not initially identify the face of her attacker, but she could provide a general description that matched Ron's profile. The circumstances were so similar that it was believed that both attacks had been perpetrated by the same individual.

While there was no physical evidence to prove that Ron was at either of the crime scenes, he was convicted of both crimes, based largely on Jennifer's eyewitness testimony. She was absolutely certain that Ron was the one. Jennifer appeared in court every day to make sure that her attacker was brought to justice. The police and prosecutors were convinced that Ron was the criminal they were looking for and did not



believe Ron when he insisted that he was innocent. He was sentenced to two life terms in prison plus 54 years.

Jennifer eventually got married, had triplets, and her life regained some semblance of balance. Eleven years later, with the advent of DNA testing, it was discovered that someone else had committed the crimes. The other individual (who closely resembled Ron, but was several inches shorter) confessed, and Ron was a free man.

Everything was turned upside down. Jennifer, who could not forgive Ron for the horrible crime that he had committed against her, now had to carry the burden that her



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misidentification had caused someone to be wrongly incarcerated for 11 years. She was the one in need of forgiveness. Eventually they met in what could only be described as an emotional reunion. Ron's words to her were comforting. "I forgive you. I'm not angry at you... All I want is for us all to go on and have a happy life."

These were Jennifer's words after the meeting:

I don't think that until I stood week-kneed in front of Ron that I had any idea of what forgiveness was, or how powerful it could be. Ron gave me... the gift of forgiveness - not because I deserved it, but because that is what grace is about. Forgiveness is tricky. People think that when you forgive someone that you excuse what he (or she) did. That is not what it is. It is about power and letting go.

How does the concept of forgiveness intersect with leadership? I think there are several applications of forgiveness that find their way into the work place:

- It is well documented that trust is the glue that holds all relationships together, especially in a work environment. When trust is lost, either through an intentional act or unintentionally, forgiveness is required for trust to be restored.
- Remembering past wrongs can impair a leader's objectivity, often projecting negative motives to someone when it is not warranted. Bad decisions can often be traced to a lack of objectivity.
- As leaders we are occasionally involved in corrective action with

someone on our work team. Two things can happen after a corrective action event. You can remind your team member of their failing at every opportunity, or you can come to an understanding that the incident is in the past, and you expect better things in the future. Starting with a clean slate clears the air and establishes a clear, forward looking focus.

- There is a corrosive nature involved in holding a grudge that is inherently harmful – physically and emotionally. Bitterness can spoil everything it touches, including a leader's effectiveness. Offering forgiveness is often more helpful to the person who has been wronged than the person who needs to be forgiven.
- The judgmental nature associated with self-righteousness is often rooted in an inability to forgive the shortcomings of others. Self-righteousness creates a distance from your team members that makes it difficult for them to respect you as a person.

So the question is how can I reach the point of forgiving someone when the very idea seems to go against my basic human nature? I believe that it is only possible by recognizing the spiritual dimension of forgiveness. It is easier to forgive someone else if you see yourself as a person who has been forgiven as the beneficiary of undeserved grace. The Apostle Paul put it this way in the book of Colossians, chapter 3 "Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive

anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others (NLT)."



Does the pursuit of forgiveness mean that we ignore the behavior of those we work with? As responsible leaders we do not have that option. We must confront problem behaviors as we strive for excellence. But we can deal with difficult situations in a straightforward way, focusing on the behavior that needs to be improved and move on rather than attack a team member's character and remind them of their failings at every opportunity.

The conclusion of Picking Cotton is especially powerful. Jennifer Thompson and Ron Cotton and their families have become close friends. In recent years Jennifer and Ron have used their experience to advocate for judicial reform, seeking to help others who have been unjustly convicted.

It seems that forgiveness has a healing power that is unlike anything else in life.

Reflections on Leadership



A Message on Servant Leadership

May 2014

For People of the Christian faith, Holy Week is the perfect time for a message on Servant Leadership. This is the time of year when the radical idea of the leader who serves is celebrated within the Christian community around the world. It is for this reason that this issue of Reflections on Leadership is being circulated out of its normal monthly cycle.

In the record of events in the last week of the life of Jesus, the thirteenth chapter of the book of John starts with the following statement:

“Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew his hour had come to leave this world and return to the Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end... So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash his disciple’s feet, drying them with the towel he had around him.” (NLT)

Seeing their leader do this caused the disciples to object strenuously, but Jesus insisted, stating that *“unless I wash you, you will not belong to me”*. This is an important point to consider. Through serving, a leader sends an unmistakable signal that he or she cares deeply for others. It seems that Jesus is saying that the very act of serving and being served that

creates a special bond that is like no other.

