

Reflections on Leadership



A New Year's Message – Making Resolutions and Leading a Balanced Life

January 2015

The start of every New Year is an opportunity for reflection and goal setting, and I am no exception. Some of you know that I am inclined to make lists as a way to focus my attention and to avoid forgetting things in the rush of daily life. What you may not be aware of is how often I look at those lists and the good feeling I get from crossing something off my “to do” list. I am one of those people who, when I accomplish something that was not on my list for the day, will add the task to my list, just so I can have the satisfaction of crossing it off. There is probably a name for the disorder that this behavior represents, but to me, it is all perfectly logical. So if that is an example of what I do every day or

week, you can imagine what I am likely to do at the start of a New Year.

Actually, I have an exercise that helps me to focus on a personal plan for the year – a one page set of goals to remind me to try to keep my life in some kind of balance. One area is focused on diet and exercise. This is a particularly difficult one for me, as it is incredibly easy to get off track. I have no problem starting on a healthy routine. The difficulty is sustaining the effort over time. For a week or two I can be remarkably disciplined. But throw in a crazy travel schedule and a family holiday, and everything goes out the window and I have to start all over again. My success in exercise and dieting is a lot like the Mark Twain quote about quitting smoking. “Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I have done it thousands of times.”

Another area that I tend to focus on having an intentional plan regarding what I hope to read throughout the year. A number of years ago I noticed that my vocabulary was beginning to reflect a narrowing list of subjects related to my work – the language of business or medicine. There is nothing wrong with these areas of interest, but left unattended, it leads to a one

dimensional life. Cultivating other interests and reading a cross section of novels and inspirational books is on my list every year as a way to continually expand my horizons.

One might ask the question, what role does making new year's resolutions have in relation to leadership? I think it is because in our modern society it is easy for a person's life to get out of balance. Almost every New Year's resolution is an attempt to restore a sense of balance – to concentrate on what we tend to ignore throughout the year. Balance is important to everyone whether they are at work or at home. I have heard it said “We come into this world head first and go out feet first; in between, it is all a matter of balance.” This statement has a ring of truth about it.

The reality is that it is difficult to be an effective leader if your life is out of balance. A person who is leading an unhappy and unhealthy life away from work will most likely lack energy, have a less than positive outlook, and lack the even tempered and mature qualities that leaders need. We have all heard people tell us that they can compartmentalize their lives and leave work issues at work and our home life at home. I have found that this rarely,



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if ever, happens in real life. As much as we hate to admit it, we cannot completely separate our personal and professional lives. Balance in life is what we all need. This was recognized by the ancient philosopher, Euripides, who observed in the 5th century B.C that *“The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life, acknowledging the great powers around us and in us. If you can do that, and live that way, you are really a wise man.”* Balance and wisdom seem to go together.



So let's look at the list of things that need attention in a balanced life:

- **Physical** – For many of us this means more exercise, fewer calories, lower cholesterol and blood pressure, less alcohol and other healthy choices. We should do this because we will feel better and live happier, healthier, and longer lives. The people we love who are hoping to have us around for a long time are also a consideration. But there is more. I Corinthians 6:19 tells us that our bodies are a gift given to us by God, and that we do not belong just to ourselves. Disregarding or destroying a gift given to us is disrespectful to the giver of the gift.

- **Intellectual** – Much has been made about the role of intellectual pursuits and the effect on the aging brain. The brain is as much in need of stimulation and fitness as any other part of our body. Learning a new language or musical instrument and a host of other activities can be very beneficial. One of my wife's favorite activities is learning sign language to better communicate with my hearing impaired grandchildren. While the process of learning can be difficult, it stretches the mind in new ways.
- **Emotional** – Finding an emotional balance can be hard to achieve in a modern world, but the connection between emotional health and physical health is well documented. Taking time for recreation and refreshment must be intentional, but it does not have to be a big or expensive production. Some people with a religious outlook may refer to discipline in this area as taking a Sabbath. Whatever you call it, it is a necessity for a balanced life.
- **Social** - Few of us invest enough of ourselves in cultivating relationships. Relationships do not happen by accident. Part of the reason we neglect this area is that it takes time and this task rarely comes with a deadline that forces us to do something. Forming strong relationships also involves risk – the risk of self-disclosure and the possibility of rejection. These are

risks worth taking in order to have satisfying friendships in life.

- **Spiritual** – Often the most neglected and out of balance aspect of life. It is entirely possible to be healthy in every other area, but feel a sense of emptiness. This condition reminds me of the famous quote of St. Augustine of Hippo, the Author of **“Confessions”**, and the **“City of God”**. Speaking of his creator, he observed, *“For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”* It is important to grapple with the meaning of life and one's place in the world. In addition to a need for personal reflection there is also an outward expression of spiritual development that involves reaching out to others who are less fortunate. Both sides of spiritual development are essential for a balanced life.

The New Year is a perfect time to reflect on what is important and to set priorities for the next year, and there are innumerable personal benefits from this exercise which spill over into our role as leaders. The ability to lead a team of healthy, happy and productive staff members springs from a balanced life and modeling the healthy behavior we expect in others. Sounds like an idea that calls for making some kind of list.

Happy New Year!

Reflections on Leadership



Why?

February 2015

One of the more frustrating experiences of parenthood is when a child discovers the word *why*. When that happens, there is a transformation in the relationship between parent and child. The change from expected obedience to reasoning means that everything becomes less efficient. Things that happened quickly must now be explained, sometimes in painful detail. Eventually this leads to a moment of frustration when, after many attempts to explain why something must be done, the words are uttered that you swore as a young person you would never say to your child, "Because I said so!" When my now grown children experienced that moment with our grandchildren, it was a revelation of sorts. "It was an amazing moment, Dad. I opened my

mouth and somehow my father came out." *Why* is a simple word that changes everything.

Much has been said about the generational differences in the workforce and how leaders must adjust their style to the worldview of each generation. One of these major adjustments is related to the question, *Why*? It seems that for each succeeding generation the question of *why* becomes more important. In order to get someone's enthusiastic commitment we must address the question of *why* something must be done. For a leader, this means that position power has just been taken down several notches, and the ability to persuade takes on greater importance.

In his book, "Start with Why", Simon Sinek talks about how great organizations inspire their customers and their workforce by addressing the question of *why*. Using examples from the business world like Apple, Southwest Airlines, Microsoft, Harley Davidson, WalMart, General Motors and Toyota, and individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Wright brothers, Sinek describes how a shared vision is the foundation of great leadership. He also describes what happens when leaders and the organizations become more preoccupied with how things are done

than *why*, and the predictable decline in results when that inspiration is lost. Sinek claims that great organizations are built around the answer to the question *why*, which shapes the culture of and the behavior of the people who work there.

Practical Applications

The understanding of purpose and clarity of mission are essential foundations in a world that no longer regards leaders as smart enough or principled enough to follow blindly. Here are a few of the *why* questions that leaders must address when trying to engage a workforce from the Baby Boomers to Millennials.

- Why was the organization founded?
- Why does it exist now and what is its purpose in society?
- Tell me why working here will make the world a better place?
- Why do people who work here find the experience to be personally satisfying?
- Why is my work important here? Will I get a sense of meaning and purpose from my work?
- Of all the places to work in the world, why should I choose to work here?

The list could go on and on.



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The point is that leaders need to appreciate that an increasing number of people want more from their work than a purely economic exchange. Without an expressed purpose that embraces a higher calling, everything is reduced to a transaction - What do I have to give to satisfy the job requirements, and what do I get financially for that effort? These are not unimportant considerations, but they are not the source of inspiration and commitment that drives superior performance.



The impact of a clear sense of purpose is illustrated in an old story about someone who happens to encounter three stone masons working on a construction project. He asks each of them in turn the same question, “What are you doing?”, and he gets three different responses. The first mason says he is laying bricks, the second says he is putting up a wall, and the third says that he is building a cathedral. All three are doing the same work, but each has a different understanding of what their work means. The implication is that the third mason will

see the work as more meaningful, and will be more concerned about quality because the larger purpose is clear. Building a Cathedral is a reason to get up in the morning. Putting one stone on top of another is drudgery.

Putting this example in the language of building something to serve seniors in the work of Presbyterian Senior Living might sound like this:

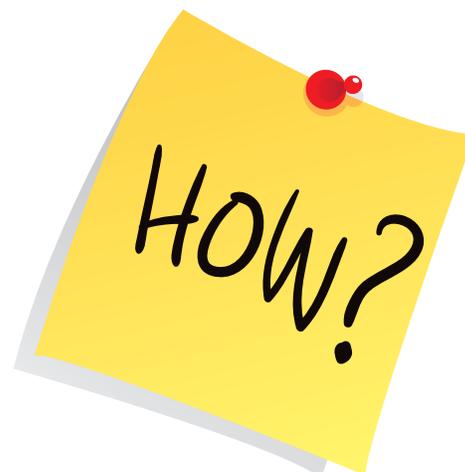
- I am building a wall in a building
- I am building an apartment for a senior to live in safety and security.
- I am building a place where seniors can receive services and age in place.
- I am building a community where seniors will be loved, respected, and form relationships to experience a full and rewarding life well into their later years.

