

# Reflections on Leadership



RETIREMENT AND SENIOR  
CARE SERVICES

January 2008

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## *Building on a Firm Foundation*

Everyone who has ever been involved in a building project knows the value of laying a solid foundation. There are test borings and soil tests. Footers are dug to the appropriate depth. While this part of the work is not glamorous, it is where everything starts. Strong foundations are taken for granted. We seldom take anyone to a construction site and point to mounds of earth, a gaping hole in the ground and concrete footers and breathlessly exclaim – “Look at this foundation. Isn’t it magnificent?”

The value of a strong foundation is clear to anyone who visits the site of the famous leaning tower of Pisa in Italy. Situated behind the Cathedral in Pisa, the tower began leaning soon after the construction was initiated in 1173. Apparently the foundation was poorly laid. The tower is over 180 feet tall, and leans at an angle of just under 4%. While this does not sound like much, the tower’s appearance next to the perfectly straight angles of the cathedral is striking.

However, the startling part of this is that the architects and builders knew that the foundation was bad when the building began to lean after construction progressed on the third floor.

Instead of taking the structure down and starting over, there was an attempt to correct the lean of the building - compensating for the tilt by making the higher floors with one side taller than the other. This caused the building to tilt in the other direction, so the shape of the tower is actually curved. Construction took over 177 years to complete. Efforts to

stabilize it since then have cost millions of dollars. Yet for all of this effort, the tower remains a monument to what happens when the basic foundation of a building is bad.

The lessons for those of us who work in organizations are obvious. PHI’s stated values, mission and vision are the foundation for everything we do to benefit the people we have been called to serve. If we are to be successful, we must get the foundation right. That is why we spend so much time and attention on those foundation stones during our employee orientation and in training the leaders at every level of the organization. It is why we take the time to articulate the leadership culture at PHI, including these monthly reflections on leadership. As we continue to grow we must strengthen those foundation stones. Our foundation must be able to support each new layer of buildings and programs that are added to the PHI family.

The Bible is clear about the need for a solid foundation. In Matthew, Chapter 7, Jesus contrasts two builders – one who builds on a solid rock foundation with another who decided to build on sand. “The wise man built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” But the foolish man who built his house on the sand experienced an entirely different outcome. “The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

The Biblical lesson is to build on a solid foundation. This is true in the lives of people and the organizations in which we work. We never know what the future holds, but we know that eventually the storms of adversity will come. In such times we can weather the storm if we have established a solid foundation. If we have chosen the wrong foundation, it is only a matter of time before a collapse occurs.

What does this mean for us as PHI’s leaders? It means that we take time to make sure that our shared values are communicated to the people we work with – both in words and deeds—to ensure a solid foundation of understanding of serving others within PHI. I subscribe to the notion that the most basic aspect of leadership is teaching. All leaders need to be good teachers. In this role we should consciously spend as much time teaching our values as we do in teaching the specific skills that we expect from those we lead. Focusing on the basics may not always be fashionable, but it is the only way to build a legacy of care and compassion that will stand the test of time.

Steve

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RETIREMENT AND SENIOR  
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February 2008

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## *Being Accountable*

When my children reached the age when they were becoming more independent, the issue of accountability seemed to become a frequent topic of discussion. As children mature, their sense of independence creates a natural friction over the need to keep parents informed about where they are and when they are coming home. One of my most vivid memories is a conversation with my son, who concluded our discussion with "I can't wait until I can get out on my own so I don't have to tell anyone where I am going and what I am doing!"

I could only smile at that response, because I knew that in time he would discover that all relationships have an element of accountability. My son is now a devoted husband and father of two adorable children. One of the great joys of having adult children is the opportunity to do things together. Now, when I call him to see if he can get away for a few hours to go fishing, his instinctive response is – "Can I call you back? I need to make sure that it is OK with my wife." He has discovered that being accountable for where you are and when you are going to return is one of the basic expectations of being a husband and father. I have resisted the impulse to remind him of the irony of his current behavior in light of our earlier conversation, and appreciate it as another one of the circular paths in the lives of parent and child. In addition to being a common courtesy, mutual accountability illustrates respect, depth of commitment, and an understanding of the needs of people we care about. With this perspective accountability is rarely seen as a burden.

