

Reflections on Leadership



January 2010

Titles or Testimonies

We live in a society where titles seem to command a lot of attention. People are often measured and their importance determined by their title. Many years ago I was reminded of this fact while attending a seminar led by Tom Peters, the author of the best selling leadership book - *In Search of Excellence*. He was commenting on an organization that was remarkable in that it had no titles for any of its employees. A problem arose when a front line supervisory staff member was asked to speak about the company at a local Rotary Club and needed a title to include in her introduction. When she asked the head of the company to assign her an appropriate title, he told her to pick out a title that sounded right to her. Mr. Peters then flashed the image of the business card that the employee had printed up for the occasion. It proudly listed her as Supreme Commander of her company. I guess if you are going to pick your own title, it might as well be a good one.

Dr. Tony Campolo, former Sociology professor from Eastern University and one of my all time favorite authors and speakers, had a very different take on titles and what they mean. In one of his most famous speeches Tony relates the words of the pastor of his church in his annual message to high school students as they prepared to leave for college:

In my church back home we have a student recognition day once a year, and all the kids come in who are going to the university. And the old folks in my church love to hear them as they say, "I'm studying literature at Yale." "I'm studying music at Juilliard." "I'm studying science at Harvard." And they love to hear these kids, and at my church they're very responsive. They go, "Mama, thank you Jesus. Beautiful, thank you Lord." It's a really nice feeling.

And when they were all finished and sitting down, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, my pastor got up and he said, "CHILDREN!", YOU'RE ALL GONNA DIE! YOU'RE GONNA DIE!" It's a good thing to tell kids. He said, "You don't think you're going to die, But you're going to die. They're going to drop you in a hole. They're going to throw dirt in your face and

*they're going to go back to the church and eat potato salad!" He said, "When you were born, you were the only one that was crying - everybody else was happy. More important is this. When you die, will YOU be the only one that's happy? And everybody else will cry." "It depends," he said, "It depends on what you live for. Do you live for **titles or Testimonies?**" Then he did what only my pastor can do, he swept through the entire Old Testament in just five minutes.*

*He said, "There was Moses, and there was Pharaoh. Pharaoh had the title - Ruler of Egypt. That's a good title. Good title - Ruler of Egypt. Moses, on the other hand, had no power. But when it was over, Pharaoh may have had the **title**, but Moses had **Testimonies!**"*

*He said, "There was Daniel and there was Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was King of Babylon. Good title - King. King Nebuchadnezzar. But when it was over, that's all he had. He had the **title**, but Daniel (who emerged unscathed from the lion's den) had the **Testimonies!**"*

*He said, "There was Jezebel, the Queen. Good title - Queen. Every woman would love to be Queen Jezebel. And there was Elisha - the prophet of God. She was going to kill him, but when it was over, that's all Jezebel had, was a title. She had the **title**, but Elisha had the **Testimonies.**"*

*People of God, I tell you the truth, one of these days you are going to die, and they're going to drop you in a hole, and they're going to throw dirt in your face, and they're going to go back to the church and eat potato salad. But the only question is, What do you leave behind? Are you going to leave behind a title - President of Rotary, Vice-president of this? Are you going to have an obituary with a list of titles, or are there going to be people standing around your grave giving testimonies. **Make your life count, so when it's over you won't just have titles, you'll have testimonies.***

Titles can be useful. When combined with a position description, a title can create expectations, define responsibilities, and establish accountability. But there are things that titles cannot accomplish that are essential to every organization. Titles cannot achieve an organization's mission or fully describe the importance of a person's contribution to the mission. Titles cannot create a sense of unity or inspire people to work together toward a common goal. Titles cannot create the kind of confidence and trust that is the foundation for positive working relationships. Titles cannot provide a sense of accomplishment for a job well done. All of these things result from what we do every day – something Dr. Tony Campolo would call our testimony.

Contrary to popular opinion, leadership is never about having an important title. If that were true, we would all be advised to get business cards with the title "Supreme Commander" engraved in gold. The relationship between leadership and titles reminds me of the quote attributed to Billy Sunday, the famous evangelist from the first two decades of the 20th century, who observed that "Going to church doesn't make a person a Christian any more than going to a garage makes a person an automobile". Being given a title will not make you a great leader, but if your actions reflect the testimony of a leader, your co-workers will respect the title that you have been given.

Starting a new year is always a time for reflection and rededication – to think about the past and chart a new course for the year ahead. As a part of this process, every leader should give serious thought to their leadership testimony. The truth is that no matter what our title is now or will be in the future – we all need to focus our attention on doing the things that reflect virtue, integrity and strength of character. It is the only way a leader can build a testimony that is more precious and long lasting than any title.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



February 2010

Relationships

When my grandson was about 5 years old, I took him fishing at a local farm pond. On the way home, he asked if we could stop at the Dairy Queen for ice cream. Being a typical over indulgent grandparent, I decided it was a great idea, even though it was less than an hour before lunch. I ordered an ice cream cone, and Ben ordered a large chocolate brownie sundae - a huge undertaking for a little kid. While he devoured the ice cream I asked him what we should tell his mother when we returned home and she asked if he was ready for lunch. He simply replied, "She won't ask, and I won't say anything." I suggested that we get our story straight, but he was insistent.

On the way back to the house from the Dairy Queen, I could see that my grandson was deep in thought. After some time, he turned to me and said, "My mom is your daughter." "Yes she is", I replied. He brightened up and exclaimed "We don't have to worry about the ice cream, because she can't tell you what to do! You could even put her in a time out chair if you wanted to!" I tried to explain to him that while he got the basics of the relationship right, it wasn't quite that simple.

As we entered the house, my daughter (his mom) said, "Ben, what would you like for lunch?" As he looked at me with a pained expression, I quickly said, "I took him to the Dairy Queen, and it will be a couple of hours before he is going to want anything else to eat." She turned to my grandson and said, "Ben, you can go and play, your grandfather and I need to talk." Ben smiled and quickly ran off. That was the day that my grandson got his first lesson on the power and complexity of relationships.