Which one of these statements is the most likely to provide inspiration and a connection between daily work and a larger purpose in life?

Achieving success requires more than answering the question *why*. Excellence also requires addressing the question of *how* something is done and giving attention to the many details that separate adequate service from superior performance. In some respects the relationship between the question of *why* and *how* is like the Biblical description of the relationship between faith and works in the Book of James. Faith without works (belief without action) is dead. Works without faith

(action without understanding) is futile. Faith is the *why*. Works is the *how*.

Clearly understanding and doing the tasks that are required every day is important, but cannot sustain superior performance over time. When a person’s work is disconnected from a compelling reason routine and boredom will eventually set in. Being inspired by the vision of why something is important without the attention to detail that creates superior outcomes is hollow. Good intentions alone are rarely translated into tangible results.



Successful leaders know that sustained high performance in any endeavor requires equal attention to both questions. Leaders who start with *Why* and follow with *How* are likely to experience the joy of leading a high performing team.

Reflections on Leadership



The Need for Patience

March 2015

Patience is a virtue that is in short supply. The evidence is everywhere – from road rage to the behavior of airline travelers facing a weather delay, there is little tolerance for any kind of inconvenience. One of my favorite television commercials features very young children who are required to be patient in adult situations. When they are given a number to wait in line or required to wait on the phone to talk to a live person they mimic the behavior of adults by expressing their dismay or throwing down their cell phone in disgust. The ad is sponsored by an insurance company that claims that their service will not require you to wait or be inconvenienced. Unfortunately the childish behavior that is cute in children is less endearing in adults.

If patience is a virtue, how is it defined in the modern age? There are two definitions that I like best:

- The capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset.
- Tolerant and even-tempered perseverance.

The first definition is focused on a personal emotional response, while the second seems to apply more directly to adult behavior in a work environment.

Patience with Others

When relating to others on a personal level, patience communicates an unusually powerful affirmation. People who exhibit patience listen well and are not inclined to interrupt. The focused attention of a patient person conveys respect for another's opinions and point of view, and a consideration of their feelings. Almost every personal act of kindness that I can recall contains an element of patience. Conversely, impatience is often expressed by being preoccupied or trying to hurry someone along. Behaviors like looking at your watch when talking to someone are sometimes called dismissal cues, and can cause other people to feel small, unimportant, or bothersome.



What does patience look like in the people we see every day? As with many parents, I have witnessed with awe the development and maturation of my children into responsible adults. My once teenage son, who lacked even the most rudimentary inclination toward patience, is now one of the most patient and considerate men I know. When I watch him in action as a coach of my granddaughter's 8 year old soccer team he has a sense of calm and focus that is nothing short of amazing.

My youngest daughter's patience when communicating with my hearing impaired granddaughter is so inspiring that it can bring tears to my eyes. And my oldest daughter's love for teaching the hungry minds in her first grade classroom requires a level of patience that is almost beyond comprehension. This experience has led me to the conclusion that patience can be learned over time. I am not claiming to have taught or modeled patience to inspire this character development in my children, just that it can be learned.

Patience is listed as a primary virtue in Galatians 5:22-23. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."* The implication here is that patience is not a natural human inclination, but is the result of something deeper.

It is my opinion that patience is an expression of love. Patience is listed as the first descriptive word in the Biblical outline of what love looks like in I Corinthians chapter 13. *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* (ESV) Patience is a powerful virtue because it communicates love and caring to another person.

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Patience and Leadership

Given the number of books written on the subject of leadership, there is surprisingly little written about the connection between patience and leadership. But if leadership is about relationships (and I believe that it is) then patience may be one of the most useful and effective of all positive attributes in a leader's character.

Patience is one of the basic building blocks for establishing trust between people and creating cohesive and high performing teams. It takes patience for an extroverted leader to make sure that an introverted team member has enough space in a conversation to express a thoughtful opinion.



If patience is so valuable, why is it not highlighted as one of the top leadership attributes? I think that it is because many effective leaders are thought to be impatient when they express a desire for things to be accomplished according to a tight timeline. The focus on delivering results and pressing harder to satisfy the demands of customers can be interpreted as diminishing the value of patience as virtue. Furthermore, patience is given a bad name in organizations when it is used as a disguise for procrastination,

indecisiveness, lack of initiative, fear of confrontation or conflict, an inability to focus, or even passive resistance.

In reality, a leader's lack of patience can be very costly to themselves and the people that they lead. In addition to the breakdown of working relationships that occurs when a leader displays a consistent lack of patience with others, impatience can be deadly in the context of organizational decision making. Moving forward with incomplete or inaccurate information has led to innumerable business failures. The impatient leader is often described as having a "Ready, Fire, Aim" approach to life. The problem is that when leaders aim at nothing, that is exactly what is achieved.

The truth is that what we call patience can be either positive or negative depending on the underlying motive. Springing from an inner peace or heartfelt concern for another person, patience is among the most desirable of virtues. However, there are situations where patience is definitely not desirable - for example, when patience tolerates injustice. Thomas Aquinas observed, *"To bear with patience wrongs done to oneself is a mark of perfection, but to bear with patience wrongs done to someone else is a mark of imperfection and even of actual sin."* This understanding calls us to a great deal of reflection as we examine our own motives for patience (or impatience) as well as the motives of others.

So if patience is a virtue, how do we reconcile the need for patience with the imperatives that drive leaders to be

accountable and to do more? I like the observation of the Venerable Fulton J. Sheen who said that *"Patience is power. Patience is not an absence of action; rather it is 'timing'. It waits on the right time to act, for the right principles, and in the right way."*

The recent movie "I'll Be Me" chronicles Glen Campbell's struggle with Alzheimer's disease and his farewell musical tour around the country. As he slips further and further into the fog of his illness he has periods of confusion and paranoia and exhibits difficult behavior toward his family caregivers. In spite of their frustration, his family's response is to patiently and lovingly reassure him by surrounding him with kindness. To those of us who have been called to serve frail seniors, this is a familiar story. In our work we deal with many victims of this terrible disease, and have front line staff members who display extraordinary amounts of patience in their day to day work. In the presence of this beautiful example of the value of patience, we should make a special effort to model this behavior to everyone around us.

In my experience, patience is a virtue that is not practiced enough by those in leadership positions. I think Saint Augustine said it well. *"Patience is the companion of wisdom."* Leaders who covet wisdom must practice patience.

Reflections on Leadership



Finding Meaning

April 2015

Recently I was listening to the radio while driving in my car and heard an ad for underwear. Now a lot of products and services are the subject of creative advertising, and men's underwear is not the most unusual subject of a marketing campaign. What surprised me were the claims made by the founder of the company. First he talked about the quality of the fabric, the innovative design, the comfort, etc. But what followed was a truly extraordinary statement. Buy this product and be prepared - "This underwear will change your life!"

Wow! All I need to do to have a better life is to move to another brand of underwear? What an idea! I had never thought of that before. Here I have been going about my life every day, oblivious to the reality that a new kind of underwear was the key. I had much

lower expectations for my current brand and its utilitarian features. Clearly I was missing out.

This caused me to think about all of the other products – cars, clothing (that you can actually see), designer handbags, the latest athletic shoes, and all of the things that are supposed to do more than what they were obviously designed to do – move you from one place to another, cover your body, carry your stuff, or help you to run in comfort. If you buy these things you will be enriched in other ways, like added status or being identified as someone who can appreciate the finer things of life. I think the marketers of all of these products are actually onto something. They know that underneath it all, everyone is looking for meaning in life. Adopting that logic, I guess if being comfortable is your life's goal, a new brand of underwear could be a life changing experience.

It is true that the search for meaning intersects with our work life, and leaders who ignore this reality do so at their own peril, personally and for the people they lead. There are few things more unsettling than being trapped into a world of meaningless work.

In a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, Rachel Feintzeig wrote about companies who realize that young workers want to make a

difference in addition to a paycheck. Employers are responding by "trying to inject meaning into the daily grind, connecting profit driven endeavors to grand consequences for mankind." She continues:

"Now, nearly every product or service from motorcycles to Big Macs seems capable of transforming humanity, at least according to some corporations. The words, 'mission', 'higher purpose', 'changing the world', are mentioned on earnings calls, in investor meetings, and industry conferences... A Kohl's Corp. executive said at an investor conference last year that if the retailers associates 'can truly relate their work to some higher purpose', they will sell more sweaters and handbags."