Accountability can also be a difficult thing to discuss in organizations, especially if it involves our being accountable to someone else. Within PHI, our model of leadership includes a strong element of what we like to call "mutual accountability". We have adopted this model for two very specific reasons. First, the complexity of our

environment means that none of us can be an island. We cannot be successful without the support of other team members, often in other departments that are not under our direct control. Secondly, the core values of transparency and servant leadership require an openness and cooperation that extend beyond traditional organizational boundaries.

This philosophy is based on the understanding that we are all ultimately measured by whether or not the people we serve are satisfied in their experience with PHI. Anything less reminds me of the picture of a group of people standing in a boat half filled with water with the caption, "That is not my problem. The hole is in the other end of the boat".

At its most basic level, the foundation of our mutual accountability starts with adhering to the Mission, Vision and Values of PHI. Other measures of accountability can be found in financial and operational measures like budgets and quality assessment tools, but our shared commitment to serving others is the frame of reference that makes everything else work.

If we accept the concept of mutual accountability, then who specifically are we most accountable to? There are a few obvious answers to this question – PHI board leadership, the people we serve, our constituents and donors, and governmental agencies that regulate PHI. But as leaders we often overlook the fact that we are also accountable to those we lead.

At PHI, being accountable to those we lead includes meeting the following expectations:

- Walking the walk - setting an example of the behavior we expect in those we lead – like honesty, integrity, strong work ethic, respect and fair treatment of others, and putting the needs of those we serve above our own personal interests.

- Talking the talk – Keeping resident centered care and other key values as frequent topics of conversation.
- Formal Structure - Reinforcing our words and deeds with written position descriptions, policies, procedures and work routines that operationalize everything we value.
- Setting clear expectations – letting people know how we define and measure success, particularly as it relates to their specific work performance.
- Providing feedback – both positive and negative in a timely fashion.
  - Recognizing superior performance.
  - Promptly dealing with unmet expectations.
- Providing support – looking for tangible ways to help those we lead to become more effective in the work they do. In his book *Hardwiring Excellence*, Quint Studer suggests a simple approach. "We want to make this a better place for you to work. What do I need to do?", and then listen to the response.

Mutual accountability includes the freedom to respectfully express our expectations to other members of the PHI team **and** to accept their observations without becoming defensive. It is not a license to be unduly critical toward our co-workers or to deflect attention to others when we feel pressure to improve our performance.

There are occasions when mutual accountability can be inconvenient and irritating. On occasion, we may even identify with the sentiments of my then 18 year old son. But when the dust settles and we have time to think about creating an environment that sustains excellence over time, it is apparent that the only way to inspire others to join us in a common mission is to be mutually accountable for the results.

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March 2008

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## *Finding Wholeness*

At PHI we are privileged to serve many seniors who are blessed to be able to live vibrant and interesting lives well into their advanced years. PHI facilities can be places of joy, where people can experience community, make new friends and pursue their lifelong interests.

But the reality is that a large part of the ministry of Presbyterian Homes is about providing care to people who are profoundly affected by illness. Most of the employees who work for PHI work with residents with some degree of physical or emotional need. We provide supportive services in independent living apartments and cottages. Some of the residents of PHI assisted living facilities would have been cared for in a skilled nursing facility only a few years ago. Our skilled nursing facilities now serve people that were formerly admitted to hospitals. Many are in need of rehabilitation and will eventually be sent home. But others suffer the effects of cognitive impairment or debilitating illness that require 24 hour supportive care or in the case of terminal illness, palliative care. This is often difficult work, and takes a special kind of person with an extraordinary amount of patience and compassion.

From my earliest days as a nurse working for PHI, I have been in awe of the people who have been called to this type of service as employees. The work can be physically hard. It can also be emotionally draining. On many occasions church and family members have asked me "How do you find such

compassionate people, and how can they do this hard work every day without getting burned out?" Even with the experience of working as a nurse and knowing many of these staff members personally, this is a difficult question to answer. Some people do experience burn out, while others seem to retain their sense of equilibrium.

