

Reflections on Leadership

 PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING

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Credibility

Over the years I have come to believe that there is a singular cause that lurks behind many of the political, economic, and social ills of our society – a crisis of credibility - the quality of being believable or trustworthy. It is said that we are living in the age of a credibility gap – a public skepticism about the truth of statements, especially official claims and pronouncements.

We have just completed a political season that included an unparalleled barrage of negative ads that were damaging on two fronts. First the ads undermined the credibility of the person being attacked. Secondly, the presence of false statements or “half truths” has made many people question the credibility of all political advertising and the politicians that benefit from such ads. Public opinion polls of both political parties reflect the damage to the credibility of politicians and the political process. The credibility crisis is not limited to politics and the media. Business leaders from Wall Street to main street, and religious institutions of all types are affected. But in reality it is a far more pervasive problem.

Sandra Later, an elementary school teacher in West Hartford, Connecticut, believes that credibility is an issue that must be addressed at an early age. The following is the approach she takes with her students:

On the first day of school, I give the children a homework assignment to look up the meaning of credibility in a dictionary, which we discuss on the following day. After the discussion, I say to them, “It doesn't make you a bad person if have trouble reading. We can help you. It's also OK if you don't like Science or Math. We can help you with that too. But you'll never get a job and you'll never have a good friend if you don't have credibility! You are only eight years old and you are going to make mistakes. Just say I did it and I'm sorry or I said it and I'm sorry, but never lose your credibility.” I reinforce this on a daily basis.

The need for credibility in organizations is particularly critical. The use of outside consultants is an effective way to access specific expertise or gain an unbiased opinion. However consultants are often used to make up for a lack of credibility within the organization's leadership - and the cost of “borrowing” a consultant's credibility can be steep. The overuse of consultants for this

purpose has caused Scott Adams (the creator of the popular Dilbert cartoon) to observe, “Consultants have credibility because they are not dumb enough to work at your company.”

One of my favorite leadership books is titled, *Credibility, How Leaders Gain It and Lose It, and Why People Demand It*, by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. In this book the authors contend that credibility is the foundation of leadership. In their view, leadership is an intensely personal relationship, rooted in personal values. Personal credibility is important for leaders of organizations because if people do not believe the messenger, they will not believe the message. In their study of credibility they identify 4 fundamentals that they believe do not change when it comes to leadership:

- Character counts. Leadership is about character development.
- Individuals act; organizations create cultures. Actions have consequences and we have to account for our own actions. Culture is the organizational equivalent of a person's character.
- Ours is a system based on trust. The lack of trust can bring an economy to a grinding halt.
- Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. Values are not imposed from the top, but must be shared in order to be effective.

While we may not be able to repair the credibility crisis in the larger society, we can have an impact on the place we work and the perception of the people we work with. In this context, what steps can a leader take to improve their credibility? I have a few thoughts that might be helpful:

- Focus on character development – personally and for those on your leadership team. Abraham Lincoln understood the role of character in leadership when he 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.”
- Establish a climate of openness – be known as a good listener. It is one thing to have an “open door policy,” but you must also have an “open mind policy.” People rarely trust someone that will not listen to their opinions.
- Demonstrate a sense of fairness in your relationships and the decisions that you make that affect those around you. Never

let it be said that in your organization it is not what you know, but who you know that counts.

- Cultivate a reputation for honesty in everything you do. Honesty involves more than telling the truth when it reflects well on you personally or on the organization that you represent. It is being completely honest, even when it is inconvenient or painful. Steven Covey has remarked that, “Every exaggeration of the truth once detected by others destroys our credibility and makes all that we do and say suspect.”
- Do not make promises that you cannot fulfill. One of the primary mistakes of optimistic leaders is to over promise and under deliver. The euphoria following the recent recovery of the miners in Chile is a testimony to the virtue of managing expectations.
- Follow through on your promises to the best of your ability. Once you make a promise to someone, do everything in your power to make it happen. Your co-workers will be keenly aware of a halfhearted attempt.
- When something unexpected happens and you cannot follow through as expected, communicate openly about what has changed and the rationale for going in another direction. If circumstances change, make sure that you communicate promptly. Extended delays in communication may be perceived as dishonesty or cowardice.
- Insist that everyone on your team behave in ways that build credibility in their day to day work relationships. Those who undermine the team's credibility should be given an opportunity to work elsewhere.

If we practice these simple steps, we can create an oasis of credibility in a world that is desperately thirsty.



Steve

P.S. Reminder that for those who have joined this journey during the past five years and would like a complete collection of Reflections on Leadership, it is available through our website. The stories are available by yearly segments to easily capture your most enjoyed months. Find us at [www.presbyterianseniorliving.org/about us](http://www.presbyterianseniorliving.org/about-us).

Reflections on Leadership



February 2011

Faith Based Leadership

Presbyterian Senior Living is considered a “faith based” senior care provider. This means that we were founded by a faith tradition (Presbyterian), continue to cultivate a relationship with the Presbyterian Church and its members, and are guided by the principles that are a part of that faith based perspective. We serve persons of all religious persuasions, and our staff is representative of the diversity of faith traditions in the communities we serve.

This is similar to many of the other faith based groups. Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, and many others have formed faith based ministries. In recent years, the Presbyterian Senior Living faith based umbrella has been expanded to include a Methodist community, and we continue to engage the Methodist constituency in our ministry.

In this environment there are heightened expectations of staff at all levels of the organization, but especially those who occupy positions of leadership. They not only expect us to be competent in the execution of our duties, but that our behavior will reflect the values of our faith based roots. In essence, we are expected to be faith based leaders.

What does it mean to be a “faith based” leader? This is a relatively easy question to answer. The United States is a place where the concepts of faith and leadership have been intertwined. Indeed, three of the most famous leaders in our country’s history, who are celebrated during the months of January and February, are shining examples of this legacy - George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.

George Washington’s farewell address summarized his thoughts on the role of faith in his vision of leadership and the future of his country:
“Of all of the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports... And let us without caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion... reason and experience forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

These thoughts were echoed by many other leaders of Washington’s generation that played key roles in the founding of the United States.

Abraham Lincoln, the American leader that faced the most profound crisis in the history of the country, was clear about the strength derived from his faith:

“Amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance on God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right.” “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all around me insufficient for the day.” “But for this book (the Bible) we could not know right from wrong.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist pastor to whom the boundaries between faith and leadership were non-existent. His messages were filled with references to faith, courage, and being called to do the right thing in spite of difficult circumstances.

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” “That old law about ‘an eye for an eye’ leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing.” “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

Why is faith based leadership important?
Faith gives a leader insight into:

- Recognition of what is right – it is difficult to avoid the temptation to rationalize our behavior and do what is expedient at the moment.
- Finding the courage to do what is right – Many people know what they ought to do, but turning convictions into action is another matter entirely.
- Seeing that the world is not centered on any one individual. Self centeredness is the Achilles heel of many of today’s leaders.
- Viewing ourselves more clearly. We are all imperfect persons in need of grace and forgiveness. Absent this perspective, it is difficult to forgive others and move on.
- Changing your attitudes about the future, reinforcing a sense of optimism and resisting the tendency to embrace negative thoughts.
- Maintaining a sense of balance – overcoming emotions of the moment, like impatience and anger.
- Focusing on serving others. Servant leadership makes little sense from a human point of view, and the ability to love the unlovely is often beyond our human

inclinations.