How do the staff members of these organizations feel about this effort to inject meaning into their work? Some research suggests that about 1/3 feel their work is a calling, while the rest don't derive deep meaning from their work. According to Amy Wrzesniewski, an associate professor of organizational behavior at the Yale School of Management, "Those who can connect their work to a higher purpose – whether they are a janitor or a banker – tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, put in longer hours, and rack up fewer absences."

I think that it is essential for leaders to look for meaning in their work, because if work does not have meaning for a leader, it is unlikely that a leader will



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be able to convey a sense of meaning or purpose to those they lead. Finding meaning in your work is not something that can be easily faked, and leaders who attempt to convince others of something they do not actually believe will be quickly seen as inauthentic and manipulative. Only those leaders who see their work as meaningful can help the members of their team see a higher purpose in their work.

But the process of helping someone to find meaning in their work is a gift that leaders and their team members can give to each other.

A recent CNN new report focused on a prank played on Wichita High School principal Sherman Padgett. A student asked him to stand out in the hallway and hold a bucket, without explaining what they were going to do next. Naturally Padgett was suspicious, but he decided to go along with the request.



What happened next was a great surprise. Students lined up and as they passed him, they dropped notes of praise and thanks into the bucket. Some of the notes were heartwarming:

- *“Thank you for making high school the best years of my life”*
- *“You’ve made my first year experience in America one that I will always remember”*
- *“You helped me get through my eating disorder and helped me get into therapy.”*

Padgett, the principal at the school since 2006, was moved by the experience. “I became a little emotional at some of them. I kind of read them and thought, man, this is better than a paycheck. This is why I do the things I do.” Finding meaning....

All of us have the opportunity to give these kinds of gifts to each other if we just pay attention to the good things around us and express those thoughts freely. It is not hard to put these thoughts into words, it just takes a little forethought. Here are a few examples:

- *When I come to work every day and see your smiling face, it makes my whole day better.*
- *The kindness and compassion that you express to the seniors we are called to serve is an inspiration to the rest of us who do this work.*
- *You always notice when someone is in need of an encouraging word, and find something positive to say.*
- *Your attention to detail is amazing*
- *You are so dependable.*
- *We can always count on you to do what you say you will do.*
- *You are so thoughtful. You always seem to anticipate what other people need before they realize it.*

- *You were so patient with me as I tried to learn my new job.*
- *You are the kind of take charge person we need around here. You just know what needs to be done, and are not satisfied until the job is done right.*
- *What I like about you is that you do not hesitate to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves.*



Words have the power to change someone’s life, and can add meaning to the work experience of those around us. This is confirmed by the book of Proverbs (25:11) where it says that *“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver”* (KJV). It turns out that the ability to change someone’s life is not that difficult to do. It may be even easier than changing your brand of underwear.



Reflections on Leadership



Positive Leadership Traits

May 2015

My first exposure to a person in a major leadership position occurred when I was 18 years old, about a month from beginning my nursing education. I was working as an orderly at Mercy Hospital in Port Huron, Michigan when I received a call to come down to the Nursing office to meet with the Director of Nursing. Based on my experience at the time, I thought that this meant that I was in some kind of trouble. When I entered the office, I was greeted by the D.O.N and another person who was introduced as the personal assistant to Cecil Runyan, the Chairman and Chief Executive of a large public utility. Much to my surprise, I was offered a job as a 3-11 chauffer and personal assistant to this nearly 80 year old executive who was in the hospital and was being discharged later that day.

I learned that Mr. Runyan was on the board of directors of the hospital and had requested help in finding someone to work for him. The fact that I was a nursing student was a plus, as he had some physical problems that needed attention. I was not aware of it, but I was about to begin an education in business and leadership that would complement my nursing education. It was a

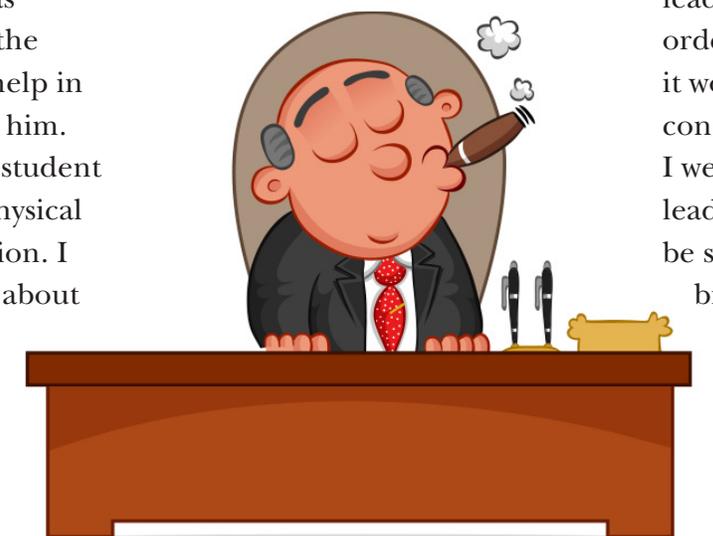
perfect job in that it permitted me to fulfill my nursing schedule and make enough money to pay my way through school.

Mr. Runyan was the caricature of a 1950's or early 60's business executive. His wide brimmed fedora was accompanied by red ties and vested suits that were all in some shade of blue or grey. His constant companion was a large cigar, which he smoked continuously. He claimed to smoke 20 cigars a day, and in the hours I spent with him, he seemed to keep that pace with relative ease. He was known to be very smart, tough minded, hard charging, and somewhat impulsive. He actually fired me several times, and rehired me the same day each time. He was strong and decisive, and not terribly conservative

in many respects. I clearly recall him telling me that if someone offered me a million dollars I should turn it down, because it was a lot more fun to make it yourself. That was easy for him to say. By the time I worked for him he was on his third fortune.

Mr. Runyan was what I would call an unintentional mentor. Because we spent so much time together, we would talk about a variety of subjects - like his strategy in establishing banking relationships, and when to borrow money. He introduced me to the Wall Street Journal and other business publications. As a young person I found myself in meetings that involved geology reports and decisions about drilling oil and gas wells. In the process I learned a great deal about analyzing options and taking calculated risks. He was the image of the old style, strong leader, comfortable with barking orders, listening when he thought it would be helpful, but perfectly content being the contrarian. If I were to describe the traits of leadership that he modeled, it could be summed up in three words - brave, strong, and optimistic.

I found out quickly that it was possible to learn what to do and what not to do from the same person. I realized if I



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paid close attention I could learn from experience about things that were not written in business books. I also discovered that I hated cigars and that barking orders was not the best way to get people to cooperate.



Over the years I have spent a good deal of time thinking about how people describe the character and behavior of great leaders. I also have observed that almost every virtue can be exaggerated until it becomes a liability. Applying this thinking to my first business mentor's leadership traits is an illustration of this reality:

Brave - Being brave is having the courage to move forward in the face of opposition, or willing to stand up for what is right even when it is not popular. However, there is a fine line between being brave and self-

assured and being stubborn and self-righteous, and it is easy for a leader to lose track of where this line is at any given time.

Strong - One of the harshest criticisms leveled at a leader is to be labeled as weak. No one wants to be a weak leader – aimless, waffling, or indecisive. Strong leaders seem to exude a certain confidence – they know where they are going, and people trust their judgment. This can become distorted into behavior that can be described as aggressive, overbearing, demanding, arrogant, dismissive, or boastful.

Optimistic – Optimism is one of the most desirable of all leadership traits. Optimism is the oxygen that enables risk taking and a positive vision of the future to exist in any situation. When a leader sees the best in people and situations the world is filled with amazing possibilities. However, the overly optimistic person can deny reality, even when it is staring them in the face. Real problems cannot be resolved unless there is a strong dose of realism.

But there is more. These same leadership traits can be expressed in unexpected ways. I recently ran across a series of pithy statements that demonstrate this concept:

- **The first to apologize is the bravest.**

The brave are willing to take the risk of rejection or losing face. The weak are fearful that an apology will diminish them in some way.

- **The first to forgive is the strongest.**

Forgiveness can break the chains that harm relationships and restrict progress. Holding a grudge can sap the strength of the most focused and determined person.

- **The first to forget is the happiest.**

The person who can quickly and permanently dispatch an unpleasant memory to a historical archive is free to experience good things. Conversely, optimism will wither in the presence of a stream of negative thoughts.

Since my first exposure to the world of business and leadership, I have had many other mentors that have provided a balance to my understanding of what a leader is and should do. After more than 40 years, I am still discovering new elements to effective leadership. There is, however, one thing that I know for certain. Wisdom is the ability to recognize how every leadership trait is practiced in any given situation. The book of Proverbs is filled with advice on how to find and apply wisdom, and offers this insight in chapter 3:13-14. *“Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than the gain from silver, and her profit better than gold”* (ESV).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'JL'.