Recently I had the opportunity to hear John Bell, from the Iona Community in Scotland. He told the story of a time when he was charged with doing a story in South Africa for the BBC that took him to a small AIDS treatment center. As a part of the early morning routine in this center, they gathered to pray, sing, and dance. After the camera crew got the entire experience on film, John spoke to the woman who ran the clinic. He remarked to her that as he watched this joyful experience unfold, everyone was mixed up, and he could not distinguish the patients from the staff. Her response was that this was intentional. **"For the healthy to be whole, they must be touched by the sick."** This struck me as a profound and moving observation. In an environment that could be described as hopeless, they had found the secret. In order to be whole persons, those who were healthy and were called to serve needed to touch and be touched by those who were sick.

This mirrors my experience with PHI staff as they work with residents who suffer from the ravages of Alzheimer's disease or terminal illness. They provide the comfort of physical touch and never cease to be touched by those

they serve. The experience of being touched continually softens their heart and makes them whole persons, able to serve with kindness and compassion.

How do we support and encourage those we lead who have these difficult jobs? First of all we thank them for the kind of people they are and for the impact of their work on the lives of the people we serve. Secondly, as leaders in a ministry of care and compassion, we must also be touched by the sick. In some cases, that means reaching out to provide physical comfort. But every leader can be touched emotionally by those who need us most. Our colleagues in the ministry of PHI cannot be fooled. They know and respect true compassion when they see it.

The role of leadership in shaping a culture of compassion is not an academic exercise - it calls us to make a personal investment. If you want to be a complete leader, remember this; **"For the healthy to be whole, they must be touched by the sick."**

Steve

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## The Pursuit of Unity

Whenever organizations seek to do important things, especially when the task is large, ongoing, or complex, there is a need for unity among those who are charged with achieving results. We all know what happens when the element of unity is absent – indecision, wasted energy and resources, confusion, emotional stress and a reluctance to take risks. Whether it is poor service in a restaurant or poor outcomes in a health care institution, the absence of unity is usually at the core of poor performance. One of the most evident symptoms of disunity is poor morale. While this can be difficult to describe, it is often characterized by negativity, grumbling, and low expectations.

The story of the Exodus in the Bible is a vivid example of disunity and failure. After the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, they were confronted with the decision of whether or not to enter the Promised Land. Overcome with fear and doubt, they lapsed into grumbling about their circumstances. Faced with a large task and a lack of unity they ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years until an entire generation had died off and they could build a new nation with a renewed spirit.

Almost everyone will agree on the need for unity. There is far less agreement about what kind of unity is needed for an organization to be successful. While unity can be defined in many ways, I would like to focus on three aspects of unity related to organizational performance:

- **Unity of Command** is the term used for the principle that no one should report to more than one boss. Originally taken from Sun Tsau's *The Art of War*, it was later applied to leading organizations. The emphasis on unity is focused on discipline, authority and a clear sense of direction. In

high stress situations where someone's life is at stake – like the military or an operating room, it becomes a primary requirement for success.

- **Unity of Thought (ideological purity)** is often desired by voluntary groups like political parties, as a means of creating a common message to influence others to join them in support of a candidate. The assumption is that the more unified the opinions of the group, the more strength they have in making things happen without the need to compromise with others. There is an inherent desire for a common approach to solving problems.

- **Unity of Purpose** - An overarching agreement on what the group is trying to achieve. This does not require that everyone think exactly alike. When unified for a common purpose, leadership roles can be interchangeable depending on the task to be accomplished, and new and challenging ideas are welcomed and incorporated.

While unity of purpose sounds easy it is elusive because there is only one way to experience it – through humble leadership. The Apostle Paul described it in these words from the second Chapter of Philippians, "Be **like minded** having the same love, being of **one spirit and purpose**. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others." The message is clear, without humility, there is no unity of purpose.

Once leaders put on the cloak of humility, there are several important questions to resolve:

- **What should we be unified in doing?** Resident centered care. Rich

Schutt, my good friend from Rest Haven Christian Services expresses it this way - "the Resident is President." If the resident is the center of our attention, it is easier to put aside our self-centered thoughts and be sensitive to the needs of those around us.