More recently I had the opportunity to spend some time in Zimbabwe, a country just north of South Africa. Being in Africa is a lesson in relationship building. I quickly learned that every meeting with a person begins with a rather lengthy discussion about family and exchange of personal information. Africans have a genuine interest in finding out who you are and what makes you tick, and a relationship must be established before getting down to business. Time must be invested in cultivating relationships. There is no other way.

Every organization is teeming with formal and informal relationships. The formal relationships are the easiest to understand, as they are defined by titles and organizational charts. However, they rarely present a complete picture of the way things work. Informal relationships, which are often more affected by personal and social factors, are more complicated and harder to discern. Effective leaders must be able to understand these relationships and deal with them in a positive way in order to accomplish organizational goals.

One of the central skills of leadership is how to forge positive relationships, especially with people over whom you have little formal authority. One might argue that the role of positive relationships in modern organizations is critical, even in the presence of a well defined hierarchy. In most organizations, titles have been losing the ability to command outcomes, while relationships have become increasingly more important. A reputation for fairness, honesty, respect for the opinions of others, and willingness to find areas of compromise in seeking solutions to common problems can be a tremendous advantage, especially when the edges of title and position power become dull and unable to cut through dense organizational undergrowth. But reputation can only take you so far. Lasting relationships are forged based on personal contact and experience.

What are the benefits of strong relationships in the work place?

- It is the basis for establishing trust between individuals that will encourage risk taking. The absence of trust results in "defensive decision making" that can slow the organizations progress down to a crawl.
- It creates a sense of security that becomes the basis for an honest exchange of information and ideas. An honest and timely opinion from a co-worker just might help to avoid the kind of embarrassing mistake that we all have made at one time or another in our work lives.
- It encourages efforts to cross formal organizational boundaries to find solutions and respond more quickly to the needs of those we are called to serve.

- Sharing personal and professional dreams and aspirations can become the springboard for high performance, inspiring the team to reach beyond solving immediate problems to achieving excellence.
- It humanizes the work environment. A sterile or antiseptic work place is not personally satisfying, no matter how lofty the overall goals of the organization.

What steps can a leader take to develop positive relationships within their work environment? In his book, *The Fred Factor*, Mark Sanborn identifies something he calls the seven B's of relationship building:

- *Be real. Always do your best at being yourself.*
- *Be interested (not just interesting). People are flattered when you express an interest in getting to know them better in an effort to serve them more effectively.*
- *Be a better listener. This will give you important practical information you can use to create value.*
- *Be empathetic. The need to be understood is one of the highest human needs.*
- *Be honest. Don't make promises you can't keep, or create expectations you cannot fulfill.*
- *Be helpful. Little things make a big difference.*
- *Be prompt. Helping people save time by being prompt and efficient is a gift of great value.*

I would like to add one other dimension to the list. – *Be Open. Don't be afraid to share something of yourself with others.* Before you can be respected as a leader, you first need to connect with your co-workers on a human level, which is the common foundation for all relationships.

Cultivating relationships in the work place can be time consuming and messy, but well worth the investment. We can all learn something from our African brothers and sisters. Take the time to build relationships - there is no other pathway to success.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



March 2010

A Matter of Trust

We live in a society where trust is in very short supply, and it is not hard to understand why that is the case. Government, business, sports, personal relationships – look anywhere and you will find an erosion of trust. The evidence can be conveyed in shorthand that everyone understands - Health Reform, Wall Street, Toyota, Steroids, Tiger Woods, etc. The problem is that trust is essential – from basic family relationships to the way organizations and institutions function in the world. Trust is needed everywhere. In his book, *The Speed of Trust*, Steven M. R. Covey identifies what he calls five waves of trust:

- Self Trust – Confidence in Yourself - the ability to set and achieve goals, to keep commitments, to “Walk the Talk.”
- Relationship Trust – Consistent behavior - you can count on me.
- Organizational Trust – Alignment – This is a place where trust is valued, where we can count on each other.
- Market Trust – reputation – you can trust this company to deliver.
- Societal trust – Contribution – creating value for others and society at large. Because of this organization, the world is a better place.

Organizations live on trust. When you see an organization where trust is absent, you are looking at an organization that is on life support, and in imminent danger.

In the last issue of Reflections on Leadership, we emphasized the importance of investing in relationships and cultivating positive relationships with those around you. These relationships are all about trust. Trust begins with what we believe about ourselves and others around us. If we believe people to be essentially dishonest and unreliable, then our behavior toward those we work with will be shaped by this belief. Conversely, if we believe people to be generally good, reliable, and hard working, we will behave differently as leaders.

If leaders agree that trust is essential, why is it so elusive? I think it is because we all know that trust is more than talk. Genuine trust has roots in what people believe, but it demands more. The problem

in my view is that there is often a gap between what we claim to believe, and how far we are willing to extend that belief when there is something important at stake. I may look at a rope and believe that it is strong enough to hold my weight as I repel down the side of a cliff. Trust is when I use that same rope to support my weight as I go over the edge. The presence or absence of trust is illustrated by the way we behave.

There is a story about John and Charles Wesley that illustrates the difference between belief and trust. While sailing from England to Georgia in 1735, the brothers found themselves in the middle of a violent storm that broke the mast off their ship. While the English panicked, the Moravians who were among the passengers calmly sang hymns and prayed. This experience led them to the conclusion that the Moravians possessed an inner strength that they lacked, and that realization had a profound effect on their ministry. One could say that in that instance, the Wesley's believed, but the Moravians believed and trusted God for their safety.

So how can we overcome the barriers to establishing and sustaining the kind of trust that will make any organization a great place to work, and deliver superior results to those we are called to serve?