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership - Leaving a Legacy

June 2015

It is not unusual for a leader to reflect a bit on his or her legacy at some point in a career. The most obvious example is when a President of the United States enters the last two years of their second term. For almost every president, thoughts turn toward how history is going to record their time in office, whether or not they will be considered a success or failure, and how things changed for better or worse under their watch. As a part of this process presidential libraries are constructed to house presidential papers and other items to document important events. Sometimes the desire to chronicle history as a part of a person's legacy in office can take on a life of its own. Richard Nixon's tape recorded conversations from the oval office were probably conceived as a part of his desire to leave a legacy of his time in office, but played a significant part in his resignation from office.

While most leaders are not as obsessed with their legacy as political office holders, the natural

human need for significance has led to the subject of a leader's legacy being addressed in leadership literature. *A Leader's Legacy*, by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner explores the subject of the desire of a leader to leave a legacy for future generations. The following are a few insights they offer to those who are concerned about their legacy as a leader:

- Great leaders are seen as servants first.
- The best leaders are teachers.
- Authentic leadership comes from the inside out.
- Leaders must decide on what matters in life before they can lead a life that matters.
- Leaving a legacy is all about making a difference, and making a difference often takes courage.
- The legacy you leave is the life you lead.

A couple of weeks ago, my friend and colleague, Rev. Jack Sharp, pastor of Govan's Presbyterian

Church in Baltimore died unexpectedly. By any measure, Jack was an extraordinary human being. In addition to his work as a pastor, he was a tireless advocate for the poor in the city – the homeless, the elderly, persons afflicted with AIDS, the hungry, the unemployed, and anyone in need. In the 1980's he founded Govan's Ecumenical Homes, a forerunner of what would become Govan's Ecumenical Development Corporation (GEDCO). GEDCO became the conduit for many of Jack's charitable intentions as he engaged people of all religious faiths in his passion for serving others. His obituary and memorial service chronicled his legacy of compassion and leadership that will be felt for generations to come.

Jack was a risk taker who always believed that God would provide. There is a story of Jack and a group of pastors taking an option on a building to serve a disadvantaged population, hoping to raise the money to purchase the building.



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The funds were not forthcoming, but they decided to attend the real estate closing anyway, hoping that someone would come to the rescue. As Jack and his colleagues were sitting in the room with the attorneys and the other people that normally attend a real estate closing, someone appeared from the Mayor's office at the very last minute with a check with just enough to pay for the building. Over the years this story was retold many times as the ministry faced financial crises that were eventually resolved.

It is clear to me that Jack may be gone, but his legacy of leadership lives on in the lives of the people he touched.



I have a few other thoughts about how leaders leave a legacy for future generations:

- A legacy can be either positive or negative, and the influence for good or evil can last for generations. A leader can leave behind a record of self-centeredness or callous indifference as easily as a legacy for good.

- A person's character always matters, and is at the heart of every legacy that inspires future generations for good. Abraham Lincoln observed that "Character is like a tree and reputation its shadow. The shadow is what we think it is and the tree is the real thing."
- It is never too early to think about your legacy as a person and as a leader, especially if such thoughts guide your behavior and how you invest your time and attention.
- That being said, leaders should not be preoccupied by how people will recall their legacy. Do the right thing all of the time, and let your legacy take care of itself.
- Leaders must always be aware of the fragile nature of a legacy. A single lapse in behavior can overshadow decades of great work.
- If an honest appraisal of your legacy reveals that it is not what you would like, do not despair. The stories of some of the great leaders in history (like Winston Churchill) illustrate that recovery and redemption is possible. Like a great opera, it's not over until the fat lady sings.
- With the rare exceptions of those persons whose lives are defined by singular heroic acts, legacies are mostly constructed in the day to day work with other people.

Understanding how a leader's legacy is constructed is not all that complicated, and can be reduced to a couple of relatively simple questions. First, how do you want others to remember you? Secondly, what kind of place would the world become if everyone followed your example?

A person like Jack Sharp is an inspiration to the rest of us who want to make a difference in the world as we leave our own unique imprint on the people around us. Knouzes and Posner contend that leaving a legacy is for everyone, not just for the extraordinary people in the world.

"Whatever your role in life may be, you make a difference. There is a 100 percent chance that you can be a role model for leadership. There is a 100 percent chance that you can influence someone else's performance. There is a 100 percent chance that you can affect what someone else thinks, says, and does. There is a 100 percent chance that you will make a difference in other people's lives."

From my perspective, there are few things in life that offer better odds for success. Go for it!

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership and Respect

July 2015

It seems that in the last few years the concept of respect as it is exhibited in daily life has changed for the worse. Teachers complain that they are treated with less respect by students and parents. Children seem to exhibit behavior that is less respectful to parents, and other adults. Politics is an ongoing story of disrespectful dialogue along the entire political spectrum. In organizational life, leaders, from front line managers to senior executives talk about the erosion of respect in the work place. The need to cultivate staff respect for customers, respect to staff from customers, respect from front line staff to leadership, and respect by leadership to their team members are common themes in leadership literature.

But the story of respect is not new. Many of these same concerns have been raised in prior generations. In popular culture, fortunes have been made around the concept of respect. In my youth, pop music featured Aretha Franklin (R-E-S-P-E-C-T), and comedian

Rodney Dangerfield built a successful career (I don't get no respect) around the idea of respect. Everyone wants respect. Everyone feels they deserve respect. But many of the same people who want more respect only grudgingly give respect to those who they believe have earned it.

Even the concept of inclusion is severely limited by an underlying lack of respect. We are all in favor of reaching out to embrace those whose opinions and views mirror our own, but are amazingly intolerant of anyone who holds an opinion that we find troublesome. We do not want anyone to offend those we agree with, but are tone deaf when it comes to offending those who we feel do not share our enlightened values. If we are honest, we have to admit that giving and receiving respect is a lot easier to talk about than it is to practice.

Over 40 years ago I learned a lesson on respect that has served as the foundation for my understanding of what respect is all about.

I grew up in a large family in Michigan. In addition to having three brothers and two sisters, my parents took in foster children, often increasing the number of children in the house to 8 or 10 at a time. Many of these children came from very difficult home lives, with parents who were neglectful or abusive. It was from one of these young people that I learned an important lesson about respect.

His name was Ed, and we were about the same age. He had spent much of his life in foster care. By the time he came to live with us he was just finishing high school and wanted to go to college. We shared a room and developed a friendship. He and his brothers and sisters were taken from his mother as small children, and the story of their early life was difficult. One day on the way home from a community college class Ed indicated that he wanted to stop in and check on his Mom. This surprised me, because I had not met her before. The apartment where she lived was run down, and not in the best neighborhood. She looked



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old and frail for her age. It seemed to me that she was still making bad choices in her life and suffering the consequences. From my point of view she had not been a great mother – certainly a huge contrast from the loving home and family that I had grown up with. What impressed me was the kindness and respect this young man had for a woman who from all accounts had done little to earn his respect and love. He was concerned about her health and her difficult living environment. We only stayed for a few minutes, and he said he would be back in a few days to check on her again. It was clear to me that he simply respected her for who she was – his Mom. To this day I am humbled by the image of a young man who could be respectful to someone who had been a source of hurt and rejection. In my personal experience, this is the gold standard of respect.



Here are a few general observations on respect and leadership:

- Leaders must gain the respect of those they intend to lead. There is no possibility of effective

leadership in the absence of respect.

- There is a connection between humility and respect. When it comes to leadership, humility breeds respect.
- A leader who exhibits an attitude of moral superiority will experience a diminished level of respect from his or her team members.
- Sarcasm as a communication strategy is never appropriate if giving and receiving respect is important. Leaders should make it clear that sarcastic remarks are inherently disrespectful, and are not appropriate in the workplace.
- Leaders should spend less time looking for arguments to support their personal point of view and more time in appreciative inquiry trying to understand the views of others.
- Appreciation and respect for someone else does not require agreement with their position. It is possible to respectfully “agree to disagree”.

Johnathon Haidt, author of the book, *The Righteous Mind*, has some important insights into gaining an appreciation and respect for those of differing political and religious persuasions. As a self-described liberal, atheist, ethnic Jew, Yale graduate, and college professor in moral psychology, his observations on appreciating the views of others is interesting to say the

least. His research on why liberals, conservatives, and libertarians have different views of right and wrong provides a strong argument for the need for understanding and respect as a basis for constructive dialogue. But most surprising to me was his endorsement of a religious foundation in terms of the way people relate to each other in a civilized society, something he calls the “Sanctity foundation” that helps to bind individuals into moral communities.

How does one describe the connection between faith and respect? From my point of view, the answer is straightforward. Every person is worthy of respect, not because they have earned it, but because they are created by a loving God who values every human being. In this context, it is inherently wrong to disrespect God’s creation - the environment in which we all live or the individuals made in God’s image living on the earth.

So from my perspective the way to encourage respectful behavior in the workplace can be reduced to two simple ideas. Give respect freely to everyone. Do everything you can to earn the respect of those around you. Leaders who live by these principles will find success is almost always within reach.