- Understanding the worth of every human being and being able to fully appreciate those who are different from you.

If not from faith, where will a leader’s values likely come from? Probably from within ourselves or from the people that surround us. If we are honest, we can easily recognize the unreliability of our own internal compass and standards of the surrounding community. We may think we know ourselves and our values, but our emotional state can alter our perceptions of the needs of others and cloud our judgment.

Even a strong commitment to abide by the values of the wider community is an insufficient guide for leadership behavior. For example, the values of the community may clearly state that we should treat our neighbors with respect and kindness. The question posed in the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10 illustrates the inadequacy of the community standard. The question of who is my neighbor and how a good neighbor should behave is answered differently when viewed through the eyes of faith. “Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? ... The one who showed him mercy.” The story of the Good Samaritan makes it clear that everyone is our neighbor, and the capacity to reach out to those who are unlike us and may be unacceptable in the eyes of the community has deep spiritual roots.

It is my opinion that leadership without faith is like a ship without an anchor. When things are going well, it may be hard to tell the difference. But when the storms come, and they always do, maintaining your bearing is dependent on being anchored to something firm. It is dangerous to set sail on the voyage of leadership without knowing that your anchor is secure.

Steve

**P.S. -
You Have Never Met
a Mere Mortal**

In this issue of Reflections on Leadership, the final point on why faith makes a difference in the way we lead is listed as “Understanding

Faith Based Leadership continued...

the worth of every human being and being able to fully appreciate those who are different from you". While I am accustomed to leaving some things unsaid in an effort to hold my reflections to only a single page, the gravity of this point requires additional space.

The question of what a person is worth is a central one in that it shapes our entire outlook on life. For example, our legal system often takes a very utilitarian view of a person's value, translating the age and potential earning power of the individual into the equation when determining damages that result from a negligent act. Tax dollars spent on vulnerable populations like the elderly and disabled are also influenced by this world view. In this environment, faith shapes how we treat other people in our day to day relationships. While society in general may not put a high value on the aged, infirmed, or disabled, faith calls us to reach another conclusion. For those of us in leadership positions in senior care organizations this changes how we relate to those we are called to serve and the colleagues that we work with every day. Simply put, people of faith tend to see all of life in light of eternity.

The person I think best expresses the effect faith has on how we view others is C. S. Lewis, who observed that:

"You don't have a soul. You are a soul – You have a body." "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work, marry, snub, and exploit ... Next to ... [God Himself] your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."

Leaders who understand this will not look at virtues like honesty and fairness as options, but imperatives. Kindness and generosity will not just be an occasional impulse, but your first inclination. We aspire to do better when every person we see is recognized as a holy expression of a loving God.

Viewing yourself as created by God as an immortal soul also has an effect on how you perceive yourself. Our worth is not determined by other people, it is determined by the One who created us. We are persons of worth because the Creator of the universe does not make junk.

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is not determined
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Reflections on Leadership



March 2011

Staying Power

This past month my wife Rhonda and I celebrated our 40th anniversary. It seems like yesterday when I walked into my first class in nursing school and was immediately drawn to a strikingly beautiful, raven haired young woman. I immediately knew that she was the one for me, and my task was to help her come to the same understanding. The fact that she said yes when I proposed never ceases to amaze me.

Passing such a milestone is also a reminder of how quickly time passes. As I was contemplating how remarkable it was to be married for 40 years, I had an opportunity to visit one of our retirement communities to participate in a celebration of the 78th anniversary of Hattie and Millard Biddle. All of a sudden, 40 years did not seem so long – just over halfway to a 78th wedding anniversary.

What was remarkable about the celebration event was not just that it was commemorating 78 years, but what was said as part of the celebration. Hattie held Millard's hand as she spoke of how she visited Millard every day since his admission to the health center. Family members remarked about how they were role models and how much their marriage had encouraged them throughout their lives. One of the more dramatic moments came when Millard's roommate in the health center asked for the microphone because he had something to say. As a tough, wheelchair bound veteran with an oxygen tank strapped to his chair, we held our breath, wondering what would happen next. He stated that as Millard's roommate, he was there to witness Hattie's arrival to see Millard at the beginning of each day. "Every morning she comes to our room and gives Millard a big hug and kiss. It is a wonderful thing to see. It is about as close to heaven as I have ever been." What a great testimony to an enduring relationship! Even the toughest person can spot genuine tenderness and admire the staying power of true love.

Staying power – the ability to sustain relationships and promises over time is becoming a lost art in a world where having a short attention span and being distracted is an epidemic. Staying power means that you can depend on someone to be there in the future, that decisions will be made with the long view in mind, not just on immediate reward or impulse.

It is possible to stumble into success – but these accidents do not produce lasting results. The musical world is filled with "One hit wonders" –

defined as a person or act that is known only for a single success. The song titles can be easily remembered, but the artist is quickly forgotten. *Spirit in the Sky* (Norman Greenbaum - 1969), *It's Raining Men* (the Weathergirls – 1982), and *the Macarena* (Los Del Rio – 1996) are just a few of a long list of musical artists who were known to experience success for a very brief period. Organizations can also be one hit wonders. I am old enough to remember seeing my first portable computer in 1981 – an Osborne. The product was very successful, selling as many as 10,000 units per month – wildly successful at the time. While personal computers are now everywhere, the Osborne Computer Corporation is just a footnote in history.

We admire organizations that have staying power – who despite the passage of time have the ability to continue to be successful in the face of relentless competition, economic challenges, and the dangers of complacency. It is great to see an organization with innovation and brilliance make the right choices and emerge from the pack, but the true test of staying power is the ability to replicate success, even when conditions change dramatically. In 1994 Jim Collins and Jerry Porras wrote the book *Built to Last*, which compared companies who had experienced long-term success with those who have had the same opportunities but lagged far behind, identifying the success stories as "highly visionary companies." More recently, Quint Studer's book, *Results that Last*, focused on techniques to institutionalize success. It is a more nuts and bolts book designed to "Hardwire behaviors that will take your company to the top." The truth is that lasting success in any endeavor takes both vision and execution. In my experience the need for vision and execution represents a bit of a paradox when striving for long term success in personal relationships and organizational life.

Vision

- Inspiration – Idealism
- Positive outlook and passion
- Enduring Values and Clarity of purpose
- Thoughtful reflection
- Focus on the future

Execution

- Realistic expectations, practicality, toughness
- Persistence in the face of adversity
- Recognition of the inevitability of change, Adaptability
- Action - Create and faithfully follow a plan, Hard Work
- Ability to be "in the moment"

Whether contemplating the recipe for a long and happy marriage or a successful organization, this is a useful list of ingredients. Staying power takes **both** vision and execution. Vision without execution is all sizzle and no steak. When the fire goes out, there is nothing left. (Witness the one hit wonder). Execution without vision soon loses a sense of meaning and purpose. Eventually a lack of energy brings everything to a grinding halt. Even when energy can be sustained, there is a danger of obsolescence. There are companies that can still efficiently manufacture high speed film for 35 millimeter cameras, but the market for the product has disappeared.

Finally, staying power is also about growing together and mutual interdependence. When we share our lives with each other – at home and at work, we develop relationships that make us stronger, individually and collectively. All lasting success in communities, churches, neighborhoods, businesses organizations and families is a byproduct of healthy relationships.