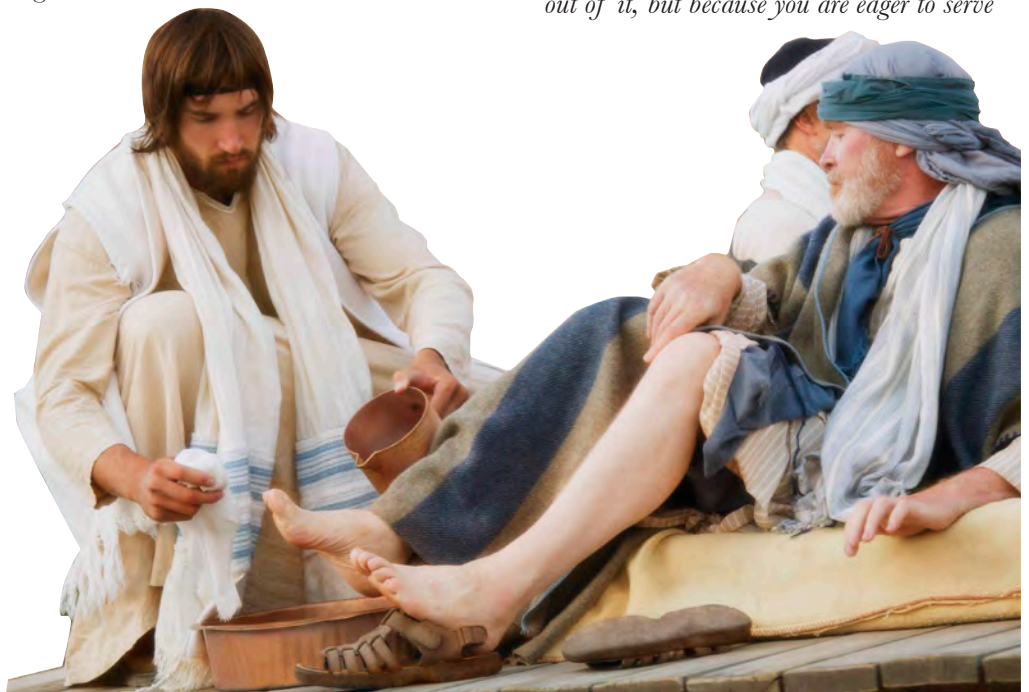
And after washing their feet, Jesus put on his robe again and sat down and asked *“Do you understand what I was doing? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, because that is what I am. And since I have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.”*

After the Passover supper, the accounts in the book of Matthew (chapter 20) and Luke (chapter 22) record a dispute among the disciples about who would be the greatest among them.

Apparently they had not absorbed the idea of servant leadership. So to settle the dispute, Jesus restates the message again:

“You know that the rulers of this world lord it over the people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant... For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve others and give his life as a ransom for many.”

With these words, the model of the servant leader was memorialized forever. For more than two thousand years this message has been a clear beacon to those who aspire to be leaders. Even Peter, the disciple who at first refused to permit Jesus to wash his feet, would later write in I Peter chapter 5, *“Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly – not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve*



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God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example...serve each other in humility, for God opposes the proud but favors the humble."

But the message on servant leadership did not stop with the Last Supper. The Thursday Passover celebration was followed by Good Friday, with a dramatic example of what a truly selfless leader will do. Jesus final act of service was to *"give his life as a ransom for many"*.

History as long honored the heroic acts of leaders who risk everything for the sake of another person. Medal of Honor winners are among the most revered persons in all of American society. Even the President of the United States is expected to salute when a Medal of Honor winner enters the room. The detailed accounts of the heroic deeds that qualify a person for this honor are riveting. Almost without exception, the narrative

contains the phrase "without regard to their personal safety..." The danger these heroes faced and the risk so grave that a high percentage of the Medals of Honor are awarded posthumously. The willingness to risk everything to protect and serve their comrades in battle is inspiring to say the least, and is considered the highest expression of heroic leadership.

But Jesus took the concept of service and sacrifice one step beyond this remarkable human example. The Apostle Paul in the 5th chapter of the book of Romans observed, *"Now most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."* This supreme act of love is the exclamation point on the teaching on servant leadership expressed at the Last Supper.

For those of us involved in the day to day work of leading people in a common mission, the definition of servant leadership is far less dramatic than the biblical account. Thinking of others first and placing their needs above our own can be expressed in many different ways. Kindness, compassion, and respect are essential parts of the servant leader's toolkit.

Holy week is a time to think deeply about our role as servant leaders. Servant leaders recognize the sacred calling of placing the needs of others above their own interests. Make no mistake, if a leader truly wants the love and respect of his or her team members, the model of servant leadership must be followed.



Reflections on Leadership



June 2014

Open-minded Leadership

This reflection may be the most likely to touch a sensitive nerve as any of the Reflections on Leadership I have written over the past 8 years. This is because if the message is taken to heart it should personally convict each of us of our shortcomings as a person and as a leader. I have thought about this topic frequently over the past months, and have struggled to find the words to adequately express the full dimensions of the issue within the confines of the Reflections format. But in spite of the sensitivity of the topic and inadequacy of the written word, it is a subject that needs to be addressed.

It is an unfortunate fact of life that many of those who fashion themselves to be leaders appear to be among the least open-minded and tolerant people in our society. Some of the proponents of intolerance are relatively easy to identify – like those with strong religious views who are quick to condemn the wayward behavior of others, those who look down on people of faith and snicker at anyone with a fixed moral or ethical reference point, or rabid atheists, whose mission in life is to strip believers of their last shred of faith.

But being narrow minded is not the exclusive territory of the politically conservative, hyper religious, or extreme left wing radicals. It is equally

problematic for those who describe themselves as liberal and tolerant of others. It is even an issue for those who regard themselves as moderate or middle of the road in their views. If we are honest, it is virtually impossible to be truly open-minded toward those who do not share our core beliefs.



Being closed minded is not new to the human experience. But what has changed in recent years is that it is now common to openly describe those with whom we disagree as being hateful or intolerant. To make matters worse, the use of sarcasm, belittling humor or dismissiveness has become the primary means of communicating with or talking about those whose beliefs differ from our own.

Commenting on these recent developments, Rick Warren, nationally known pastor and author of “The Purpose Driven Life” has described the crux of the matter. *“Our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you*

must fear or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don’t have to compromise convictions to be compassionate.”

Given the fact that an open and free society will contain people who have widely differing views on subjects which may have moral, ethical, and emotional overtones, is there a better way to test our own behavior to determine whether we are open and caring or closed and oppressive? Timothy Keller – Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and NY Times best selling author of “The Reason for God” poses two questions that I believe get to the heart of the matter:

“Which community has beliefs that lead its members to treat persons in other communities with love and respect – to serve them and meet their needs? Which communities’ beliefs lead it to demonize and attack those who violate their boundaries rather than treating them with kindness, humility, and winsomeness?”