- Start by presuming the best about those you work with. Trust can never survive in the presence of a suspicious nature.
- Earn the trust of others by being a trustworthy person. If you are not someone that others can count on when the chips are down, you will never get others to trust you with anything important.
- Test the trustworthiness of others in progressively larger ways as you delegate authority. This is a biblical lesson from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. “You have been faithful over little, I will set you over much.”
- Resist the temptation to micromanage and interfere when you have delegated something to a co-worker.
- When someone you trust lets you down, handle disappointment in a way that does not destroy the climate of trust in the rest of the organization.

- Model trust in the way you interact with your peers. The leaders of an organization can not expect their respective teams to embrace a culture of trust when the people they look up to do not trust each other.
- Be consistent. Trust is strengthened by consistency.

The benefits of trust within an organization are most obvious in terms of decision making—if you trust your coworkers the speed of achieving consensus and willingness to take risks increases. But I believe that it goes even deeper than that. It is impossible to deliver quality to the people we are called to serve or to create a satisfying work environment without trust as a solid foundation.

Trust can also be fragile. Some of the factors that erode or destroy trust include lack of openness, inconsistent behavior, failure to trust others, unwillingness to listen, or perceived lack of awareness of your environment. Covey states that a loss of trust created by a lack of character (integrity or intent) is far more difficult to restore than a loss of trust created by a lack of competence (capabilities or results).

Finally, we need to assess the level of trust in our environment by asking a few simple questions:

- Who do you trust? In order to do your job well, who should you trust?
- Who trusts you? In order to accomplish the goal of serving people better, who should trust you?
- Based on these answers, what steps should you take to strengthen the bonds of trust with those around you?

Trust is the heartbeat of an organization. As leaders we have a responsibility to create and sustain a heart healthy environment.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



April 2010

Making Every Moment Count

It has been said that time is the world's most precious commodity. Once it is gone, it can never be recovered. One of the most vivid reminders of the value of time is when we observe people who have spent their lives pursuing wealth, only to find that they did not have the time to enjoy what they had accumulated. Ben Franklin is credited with coining the phrase "time is money" – an axiom that is often repeated in the business world. But time and money are currencies that are not exchanged with ease. Wasting time may cost money, but money cannot buy back time once it is lost.

During this year I have been reminded that time is such a precious commodity, and that as we age, the time seems to go by more quickly. As my sister and I sat with my Dad in the final hours before his death, I was flooded with the memories of the time we had spent together over the years. Learning to throw a baseball, ice skating, fishing or talking about the things in life that mattered most are treasured thoughts that have enriched my life and shaped the man I have become. Since that experience I have looked at my children and grandchildren differently, knowing that each moment spent with them is part of making memories that will endure well beyond my time on earth.

I am struck by the fact that almost everyone has been on the receiving end of the generous gift of time. Mothers are famous for the time and attention that they invest in their children. It is one of the reasons that Mother's Day strikes a chord in the hearts of people who overlook many other special days in the year. We know the value of the time our mothers have spent nurturing us throughout life.

As human beings we know that our years are numbered and relatively short, especially when viewed in comparison to the span of human history or eternity. In Psalm 39 we read, "*Show me O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; Let me know how fleeting is my life...Each man's life is but a breath.*" This understanding should inspire us to consider if the way we spend our time truly reflects what we value most in life. Expressing our thoughts more freely to those we love, serving others with energy and enthusiasm, investing in friendships and taking the time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life are just a few of the ways we can make every moment count.

How does this relate to Leadership? There are many tools in the leadership arsenal. But I believe that the most powerful of all tools at the leader's disposal is their time and attention. We can spend hours talking about what we value, but we illustrate what means the most to us by where we spend our time and who is the recipient of our attention.

As leaders there always seems to be competition for a limited amount of time. This competition can be self imposed or driven by phone calls or emails. In an age when we are constantly connected and are available to a wider range of people, it is hard to escape the pressure of time. In the years before cell phones, the time spent driving to one of our distant locations was a respite from the calls that seemed to always interrupt my train of thought. Technology has increased productivity, but there are few moments that are beyond reach of the immediate concerns of the day. It can be difficult to escape the tyranny of the urgent.

The famous poet Carl Sandburg understood that where a person spends their time was a matter of stewardship when he observed that "*Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you.*" We need to be intentional about how we spend our time.

The truth is that we are all given the same number of hours in a day. Some leaders achieve more than others, mostly because they are able to figure out what things are the most important and concentrate their energy on those things. Look at any failed effort and you will usually discover that everyone was working hard, but that they spent their time working on things of lesser value.

So how do we figure out what is important and what is less important? Steven R. Covey in his famous book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," put together a time management matrix with 4 boxes that were labeled Important and Urgent (Quadrant I), Important and Not Urgent (Quadrant II), Not Important and Urgent (Quadrant III), and Not Important and Not Urgent (Quadrant IV). It was his contention that leaders spend too little time on Quadrant II - Things that are Important but Not Urgent and too much time on Quadrant III (Urgent

but Not Important). Interestingly enough, one of the things he identified as important but not urgent was relationship building (see February issue of Reflections on Leadership). I think this is a good exercise for both our personal and professional lives. The key is to be very thoughtful about what you place in each of the four boxes.

My wife likes to kid me about my task orientation and compulsive behavior. I have lists at work and lists at home, and at the end of the day I review the lists to see what I have crossed off. I have been known to even add items to the list at the end of the day, just so I could cross them off as something that was accomplished. While this sounds pretty weird, I know a lot of nurses that do this. I think it comes from the need to feel organized while multitasking.

The problem with this approach is that the cultivation of relationships does not fit well into a list format. "Make a new friend", "Express concern to a co-worker going through personal difficulty", "Reach out to be helpful to a neighbor", "Communicate better with my spouse", "Pay closer attention to the needs of those I work with every day" rarely show up on a list of things to do. I think that is because relationship building requires a more sustained effort and a changed attitude about what is on your mind at any given time.

It is my belief that it is impossible to be a good leader or be satisfied with your life away from work if you are not intentional about how you use your time. It all begins with the understanding that time is precious and we need to make every moment count.