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership and Self Esteem

August 2015

There has been a lot of talk about self-esteem in recent years and the effect of low self-esteem on happiness and success. The concept of self-esteem has been around for a long time, dating back to the 18th century when Scottish Enlightenment thinker, David Hume, argued that it was important to value and think well of yourself. The first psychological use of the term was attributed to William James in 1890. Self-esteem has been defined as a feeling of having respect for yourself and your abilities (Webster). In psychology, the term is used to describe a person's overall sense of self-worth or personal value.

In recent years, particular attention has been given to the role of self-esteem in the education of children. I remember going to parent's night when my children were in middle school and seeing banners placed in every hallway. Students were told that they were smart and could do anything they set their minds to in

an attempt to raise self-esteem and scholastic achievement. Knowing that encouragement and positive reinforcement was one of the primary tools of leadership, I often wondered if the same principles could be transferred to the workplace.

As it turns out, not everyone is convinced that unfettered praise is the way to a healthy self-image. Jim Taylor, author of the book *Your Kids Are Listening: Nine Messages They Need to Hear from You* argues that there are better ways to build self-esteem than heaping on praise for everything kids do—starting with helping them become competent in the world. To do so, though, you have to learn to step back and let your child take risks, make choices, solve problems and stick with what they start. Self-esteem comes from feeling loved and secure, and from developing competence, Taylor says, and although parents often shower their kids with the first two ingredients, competence—becoming good at things—takes time and effort. *"As much as we may want to, we can't praise our kids into competence,"* he says. By over-praising kids, we're doing more harm than good. *"We're lowering the bar for them,"* Taylor says. *"If you keep telling your child she is already doing a fantastic job, you're saying she no longer needs to push herself. But confidence comes from doing, from trying and failing and trying again—from practice."*

Research even suggests that children who get an overdose of this kind of unmerited praise are inclined to give up more easily when faced with a difficult task.

Over a century ago William James devised a simple formula for determining self-esteem. Self-esteem equals success divided by expectation. According to James the more success we have and the lower our expectations - the higher our self-esteem. To raise self-esteem, therefore, we have two options: lower our expectations of ourselves or increase our achievements. It would stand to reason that in educating our children or providing leadership in an organization where superior performance is the goal, that increasing achievement would be more desirable than lowering expectations.

An understanding of self-esteem is important for every person in a leadership position. The self-esteem of an individual or group becomes the lens that affects how they see everything around them. There is a definite connection between self-esteem and one of the most attractive leadership attributes – confidence. Strong leaders seem to have a more confident demeanor which inspires people to follow them. Charismatic leaders are almost always described



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as confident. Secondly, leaders must be sensitive to the self-esteem of their team members, individually and collectively, and take steps to cultivate a healthy self-image in their day to day relationships. In my experience, teams that undervalue themselves and those they work with are often plagued by low morale.

Looking at self-esteem and a leader's behavior, what is the evidence of confident leadership? In my experience, confident leaders:

- Are open to new ideas from others.
- Encourage respectful dissent among their team members.
- Are not defensive when their ideas are challenged.
- Willingly take calculated risks, and encourage their team members to do the same.
- Generously ascribe credit to others when something is successful.
- Freely assume blame for less favorable outcomes.
- Are not depressed or discouraged by failure.
- Give praise whenever they see genuine accomplishment.
- Remain calm in the face of pressure or adversity.
- Acknowledge their own imperfections and shortcomings and are not threatened or paralyzed by the thought that they may not be right every time they make a decision.

When it comes to leadership, self-esteem is not just a personal matter. Leaders have a profound impact on the self-esteem of the people they work with. This begins with the recognition that everything a leader

says and does has the potential to build up or tear down the self-esteem of their team members – individually and collectively. Negativity should not be authored or tolerated by a leader who desires a high performing team. In the final analysis, leaders almost always get what they consistently reinforce. In this regard, encouragement for effort and risk taking is as important as praise for a successful outcome. Openness to new ideas and respect for contrary opinions must be modeled by the leader if the team is to adopt those treasured values.



Where does a leader and their team member's self-esteem come from, and does the source of self-esteem matter? Moral psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt points to research that suggest that self-esteem is largely driven by what others think of us. Generally speaking, if people you care about think well of you, you are likely to have higher self-esteem. In his view, the internal compass for self-esteem is drawn to public opinion rather than true north. He uses politicians and their reliance on polls as an illustration of this tendency. While this may have a ring of truth to it, it is hard to imagine that this kind of

self-esteem is durable enough to serve as the basis for confident leadership when the best decision is not the popular alternative.

If the whim of public approval is unreliable, is there a better foundation for self-esteem that will hold up when the going gets rough? For a person of faith, there is a deeper understanding of human worth that undergirds the concept of self-esteem. In the words of the Old Testament Psalmist, each human being is "*Fearfully and wonderfully made*". There is a confidence in knowing that even in the face of withering criticism, a person cannot be devalued or rendered worthless in the eyes of God. This understanding can be a source of enduring confidence – a confidence that can withstand testing in the crucible of leadership when things are most difficult. This deeper perspective also shapes the way we see and value the other people we work with every day, making it less likely for a leader to unleash a critical spirit that undermines the self-esteem of his or her team members.

One final note. It is possible for a leader to confuse bravado, pretentiousness or stubbornness with confidence. The root of these destructive behaviors is insecurity, not the healthy self-worth that has been the theme of this reflection. Leaders are often called on to make hard decisions. But a leader with a positive self-image will never intentionally disregard, diminish or belittle someone else to get their own way.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials "JH" with a stylized flourish.

Reflections on Leadership



Curious Leadership

September 2015

Many years ago my wife, Rhonda and I were on vacation in Italy and visited the Pantheon in Rome. It was in the summer tourist season, and the place was packed with so many people that it was hard to move around freely. In the middle of this extraordinary environment, an older gentleman walked by wearing an Altoona Curve baseball hat. My first thought, was “Wow, isn’t that interesting. Altoona is less than 150 miles from where we live.” Rhonda, who has an inclination to talk to almost anyone, took the initiative and struck up a conversation. Much to my surprise, the man was there with his daughter and son-in-law, who soon joined in the conversation. It turned out that the son-in-law’s father was John Martin, the former Executive Director of the Presbyterian Homes of the Presbytery of Huntingdon (PHPH), an organization that had merged with Presbyterian Senior Living a couple of years earlier. As one of the patriarchs of PHPH, his portrait can be found in buildings that I frequent in my work.

Even being thousands of miles from home there was someone literally right next to us with whom we had a connection.

This experience, and others like it, has changed the way I look at life – specifically a better appreciation of the power of curiosity. Left to my own devices, the story would have ended with – “Imagine seeing an Altoona Curve baseball hat in Rome?” It was a curious mind engaging in further conversation that uncovered the rest of the story. Now, whenever I enter a room full of people, I expect to find people with whom I have something in common, and I try to discover the connections.

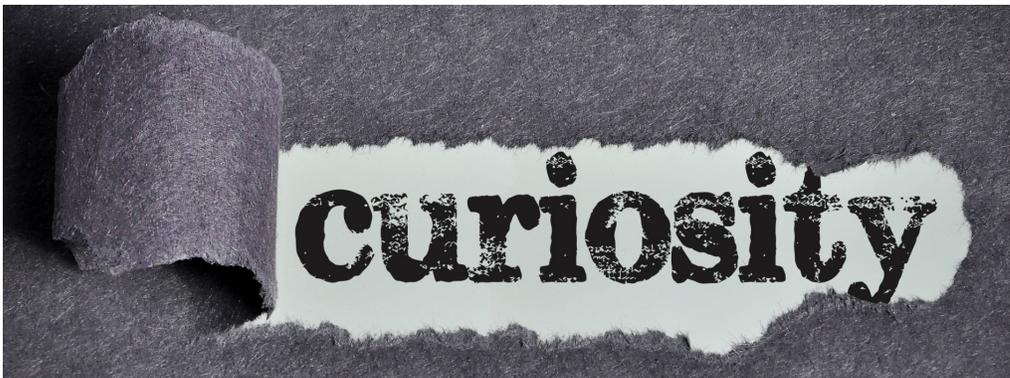
In his book *Curious, the Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It*, Ian Lesley tells the story of John Lloyd, the creator of the British program *QI* (short for *Quite Interesting*) a BBC comedy panel game television show that began in 2003. In his pitch to get BBC to produce this program, Lloyd observed that all primates have three

basic drives - food, sex, and shelter. Only human beings have a 4th drive – curiosity. *“Pure Curiosity is unique to human beings. When animals snuffle around in the bushes, they are looking for the three other things. It’s only people, as far as we know, who look up at the stars and wonder what they are.”*

But curiosity is not a single impulse or trait. Leslie defines curiosity as having three distinct expressions: *Diversive*, *Epistemic*, and *Empathic*:

- **Diversive Curiosity** – The curiosity that is exhibited by the very young – an attraction to everything novel. This type of curiosity is immature, and can become a waste of time and energy. I have heard this kind of curiosity referred to as the pursuit of the next shiny object.
- **Epistemic Curiosity** is a deeper, more disciplined, and effortful curiosity. When curiosity is transformed into a sustained, cognitive effort it becomes a quest for knowledge and understanding.
- **Empathic Curiosity** – Curiosity about the thoughts and feelings of others, looking at the world from their perspective. *Diversive* curiosity asks what a person does for a living. *Empathic* curiosity wonders why they do it.