Clearly the extension of love and respect, kindness, humility and winsomeness are evidence of open-minded behavior, while demonizing and attacking are clear evidence of closed and oppressive conduct.

Keller’s questions apply equally to individuals, and especially to leaders, as we examine our own behavior toward

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others. Most of us avoid behavior that is obviously demonizing or attacking. However, there are more subtle or refined ways to convey a lack of respect and still claim the illusion of open-mindedness. But the expression of biases in more socially acceptable ways does not make someone an open-minded leader.

Why is being open-minded an important as a leadership virtue? It is because as leaders we are called to engage with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Some of the people we relate to every day may mirror our feelings on many subjects, but others may be very different or hold views that are diametrically opposed to an idea or concept that we hold dear. It is true that the foundation of the relationship between a leader and his or her team is respect. It is also true that a leader's respect for his or her team members cannot be withdrawn or reduced based on a difference of opinion without inflicting significant damage to this relationship. Also, one of the principle roles of leadership is to foster harmony by modeling behavior that encourages mutual respect, trust, and kindness. Even a subtle lack of respect demonstrated toward your team members will eventually harm the relationships that your team members have with each other.

So the question is this - How do we as flawed human beings overcome a

human nature that is inclined to be intolerant of others?

- By acknowledging that we all have our biases – that being intolerant or closed minded is not just an issue for someone else to correct, it is a tendency that is present in each of us.
- By recognizing the societal influences that lead to disrespect and a lack of compassion and make a conscious effort to resist these influences at every opportunity.
- To change your thinking of what it means to be closed minded or intolerant, and understand that complete agreement is not condition of extending respect to another person or group. Mature individuals with differing points of view should be able to regard each other with genuine respect and appreciation.

Jesus was compassionate and respectful to those who were far different from him – even to those who were considered the outcasts of society. He was able to do this while continuing to articulate the highest moral and ethical standards for all who would follow him. One of the most frequently quoted examples of this openness and compassion is found in John, Chapter 8, where Jesus comes to the rescue of a woman about to be stoned to death. Facing her accusers, he says, *“Let him who is without sin among you cast the first*

stone.” When the accusers disappear one by one from the scene, Jesus turns to the woman and says *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* She said *“No one, Lord”*. Jesus replies, ***“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”***

The apostle Paul also has words of advice on the way to communicate respect to others. Ephesians 4:31-32 *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you”* (NLT). I believe these words are especially important in our role as leaders.

If your first thought in reading this Reflection is of someone else who needs to learn to be more open-minded, stop right now and reread this Reflection until you can see yourself and the ways you fall short of Keller's standard of kindness, humility, and winsomeness.

Our challenge is this – Strive every day to be an open-minded leader. You will be surprised at how making an effort in this direction will make you a better leader, strengthen your personal relationships, and make you a happier person.



Love Respect Kindness Humility Winsomeness

Reflections on Leadership



Open-minded Leadership - Part II

July 2014

While rereading the last issue of Reflections on Leadership on the need for open minded leaders, I was struck by how much easier it is to address this subject in general and abstract terms than in messy, real life situations. Given the importance of the topic and the fact that there was not enough space to provide any examples to illustrate how to become a more open minded leader, it seemed that a follow up on the subject might be helpful. The following illustrations may help to clarify how we can better appreciate those who have different views than our own.

Story Number 1 – How life experience can shape perceptions on social issues.

A number of years ago I was walking down the hall in one of our nursing centers when I spotted what appeared to be a large deer with a huge rack, just outside of the window of a room of an older man who was lying in bed. Curiosity got the better of me, and I stepped into the room, only to discover that the deer was a stationary, target practice dummy, with a big sign on the side that said "Shoot me Merle". Striking up a conversation with the person in the bed (whose name happened to be Merle), I discovered that every year Merle and the men in his family went deer hunting – a tradition that bonded generations of

men in his family. Since he had suffered a stroke a few weeks earlier, for the first time in his life, he was unable to go. His grandsons, feeling the loss of his companionship and realizing that this was a significant loss for their grandfather as well, decided to put this target practice deer outside of his window to remind him that they were thinking of him, even though he was unable to make the trip. While I am not a hunter and do not own a gun, I was deeply touched by the sentiment shared by a grandfather and his grandsons.

A few years later my wife and I were on a trip to Italy, sharing a tour bus with 18 other people. Sitting at breakfast with one of the other couples, we inquired if they had children. The husband said yes, and the wife said no, followed by a long awkward silence. Later on that morning, the husband shared with me that they had a college age daughter who had died just over two months earlier in the mass shooting at Virginia Tech University that killed



32 people and injured 17 others. They were struggling to make sense of everything, and the mother of this beautiful child was both sad and angry at the university and anyone who could have possibly prevented this crushing tragedy. As a parent and grandparent, the pain and raw emotion experienced by this couple still brings tears to my eyes.

One can easily guess that in a discussion on the role of firearms in American society, the two families would have dramatically different ideas about what should or should not be done based on their life experience. I may or may not completely agree with either point of view, but an understanding of their story should cause me to respect how they reached their respective conclusions.

Similar examples can be found in almost every social issue in our society today, but the lesson is the same. The ability to cultivate the capacity for being an open minded leader is based on an understanding that every human being's perception of reality is shaped by their life experience. As leaders we need to make it our business to know the stories of those we work with in order to appreciate how they came to hold opinions that are different than our own.

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Story Number 2 – How to appreciate those who seem to have a closed mind.