Shared Lives

*Trees planted close together
That grow with passing time;
Hold each other, give support,
Roots, branches intertwined.
Nourished from the same rich soil
And reaching to the sky;
Surgery to separate
May cause them both to die
So we have grown with every year,
Together strong and true.
The thought of being all alone
Or starting life anew
Is hardest to imagine
In the present state of mind;
Holding up each other,
Roots, branches intertwined.*

Thanks Honey. It's been a great 40 years.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



April 2011

Giving Your Life

Recently I read an article that focused on a study of European young people that asked the question, "What would you be willing to die for?" The surprising answer was that there was nothing that they could think of that they were willing to die for – not religion, not country, not family, nothing was that important to them. This was in contrast with the survey of American young people who thought there were things in life that were worth dying for. The writer of the article implied that the European view was more enlightened, and that being willing to die for something beyond yourself was an indication of a fundamentalist or radical point of view. I am not sure if that is a correct assumption or if it is more of a reflection of a general tendency toward self-centeredness. It is also possible that attitudes may change when one gains more life experience.

There are other opinions on the question of "What are you willing to die for?" Martin Luther King Junior weighed in on the subject with his typical clarity and inspirational insight: "If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." That was not an idle statement. It was a description of what he believed in his heart and the way he lived his life. As I write this article there are people in Japan working in highly radioactive areas trying valiantly to avert a melt down in the damaged nuclear power plants in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami. They know the consequences of the exposure, yet they put themselves at risk. They may be giving their very lives to help their communities avoid further consequences of the disaster.

It is unlikely that during our lifetime we will be called on to do something so heroic that we will have to decide whether or not we should risk our life for the benefit of another. Whenever we hear of a story when someone risked everything to save another person, we would like to think that when faced with such a choice that we would do the noble thing.

The reality is that every day we spend another portion of our limited time on earth. Whatever we decide to do in each day of our lives is the answer to the question, "What are you willing to give your life for?" I believe that if we approached each day with this in mind, that we would change our behavior and reprioritize the things we do.

In his book *When the Game is Over it all Goes Back in the Box*, John Ortberg has expressed it this way: "We want to leave the world a little changed. When it's time to go, we would like someone to say, 'My life is a little richer; my world a little bigger; I'm a better person because this human being walked on the planet a while. He (she) made

a difference. He (she) changed my life... Deeper than our need for food or air or water is our need for meaning, our need to know our lives count for something."

Why is this important from a leadership perspective? Whether we see our lives as having purpose or if we are just going through the motions has a profound impact on the kind of leadership we provide to those around us. If your heart is not in your work, you can bet that those you lead will likely follow your lead as a group of people sleepwalking through the day. As leaders we are given opportunity to encourage those around us and illustrate the value and meaning that can be derived from work.

In their book *Encouraging the Heart*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner talk about adding soul and spirit to the workplace. They focus on being aware of those around you, and recognizing the humanity in those you work with every day. They also talk about leadership being an intensely personal experience, and bringing your humanity to work. To support the connection between the leader's behavior and results they cite a study from the center for Creative Leadership in Colorado that concluded that the highest performing managers show more warmth toward others than the bottom 25%. Their formula for adding meaning to the workplace has seven points:

1. Set clear standards
2. Expect the best
3. Pay attention
4. Personalize recognition
5. Tell the story
6. Celebrate together
7. Set the example.

I think that Kouzes and Posner have gotten it right. Effective leaders add soul and spirit to the work place. They begin by asking themselves what kind of lasting impression they are making on those around them. They share stories and experiences that convey meaning, common values and mission. They find ways to encourage their team members.

As a leader it is important to recognize that the people we lead have chosen to spend these hours of their life working with us today. This realization should command our respect. In return we should honor them by giving our best effort as we work along side of them.

Strong leaders help those around them to connect the dots between time spent on the job and meaning. We have all observed that two people can perform the same work, and one will find meaning and fulfillment, while the other sees

drudgery. Leaders can help to move those who only see drudgery to understand that they are a part of something bigger. It is a bit like helping someone playing an instrument to hear the entire symphony, not just their individual notes. There are a number of ways that a leader can help to create an environment where people can find meaning in their work:

- Let them know that their work matters to you.
- Let them know how their work matters to others, especially those you are called to serve.
- Pass on words of praise whenever possible – directly or indirectly from others.
- Express confidence in their ability to learn and grow. Everyone wants to think that they are able to improve in some way.
- Enhance their level of competence. Give the people you work with the training they need to do their jobs well. It is nearly impossible for a person to have high self-esteem or experience a sense of achievement if they do not feel competent.

It is important that people are compensated fairly for their time and effort. But this is only one dimension of the exchange between an organization and the staff, or leaders and the members of their team. The non-financial part of the exchange is more complicated, and ultimately more important.

So the question that faces every one of us each morning when we wake up is – "What are you going to give your life for today?" And at the end of the day, there is a second question – "Was this part of our life exchanged for something of value?"

The words of Psalm 90:12 express a timeless truth. "So teach us to number our days, that we might apply our hearts to wisdom." We are granted a limited amount of time on this earth - spend each day wisely.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



May 2011

Measurements and Benchmarks

We seem live in an age of comparisons. US News and World Report ranks the nation's best colleges and universities and publishes the list every year. Colleges at the top of the list tout their position as the reason that potential students should look at them first, and that alumni should contribute to their alma mater. The magazine also does an annual ranking of hospitals. For the past 20 years, John's Hopkins has won the award as the top hospital in the country. If you walk in the underground connecting tunnels between buildings on the campus, you can see the enlarged poster sized US News magazine covers for each of the years – a pretty impressive sight.

Sports may be the subject of more measurement and comparison than anything else in society. College football teams are compared throughout the year based on won-lost record, strength of schedule, margin of victory, coaches and sports writer polls, and computer rankings for the purpose of ranking teams for national title consideration. Baseball may be the most measured of all sports. There are so many statistics in baseball that one could argue that it is really a numerical exercise with an underlying sport that feeds the statistical measurements.

Individuals are always looking for information to use for comparison purposes. Parade magazine publishes an annual report entitled "What people are paid". From the highest paid actors and athletes to part-time positions in the fast food industry, annual incomes are listed across the country. I suppose that this is supposed to be some indication of value or worth, but I have a hard time thinking that the ability to throw a 95 mile per hour fastball is of greater value than a compassionate nurse or a gifted teacher.

The tendency to compare and measure yourself against the position of others is part of the human condition. John Ortberg has outlined some of the ways people compare themselves with others, and the dangers associated with each. He lists three types of comparisons and the liabilities of each.

- Upward comparison – comparing to those who are better off (which can result in envy).
- Lateral comparison – comparing to those at the same level (which may

inspire competition).

- Downward comparison - comparing to those who are worse off (which may make us arrogant).

Ortberg contends that we tend to keep score in the most self-serving ways – quoting Leon Festinger on the principle of slight upward comparison. *"We chronically compare ourselves with those just a little better off in the hope of attaining their level of success. This keeps us from gratitude and keeps our eyes off people who are under resourced so that we don't think about our need to share."*

When it comes to ethical behavior we all tend to compare ourselves to people we perceive to be lower than us in the morality ratings. By choosing someone who is a little less moral than we are, we tend to give ourselves a higher score on integrity.