How is *Epistemic* and *Empathic* curiosity useful in terms of organizational life and leadership?



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Innovation. The most obvious application of curiosity is a fascination related to how things work and exploring the art of the possible. Albert Einstein, one of the truly creative minds in human history observed, *“I know quite certainly that I myself have no special talent; curiosity, obsession, and a dogged endurance, combined with self-criticism have brought me to my ideas.”* In his book, *The Medici Effect*, Frans Johansson credits the breaking down the barriers between fields – which he refers to as “Intersections” as a key to innovation and discovery. A wide ranging curiosity about things that may appear on the surface to be unrelated is a foundation of Johansson’s theory. The stories of innovation and invention through the ages are marked by an insatiable curiosity.

Organizational Benefits of Curiosity. There is a connection between curiosity and respect. Einstein also said that *“When you approach a situation, person, or project with curiosity, you engage with openness, marvel, and respect...”* Using curiosity to foster understanding sends a message that you value the input of others, establishes common ground between individuals within an organization, and sets the tone of an organizational culture that is open to criticism and to new ideas. There is also a clear connection between curiosity and humility. The underlying assumption is that the curious leader does not regard himself or herself as the smartest person in the room. Authentic curiosity is demonstrated by withholding judgment in the desire to find out more, and better information ultimately results in better decision making. Finally, curiosity contributes

to growing future leaders within an organization. Asking questions instead of giving answers is the best way to develop a deeper bench of leadership talent. Minds that are stretched by wrestling with questions become stronger and more flexible.

Curiosity and Experience. While children are naturally curious, adults can frequently suffer from a lack of curiosity. Experience is an important teacher, but when experience blinds us to the ability to see the unexpected, failure is just around the corner. Leaders that rely on experience at the expense of curiosity are like motorists driving with their eyes closed with a belief that the road is exactly as they remember it, and their memory of the road ahead is sufficient to reach their destination. It is not hard to imagine a catastrophic outcome. Jesus observation in 6th chapter of the Book of Luke comes to mind. *“Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they both not fall into a pit?”*

Many years ago I had a conversation with a highly respected CEO at an educational conference. She remarked that it was tougher for her to attend educational conferences after so many years. *“When you have heard as many educational presentations as I have, you realize that there is not much left to learn.”* When does a groove become a rut? It happens whenever experience overpowers curiosity.

Reflective curiosity. In addition to Diverisive, Epistemic, and Empathic curiosity that were described earlier, I would like to suggest that leaders need something more – a reflective curiosity rooted in the need to understand themselves and their

place in the world. In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks identifies something he calls the Humility Code which connects curiosity and humility by seeking answers to penetrating questions. *“Toward what should I orient my life? Who am I and what is my nature? How do I mold my nature to make it gradually better day by day? What virtues are the most important to cultivate and what weaknesses should I fear the most? How can I raise my children with a true sense of who they are and a practical set of ideas about how to travel the long road to character?”*



Other more specific reflective questions might include – Why is this important to me? What am I giving up in order to do this thing? Why am I blind to this concern?

Final thoughts. There are those who portray a strong leader as one who has everything figured out. But the mind that is certain of all of the answers has no room for curiosity. Great leaders give themselves permission to be curious, but do not use curiosity as a reason to avoid or delay making a decision. The transition from curious exploration to action requires the most precious and elusive of all leadership virtues – wisdom.

Reflections on Leadership



Lessons from Mom

October 2015

As many of you know, this past month my Mom died just 4 days before her 86th birthday. She had been terminally ill for a number of months, but was only incapacitated for the last two weeks of her life. While it is sad to lose someone who had such a great influence on your life, she handled her final illness with dignity and courage. She was a woman of great faith, and was certain of her eternal destiny.

Mothers often have a greater impact on their children than anything else in life. Because a Mother's face is the first thing that a newborn child sees, the bond between Mother and child is likely to be deeper than almost any other human relationship. I have often thought that all mothers are connected in a common experience that could be referred to as The First Breath Club. They are witnesses to humanity at its most vulnerable moment when a child enters the world.

Thinking about the influence of my mother on my life has caused me to think of the role mothers have in the lives of leaders. While most of the thoughts of motherhood tend to focus on warmth and tenderness, unconditional love, etc., mothers often teach us the harder lessons of life and shape our character as leaders. The following are just a few

of the leadership lessons that I have learned from my mother:



Setting Expectations

As the oldest child in the family getting ready to head off to second grade I recall my Mom's words at the breakfast table with my sister (who was headed to kindergarten on that day). "Son, you are the oldest child. Your sisters and brother will follow you at school, and the opinion that the teachers will have of our family will be shaped by your behavior. As you walk to school today and every day, remember that you are carrying the family honor with you." Mom taught us that life is about setting and meeting high expectations.

Courage

As a middle school student at Garfield Jr. High I was being picked on by a boy in my class, who chased me home from school every day. I was not a

fighter, but could run pretty well, and every day made it to my back porch just ahead of him. My mom noticed this, and after a few days asked me what I was going to do about this situation. I told her that I was pretty confident that I was faster than this other student, and sooner or later he would get tired and just stop. She was not so sure. "Eventually you are going to have to muster the courage to stand up to him", she said. Like most middle school students, I did not think my mom knew what she was talking about.

A few days later, I was barely in the lead as I reached the back porch, followed by my nemesis. But this time there was a surprise. The back door was locked. Through the window on the door I could see my mom just shaking her head, and I realized that she was not going to open the door. The only recourse was to turn and face the music.

In the ensuing moments I discovered that standing up to a bully was not the worst thing in the world. I still came out on the short end of the conflict, but did better than I thought I would, earning the grudging respect of the bigger and tougher child. We never became close friends, but he later instructed his friends (some of whom were equally scary) to leave me alone.

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Throughout my life, whenever I have been tempted to avoid dealing with a difficult situation I am reminded of this experience, my mother's words come to mind - "sooner or later you have to face the music, it might as well be now." This experience led me to the conclusion that it is not a good idea to build your strategy around running away from a problem. Even in difficult situations, stand up to it and take action.

After confronting the schoolyard bully I had an interesting conversation with my mom. My initial reaction was "Mom, what were you thinking? I thought your mom was always supposed to be in your corner." She explained that she had selected the terms on which I would have to confront this bully. She was watching from inside of the house and could have intervened had things gotten out of control. If it had happened several blocks away, the safety net would not have been there. Unbeknownst to me, she had provided a safe place to take risk and exercise courage.

Generosity

Like almost all of life's virtues, the roots of generosity are often learned on the home front. 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. This example has shaped the lives of all of her children as they have looked at the needs of others in a spirit of generosity throughout their lives.

Maturity

In many respects my Mom had a very practical outlook on life, and many of our conversations reflected that view of the world. I was reminded of this the other day when I read the following definition of maturity written in the front of her Bible:

Maturity is -

1. The ability to stick to a job until it is done.
2. The ability to do a job without supervision.
3. The ability to carry money without spending it.
4. The ability to bear an injustice without wanting to get even.

I can recall discussions that occurred at various points in my childhood where these messages were emphasized.

Faith

My Mom was clearly aware that our time on earth is only temporary in the light of eternity. With this in mind, she taught us that trusting Jesus for salvation and living a life dedicated to God was more important than anything else. Later in life my parents served small country churches in rural Michigan. Their years spent in ministry were a clear illustration of how they applied this important principle in daily life.

In the last few years whenever I spoke to her on the phone, she wanted to know when and where I would be traveling so she could pray for my safety. But I was not the only one on her prayer list. A few months ago I casually asked her how many people were on her daily prayer list, and she responded without batting an eye - "Seventy two. It takes quite a while to pray for everyone on the list, so I have to write all the names down".



Finally, my mom was one to help keep things in perspective. She placed a great value on humility as a virtue. "Son, I am proud of the accomplishments of all of my children. I just want you to always remember that everything you have is a blessing from God. Also, never forget where you came from."

Great advice. Thanks Mom,

More thoughts on moms...
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I realize that the experience with my Mom is not unique. As I write these words we are in the college and professional football season. The same TV cameras that capture the exploits of tough and supremely conditioned athletes also show images of mothers in the stands, rooting for their sons on the field of athletic competition. Sometimes after a big play in a college game, when the camera pans the sidelines, an athlete will look into the camera and shout “Hi Mom”. Nearly everyone has a soft spot for their Mom that is unlike anything else in life.