Steve Proctor

Reflections on Leadership



May 2010

Disappointment or Inspiration

As I write this Reflection, I am still bleary eyed from staying up to watch last night's final college basketball game. It was a classic David and Goliath event, with tiny Butler College taking on national powerhouse Duke University. The game went down to the final seconds, with heavily favored Duke escaping with a two point win. Both teams were well coached and disciplined. In a day when most athletes have large egos and many put their own personal goals ahead of the other members of the team, it was refreshing to see young men who understood the importance of putting the goals of the team first.

Basketball is not the only place where egos come into play. Leaders in every walk of life often have to deal with people who see the world from a very narrow point of view. It can be difficult to lead a group when each person thinks that they are the center of the universe, and resist any attempt to take the focus away from their interests. This problem is so prevalent in our society that leaders can become rather jaded.

Along this line, I recently heard a quote by Ron Heifetz, the leadership guru from Harvard, who observed that "Leadership is about disappointing people at a rate they can handle." In reality the quote is not quite as negative as it sounds. The premise is that a leader needs to lead in such a way that everyone is OK putting their personal agenda aside to achieve the larger agenda for the organization. At the heart of effective leadership is creating an environment where self interest takes a back seat to the greater good. There are many places where disappointing people at a rate they can handle can be a part of leadership.

- On many athletic teams every player wants to start every game, play almost every minute, and score the most points. In response, the coach is challenged to spread around the playing time so that no one gets discouraged.
- In a polarized political atmosphere, politicians of every persuasion have to stay connected to their base supporters, even if they cannot be successful in achieving their follower's full agenda. In this context, being an effective (and re-elected) political leader often means being skilled in the art of letting people down easy.

- In corporate life when several people apply for a promotion and only one person can get the job, the boss must have the ability to reinforce the value of the contribution of the unsuccessful candidates in spite of their disappointment at not being selected.
- In problem solving situations that involve competing ideas from team members looking for solutions, it can be important for a leader to help the person with the losing point of view to save face if the group goes in another direction.

Even understanding the realities of life and situations outlined above, "disappointing people at a rate they can handle" can be a pretty depressing description of the essence of leadership. While I understand this point of view, I prefer to express it a bit differently. Leadership is about creating a compelling vision of the future, a desire to reach a goal or to serve people so well that individuals who become a part of the team willingly set aside their self interest or special interests for a higher calling. To put it in plain English, it is better to lift someone up with inspiration, than to concentrate your efforts on letting them down easy.

There are a number of key differences between providing inspiration and carefully dispensing disappointment:

1. Instead of ratcheting down expectations and lowering the bar until the lowest tolerable level is reached, advocate a new standard that causes people to look beyond themselves to the good of the whole – even for the good of those who may disagree with them.
2. Be honest. The best surprise is no surprise. Be clear about the goal at the outset, including the sacrifice they may need to make to achieve the desired end.
3. Make sure that people on the team clearly understand their roles. As the leader your job is to affirm that every person's role is important to achieving success. Konstantin Stanislavsky once said "Remember, there are no small parts, only small actors."
4. Find selfless individuals to be on your team and cultivate those tendencies by redefining success from getting your own way, to finding the best way.

5. Make sure that credit for success is not limited to individuals with starring roles, but to everyone associated with the effort.

It is possible to create and sustain an atmosphere where inspiration and selflessness is the norm. From 1957 – 1969, the Boston Celtics were the world champions of the National Basketball Association 11 times in a 13 year span, including 8 consecutive championships - a record that is unmatched in U.S. sports history. Remarkably, in all of those championship years with many great players that ended up in the Basketball Hall of Fame, the Celtics never once had a league scoring champion on their team. The key to that unparalleled success was the coach Red Auerbach's focus on team play. The Celtic players were always focused on winning games, not individual honors.

We all know that life is much more than a sport. The teamwork and responsibility of providing care and compassion to a frail older person is far more important than winning any game. Losing a championship game is disappointing. Losing your mom to cancer or your father to Alzheimer's disease is a life changing event. We are the ones who are called to be there to support our residents and their families in those sacred moments. That realization should be enough to inspire us and those we lead to look beyond ourselves.

In his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul inspired his team with these words; "I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is great advice for any team.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Homegrown Leadership

June 2010

This June will mark the first father's day that I will not be able to call my Dad and tell him how much I appreciate him as a father. As I was contemplating this reality, I was reminded of his role in shaping me as a leader. What is interesting about this reflection is that my Dad would not have described himself as a leader. He worked for Detroit Edison as a coal handler and heavy equipment operator. It was hard, often physically demanding work that took a heavy toll on his body and aged him prematurely. In some ways it was like being a coal miner. At the end of a work day no matter how many times he scrubbed his hands, they remained rough and stained with coal dust. One of the lasting memories I have of my father is seeing those muscular hands carrying his black metal lunch bucket to and from work. He was the image of a blue collar working man – dependable, honest, and faithful in supporting his family. But there was no mistaking the fact that he was a leader in our home. This is a part of my father's enduring legacy.

It is my belief that the seeds of leadership are planted well before we reach employment age. I have heard it said that parents are visionary leaders if they see themselves as raising adults, not children. This was made clear to me while visiting my sister many years ago when her children were small. We were all sitting around the breakfast table eating pancakes, and she turned to me and said, "Listen to this - Hey kids, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Expecting to hear baseball player, astronaut, or some other occupation, I was surprised to hear them all shout in unison, "We want to be tax payers!" While it sounded funny to hear a 4 year old child express a desire to pay taxes, she explained to me that she intended

for her children to be responsible members of society and self sufficient adults. It was obvious that my sister was a visionary leader, intent on raising adults.

Leadership lessons learned at home are often the basis for effective leadership in other settings:

- A clear moral compass
- Humility
- A healthy respect for others
- Fairness
- Compassion
- Personal responsibility
- Setting high standards for yourself.
- Dealing with disappointment
- The importance of relationships and working with others
- Courage - overcoming fear
- Understanding and expressing clear expectations
- Being dependable
- Accepting criticism
- Handling mistakes
- The importance of relationships

These are topics that come right out of books and articles on leadership – and have been the subject of previous issues of Reflections on Leadership.