In all of the years that I remember growing up there was never a drop of alcohol in our home. My mother was insistent that this rule was absolute. For her there was no compromise. As a typical teenager it was my belief that she had a closed mind and was not thinking rationally on this subject because it seemed to me that other families took a very different approach to alcohol in their homes and did not appear to suffer any ill effects. It was only later in life that I understood how my mother came to this conclusion. As a young child and a teenager she experienced the impact of broken relationships and poverty that resulted from alcohol abuse, and she was determined to protect her family from a similar fate. Since my childhood was marked by a stable family and loving relationships it was hard for me to relate to her on this subject. As I have gotten older, I have developed an appreciation for her opinion, even though we differ in the way we live our lives. I have even come to the conclusion that had my life experience paralleled hers that I may share her opinion today. In any event, I no longer see her as a person with a closed

mind, but as a person with a viewpoint shaped by her life experience.

Story Number 3 – Overcoming stereotypes

Some years ago I was visiting a pastor who, in his retirement years, was living in one of our independent living units. Just before my visit he had fallen in the bathroom, and had called for help. Apparently this had happened before. He did not appear to be injured, so I helped him to get back in his wheelchair. When the staff person arrived at the door of his apartment, I was horrified to see a young man with tattoos all down his arms, and a couple of strategic piercings. My first thought was that this 90 year old former pastor was going to complain about our hiring standards. Instead what I heard was a hearty greeting, along with a testimonial about what a great caregiver this young man was, and how he had rescued him in several similar situations. In that moment I realized that I was suffering from two negative stereotypes. The first was that someone who looked a bit unconventional may not possess the skills or personal characteristics to be a top flight staff person. The second stereotype was that this 90 year old pastor, who I reckoned to be more conservative than I was,

shared my bias. His effusive praise for this young man and his work shattered both of my misconceptions. The first lesson here is to avoid prejudging anyone based solely on appearance. The second lesson is not to jump to conclusions about what others believe and use this assumption to reinforce or justify your own opinions.

As was indicated in the previous Reflection on Leadership, open minded leaders do not have to agree with or enthusiastically affirm everything about another person in order to respect and appreciate them. Our attitude as a leader should be based on the realization that we are all God's children, and if we disrespect each other in any way we are disrespecting God as the creator and sustainer of all humankind.

Finally, I am convinced that it is possible to develop a genuine appreciation for almost every person if you take the time to get to know them. One of the reactions to the last Reflection came from my good friend and colleague, Kathy Anderson, who reminded me of a quote from Abraham Lincoln – "I don't like that man, I must get to know him better". This is the kind of wisdom that, when taken to heart, will enable us to become the kind of leader and person that God intended.



Reflections on Leadership



August 2014

Making Good Decisions

Many years ago my Mom asked me an interesting question about my approach to work. I think I understand the reason for her question now that my own children are grown and have become responsible citizens, because parents are both pleased and amazed when their adult children are entrusted with responsibility. She asked, “How do you make important decisions that affect the future of Presbyterian Senior Living and the lives of your residents and employees? Don’t you worry that you will make a wrong decision and something bad will happen?” My response was – Of course, I am always concerned about making decisions that affect the lives of other people, and I worry about the consequences of making a bad decision. The weight of leadership in this regard should never be easy. But I have to find some level of comfort in making decisions, or I need to find a job that does not require this specific skill.

The style of decision making can vary dramatically based on the unique culture of an organization and the type of decisions may differ based on a person’s role in the organization. Some decisions are strategic, like the launch of a new program, while others are tactical, like hiring the members of your team or planning a change in work assignments or service delivery.

In any case, making decisions is the most fundamental responsibility of leadership and a leader’s success or failure is closely connected to the quality of decision making.



Making decisions does not come easily to everyone, and often the way a leader makes a decision is an extension of one’s personality. But decision making is a teachable skill, and has been closely studied in an attempt to better educate leaders on the ways they can improve and make better decisions.

Daniel Kahneman, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics has written a wonderful book entitled **“THINKING, FAST and SLOW”**. The basic premise of the book is that in every person’s brain there are two distinct processes at work. He calls them System 1 and System 2.

System 1 operates automatically and quickly with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. It is often described as intuition. He calls System 1 the hero of his book, performing tasks like sensing danger and acting quickly. He gives one example of a firefighter who, without any perceptible evidence made a decision to immediately withdraw his men from a fire only seconds before the floor collapsed. This intuitive, split second decision saved the lives of his crew. System 1 is swift and effortless, but prone to systemic errors in certain circumstances.

System 2 is slower and designed for more complex tasks, and constructs thoughts in orderly steps. It is described as rational. It allocates attention to mental activities that demand it, including complex calculations. It can and does overrule System 1 activities in the brain. It is capable of reasoning and it is cautious. But at least for some people, it is also lazy.

For over 400 pages, Kahneman describes how decisions are reached using these two systems, how prudent and imprudent risks are taken, how optimism works, and the strengths and weaknesses of optimists as they make decisions. He points out the tendency of decision makers to use System 1 when System 2 is the better choice.

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At the crux of the matter is the issue of speed and accuracy in making decisions, and when fast thinking or slow thinking is the best approach. I believe that where a person falls on the fast / slow continuum may be related to their personality. Those with a short attention span may favor acting quickly, even when circumstances call for a more thoughtful analysis. Those who are more inclined toward analysis of every alternative may find it difficult to act quickly, even in emergency circumstances.

Sometimes there is a stark contrast between the nature of the individual and their environment. My favorite college professor spent several decades in senior management in a large international corporation, and was accustomed to a pace of decision making that was inconsistent with academic life. The story around campus was that at a social function with the rest of the faculty, he informed the President of the college that the reason the college could not make progress was that the bottleneck was at the top.