The Bible warns us of how comparisons can be misleading in II Corinthians 10:12. *"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise."*

But comparisons are not necessarily bad. Every top performing organization has developed a set of key measurements to focus attention on quality and productivity. Some of these comparisons are internal standards. Sometimes there are external comparisons where we measure ourselves against the performance standards of others. External comparisons call us to look for the best practices in others and set our sights higher. Some of our measurements help us to stay connected with thoughts and opinions that matter to us – like customer and employee satisfaction surveys. Others are measures of cost and productivity, some of which are used to set rates paid by governmental agencies. Outside regulatory agencies also determine our effectiveness by measuring outcomes.

How do we get the benefit of measurement and comparisons and avoid the pitfalls? Here are a few observations on this subject:

- We should not fear the light that comparisons shine on us. Transparency is the first line of defense against complacency.
- The pursuit of excellence must be accomplished with the right frame of

mind – free of envy, arrogance, or unhealthy competition. Healthy competition is the kind that causes both parties to aspire to work harder and do better. Unhealthy competition could be defined as wishing the other person or organization ill so that you look better.

- A team usually pays close attention to what is measured. Leaders can focus attention on important issues by developing systems that measure the right things.
- Avoid the temptation to measure everything. Trying to measure too many things can cause an individual or organization to lose track of the key elements that really matter.
- Benchmarks and measurement is based on the idea that everyone and everything can and should constantly improve. It is also about comparing ourselves with a vision of what we can and should become.
- We should avoid exclusively focusing on the negative by measuring more than mistakes or shortcomings. Mistakes are easier to find than to recognize and reward those who go out of their way to do the right thing from the customer's perspective. Failure to reward initiative can lead to standardized mediocrity.

Finally, we should never fall into the trap where the measurement or benchmarks become more important than the mission of the organization. Measurement almost always focuses on how things are done. It rarely, if ever, answers the question why something should be done. Even Albert Einstein, whose name is synonymous with scientific genius knew the limitations of measurements when he said – "A lot of what is counted doesn't count, and a lot of what counts cannot be counted."

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



June 2011

Connections

A lot of energy in our society is focused on what I would call connectivity – creating and sustaining connections between people. This is not a new concept. At one time, being connected was focused on the neighborhood where you lived – a place where you knew people and where you were known. My mother can recall the time when her mother's entire extended family lived in a four square block area in our home town. Growing up in my old neighborhood it was difficult to get away with anything. The whole neighborhood was connected, with a direct line to my parents!

We are inspired by stories where unknown connections between individuals are discovered. One of my favorite connection stories occurred several years ago at Kirkland Village when Grace Davies and her friend Rachel Bayer were having dinner. When the conversation turned to their childhood, Grace mentioned that she had been born in China, the daughter of missionaries. Rachel was surprised, because she was also born in China. After further conversation they discovered that they were both born in July, one year and two days apart in Kuhling, a small village that was a summer vacation spot for missionary families. Both families returned to Kuhling for many years for their summer vacations. While they do not remember meeting, they remembered attending the same church, swimming holes and summer activities. Both families left China in 1927. Rachel moved to the U.S. and Grace went to Wales. A series of extraordinary circumstances led both to the same retirement community when they were in their late eighties. The newly discovered connection had a profound effect on both women. Grace remarked that "After all these years to find someone who can connect with my experience as a missionary child growing up in China is a great blessing. It is almost like finding a sister!"

Having personally experienced a number of seemingly coincidental connections has caused me to look around for potential connections everywhere I travel. I can easily imagine that somewhere in this group of people is a connection with someone I know or an experience that I have had at some time in my life. While we may not discover someone that we regard as a sibling, the need to find a connection with other people resonates in all of us.

Much of the idea of connection today seems to involve technology. The way we connect with others can involve voice mail, email, texting, cell phone, Blackberry, iPhone, FaceBook., Twitter, LinkedIn, and Skype – the list goes on and on.

Connections today are short and fast – like in text abbreviations, like BFF (Best Friends Forever). In some ways the methods of connection define our expectations of relationships. FaceBook is a place where relationships are wide, but shallow. It is possible to have many friends – and to communicate with all of them simultaneously, but few close friendships result from this kind of superficial connection.

There are benefits to connecting in new and different ways. I love to get text messages from my 13 year old granddaughter and 11 year old grandson. In some ways I am in the moment with them in a way that I missed with my children. I recently got a text that went something like this - "Grandpa, I am waiting to go on stage for my tryout for the school play. I am very nervous. I hope I don't throw up."

In this day of technology and changing forms of communication, it is important for leaders to understand that the need for a connection is an essential part of the relationship between the leader and his or her team. Even in the modern age, leadership is still a personal experience. We do not always expect our leaders to be brilliant or charismatic figures. However we do expect our leaders to connect with us in some tangible way, to see us as individuals and understand what we are going through.

One of the ways you can tell if you have a real connection with someone when you can go for a long time between occasions when you see them, and you can pick up right where you left off in an earlier conversation. There are those of you reading this Reflection that I have known for more than 30 years. When I see you in a kitchen or at a nursing station or at a meeting, the time melts away – the connection remains.

One of my all-time favorite books on leadership is a short book called *Leadership is an Art* by Max DePree. In his simple and straightforward fashion, Max tells the following story, entitled "The Millwright Died".

My father is 96 years old. He is the founder of Herman Miller, and much of the value system and impounded energy of the company is... a part of his contribution. In the furniture industry in the 1920's the machines of most factories were not run by electric motors, but from pulleys from a central drive shaft. The central drive shaft was run by a steam engine. The steam engine got its fuel from the sawdust and other waste coming out of the machine room – a beautiful cycle. The millwright was the person who oversaw that cycle. He was a

key person. One day the millwright died.

My father being a young manager at the time, did not particularly know what he should do when a key person died, but thought he ought to go and visit the family. He went to the house and was invited to join the family in the living room. There was some awkward conversation – the kind with which many of us are familiar. The widow asked my father if it would be all right if she read aloud some poetry. Naturally he agreed... When she finished reading, my father commented on how beautiful the poetry was and asked who wrote it. She replied that her husband, the millwright, was the poet.

It is now nearly 60 years since the millwright died, and my father and many of us at Herman Miller continue to wonder: Was he a poet that did millwright's work, or was he a millwright who wrote poetry?

Max goes on to ask, "What is it that we should learn from this story?" In addition to all of the ratios and goals and parameters and bottom lines, it is fundamental that leaders endorse the concept of persons. This begins with the understanding of the diversity of people's gifts and talents and skills. Recognizing diversity helps us to understand the need we have for opportunity, equity, and identity in the work place. Recognizing diversity gives us the chance to provide meaning, fulfillment and purpose, which are not to be relegated to private life any more than are such things as love, beauty, and joy.

Leadership involves being connected to those you lead, and connections come from knowing and appreciating someone as an individual. Cultivating a genuine interest in learning about those you work with is a great place to start. Leadership is also about creating an environment where connections between team members are fostered, where common interests are shared, and where mutual dependence, support and encouragement are freely expressed. Strong relationships are all about making connections. When it comes to the people you lead – take the time to get connected and stay connected.