The point is that while we understand the need for leadership at work, we also need to be keenly aware of leadership opportunities in our homes, neighborhoods, and communities. The leadership imprint of parents, grandparents, scout leaders, soccer coaches, Sunday school teachers, volunteer math and reading tutors, and community and neighborhood role models will be felt for generations to come. The need for leadership in these arenas is as critical as the leadership needed in the work place.

Where will future leaders come from? They are likely to be the people you

have dinner with this evening or the children next door. They will come from your neighborhood, community, or church. Whether you know it or not, they are watching you, and you are shaping their outlook as people and future leaders in our society. From this perspective, it is not an exaggeration to say that all of our leaders are home grown.

Later in life my Dad's leadership skills would become more evident to those outside of our home. As a Sunday school teacher, Presbyterian elder, and pastor of several small country churches he had a positive impact on a wide range of people. But if you were to ask him if he thought of himself as a leader, he would probably say, "I don't know about that. I'm just a working man, by the grace of God doing the best I can." That may have been his opinion, but I knew the truth. The best leaders are not always the ones with the most impressive titles or expansive job descriptions. Sometimes we can find them in our own back yard.

Working Men

*My Father's old black lunch pail;
A stark, metal box.
Thermos, sandwich, nourishment
In rough, working hands.*

*Resting on the kitchen table
Every morning,
We knew it carried his lunch
And brought home the bacon.*

Thanks Dad.


Steve

Reflections on Leadership



PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING

July 2010

A Thankful Heart

In the past few years I have had the opportunity to visit Central America and Africa to witness first hand 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.

Others who have shared this experience, have expressed that seeing such conditions changes their perspective – often calling it a life changing event. Visiting a third world country is a reminder of how richly we have been blessed to live and work in this country. While poverty and hunger exist in the US, the magnitude and gravity of these problems are more clearly understood when visiting a nation where poverty is the norm.

This is not just an anecdotal observation. The facts are even more compelling. In his book, *A Hole in Our Gospel*, Richard Sterns, the CEO of World Vision, quotes the following statistics that illustrate our blessed situation as Americans:

- 2.6 billion people – 40% of the world's population live on less than \$2 a day;
- 1 billion people – 15% of the world's people live on less than \$1 a day;
- If your income is \$25,000 a year, you are wealthier than 90% of the world's population;
- If you make more than \$50,000 a year, you are wealthier than 99% of the world.

In addition to these economic measurements, we are blessed to live in a place of extraordinary freedom – where our government assures us that 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 is beyond our 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 self 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 coworkers 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 for a leader. 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 arrogance 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." I wonder how that admission inspires those people he works with on a daily basis? How can a virtue like loyalty exist in the presence of such an attitude?

As leaders, what should we be thankful for?

- The recognition 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 are all undeserving recipients of the blessings of God.

- Those who have helped us on our leadership journey as examples or mentors.
- Work that has intrinsic meaning and makes a difference in the lives of others.
- Those we are privileged to work with – who turn the mission of the organization into reality in the lives of those we serve.

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."

As a final note - I am thankful for each of you as leaders in the PSL family. You are my heroes. The compassion and kindness that you exhibit in your work is a clear witness to the hands of God working in the world today. My prayer for all of you is that you experience the joy of a thankful heart.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Confronting Problem Situations

August 2010

Previous issues of Reflections on Leadership have focused on the many ways that leaders inspire those around them to superior performance, using terms like talking the talk, walking the walk, focusing on common goals and objectives, putting the interest of those we serve above self interest, listening to your co-workers, relating to others with kindness and compassion, teaching and mentoring those you work with, showing appreciation and encouraging your team members, setting high standards for yourself and others, and laying the groundwork for change. All of these topics are uplifting and inspiring to read. We would like to believe that something in this leadership toolbox will work in every situation.

But there are occasions when all of the best intentions fall short, and the more nurturing approaches to leadership have not been successful or worse, misinterpreted as meaning that everything is OK. In these situations a stronger approach is needed. While you can find all kinds of books on "feel good" leadership topics, less is written about what to do in tough situations that are likely to make people feel uncomfortable. I believe that there are a number of reasons why this subject is avoided.

First of all, we all have a basic need to have others think well of us. Bringing up issues in a way that causes someone to be uncomfortable is likely to engender negative feelings in those we care about. We remember how it felt to be on the other end of a conversation that made us uncomfortable, and may have resented the person who was insistent that the problem be addressed. The difficulty with being a leader is that the desire to be liked cannot come at the expense of avoiding the hard decisions that are needed to fulfill the mission. The first rule of leadership is that the mission is paramount.

Secondly, most leaders (me included) favor a slower, persuasive, and less direct approach whenever possible. This is a desirable tendency, and works well when the pressure of time is not a critical factor and the consequences of failure do not threaten the organization. However, when problems reach a certain level and the pressure of time and the consequence of inaction are acute, softer leadership techniques are less effective. One key is to understand that the individuals involved in dealing with a problem may have different perceptions of the risk to the organization. When one party perceives the situation to be urgent and the consequence of failure to be serious and this opinion is not shared by others on the team, tensions are likely to increase. It is up to the leader to ensure that the gravity of the situation and the risks posed by a poor outcome is clearly understood.

Thirdly, we have all experienced occasions when things have just gotten better with the passage of time. This is the best rationale for a patient

approach to problem solving. It is also the cause of the greatest source of regret when things do not get better, and more drastic steps need to be taken at a later time. There is an old saying that goes something like this – "Whatever you are trying to avoid will not go away until you confront it." Avoidance almost always makes a situation worse, and the likelihood is that the problem will grow and become increasingly unmanageable.