The truth is that everyone wants a leader who is able to make timely and accurate decisions, but not everyone can agree on the definition of what is timely and accurate in every circumstance. Quick decision makers can be described as impulsive, scattered, superficial thinkers, prone to knee jerk reactions, and highly inaccurate - operating by the motto "Ready, Fire, Aim". Slow decision makers are described as unsure, looking for perfection, dithering, disconnected from the real world, and uncaring or oblivious to the needs of those who are waiting for a decision.

For those of us who exist in rapidly changing environments, there is added danger in being a slow decision maker. We may want the world to stop long enough to give us time to collect more data, talk to more people, and get comfortable with where we think things are going, but in a competitive world life is rarely that neat. Not making a decision can be as dangerous as making a less than optimal decision.

So how can I tell whether my decision making style is effective? I think it can be helpful to consider 6 simple questions:

1. Am I proceeding with the clear intention of making a decision?
2. Do I have enough information to make the decision that needs to be made at this time? If the answer is no, is there a plan to acquire the needed information?

3. Am I consciously aware of the timeframe in which the decision needs to be made, and proceeding to make a decision within these time constraints?
4. Are the consequences of an incorrect decision proportional to the amount of time this decision is likely to take?
5. If I am making a conscious decision to delay, am I fully aware of all of the consequences of the decision not to act?
6. Have I communicated the reasoning behind the pace of my decision making process to the people waiting for a decision?

If you can honestly say yes to each of these questions, then you are likely to be on solid footing.

One final note - being a decision maker is not likely to make a leader popular. Often, the same people who push for a swift decision will be the first to criticize if the decision does not work out well, even if they were given a significant role in reaching the final conclusion. But leaders are called to make decisions and are responsible for the consequences one way or the other. Mom was right. Making decisions can be a heavy responsibility. But it is what leaders are called to do.

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Reflections on Leadership

Leadership, Introverts and Extroverts

September 2014

It is often assumed that the qualities of leadership are associated with extroverts. The very idea of a charismatic leader inspires the vision of the polished individual, confident, well spoken, great public speaker, able to enter any room with a presence and ability to engage others in conversation - even total strangers with relative ease. I have often wondered why we buy into this myth. Maybe it is because we would all like to be more comfortable and project an air of confidence that we do not naturally possess.

Some of the distorted opinions about introverts have been shaped by popular books and movies. The heroic leader is almost always cast as an extrovert, while the introvert is found in the role of a poet, brainy nerd, or taciturn cowboy. This can create the impression that extroverts are more natural leaders or that introverts are averse to leading and reluctantly assume leadership roles. This conclusion is unfair to both introverts and extroverts. In reality, leaders come in all shapes, sizes and personality types.

In the book **“Quiet, The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking”**, Susan Cain explores the fallacy of needing to be an extrovert to be an effective leader. Introversion is not necessarily an avoidance of people, it is a different method of thought and

approach. Cain highlights the power of introverts who think more clearly without distractions – an obvious connection to System 2 thinking referenced in the last Reflection on Leadership from the book, **“Thinking, Fast and Slow”**. I agree with the view that introverts may be more inclined to use a system 2 thought process and are less likely to jump to conclusions. Cain offers insights into how introverts can and do successfully engage others when necessary. She also provides examples of how introverts have adjusted to become extremely successful in jobs that seem to be suited only for extroverts.

There are introverts who are among history’s greatest leaders. My personal favorite is Moses, who spent 40 years in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, working as a shepherd tending his

father-in-law’s flocks. Tending sheep in the wilderness sounds like a perfect job for an introvert. But when God called Moses from the burning bush to become the leader of the people of Israel, Moses’ unleashed a barrage of excuses. As the excuses were overcome one by one, Moses exclaimed, *“I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue”*. Finally, in desperation Moses finally responded, *“Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.”* The entire exchange sounds like an introvert trying to avoid a job that seemed to require the talent of an extrovert. But in His infinite wisdom, God knew that the naturally introverted Moses was the perfect leader for the task of leading His people from bondage. The book of Exodus is a shining example of what an introverted leader can accomplish.



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The message is leadership is not exclusive to extroverts—introverts are just as capable of leadership, albeit not as flashy in style. Introverted leaders are often described as thoughtful and genuine in their leadership style, are more measured in their approach to others, and less likely to say the wrong thing in the heat of the moment.

If you are an extrovert, there are a number of lessons to learn from introverts:

- First of all, there is great value in being a good listener. Sometimes it is difficult for extroverts to connect and have a meaningful conversation, even with another extrovert. There is a quote attributed to Yogi Berra that says it all. “It was impossible to get a conversation going; everyone was talking too much.”
- Secondly, recognize that excessive, self-focused conversation can get in the way of establishing meaningful relationships. Recently I spoke to a friend after he spent an evening with a mutual acquaintance—a gregarious extrovert. He observed, “In the several hours that we were together, he never once asked me anything about my life, my family, by business, or anything about me – not one single question. He is a remarkable man in many ways, but I don’t think I could ever consider him to be a friend.”
- Thirdly, extroverts are often uncomfortable with silence and will fill in the blank spaces by continuing

to talk. Whenever two parties are in a negotiation, the person who feels compelled to talk is at a disadvantage. When confronted with silence, the extrovert often ends up negotiating against himself. Silence can be a powerful negotiating tool.



Whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, the odds are that you will likely work with a team that contains both types of personalities. This is confirmed by studies that estimate that one third to one half of Americans are introverts. As a leader this means that when your team gathers in one place, you will get the best results when you have a process that draws out the introverts and provides an opportunity for them to reflect before they are asked to render an opinion. You will also need to make sure that the extroverts do not dominate the conversation and marginalize the introverts in the room. Direct questions may be needed to engage those less likely to speak up, like “Sally, you have not chimed in yet. I am interested in what you have to say on this subject”.