There is a cautionary note for connected leadership. Genuine interest and sympathetic understanding from a leader to his or her team members cannot result in favoritism or special exemptions from established policy or procedure. Relationships are a reason to expect a higher standard of conduct from each other as we work together to fulfill the mission of the organization.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



July 2011

The Elephant in the Room

For many people the concept of leadership often conjures up images of command and control, defining objectives, issuing and following orders, and overcoming obstacles and objections. In some limited situations, like times of extreme crisis, these images of strong leadership may apply.

But leadership is much more than the ability to direct the behavior of others. In almost every situation that I am aware of, leadership involves the head and the heart – being able to explain the rational basis for the action taken, and to inspire people to give up what might be their own narrow self interest for a greater good.

In the book *Switch, How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath quote University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt's analogy of the rider and the elephant when looking at our emotional and rational sides. The elephant is the emotional side of us, while the rider is the rational side. The benefits of the rider are clear – we all need a sense of direction. But they point out that the elephant (the emotional) can easily overpower the rider (rational) when there is a disagreement about which way to go. The elephant will almost always focus on the immediate while the rider is more likely to focus on the long term.

The surprise in this analogy is that it is the elephant that has the real strength to get things done. The elephant has the power of emotion – love, compassion, and loyalty – things that the rider does not possess. Moving forward without emotion will only achieve a halfhearted result. In later chapters the authors talk about directing the rider, motivating the elephant, and shaping the path (creating a better situation for both rider and elephant). The point is that we need both – the rider and the elephant to act in concert if leaders are going to be truly successful.

The rational aspect of leadership is fairly straightforward. It is mostly about thinking through the reasons for the need to do something and focusing on a plan to effectively communicate why something is necessary. Honest and clear logic can persuade people to change. But logic has its limitations. Truly heroic acts are not solely the product of a calculated, rational thought process.

Human beings are not entirely (or even mostly) rational. As human beings we know that the role of feelings and emotions are often of greater importance than pure logic in changing human behavior. Every Star Trek fan can appreciate that the contrast between the rational and emotional has entertainment value. Mr. Spock's purely rational approach is clearly not a typical human response.

Engaging the heart is a different matter entirely, and is the key to unleashing the most powerful force for change available to any leader. This is evident in Alvin J. Schmidt's book, *How Christianity Saved the World*, when he quotes Dionysius, a Christian Bishop from the Third Century regarding the Alexandrian plague about the year 250:

Very many of our brethren, while in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness, did not spare themselves, but kept by each other, and visited the sick without thought of their own peril, and ministered to them... drawing upon themselves their neighbor's diseases, and willingly taking over to their own persons the burdens of the sufferings of those around them.

What is described here is not a strictly rational approach. A purely rational assessment of risk and self interest drove the Romans to flee in the face of disease and death, leaving the sick to die without care. The desire to create a more just and caring society and the anticipation of eternal life for the faithful became the rational foundation for taking risks to help those in need. But the early Christian church also fully engaged the hearts of its followers to reach out with extraordinary acts of compassion. From the Christian point of view, helping the sick and needy was considered a sign of strength, not weakness. In the process of helping the weak and the helpless, people were drawn to the Christian faith. This was such a radical departure from societal norms that it eventually overwhelmed the traditional sources of power and authority, changed the Roman Empire and the course of history.

What is the application to leadership and the work of serving seniors?

- Compassion is at the core of what we do. When people come to live in one of our communities, they expect that we will care for them in sickness and in health. When families choose us to care

for their loved one in a time of frailty or illness, they are trusting us to act on their behalf – to treat the person with the same consideration that they would extend to their family member if they were able to provide the care themselves.

- Reward (pay for services) and punishment for not obeying the rules are insufficient to create the kind of environment where kindness is the normal response to every situation. You may be able to pay enough to get what is in someone's mind, but you can never provide enough reward or discipline to capture someone's heart.
- Kindness and compassion in daily work can only happen when leaders connect with members of their team on a visceral level – like love, respect, and shared values. While the selection process can go a long way toward putting together a team with shared values, love and respect are not freely given, but must be earned by the leader. How leaders treat others and the consistency between what leaders say and do is the currency of love and respect.

Leadership always needs a rational foundation – the role of the rider is critical. But leaders must never forget about the elephant – the one that resides within them, and the one that is a part of every human being they work with every day. The key to our success as leaders is being able to fully engage the rational **and** emotional sides of ourselves and those around us as we seek to serve others.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



August 2011

The Languages of Leadership

In the last Reflection on Leadership, we introduced Jonathan Haidt's analogy of the rider and the elephant when looking at our emotional and rational sides. The elephant is the emotional side of us, while the rider represents our rational side. The connection with leadership is the need for leaders to engage both the head and the heart of their team members in order to be effective.

There is one question that lingers when thinking of how important it is for leaders to connect both rationally and emotionally with those we lead. How can we create a better connection between those whose first inclination is to think in rational terms and those who respond from a more emotional base? This is an important consideration because turning strategy into superior and consistent performance is one of the most difficult challenges for any leader. I believe that one of the major barriers to success in this area has to do with translating the language of the logical into an emotional context that people can understand.

In the novel by Sara Gruen, *Water for Elephants*, there is an elephant that is acquired by the Benzini Brothers circus from another small circus that had gone out of business. When the new owners begin the training process, they are frustrated to discover that the elephant does not seem to have the ability to follow the simplest commands. They quickly come to the conclusion that they have purchased the dumbest creature ever created. One of the trainers is especially brutal, beating the elephant with little success in motivating it to perform. Finally, the main character, who is acting as the circus veterinarian, attempts to comfort the elephant by speaking a few Polish phrases learned in his youth. He is amazed to discover that the elephant understands Polish. With this new found common language, the elephant quickly learns a variety of tricks to become the star of the circus.

This sounds remarkably like the problem with many leaders who spend their time thinking and speaking in the language of strategy and tactics to express why things can and should be better than they are now. If the people they work with don't "get it," leaders sometimes think reason will prevail if they just explain the logic better. Political leaders often refer to this as a "messaging problem." However well crafted, a message delivered in a language that does not capture the attention of the listener, is a sure recipe for failure.

What is true for individuals is also true for groups who work together in organizations. In recent years it has been recognized that organizations are described as having a distinct culture. Whether we are talking about individuals or entire organizations, the analogy of the rider and elephant is still accurate.

In organizations there is strategy (the rider) and culture (the elephant). The language of the rider is about vision, anticipating future trends, understanding demographics and consumer preferences. The common wisdom is that a great strategy is the ticket to success. If you can out-think your competitors, life is good. Business literature is filled with leaders who expound on the virtue of a forward thinking strategy.

Fewer leaders like to talk about the elephant – the emotional side or the culture of the organization. An organization's culture is based on shared values which underlie the collective emotional tone of the organization. If an elephant is the emotional side of an organization, culture is what motivates it. Like a herd of elephants, culture can (and does) overpower strategy every time. Just ask the airlines that have tried to copy the strategy of Southwest Airlines without replicating its culture.

For more than 83 years, Presbyterian Senior Living's culture has been embodied in our mission statement. While the rational part of organizational strategy may change, the underlying commitment to Christian compassion has never wavered.