Finally, we can manage to convince ourselves that a more confrontational approach may be inherently disrespectful, especially if we feel that dealing with a problem forcefully may elicit an emotional response from a co-worker. While kindness and respect are virtues, they can also become faults if they distort or understate a message that must be heard. One could argue that it more compassionate to hurt someone's feelings and warn them of impending danger than to remain silent and witness an avoidable tragedy. However, when struggling with this emotional balance it is important to understand the difference between taking deliberate and direct action and a personal attack.

As much as we hate to admit it, we often learn some of the most valuable lessons from those who make us unhappy at the moment. My least favorite teacher in my entire formal learning experience was my 10th grade English teacher, Mr. Hayward. Before taking his class, I was accustomed to getting good grades with a reasonable amount of effort. The most charitable way I can describe Mr. Hayward is that he was a blunt and merciless critic. Papers that I thought were pretty well constructed came back to me in pieces, covered with so much red ink that I could hardly make out what I had originally written. I struggled to get above a C in his class, as did many of my classmates. It was a relief to finish the year and get rid of him and his irritating style. At the time I believed that he was just a difficult human being, intent on making me miserable, lacking any concern for my feelings. Several years later, when taking a writing class in college, I developed a new appreciation of what he had done for me. I quickly discovered that the lessons learned in his class made me a better writer than 90% of my fellow students. Much of my ability to use the written word today can be traced back to his teaching. I now believe that because he cared about his students and their future, he was willing to be less popular than other teachers. While I cannot name many of my old high school teachers, Mr. Hayward is an exception. Forty years later I still appreciate his work.

In spite of this experience, I remain wary of those leaders who continually use a type of "honesty" that causes pain in their relationships in the workplace. Over the years I have developed a few questions that I believe help to promote a sense of balance when a more confrontational approach is required.

If you are the leader who feels that the situation

calls for a change in tactics, ask yourself the following questions before taking a confrontational approach:

- Up to this point has my message been well organized and clearly articulated?
- Have I tried other leadership approaches before resorting to a more confrontational position?
- Are my motives pure? Do I really have the best interests of the residents, my co-workers, and the organization at heart?
- Is my approach driven by a sense of personal frustration, anger or impatience? (Proceed only when you can answer no to this question.)
- Is the intensity of my approach commensurate with the gravity of the situation at hand?
- Is the message I am about to give focused on the behavior that needs to be changed rather than the individuals involved in the discussion?
- How will what I am about to say affect my relationship with the rest of the team in the future? If there is damage, what is my plan to repair the relationship and restore it to its normally healthy state?

If you find yourself on the receiving end of what you believe is a confrontational approach to solving a problem, ask yourself the following questions:

- Up to this point have I chosen to use a kinder and gentler approach to avoid changing my behavior to deal with a hard set of circumstances?
- Have I been prone to offering excuses for lack of progress in place of action that has delivered measurable progress?
- Have I allowed personal relationships or emotions to get in the way of improvement or finding a solution?
- Is it possible that up to this point my approach could be interpreted as understating the importance and urgency that I feel about this situation?
- Do I understand or appreciate why others may have a different perspective on the nature of the problem being addressed?
- Do the facts support a stronger or more urgent response than I have displayed thus far?

The need to confront problems directly while maintaining a sense of unity was addressed by the Apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians. He encourages those in the church to "speak the truth in love" and points to this as evidence of maturity and growing to follow the example of Christ. If this advice is taken to heart, it is possible to handle the most difficult and sensitive matters, even if they cause temporary discomfort.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership

 PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING
September 2010

Working with the Gifted

The term “gifted” is often used in relation to educational programming for children with high intelligence or a special talent that is recognized as being beyond the range that is normally expected in the general population. Applied to the broader population, it is often accompanied by terms like skilled, exceptional, extraordinary, and remarkable. We all have our own image of what being “gifted” means. Looking at the people who are most commonly thought as gifted in our society, one quickly focuses on athletic accomplishments, musical or artistic talent, or scientists who grasp the mysteries of the universe or are working on a cure for some dreaded disease. The reality is that every human being is gifted in some unique way. Their gifts may be obvious and well developed, or underdeveloped and hidden, but they are there nonetheless. There are several steps that a leader must take to work with the gifted:

Expand your understanding of what a gifted person is. It is my experience that the most gifted people are often not the first person you notice in a room full of people. There are many gifts that are overlooked. Some of them include:

- The gift of hospitality
- The gift of undivided attention – listening.
- The gift of appreciation - making someone feel unique and special.
- The gift of thoughtfulness – instinctively knowing the right thing to do or say when someone is going through a hard time.
- The gifts of awareness of the needs of others.
- The gift of compassion.
- The gift of analysis – the ability to unravel unique and difficult problems.
- The gift of organization – understanding the best way to develop a process and sequence activities to avoid duplication and wasted effort

Understand your own gifts and weaknesses. When a leader understands their own talents they are in a position to use them to greatest advantage. Understanding your weaknesses will put you in a position to find others who will compliment your gifts and attract them to your team. Unfortunately leaders often have the greatest appreciation for people whose talents mirror their own and end up having people around them who share their weaknesses.

Look for the gifts of greatest value in those you select to be on your team. In *Good to*

Great, Jim Collins talks about “getting the right people on the bus” as the key to developing a high performing organization. The question for leaders is how to recognize who should be on the bus when they are adding a new member to their team. First of all, the most successful leaders are not afraid to hire people who are different, smarter or more talented than they are. Secondly, if you know the strengths and weaknesses of your team, you can look for someone with abilities that will make the team stronger. Not all gifts are of equal value when viewed in the light of accomplishing a clearly defined mission. Flashy gifts may impress us the most, but are the least useful in our day to day work.

Acknowledge the gifts of your team members and encourage them to utilize these gifts to the fullest extent possible.