Teach all of your team members the power of appreciative inquiry as a means of gathering opinions and ideas

from their colleagues. This will change the culture of your team by making them all better listeners.

When putting a team together, there is a need for both introverts and extroverts in order to create a balanced point of view. A team of all extroverts or all introverts is like having a baseball team with all right handed batters or all left handed batters. It is possible to get by, but the lack of balance will become evident and ultimately hamper the success of the team.

There are a number of tools (like the Myers – Briggs personality test) that are used to measure whether someone leans toward being an introvert or an extrovert, but extroversion or introversion it is not hard to discern. Whether you are a natural introvert or extrovert, you can be a more effective leader if you understand and appreciate those whose gifts differ from your own.

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Reflections on Leadership



October 2014

The Call of Two Trumpets

For almost 10 years I have used a simple exercise when orienting new leadership staff at Presbyterian Senior Living. Dividing into groups of 5 or 6 people, we ask each group to develop two lists – one which describes the best leader they have ever worked with, and a second describing the person they would characterize as the worst leader in their experience. Both lists come together quickly in a highly interactive experience. There are often stories to illustrate what are considered exceptional leadership examples – both positive and negative. It seems that lessons in how to be a better leader are learned from good role models and from individuals who made a strong negative impression. The amazing thing about the exercise is that over the years the lists have been remarkably consistent, with only slight variations over time.

One might ask why we would choose to start a leadership orientation with this type of exercise? First, it is to illustrate that a leader does not have to read every book written on the subject of leadership to understand what good leadership is all about. I have over 100 books on leadership in my library, all offering special insights into how leaders should think and act. While I find them to be interesting and inspiring, it is not necessary to read them all to know what good leadership

looks like and how to become a better leader.

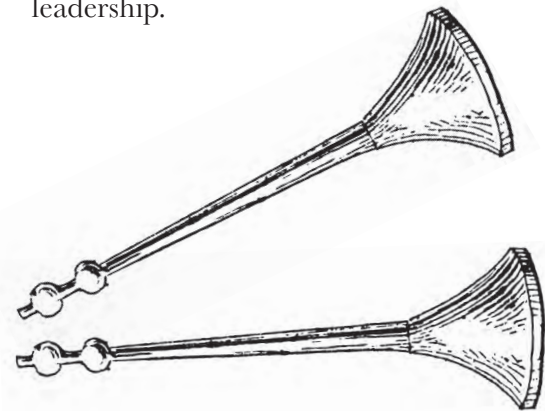
Secondly, these lists are created with such ease that it strongly suggests that the people we work with every day also know good leadership when they see it, and they know when they are in the presence of a poor leader. This should be a sobering thought for every person in a leadership role. People can tell if a leader is measuring up to a standard that will likely result in a high performing organization over the long term. This awareness can help a leader to better understand the expectations of the people they are called to lead.

Finally, leaders can use this approach to conduct a routine self-evaluation. Simply create both lists and place them in a convenient place so that they can be reviewed once a week, along with the following questions:

- How would my team members and my immediate supervisor describe my leadership in light of both of these lists?
- What steps do I need to take to become the kind of leader that is described in the positive list?
- If I have demonstrated any of the poor examples on the negative list, what should I do to repair any damage that I may have caused?

An honest response to each of these questions will provide insight into your progress on your leadership journey.

It is also interesting to discover in the leadership description exercise that both lists are almost equally split on describing the leader's character and conduct. This leads to what can be described as the "two trumpets" of leadership.



In the beginning of chapter 10 in the book of Numbers, Moses was instructed to make two silver trumpets to aid in leading the children of Israel on their journey in the wilderness. These instruments were to be used for summoning the people together for a meeting of the congregation and for sounding the call for action to set out on the next leg of their journey. Depending on the nature of the trumpet blast, the focus would be inward or outward. It would either be to gather, reflect, organize, and communicate or it would initiate intense activity to get on the move.

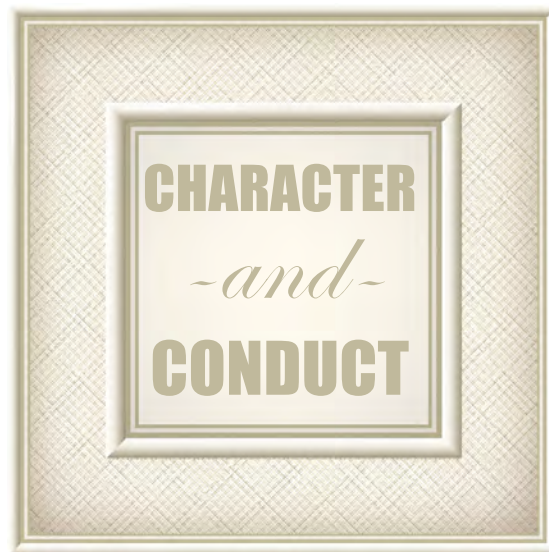
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The image of the two trumpets is remarkably consistent with what I know about the subject of leadership. In many respects leadership consists of two distinct dimensions – an internal dimension that is centered on issues of character development, and an external dimension that is focused on behavior or action steps. Leaders are evaluated by both measures - who they are and how they behave.

The differences between personal virtues and a leader's behavior are not usually hard to distinguish. For example, honesty is a characteristic; keeping your promises is the behavior expected from an honest person. Loyalty is a personal virtue; investing time and attention and placing a high value on human relationships is what a loyal person does. Compassion is a personality trait; kindness and generosity extended to the less fortunate is the natural expression of a compassionate person. Someone who trusts others is more likely to be a leader who delegates well and is not inclined to micromanage. A leader who has a strong sense of personal responsibility is likely to hold others accountable for results. You get the idea. The point is that both trumpets – the call for inner reflection and character development and the call to action are essential to be an authentic and effective leader.