This reminds me of the statement that seems to convey the powerful impact of motherhood – “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” This phrase is a refrain taken from the poem by William Ross Wallace. While the language reflects the age in which it was written, still conveys what I believe to be the truth about the value of mothers now and throughout history.

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE IS THE HAND THAT RULES THE WORLD.

*Blessings on the hand of women!
Angels guard its strength and grace,
In the palace, cottage, hovel,
Oh, no matter where the place;
Would that never storms assailed it,
Rainbows ever gently curled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.*

*Infancy's the tender fountain,
Power may with beauty flow,
Mother's first to guide the streamlets,
From them souls unresting grow—
Grow on for the good or evil,
Sunshine streamed or evil hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.*

*Woman, how divine your mission
Here upon our natal sod!
Keep, oh, keep the young heart open
Always to the breath of God!
All true trophies of the ages
Are from mother-love imperaled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.*

*Blessings on the hand of women!
Fathers, sons, and daughters cry,
And the sacred song is mingled
With the worship in the sky—
Mingles where no tempest darkens,
Rainbows evermore are hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.*

William Ross Wallace (1819-1881)



Reflections on Leadership



Thankfulness

November 2015

This month marks the start of the 11th year of Reflections on Leadership. In the beginning I recall a conversation with my Mom when I sent her the first couple of issues. She said that she thought the writing was pretty good and asked me how often I intended to send these out. When I told her that it would be a monthly publication, she remarked, "Well, it just seems that a topic like leadership is fairly narrow. You may run out of things to say." It took her about 5 years to admit that the topic was bigger and more complex than she thought. Much to my surprise, ten years later I still find that I have a few thoughts to express.

Every month I plan to write on a new topic, assuming that someone in the audience will remember the words that I had written months or years ago. It occurred to me recently that I may be the only one who would notice if a topic was repeated. After visiting Southern Africa this past month on a mission trip with [Forgotten Voices International](#) I found that I was drawn to the topic of thankfulness, and decided that while I had written on the subject in 2010, that it was a message that should be repeated especially as the Thanksgiving season is approaching.

Over the years I have had the opportunity to visit Central America and Africa to witness the hardship and desperation that people in other parts of the world endure as a part of their daily lives. This is more than seeing the aftermath of a natural disaster, like an earthquake or flood. It is an ongoing reality for millions of people in the world.

Other people I have known who have had a similar experience have expressed that seeing such conditions altered their perspective – often calling it a life changing event. While poverty and hunger exist in the United States, the magnitude and gravity of these problems are more clearly understood when visiting a nation where poverty is the norm.

The reality of this hit me hard when having a conversation with a group of church members in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. From my perspective, everyone in area surrounding the church was poor, and the church was doing a great job in taking care of many children orphaned by AIDS. It is the mission of Forgotten Voices International to assist these churches in helping these children and their families. The nature of the problems

they faced were confirmed when we visited a family of 4 who were living in a single eight by eight foot room which served as their kitchen and bedroom. They shared a single bathroom with a dozen other similar families in the same building.

I cannot fully describe the conditions other than to say that it was unlike anything I had seen before, even in Central America. This was a world rarely seen by those of us in the United States. Children in the neighborhood rushed to touch our faces and arms, amazed to see a person with white skin. We were visiting this family on a good day. They had been able to buy a chicken and would have something to eat that evening.

Earlier when I asked the church members what they were doing to reach out to the community, they pointed to a program that that served the poor in villages about 40 miles away – a group that they considered to be at even greater risk than those in their own neighborhood. When someone with an income of less than \$3 a day tells you about their concern for those who have less, it is a humbling experience that can bring tears to your eyes.

While our country has many imperfections, we are blessed to live in a place of extraordinary freedom – where the rule of law prevails, and where there is opportunity to succeed based on hard work and initiative. Many of the stories of extreme political corruption and brutality of dictatorships in third world countries are beyond our



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comprehension. If relative position in the world is an inspiration for thankfulness, we should be the happiest and most thankful people on the planet. Unfortunately many of us need an occasional reminder to keep things in perspective.

But how is thankfulness connected to leadership? The Roman philosopher Cicero stated that “A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues.” I believe that the presence of thankfulness is a fundamental characteristic of an effective leader. A few of the reasons I believe this to be true include:

- Being thankful can make you a happier and more optimistic person. It is rare for a fundamentally unhappy person to inspire followers to give up their selfish interest for the common good, and optimism is a key attribute of strong and inspiring leaders.
- Thankfulness opens our minds to the needs of others. When we recognize how we have been blessed, we are more apt to notice the needs of others whose situation in life is less fortunate. The roots of empathy are nourished by a thankful heart.
- Thankfulness is the basis for generosity. Religious guilt and fear may be powerful motivators for some people, but thankfulness has staying power when it comes to sharing resources with others in need. The motive for giving also matters. In the book of II Corinthians, the Apostle Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver. Thankful people give cheerfully.
- The free expression of thankfulness creates a culture of appreciation of the work of others. This is not something that can be easily faked.

The absence of a thankful heart will make it difficult to sincerely tell your co-workers how thankful you are for their hard work and dedication.



Since most descriptions of a good leader include optimistic, empathetic, generous, and appreciative of the work of others, the connection between thankfulness and leadership is clear.

Conversely, a lack of thankfulness can be a serious impediment. We all know leaders who believe that they are entitled to preferential treatment, seem arrogant, and are insensitive to the needs of others. It is hard to comprehend how such attitudes can exist within a thankful heart. The absence of thankfulness also creates room for an insatiable desire to acquire more. I have a friend (who is also a nurse) who clearly states – “I make sure that my employer knows that my services are always available to the highest bidder, and I may leave at any time.” It is hard to believe that a virtue like loyalty can survive in his team members if that is his attitude.

As leaders, what should we be thankful for?

- Work that has intrinsic meaning and makes a difference in the lives of others.
- Those we are privileged to work with – people of good will who turn the mission of the organization into reality in the lives of those we serve.

- Those who have helped us on our leadership journey as examples or mentors.
- The realization that every one of life’s blessings comes from God. The antidote to the sense of entitlement and arrogance is an understanding that as human beings we have all received blessings we did not deserve. Any one of us could have been born into the extreme poverty of a third world country instead of where we are now.

There is much we can learn from those who remain thankful, even in the most difficult situations. In his book, *Traveling Light*, Max Lucado tells the story of a short-term missionary on the island of Tobago.

On the final day of his trip, he was leading worship in a leper colony. He asked if anyone had a favorite song. When he did, a woman turned around, and he saw the most disfigured face he had ever seen. She had no ears and no nose. Her lips were gone. But she raised a fingerless hand and asked, “Could we sing *Count Your Many Blessings*?”

The missionary started the song, but couldn’t finish. Someone later commented, “I suppose you will never be able to sing that song again.” He answered, “No, I’ll sing it again - just never in the same way.”

I agree with Cicero. Thankfulness is the parent of all other virtues. If we can see the world through the lens of thankfulness, we have an opportunity to attain the other virtues that our team members rightfully expect of those who aspire to lead them. Without thankfulness the goal of effective leadership is virtually impossible.



Reflections on Leadership



Life Stories

December 1, 2015

The art of telling a good story is a gift shared by many great leaders. Last month my friend and colleague Larry Minnix retired as the leader of LeadingAge after 16 years as CEO. At his retirement celebration, many people referenced his ability to tell a story as one of his many outstanding talents. His southern drawl was an asset as he fashioned stories about seniors and caregivers as real people, with real needs – a departure from the normal Washington, D.C focus on statistics and future projections. Sometimes his stories included farm animals or a cousin named Bubba. Whether the stories were literal or a parable of sorts, he effectively carried the message in his own unique style.

A great story has the potential for reaching people on an intellectual and emotional level. 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.

The use of stories to drive home a message has a long history. The parables of Jesus are reminders of how a story can etch an eternal truth in the human mind in a way that is nearly indelible. Just mention the subject of a parable, and the lesson comes clearly into view:

- The Good Samaritan – Who is your neighbor, and what is your responsibility for your neighbor’s welfare?
- The Prodigal Son – The power of forgiveness and redemption.
- The Widows Mite – Sacrifice and generosity.
- The Parable of the Talents – Risk taking and accountability.

The list could go on, but you get the picture. Nothing is better at communicating a message than a compelling story.

The value of a great story extends beyond communicating a memorable message. It has been my observation that people are hungry to hear life stories from those who lead them. Leaders have an opportunity to draw people closer to them through self-disclosure. Of course there are boundaries to self-disclosure in terms of details and intensely personal information. But if your life stories are authentic, people will see a leader as a human being with a mixture of faults and strengths. There is comfort in knowing that everyone shares a common humanity, struggling to become the kind of person that they know they should be.