The best leaders can recognize the special talents in those they work with and will put each person in a position to maximize their value to the benefit of the organization. Extending the Collins analogy, this could be seen as putting the person in the “right seat on the bus”. This involves recognizing and developing talent. Conducting a “Gifts Inventory” of your team may be a helpful way to compare their natural abilities with the work they are assigned to do. Acknowledging the gifts of your staff and reinforcing your appreciation for their abilities will encourage them to use their gifts to even greater advantage. It is also important to shore up weaknesses that inhibit performance or detract from the gifts they have to offer. For example a compassionate and kind individual may need some coaching on time management to complete their work so they have the time to express the care and compassion that comes naturally to them.

In his book *Ordinary Heroes*, Timothy Wallis features photographs and stories of Medal of Honor winners. This is a rare group of individuals, whose heroic deeds command such respect that the President of the United States is obligated to salute them. Reading the acts of valor that qualified them for this honor, one might think that these people were larger than life. But the message of the book is that the most heroic figures in our country are just regular people with struggles and faults just like anyone else. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the people these heroes admire most are not the people that the rest of society recognizes as heroic – like parents, teachers,

and faithful friends.

In what is probably the most unexpectedly touching story in the book, Wallis describes his uncle Ralph, a veteran of World War II and Purple Heart recipient. As a youngster Wallis had the opportunity to live with his Uncle Ralph and Aunt Ray for a time. A mild mannered person who seemed somewhat distant, Ralph was kind to Wallis. His Aunt talked to Wallis about how Ralph was vulnerable and child-like as he struggled with his war memories. Many years later Ralph unexpectedly had a mental breakdown and snapped. Suddenly rising from his chair and announcing that it was time to fight, he found his handgun and shot Aunt Ray several times believing she was the enemy he had fought in the war. She survived the attack, and Ralph was committed for psychiatric care. After treatment, he was later released to Ray’s care, and she welcomed him home, understanding that his attack was not directed at her, but was a result of his war experience. From Wallis’ point of view, Aunt Ray was a hero with the gift of unconditional love.

The message of *Ordinary Heroes* is that we are surrounded by the gifted and heroic. As leaders it is our obligation to see these qualities in those we work with and to enable them to exercise their talents to accomplish the mission of the organization. Unfortunately, leaders ignore or suppress the gifts of their team members rather than encourage and empower them to be their best.

One final note on how to best use our own gifts and the gifts of those we lead. Our gifts are most effective when seasoned with a humble spirit. They should not be used for selfish purposes or to make ourselves or our team the center of attention. This is consistent with the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans, Chapter 12, “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned..... Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (ESV).



Steve

Reflections on Leadership

 PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING
October 2010

Giving and Taking Credit

In the last issue of Reflections on Leadership there was a story about Medal of Honor winners, and a story from the book, "Ordinary Heroes". The message was that we are surrounded by the heroic and gifted, and that humility is a necessary ingredient for gifted leaders. Just a few days after the Reflections article, The Harrisburg Patriot-News carried the story of Salvatore A. Giunta, a Medal of Honor winner from Harrisburg. He is the first living Medal of Honor winner since the Vietnam War. Six other soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have received the honor posthumously.

The heroic acts described in the October 2007 mission were impressive, and illustrate the kind of valor that is typical of the highest honor bestowed to an American. However what impressed me even more was the quote from Mr. Giunta that was contained in the article.

"I entered the army when I was 18, and I am 25 now. I became a man in the Army. That night I learned a lot – and after that night I learned even more. This respect that people are giving me? This was one moment. In my battalion, I am mediocre at best. This shows how great the rest of them are."

Even while being recognized for a singularly heroic act, this leader had a genuine awareness of the value of the team – and his thoughts and remarks were focused on them. This was likely a combination of true humility and an awareness that sometime in the future, his life might well depend on the courage and selflessness of his comrades. This is the kind of leadership that I find truly inspirational. It also caused me to think about the question, "When we experience success, what do we as leaders say to others? Who gets the credit when things go well?"

It is more common to read an interview with a leader of a successful organization talk about the importance of strategy and vision, rarely giving credit to the wide range of individuals that were key players in the successful effort. In a highly competitive environment, leaders may be tempted to take credit for another's idea and hard work. This can happen either by what the leader says or fails to say. Whether it happens by neglect or intention, the damage can be significant. The emotional impact of having someone take credit for your work was illustrated in the 1980's movie Working Girl. The main character (Tess) worked for an

ambitious boss who, in addition to other unappealing characteristics, freely took credit for her assistant's idea and initiative. This behavior was accurately portrayed as a personal and professional betrayal, with a demoralizing effect on Tess and her co-workers.

Conversely, we all recognize that there is virtue in drawing people into situations where credit is freely shared. When everyone on the team is recognized for their efforts, the result is an increase in team morale, individual self esteem, innovation and improved teamwork.

The reality is that future success is often determined by how credit is given and taken in a previously successful experience. This goes beyond whether or not the leader takes an inordinate amount of credit for achieving a positive result. It can be equally harmful to attribute the success of a team to a single individual. When leaders start by emphasizing the importance of the individual they usually end up with a group of "lone rangers". Focusing too much attention on individual behavior can undermine the spirit of cooperation that is essential to the achievement of complex tasks on a daily basis. This is a special challenge for those of us who live in the United States where we lift up rugged individualism and the advance the idea that one person can make a difference in the world. This societal leaning can become counterproductive if the value and work of others becomes less appreciated.

There are some things that leaders can do to encourage the sharing of credit in an organizational setting:

- Hold up the team as the hero. Daniel Goleman uses this term in his book "Working with Emotional Intelligence". This establishes the expectation that the path to success is not a solitary exercise.
- Create an open process that encourages a wide range of people to actively participate in the planning and execution of a potentially successful venture.
- Assign work to assure interdependency. Avoid situations where one person or another team member can get ahead at someone else's expense.
- Stay involved enough to make sure that no one is able to take sole credit for a group achievement.

When it comes to celebrating an accomplishment:

- Pay attention! Notice everyone who is involved in the successful venture and make sure that no one is left out.
- Provide recognition that is proportional to the effort – showering accolades on those with little or no participation in the effort only cheapens the praise that is rightfully given to those who have carried the load.
- Give special recognition to people for helping each other or who reach out to engage others to gain their voluntary cooperation.
- De-emphasize your personal role in achieving the desired result. One of my favorite observations is that good leaders take more than their share of the blame, and less than their share of the credit. Whenever possible give more credit to others and take less credit yourself.