There are many ways to describe the interplay between a leader's character development and action, but the one that makes sense to me is

the correlation between the need for practice before a big game. Success in athletic competition is the result of hours of practice, discipline and focus before getting into the arena. The same principle is behind the hours of practice of a musical instrument prior to a performance. One of life's truest statements is the oft repeated phrase, practice makes perfect.



But it is not enough to practice well. The game is played on the field, and the performance is delivered in front of the audience. The same is true of leadership. It has been observed that some of the most popular and articulate leadership authors are not always the best practitioners. This mirrors a criticism of people of faith who constantly study the playbook (the Bible) and gather in the huddle (church services), but rarely put their faith in action in the conflict and messiness of day to day living. Success in leadership is measured by applying well developed values in real life situations where risks are taken and the outcome is uncertain.

So the questions a leader should consider when thinking of the connection between character and conduct are:

- Do I spend enough time in reflection and practice to be good at the role of leadership to which I have been called?
- Is there a consistency in my personal and professional life that serves as the foundation of a healthy and authentic leadership style?
- Am I willing to vigorously apply my most dearly held values to my work as a leader, or am I timid in making this connection?
- Do I respond to the call of action oriented leadership when the situation warrants, or am I content to watch from the sidelines?

If you can answer yes without reservation to the questions above, you are on the right track. Just like the children of Israel and trumpets mentioned in the book of Numbers, leaders must be attuned to the call to gather and reflect and be prepared to confidently spring into action when the trumpet sounds.

Reflections on Leadership

Leadership and Hypocrisy

Probably the most damaging thing that someone can do to undermine his or her effectiveness is to publicly espouse values and standards in their role as a leader, and contradict those expressed values in their personal conduct, on or off the job. While there are those who say that what a person does in their personal life is their own business and is entirely separate from their work life, nothing could be further from the truth. Recent events suggest that the lines between personal and professional standards of conduct are becoming even more blurred. For example, after years of turning a blind eye to the issue of domestic violence, the National Football League has recognized that the public will no longer tolerate this type of behavior from those who are lifted up as role models of society.



Whether we like it or not, in our culture we have always expected leaders to display a consistency in their personal and private conduct. This is based on the premise that it is difficult, or impossible, for a person to completely separate their private and public persona. The virtue (or lack of virtue) practiced in private is likely to be the behavior that appears in the work environment, especially when the pressures of time, money, or social embarrassment are added to the mix.

The problem of hypocrisy and leadership is an ancient one. In the Old Testament book of II Samuel, the revered King David arranged for the death of Uriah to protect his reputation from the stain of taking Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. In the New Testament book of Luke, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is a story of three persons who passed a person injured on the highway. The two respected leaders (the priest and the Levite) crossed on the other side of the road, displaying a complete lack of compassion. It was only the reviled Samaritan that reached out to help. Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 is the classic indictment of the evils of hypocrisy. *"The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you – but do not do what they do. For they preach but do not practice"*.

This statement is followed by a lengthy condemnation of the moral bankruptcy of hypocrisy.

In our own day, we have all witnessed leaders who claim to adhere to values when their personal conduct displays the opposite message. Here are a few common examples:

- Advocate compassion for the poor – but display a lack of personal generosity toward the less fortunate.
- Express a commitment to family values – but cheat on your spouse, or ignore your children.
- Champion fairness – but make or influence decisions to gain personal advantage for yourself or a favored friend or family member.
- Claim to be honest – but redirect or misappropriate funds entrusted to your care.
- Publicly support transparency – but withhold information that does not put you in the most favorable light.
- Talk about the need to respect the opinions of others – but ridicule anyone who does not share your point of view.
- Hold others to a standard of excellence – but take shortcuts that affect quality when no one is looking.

- Give lip service to the need for humility – but act superior or belittle others when you want your own way.
- Lift up the need for consistency in the application of standards - but carve out exceptions to the rules for yourself and those you favor.
- Place a high value on truthfulness – but use imprecise or misleading language to conceal the truth.
- Emphasize the importance of keeping your promises - but backtrack whenever keeping a promise is uncomfortable or costly.

When faced with the inconsistencies outlined above, leaders sometimes attempt to lower the bar. “I never claimed to be generous. Who knows what is true. Isn’t everything relative? I am not your role model... your parents are your role models. I did not run on a platform of family values – that was the other guy. I am not sure how this episode, while regrettable, affects my ability to do the job.” The list could go on and on, but at the root of every excuse is a single message – don’t look at me. I never claimed to be better than anyone else.

The problem with all of these excuses can be summed up in a single word – Respect. Leaders need the respect of their team members and everyone they come in contact with in order to do their jobs well. This is because trust is not extended to those we do not respect, and a lack of trust will eventually bring any organization to its knees. Therefore, a leader gains

nothing by advocating for a lower standard, because a void remains in the leader’s respect and trust accounts. A continuous effort to achieve a consistency between the virtues that are universally admired in our conduct on and off the job is the only path open to those who aspire to lead others.

This does lead to a number of troubling questions about the possibility of unrealistic expectations of leaders, like:

- **Aren’t leaders afforded the luxury of a private life?** Of course everyone is entitled to a private life. But in recent years, advances in technology have exposed more and more behavior to the light of day, and less conduct is out of public view. For example, expressing vile language or racial intolerance on the telephone, Facebook or in an e mail is not private conduct, and is likely to have devastating consequences for a leader, even for one who may be rich enough to own a professional basketball team. Generally speaking, there are fewer unguarded and unobserved moments than there were even 20 years ago.
- **Are leaders expected to be perfect?** Not really, because no one in this life is able to attain perfection. But because leaders are in the position to make decisions that affect the lives of other people, the behavioral expectations of leaders is higher than for people who are not in leadership positions. From my perspective, leaders need

not be perfect, but they do need to be honest and well intentioned.