The gap between the rational and emotional is something that became clear to me when working with Forgotten Voices International (FVI), an organization that supports local churches in Africa to meet the need of children orphaned by AIDS. From its inception, Forgotten Voices was concerned with being able to measure the effectiveness of their work in a Southern African culture where accountability and a focus on measurement are valued differently. The North American approach is more transactional, using written reports with a focus on numbers to gauge progress toward a goal – an almost purely rational approach to measuring success. Southern Africans emphasize relationships over time, with reporting coming through conversations and anecdotes that are rich in emotion and meaning. What FVI learned was the essential nature of extracting the best of both cultures. They needed accountability and transparency to assure current and prospective donors in the US that they are good stewards of the resources they have been given. But they also needed to tell the story in human terms – like how the church in Africa reaches out to help a family whose parents have died from AIDS leaving a 12 year old child as the head of their household. The African partners of Forgotten Voices International were experts at telling stories that inspire people to support their mission.

What can we do as leaders to facilitate communication that recognizes both the rational and emotional components of human beings in organizations? How do those of us who are fluent

in "rational" learn a second language? How do those of us who use the language of emotion, appreciate the need for the rational touchstone that values facts and accountability? I have a few suggestions:

- Take a moment to identify your language. There is no "right or wrong" language, one language is usually more comfortable than the other.
- Broaden your circle of contacts and develop your listening skills. Don't just listen to those who share your language or point of view. Your ability to listen should be at least as good as your ability to persuade others. The book of Proverbs (18:13) puts it this way – "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame".
- Practice your emotional and rational language skills. Don't be concerned if you stumble from time to time. You will get credit for trying even if you are not fluent.
- Use what Frank Luntz calls a "People Centered Lexicon" to fully engage the people you work with. Terms like "I'm listening, I get it, I respect you, and you have my commitment" reflect a people centeredness style that connects on an emotional level.
- Take the time to develop an organized approach to the message that you are trying to construct – with a definite sense of order and direction that leads methodically from an introduction to a conclusion. Whether your starting point is "rational" or "emotional," a coherent message is critical to effective communication.
- Immerse yourself in the other person's point of view. You will know when you are getting better at this when you begin to think in the other person's language.
- When in doubt - find an interpreter you trust and test your message. For example, if your natural style is to think like an accountant or business person – look to connect with a social worker or a nurse (or vice versa).

We can only achieve our mission when our strategy and culture are in alignment and reinforce each other. The first step in making this happen is to have a leadership team that is truly bilingual – both rational and emotional.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Hear the Call – Be the Call

September 2011

September 1, 2011 marks the anniversary of 40 years of my employment with Presbyterian Senior Living. In recognition of this milestone, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on being called to a vocation – which in my case is the work of serving seniors.

The idea of being called to a vocation or purpose in life has been common in religious circles for thousands of years. The biblical accounts of persons being called for service are often vivid and dramatic – truly life changing events, and pivotal points in the biblical narrative. Well known examples would include Moses and the burning bush, the call of Samuel or Isaiah (*Here I am Lord, send me*), Gideon (*putting out the fleece*), Jonah, or the call of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. These examples illustrate the power of receiving a clear and certain call to do something important. When a person knows that they are in the right place doing what they are called to do, it is possible to move forward with confidence. On a lighter note, even the Blues Brothers knew this to be true. The announcement that they were “*on a mission from God*” was central to the crazy journey that followed for the rest of the movie.

The problem is that most of us do not receive a call that is as clear and dramatic as characters in the Bible. As a person of faith, I look back and realize that I have heard the call through the words and actions of many people. Instead of a single note, crisp and clear above the background noise of the rest of the world and its distractions, my call to serve seniors has been a series of notes – a melody that has led gently down a pathway. At this point in life I can see a definite pattern of notes that have taken me to this point. What follows is a few of the stories that relate to my vocational call.

Like many people, my earliest memories of family have shaped my outlook. My grandmother, Violet McTaggart displayed a sense of playfulness and vitality that made her a joy to be around as a young child.

I always expected that being with an older person could be fun! My great grandfather, Alfonso Cline was the picture of dignity. Handsome and impeccably dressed in a starched collar and suit, he seemed to be the image of God to a small child. Respect for seniors had early and deep roots in my life.

As a young person in my old neighborhood I seemed to be drawn to older persons. Most of the customers on my paper route seemed to be old people, and I found it easy to talk to them as a youngster. I can still remember some of their names – Mrs. Innes, Mrs. Davidson, Mr. McPherson. Occasionally I would return to help them with small tasks around their homes – like scrubbing floors, washing windows – even emptying mouse traps. They provided a witness to the struggle to remain independent in spite of increased frailty.

The attraction to and sense of comfort with a medical environment came from hours spent in physician offices going through years of shots for severe allergies. Part of this time was spent being observed in the event of a reaction to the regular injections. In the process I spent many hours conversing with nurses who were patient in answering the questions of a curious 11 year old. As a result, the presence of sick people held no mystery or fear for me.

As a teenager I was trained as an orderly in a Sisters of Mercy Hospital and worked on a medical floor that was primarily populated by seniors. Marilyn Vander Esch, the staff development director who taught the orderly’s class took a special interest in her work, making it fun and opened up the world of medicine to hungry minds. Working in this environment helped to cultivate a healthy respect for the hard work and compassion required to serve people in particularly difficult circumstances. From this experience the importance of bathing, dressing, and personal hygiene on a person’s general health and well being is still clearly etched in my mind.

In nursing school I was privileged to work as a chauffeur for Cecil Runyan, the 80 year old chairman and CEO of Southeastern Michigan Gas Company. He was the poster child for what a person could achieve with persistence and hard work, and how age was not relevant to a person’s competence or ability. Confined to a wheelchair from the aftereffects of a stroke, I was never far from his side. Accompanying him to various business meetings where strategy was discussed and conversations with bankers were held became my initial business education. The hours spent discussing the latest articles in the Wall Street Journal were a contrast from my education in nursing, and would prove valuable many years later.

After a rejection of our application to the Presbyterian Board of Missions, Al Schartner called and for reasons unknown to me, concluded that I had promise as a nurse and a future leader of Presbyterian Homes. His confidence in my ability was a surprise and caused me to think beyond nursing to a career in Long Term Care Administration. His encouragement to attend the University of North Texas masters program in Gerontology led to people like Herb Shore and Cora Martin, who helped me to explore the possibilities of what serving seniors could look like in the future.

There are many others who have played a role in my call to serve seniors, but this provides some idea of the nature of what has led to what is now a 40 year call to serve older persons. It is a call that continues to engage me as completely as it did on my first day on the job.

This story is not entirely unique. Many of the individuals who have served in the field of Long Term Care have similar stories. For those who are considering what they will do in the future, I have some fairly simple advice – be attentive to your surroundings and be open as you look to the future. What you are doing right now may be your life’s calling, or may be another step in the direction of how you are to spend your work

continued...

life. In any event, if you give it your best effort, you will never regret it. Also, it is never too late to be called to a new work. Marc Freedman's book *Encore*, provides vivid examples of individuals who have experienced a new call for service in the second half of life.

Looking beyond your own situation, you may discover that you are one of the notes in another person's vocational call to serve others. Any encouragement you can give to someone – either by the spoken word or by the example of your life, may be a confirmation that they are in the place they have been called to serve, a turning point in their career path, or an inspiration to strike out in a new and exciting venture. This is extremely important work. The quality of service for seniors in the future is dependent on attracting people of compassion and commitment to serve in leadership positions.