One of the marks of a great leader is to look for opportunities to highlight the role of others in the success of the organization. If this is a characteristic of your leadership style, you will find that people will be drawn to you and the success you desire will be repeated over and over.

Benjamin Jowett, the English theologian remarked, "The way to get things done is not to mind who gets the credit for doing them". I don't think that is exactly right. In my experience the way leaders get things done is to make sure that they are known to be generous in giving credit to anyone and everyone who contributes to a successful outcome.



Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Reflections - A Five Year Journey

November 2010

Just over five years ago the first Reflections on Leadership newsletter appeared as an attempt to provide an ongoing narrative of the corporate culture of the organization we now call Presbyterian Senior Living. We had just completed a series of descriptive pieces on the organization's corporate culture, and it seemed like some kind of follow-up publication would sustain an interest in the study of leadership.

At the time I was not sure whether or not it would be a monthly or quarterly publication or what topics would be covered. I was also not entirely sure how it would be received. There were plenty of things that I wanted to say about leadership, but did not know if the intended audience would appreciate the message. There were a few basic guidelines for how Reflections on Leadership was supposed to work.

The audience was to be all levels of leadership in the organization from the voluntary leadership on the Board of Trustees to the front line leadership staff. This was based on the realization that the effectiveness of every organization is profoundly influenced by the quality of front line leaders – a group of individuals that is often overlooked. It was also important that a consistent message was given to the entire leadership team.

Every issue would focus on one topic, and would be contained on a single page. This was often a significant challenge. While there have been times when the margins and size of the font were shrunk significantly, this promise was kept. The intended audience was a busy group, and long articles are seldom read. Each issue of Reflections was expected to stand on its own as a concise message, rather than a series that must be read from the beginning to make sense.

The message should be personal. The personal nature of Reflections was to focus on lessons learned from failure and hard experience and the emotional content that is a part of being in a leadership position. While this might prove to be somewhat embarrassing at times, it was necessary to show that leadership is applied in a decidedly imperfect world.

The messages would focus on values and practical applications rather than theory.

Reflections on Leadership was to be more than an informational piece. There was a quote from General Robert McDermott, the first permanent Dean of the Air Force Academy that expressed my thinking in this regard:

"It is a matter of grave concern to me that the modern slogan for the pursuit of happiness and success has become 'knowledge is power'. It is my hope for planet earth that the leaders of the 21st century adopt the slogan that 'integrity is power'. We dare not let the explosive developments of science and technology obliterate the development of character as the driving force for man's behavior."

Reflections on Leadership followed this approach, with some rare exceptions. Even though the Reflections were published monthly, there were always a dozen or more topics waiting in the wings at any given time. This is probably because I continue to be inspired by all of you – my friends and colleagues in the work of serving seniors. With the advantage of technology in the distribution process, the audience has expanded a bit to include a limited audience outside of the PSL family.

What are some of the lessons of the first five years of the Reflections journey?

- Leadership is a discipline that can be learned. This has been clear in reading the Reflections stories of my experience as a leader. It is said that a smart person learns from their mistakes, a wise person learns from the mistakes of others. I have taken both paths in my learning experience. I have also witnessed tremendous growth in many of you as you have matured in your leadership roles – before and after the first issue of Reflections on Leadership.
- Leaders are hungry to understand how they can improve their leadership skills. Many of us who have spent years acquiring an impressive array of technical skills are delighted to discover that there are resources that can add to our leadership expertise.
- The investment in teaching effective leadership skills has a significant payoff in improving organizational performance. Most organizations exist in the same environment as their competitors, and must overcome the same challenges. The reason one organization is able to rise above its peers is almost completely related to the quality of leadership.
- Leadership is personal. Good leaders care about

the people they work with, and clearly express how much they care by where they spend their time and attention. Aloof leaders will never have the credibility they need to be effective over the long term.

- Every organization has a leadership culture that shapes and is being shaped by the leadership team as they work together. This is not just adding together the sum of the parts of the leaders that work within the organization. It is about setting expectations and holding each other accountable to meet those expectations. It is about shared values at all levels of the organization.
- The culture of caring in a human services organization (like resident centered care) can only blossom in the presence of a healthy leadership culture. Attempts to improve the culture of care will never work as a bottom up effort without a leadership that supports and encourages such initiatives.
- Leadership is a spiritual journey. The book of Micah 6:8 expresses it this way - "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." This is a clear roadmap for leaders to follow. Imagine a place where the leaders are described as fair, compassionate, and humble. That sounds like the kind of organization that anyone would like to work for, and one that will consistently deliver superior results.

I continue to add to my library of leadership books to learn more about best practices in an ever changing world. The people who inspire me most are not those with the most elaborate research projects or who are the most articulate writers, but those who are tested in the daily battles of leadership and prevail. That is a pretty accurate description of the leadership team at PSL that is a source of personal and professional inspiration. I look forward to continuing our journey together.

Steve

P.S. For those who have joined this journey during the past five years and would like a complete collection of Reflections on Leadership, it will be available through our website starting November 22. They will be available by yearly segments to easily capture your most enjoyed months or years together for the entire catalog of Reflections. www.presbyterianseNIorliving.org/about-us.

Reflections on Leadership



December 2010

Gift Giving

December is known as the gift giving season. Some of you reading this Reflection may even be contemplating your Christmas shopping list. The experience of gift giving 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 I should bring him 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. Recently 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 may be 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.

Last year for Christmas I gave my wife of nearly 40 years 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.

How is the concept of gift giving related to leadership? I have heard it said that work is the new neighborhood. 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. 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:

- Give your personal time and attention. 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. In an earlier Reflections on Leadership I told the story of an employee that made the following comments 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 such undeserved generosity.

Steve