- **What do we do when we fall short of consistency and high standards in our personal and public conduct?** Since the key marker of a hypocrite is the dishonesty involved in creating a false impression of superiority, the first step is to create a climate that is free from such illusions. When an inconsistency occurs, the next step is to avoid the impulse to shift blame or shirk responsibility. Own up to the problem and take immediate steps to repair the damage. Finally, indicate that you will do everything humanly possible to avoid repeating the mistake.



We live in a time of great cynicism about the character of leaders, and unfortunately much of this cynicism is well deserved. In order to overcome this negative impression, leaders must not only “talk the talk, but walk the walk.” Or using the words of Jesus, it should never be said that as a leader that you “preach, but you do not practice”.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'JL' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Reflections on Leadership

Wow Moments

Whenever I am at a loss for words or am afraid my initial reaction to something that I have just seen or heard may not be exactly appropriate for the moment, I tend to fall back on a single word that seems to fit most circumstances – *Wow!* Coined by the Scots in the early 16th century, the generally recognized definition of *wow* is an expression of strong feeling or surprise. But in reality, it is a word that can mean almost anything. With a slight change in voice inflection, *wow* can be an expression of sympathy, wonder, excitement, encouragement, or congratulations. Let me give you some examples of how useful this word can be:

- Have you noticed that I lost 30 pounds? **Wow.** (*Incorrect responses – No I did not notice. I am surprised by that. You look so much better now. Your clothes fit you so much better than before.*)
- How do you like my new suit? **Wow.** (*Incorrect responses – Where do you intend to wear that? It is a major upgrade to your usual wardrobe. Interesting material. I have never seen anything like it before in my life.*)
- Look at this photo. Isn't my grandchild just the most perfect child you have ever seen? **Wow.** (*Incorrect responses – What in the world is he wearing? You should see my grandkids, they really are perfect.*)

- Aren't those bridesmaid's dresses beautiful? **Wow.** (*Incorrect responses – Where else could you wear something like that? That is an unusual design. It takes a special person to be able to wear that.*)
- How about this as an innovative approach to our problem? **Wow.** (*Incorrect responses – Where did that idea come from? What makes you think that would work? That idea never occurred to me, and still doesn't.*)

You get the idea. *Wow* is the nearly perfect word.



But more than anything else, *wow* is the first word that comes to mind when I witness something that takes my breath away – like the beauty of a sunset or a mountain vista, holding a newborn child or grandchild, or the memory of love at first sight. It even includes experiences that may seem a bit ordinary, like a quiet dinner with family. Deep down, everyone wants to

experience a *wow* moment. But what one person considers a *wow* moment, may be purely routine for another. A trip to visit Disney World may be a *wow* moment for both parent and child. Spending a morning fishing and catching nothing may be boring for an adult, but the undivided attention of a parent may be remembered by a child for years to come, and may ultimately exceed the Disney experience in terms of lifelong impact.

Leaders should be all about creating *wow* moments. I believe that success in the battle for the hearts and minds of customers and the people you work with every day is found in the creation of *wow* moments. This is not about doing things that make a big splash. Sometimes a *wow* moment can be created by simply slowing down a bit and noticing those around you by acknowledging their presence. The power of acknowledgement is illustrated in one of my favorite movies, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (for the Elderly & Beautiful), the story of a group of foreigners who are lured through slick advertising to a dilapidated hotel in India. In one scene, a guest named Muriel asks one of the hotel staff why a particular servant at the hotel invited her to visit her family, because she had not been especially kind to her. The response given was “It is because you were the

only one to acknowledge her". Simply acknowledging this young woman was a *wow* moment for her.

But other than talking about the need for building strong relationships and connecting with people with a sense of warmth and humanity, how does a leader create a *wow* moment in the busy rush of a daily work schedule?

For customers this means noticing what they like and anticipating what they need before they ask for it. It means volunteering to go one step beyond what they ask for to create a sense of delight, and looking at the world from the customer's point of view in everything we do. In the calling of providing service to seniors, this is what person centered care is all about.

From a staff relations perspective, *wow* moments can include expressing appreciation to your team members for a job well done, or making sure that your entire team is able to bask in the limelight of success when something important happens. They can also occur when you actively seek input from your team members and embrace their ideas in solving problems.

Throughout the year many of my *wow* moments occur with the presentation of employee service pins at our various locations. In a simple ceremony, the person being recognized is called up in front of their peers and their supervisor talks about the special qualities that the staff member brings to work every day, and how much their work makes a difference in the world. Often there are tears in the eyes of the person being recognized and their supervisor as these heartfelt comments are made. While this is being done, I get the opportunity to offer a few private words as I affix the pin to their lapel. Just being a witness to these events are *wow* moments for me.



As we enter the month of December we need to recognize that Christmas is a season that is ripe with *wow* moments. The blessings of family, the opportunity to give and receive gifts, recreating favorite Christmas traditions, and

expressions of good will toward others are just a few examples. The truth is that we should carry more of the Christmas spirit and create the warm feelings and the accompanying *wow* moments with us throughout the year. If we were able to do this effectively, we all would be better leaders, and the world would be a better place.

To me, Christmas is the ultimate *wow* moment – the celebration of an event that is unique in all of human history. In every manger scene and every Christmas star we are reminded of the miracle of a holy God reaching out to a lost world. The God who created the universe decided to enter into the human experience out of love for his creation. By taking this step He made it possible to be reconciled to Him and live with Him forever. Such love is beyond our full comprehension. When faced with such an awesome realization, my first reaction is simply - **WOW.**

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