Every day presents us with a new opportunity to hear the call of God for ourselves, and to be used by God in the call for others. Forty years from now you may be remembered by someone as one of the reasons they have chosen a life of service to others.



Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Reflections on Leadership



House Rules

October 2011

The experience of growing up in a large family has shaped me in many unexpected ways. For example, sharing a room with two of my brothers probably contributed to my being a more socially oriented person. In later years I did not fully understand my children's point of view when they announced that they found it difficult to share a room, and they needed their own "space". They were surprised to learn that I never had my own room – going from sharing with two brothers to being married and sharing a room with their Mom. I can still hear their response, "You never had your own room? That explains a lot Dad."

Living in a large family also meant that we had a significant number of house rules to govern our conduct. A few of the rules were quite explicit:

- Always stay within hearing distance so you can hear when you are called for dinner.
- Curfew on school nights is 9:00 pm, Saturday night curfew is 11:00 pm.
- Whether you like it or not, the whole family goes to church together on Sunday.
- The schedule for chores is on the inside of the kitchen cabinet. Follow the schedule. Everyone takes their turn washing and drying dishes.
- Respect your Mother. Any backtalk will be met with severe consequences.

There were many other rules designed to maintain order in a house that contained 6 children and any number of our friends from the neighborhood. The presence of rules in our home was not always popular, especially in the 1960's when there seemed to be a cultural disdain for rules in general and it was fashionable to protest against rules that were considered unnecessary or inconvenient. While the effect and reasonableness of rules were discussed in our home on rare occasions, protest was not an option.

In later years I realized the benefits of having rules, and the clarity and comfort that can come from setting reasonable boundaries. The value of boundaries can be seen in the behavior of children or animals in a defined area surrounded by a fence. It is easy to observe that there is less of a tendency to tightly gather in a herd and utilize more of the available space when the boundaries are well understood. Even the lines that mark traffic lanes on the highway offer a degree of comfort and safety. Try driving on a multi lane expressway without clearly marked lanes with traffic moving in an out from either side,

and you will experience a rush of anxiety.

While we all complain about excessive rules and regulation from time to time, rules exist everywhere in society to provide a structure that enables people to live together in relative peace and tranquility. Along the same line, every organization has a need for rules to establish a guide for acceptable conduct, foster trust in the work place, and to provide a framework for the effective delivery of service. Presbyterian Senior Living is a large family – with 2700 members all working together toward a common goal. We are governed by a series of rules – some imposed from outside sources, and some internally generated that have evolved over time. It seems that every year we refine our employee handbook and operating policies in some way to provide clarity or respond to changing conditions.

But rules alone are insufficient to achieve excellence. Excellence takes more than compliance – it takes the alignment of motives and behavior. There are no rules that can effectively replicate love, respect, concern, kindness, or integrity. We all know that motives matter. For example, one can be faithful to their marriage vows because of a fear of the consequences of being caught or because they love and respect the other person in the relationship. While the behavior may appear to be the same in both situations, love and respect offer a much more stable foundation on which to base a happy and healthy relationship.

The Christian faith has a unique perspective on the question of rules. In Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus summarizes the entire law and the prophets - "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" But there is more. In Matthew 5:43 he also says, "*You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" This is profoundly different from following a list of detailed commandments. The point is that a person's conduct should not be driven by the fear of the consequences for not following a list of rules, but spring out of a love for God and other people.

Commenting on the role of rules in the Christian faith, Timothy Keller – The New York Times bestselling author of The Reason for God, Belief in an Age of Skepticism, puts it this way, "*It is a little hard to understand how rules*

actually function in the Christian faith. They actually don't operate in the same way that rules operate in other philosophical systems or religious systems. Traditional religion says that if I obey the rules, then God will accept me. Whereas Christianity says that because I believe in Christ who has done everything for me, he has died in my place, I am accepted – and therefore I obey the rules.... For Christians, the rules are not the center."

How is this approach to rules connected to leadership? As leaders we are often required to apply rules in a fair and equitable manner to create a safe and healthy work environment. But the path to excellence requires that leaders model the motives and virtues that reach deeper than superficial behavior. Respect and kindness or apathy and disdain are revealed in the most subtle ways – a ready smile, voice inflection, a raised eyebrow, a distracted stare all convey what is in our hearts. These simple gestures convey important messages, but are beyond the strict application of rules. Instead of the proliferation of more and more rules, leaders should focus on a few simple concepts that rephrase the words taken from the Gospel of Matthew.

- Look beyond yourself to find the source of power to love others.
- Try to see the world from the perspective of other people and act according to the golden rule (love your neighbor as yourself).
- Love and respect everyone – even those who are not entirely loveable.

The effect of this perspective on the relationship between leaders and their team members is profound, because the ultimate test of a good leader is the degree to which those around you are inspired to do the right things instead of being driven by a fear of doing something wrong.

There will always be a need for "house rules" to provide clarity in specific situations and to establish and maintain acceptable boundaries for behavior. But if leaders establish a culture that is guided by love and respect, rules will become less central to achieving our mission.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Leadership and Fear

November 2011

Like many youngsters, my Dad taught me how to throw and catch a baseball. To master this task, the first obstacle to be overcome is the fear of being hit by an incoming ball. As is the case in almost every father/son activity, the lessons learned in the time spent together went well beyond the development of hand-eye coordination. I learned at an early age that the mastery of fear was essential to almost every meaningful achievement.

I have heard it said that everyone is afraid of something or someone. It is also clear to me that we live in a fearful time and many people sense that there is danger all around us. The television programs that are the most popular seem to focus on crime, giving us the impression that crime is commonplace and just waiting for the moment when we are not looking. It is not just the television industry that contributes to a climate of fear – the news media does its part. The abduction of a child in California or Florida quickly becomes a national story, capturing the attention of the entire nation. If there is a trial involved, the story can be front page news for months.

Economic fear has been a driving force behind the sluggish economic recovery over the past 2 years. Fluctuations in the stock market are often more a reflection of fear of the future than current economic performance. Both political parties seem to use fear as a means of rallying their base and beating up their political opponents. Whether the issue is Social Security, Medicare, unemployment, taxes, or the national debt, the voices of fear seem to be the loudest in the debate.

We are even willing to pay for the privilege of being frightened. The recently released movie, *Contagion*, is a dramatic story of a pandemic that wipes out most of the world's population in a matter of weeks. The message – under the right conditions, even a friendly handshake from a neighbor or acquaintance can be fatal.

The question of leadership in a time of fear is an important consideration. One of the most inspiring phrases in history was uttered by Franklin Roosevelt's as the United States faced the harsh reality of a world wide war, "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*" The ability of leaders to reassure and inspire during times of crisis is an enormous advantage, and has been evident at many turning points in history. Leadership can make the difference between being paralyzed by fear or rising above the most difficult circumstances to achieve greatness.

Since we are called to lead even when those on our team are fearful, it is incumbent on leaders to know a few things about how fear works and how their behavior affects those around them:

- Fear can be a reasonable and useful response. Sensing danger is one of the primary tools of survival. Those without fear are likely to live a shortened life.
- Fear can be a combination of rational and irrational elements, and it is often difficult to separate the two, as illustrated in the motto I once observed on a bumper sticker - "Just because you are paranoid doesn't mean that someone is not after you."
- Fear can be the result of misunderstanding the environment. Put someone in a completely dark room, and even the most common noise can inspire fear.
- No one is immune to fear.
- Fear of what you cannot control can be draining or unproductive. It is important to be able to understand what you can and cannot control and adjust your behavior accordingly.
- People bring their fears to work, which can negatively influence the way they perform their work or relate to others.
- Some people can get used to living with fear or can compartmentalize their lives or focus their attention so that fear can be kept in check.