It has been my experience that while every life can be viewed as a single narrative, in reality it is a story that may have several distinct chapters:

Professional – This can relate to our employment history – but often is a much more inclusive narrative. For many people there are defining moments when he or she experienced a moment of intense clarity – like when an occupational calling becomes obvious. I particularly appreciate a story that begins with “My affection for seniors began at an early age...” It may also include the impact of important



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mentors who helped to shape us as a leader.

Values – The values that define a person’s character are often the result of a life experience that reveals, clarifies or strengthens what is believed to be true. My Son Eric describes such a moment when he witnessed the birth of my grandson. Looking at his son for the first time in the hospital he says that “I finally understood my purpose in life. I was born to be a Dad to my children!” This was a revelation to me, as for most of his life he was not enthused about the prospect of being a parent. Anyone who knows Eric would affirm that his priorities in life reflect this expressed value.

Relationships – Whenever I meet what appears to be a couple in a happy relationship, I am always interested in the story of how they met. The facts of the story are almost always laced with the joy of discovery and how they felt at the start of this important part of their life. Stories of lifelong friendships are also rich with shared experiences that connect them in a powerful way.

Faith Journey – From a faith perspective, a person’s story is sometimes referred to as their testimony, which can be dramatic and life altering. Perhaps the most famous story of this nature is the Apostle Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road in the book of Acts. Most people do not have such a vivid story to tell, but each story is presented as evidence to support a changed life and hope for the future. Paul constantly repeated his conversion experience throughout his life as his most important life event.

But aside from the obvious communication advantages and personal connections that are fostered by being able to tell a good story, it appears that there are other important benefits that are less obvious. In his book, *Return on Character*, Fred Kiel connects the ability to tell a coherent life story with the character development that is essential to every leader. He says that “Your life story is the narrative that you tell yourself and others that allows you to make sense of your life experiences, from your earliest memories onward. Your life story is your answer to two key questions: Who am I, and how did I become the person I am.”



Kiel’s research involved interviewing CEO’s, finding that the most important fact was whether or not the leader knew his or her life story, connecting positive and negative life events and how those events shaped their personal development and their self-awareness. They found that the strongest leaders were self-aware because:

“They have spent time reflecting on their life’s journey. They have some understanding of its milestones, how they are connected, and where they continue

to lead. They know where they are going, in part because they know where they have been.”

The least principled leaders were more likely to be running blind through their life journey. He found that such leaders “lacked the foundation of supportive relationships, character habits, self-awareness, and mental complexity upon which to build the kind of character driven leadership that reliably contributes to sound decision making and strong sustainable business results.”

It would seem that the presence of a cohesive life story was the key to a leader finding his or her bearings in a world where things constantly change.

Not every leader is blessed with the gift of telling a spellbinding story. But we can all use the power of stories in one way or another to reach others on an intellectual and emotional level. It is even more important to know and understand your own life story and use its lessons in your inner journey as a leader. It may take some effort amid the confusion of daily life, but every leader needs to get his story straight in order to be consistently successful.

Reflections on Leadership



Gift Giving

December 15, 2015

December is known as the gift giving season. The experience of gift giving at this time can be stressful. It can also be a source of enjoyment or humor, especially if you can take a step back and consider the gift giving process beyond the cost or length of the list to be completed. I would like to provide you with a few of the insights I have gained over the years related to gift giving.

Our first Christmas with my oldest daughter is one of my favorite gift giving memories. While Michelle got a number of gifts that were appropriate for her age, her greatest joy was tearing open the wrapping paper and throwing it in the air. Nothing else seemed to matter. The lesson learned – the anticipation and excitement of receiving a gift often transcends the value of the gift that is given.

On my son's 10th birthday I was attending a conference in San Antonio, Texas, so I thought he would like a birthday gift with a distinctly Texas flavor. After looking around for a long time, I picked out a bull whip. My

son loved the gift. My wife's response to giving him a bull whip was, in retrospect, quite predictable. "What were you thinking, giving a 10 year old boy with two sisters and a dog a bull whip? Who do you think he is likely to use it on?" This gift is still recalled by my family under the general heading of "It seemed like a good idea at the time". The lesson learned – when selecting a gift, it is always a good move to get another opinion prior to the purchase.

Being a grandparent is an interesting vantage point to view the whole experience of gift giving. When my 7 year old grandson had a birthday party, where there were a number of gifts given – several of them relatively expensive and educational in nature. Of the many gifts opened at that time, the one that was the hit of the evening (which was not my gift) was the least expensive of all of the gifts given to him – a Whoopee cushion. If you know anything about the humor of a 7 year old boy, this was not a big surprise. The lesson learned – a gift does not have to be expensive to be truly appreciated.

Some gifts that initially appear to be odd can be the best gifts ever. A number of years ago we gave my mom a Christmas gift that was her favorite of all time – a headstone. While this sounds pretty strange at first, if you know the story, you can understand its impact. My great-grandfather, who had played a large role in my Mom's life as a young child, had been buried without a grave marker because the family was too poor to afford a headstone when he died. For most of my life I had heard my mother express a concern

that her grandfather was slipping into obscurity as the patriarch of her family. After locating his exact burial place, my siblings and I were able to purchase and place a headstone to mark his grave. The visit to the cemetery to see my Mom's Christmas gift remains one of my fondest memories. The lesson learned – The best gifts often meet an emotional and practical need.

One year for Christmas I gave my wife a gift that may have been the least expensive of our entire married life – a collection of the poetry that I had written for her over about a 15 year period. I also made identical copies for each of my now married children with instructions to fill out the remaining pages of the book with expressions of their own love story. The book itself is not very impressive. Anyone else reading the verses contained on those pages may not grasp the impact of a love story chronicled in such a way. But my wife can recall the specific experience that inspired each piece. The lesson learned – the most treasured gifts often cost more in terms of time and less in terms of money.

Some gifts go out of fashion – Beanie Babies come to mind as something once in demand that is no longer a hot commodity. Whenever I think of giving a gift, I think about its immediate impact and long term value. Based on my experience the best gift you can give is usually something that strengthens the bond between the giver and the receiver of the gift. If you can find such a gift, it will be genuinely appreciated and retain its' value in the eyes of the receiver.



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How is the concept of gift giving related to leadership? We are often closer to people we work with every day than our next door neighbors. This is because we may spend more time with those we work with than anyone else – even some of our family members. Some have observed that work is the new neighborhood. Intuitively we know that the work place is all about relationships. In this environment, leaders should ask themselves - what can we give to the people we work with that will strengthen relationships throughout the year? I have a few suggestions for your leadership gift list:

- **Time is life's most precious commodity.** All relationships require the investment of time. One of the primary reasons why many people only experience superficial relationships is due to a lack of this kind of investment. If a leader desires a better relationship with his co-workers, he or she can start by paying closer attention to their team members when they are together. Some have called it being present, or being in the moment. Whatever you call it, the gift of your attention is always appreciated.
- **Give the gift of fun.** This is not a license to engage in horseplay or humor at someone else's expense. In the book, *Encouraging the Heart*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner talk about the need to celebrate together in the workplace as a way to infuse life with passion and purpose, providing more than 20 concrete suggestions to "create a culture of celebration". Life is too short not to have fun at work.
- **Give the gift of authenticity.** Be yourself and encourage your team members to be themselves. Find ways to foster authentic relationships among team



members. This involves a bit of self-disclosure among team members. It helps when your team members understand that no one is perfect and we all have strengths and weaknesses. It is my experience that people who really know each other are less inclined to posture or try to gain an advantage at the expense of someone else.

- **Give the gift of concern.** Every life has its ups and downs – including the people you work with. It can be distressing to go through a period where things are not going well and discover that you are going through the experience alone. Good leaders try to create an environment where this does not happen. At an PSL service pin presentation some years ago a nursing assistant made the following comments to her fellow staff members about a hard period in her life when her son died in a tragic accident: *“I don't think I could have gotten through all of this without the people here at work. You surrounded me with love. When we did not have the money to pay for funeral expenses, the staff raised money through bake sales to cover the costs. I believe that God led me to work here because He knew that this is a place I would get the support to sustain me. I don't know what I would do without all of you.”* That is what the gift of concern looks like in action.

There is also spiritual dimension to gift giving. All of life is a gift from God. James 1:17 tells us that “Every good

and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”. Gift giving should come naturally to those who have been the recipients of undeserved generosity. In response to the generosity of God toward us we should consider the needs of those who are less fortunate and reach out to meet their needs.

In December we also celebrate the gift of God to humankind – an event that is recorded in chapter two of the book of Luke.

And in the same region there were shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you this day is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (ESV)

An unexpected gift at an unexpected time – a gift that transformed the world as we know it, and continues to transform the lives of those who choose to follow him.

Gifts come in many shapes and sizes. My wish for each of you is that you are surrounded by love this Christmas season, and that you experience the gift of peace – the peace of God which passes all understanding.