How should understanding these simple concepts alter our behavior as leaders?

- Fear can be productive if it serves to change behavior in positive ways. For example, some people refrain from drinking and driving because they are afraid of the legal, moral, and ethical consequences.
- Leaders cannot dismiss the fears of others, whether their fears are well founded or not. Like it or not, leaders must deal with the issue of fear.
- A leader's reputation for honesty and openness can reduce the fear of the unknown in those on his or her team.
- A leader has the opportunity to connect with their team when they can admit that they have many of the same fears as everyone else.
- If you are known to have a quiet confidence in the face of adversity, you will automatically exert a calming influence on your team, thereby reducing the "fear factor".
- People who rely on fear as a primary leadership tool are treading on dangerous

ground. While the use of fear may work in the short run, the damage to individuals and relationships are rarely worth the temporary gain.

- Before you can manage the fear in others, you must be able to deal with your own fears.

There is a spiritual dimension related to how we experience and handle fear in ourselves and those around us. In the Book of Second Timothy (1:7) we read that, "*God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self control.*" The benefits of demonstrating the virtues of love and self control are also mentioned in the Book of First John (4:18) when the author observes that, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*" Lead with love and fear will melt away.

Circling back to the memory of lessons learned from playing catch with my Dad, some time ago I wrote the following piece on overcoming fear. Over the years I have spoken to many people who have gleaned similar life lessons from their parents.

Courage

*Fear beside a picket fence,
A backstop in our yard.
A father pitching to a son,
Hurling balls so hard
That every week the broken slats
Would have to be replaced,
From errant throws and cowardice
Behind a makeshift plate.*

*Don't turn your head, son. Watch the ball.
Face it square and true.
Fear becomes the enemy that's
Conquered by the few.*

*Day by day the fear recedes,
The boy becomes a man.
No longer kneeling with a glove,
Brown with summer's tan.
Fastballs thrown by other arms,
Delivered with great speed;
Circumstances, challenges,
In thought and word and deed.*

*Still it rings within my ears
When pitches seem too hard.
Lessons learned with baseball gloves
And Dad in our back yard.*


Steve

Reflections on Leadership



The Art of Listening

December 2011

When I was about 4 years old, I had an experience that left an indelible imprint on me and shaped my understanding of the need to listen carefully to those around you.

Like most parents in the 1950's, my father was a great believer in the idea that children should be seen, but not heard. We were expected to confidently interact with adults when spoken to, but not to interrupt adults when they were speaking or otherwise occupied with grown-up activities.

One day my uncle came to visit, and as was their custom, the two men spent much of the afternoon playing Cribbage on our dining room table. While they were engrossed in their game, my sister and I took a book of matches from the table (both my father and uncle were smokers at the time), and proceeded to go to my parents bedroom to see how these matches actually worked. The flair of a striking match surprised me, and much to my dismay, the match landed on the bed, setting the bedspread on fire. I quickly ran from the room to tell my Dad that he needed to come to put the fire out - somehow closing the door on my two year old sister, who remained behind to observe the fire.

Pulling on my Dad's sleeve, the conversation went something like this:

"Dad, the bed is on fire."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt adults when they are busy?"

"But Dad, the bed is on fire."

"Your uncle and I are busy here. I will talk to you later - not now!"

"But Dad, the bed is on fire!"

"If you don't stop interrupting us you will regret it - What did you just say?"

"The bed is on fire."

"The bed is on fire! Why didn't you say so?"

Both men rushed to the bedroom, threw the door open and dark smoke billowed out into the rest of the house. They grabbed the bedding and mattress and dragged the smoking and burning mess out into the front yard. My sister, looking like a little raccoon with a soot smudged face, emerged unscathed from the experience. I can still hear my Mom's voice as she told my Dad "Ken - You should not get so busy with what you are doing that you can't listen to the children." The lesson of this experience for my life - be persistent when you have something important to say, and when you stop listening you are likely to miss something important.

Listening is the key to successful relationships, not just at work, but throughout life. The root

cause of the demise of many relationships is the failure to communicate. Sometimes poor communication is based on one or more of the parties not adequately expressing their feelings, needs, or wants, but most often it is the inability or unwillingness to hear the messages that are coming from the other person.

The unwillingness to listen is also behind the decline and ultimate failure of many successful business enterprises. Successful organizations listen to customers, employees, and even those who may have little experience in their specific line of work. Superior organizations also go out of their way to seek out contrary points of view.

In his book, *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins identifies five stages of decline in a business enterprise. The first Three - Hubris Born of Success, The Undisciplined Pursuit of More, and Denial of the Risks of Peril, all spring from an inward focus that involves a lack of listening. Conceit, overreaching, and making excuses for poor performance are relatively easy to do when an organization stops listening to outside voices or contrarian points of view.

Listening can have a powerful impact on those around you. Karl A. Menninger said that "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand." Listening changes the focus to the other person and affirms their importance to you. Conversely, not listening is by its very nature dismissive and demeaning. It should be no surprise that leaders who are known to be good listeners often retain the respect of people who disagree with them on a particular subject. From this vantage point listening can be a strong tool in influencing the behavior of your team members. There is a Chinese proverb that expresses this thought - "To listen well is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well, and is as essential to all true conversation."

Listening is a key element in building a culture of trust in an organizational setting. In his book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen Covey cites "Listen First" as one of the 13 behaviors that build trust - calling it an "equal blend of character and competence." People trust leaders who are open to new ideas and will give them their undivided attention.

Listening does not come naturally to most people. Many of us have been known to use

the time when other people are talking as an opportunity to organize the points of our next argument. This is pretty typical behavior for a political debate, when you can see the person who is not speaking writing notes for their rebuttal. However, we would never mistake a debate format for a listening experience. It is not unheard of to win an argument and lose a relationship with someone you care about.

However, it is possible to cultivate the art of listening. Good listeners must master a variety of skills, including:

- Maintaining eye contact;
- Attentive body language;
- Minimizing distractions;
- Giving feedback in the form of affirming responses to encourage the other person to speak;
- Avoiding interruptions and defensive behavior;
- Keeping an open mind.

Listening does not mean that you have to agree with anyone or everyone who has expressed an opinion. Sometimes the worst leaders are described as making decisions based on the opinion of the last person to talk to them. Strong leaders can listen carefully and thoughtfully consider the conflicting views of others without becoming indecisive. After a decision is made, good leaders also communicate the reasons for their decision in a way that is respectful of those with whom they may disagree.

Effective leadership requires wisdom, and wisdom is acquired by listening. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., the great American physician, poet, writer, and professor at Harvard observed that "Listening is a source of wisdom. It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen." *The Book of Proverbs* (19:20) puts the connection between listening and wisdom this way, "Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future." (ESV)

Finally, in earlier issues of Reflections on Leadership, we have connected leadership with love. Listening offers another touch point in this message as we consider the words of Paul Tillich who said that "The first duty of love is to listen."

Steve