- **How can we promote unity?** By striving to be peacemakers, modeling humility and optimism, and encouraging others to assume the best motives in those who hold differing opinions.

- **How is grumbling different from an honest difference of opinion?** An honest difference of opinion includes an intention to resolve differences and reach common ground. Those who grumble do not seek resolution.

- **How can we deal with those who foster disunity?** By encouraging and rewarding creativity, flexibility, and initiative and insisting that team members be mutually accountable for seeking common solutions that will benefit those we serve.

The pursuit of unity should never be seen as an excuse to squelch new ideas or dissenting opinions. We need those who question commonly accepted ideas. Without innovation or new approaches to challenge the status quo, success can be short lived and obsolescence is inevitable.

At PHI, we strive for unity of purpose as expressed in our mission, vision and values. It is only when we are fully committed on that level that we can achieve sustained excellence.

Steve

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## *Spring Cleaning - Figuring Out What to Keep*

Every year when spring arrives things begin to change at our house. I start to get up earlier in the morning to do things outside before I leave for work. I guess you could call it spring fever, but I seem to have a lot more energy when the weather improves. My wife might call my burst of energy "seasonal hyperactivity". In addition to cleaning up the yard I begin to take a serious look at the garage and basement, finding inspiration to do what my mom always called "spring cleaning".

Spring cleaning is not just about rearranging things. At our house spring cleaning is an activity that my wife and I sometimes do together because we have differing ideas about what we should keep and what should be thrown away in the spring cleaning process. Some of her treasures are the kind of things that I would throw away first if I was left on my own. She, on the other hand fails to grasp the value of a stray piece of lumber or a bucket full of nuts and bolts that just might be useful someday. It is always interesting to see how the art of compromise works when faced with the decision of what to keep and what to throw away.

Figuring out what to keep and what to throw away is a question for every organization that exists in a changing environment. We all know that some things are intended to be used and discarded while others are organizational heirlooms that are treasured for generations. The difficulty with organizational "spring cleaning" is that deciding what to

keep and what to throw away often depends on your point of view. Some organizations opt to keep everything and are eventually paralyzed by the clutter.

Some time ago I heard from a pastor friend who visited Turkey with a church group. During the tour, they visited a place that specialized in handmade Turkish carpets. These carpets were painstakingly constructed over months and years of an individual's life in order to create just the right design. They were told that the wool carpets that were being made were expected to last about 300 years and the silk carpets that were more densely constructed could last up to 700 years. I am not certain that this is all true or is a marketing pitch, but I was impressed with the durability of anything that could be used for so long.

There are some things about an organization that can and should last for generations. Our values and purpose are anchors that give us stability. For PHI, our mission represents things that we believe to be timeless: Christian understanding, compassion, and a sense of belonging. They are PHI's handmade carpets. It is our responsibility to care for these heirlooms and pass them on to the next generation of PHI leadership.

The methods used to accomplish our mission, however, are changing and must change if we are to have an effective ministry in the future. The

bricks and mortar that surround the programs we design to serve older adults age and become obsolete. We need to replace outdated buildings and redesign programs in order to meet the changing needs of our constituents. PHI has embraced new technology to provide better service and to become more efficient. Even the language we use to describe the services we provide needs to be updated. The first letter sent to me as a new PHI employee 36 years ago was addressed to the "Matron and Inmates of the Presbyterian Home". This is not language one would use today to describe any of our employees or the people we serve.

So the real question that we face as leaders is how to tell the difference between the disposable and the timeless. Sometimes it is easy, like the need to change computer hardware and software. Other times it is not so clear – like the policies that define the way we treat residents and employees that raises the question - are we adjusting to new market conditions or sacrificing sacred values?

These decisions are most effectively accomplished when surrounded by the kind of discussion that may be heard in our garage or basement at this time of year. "Honey, can you explain to me again why we can't throw that away? It really doesn't look very valuable to me."

Steve

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## *Mission Minded Servant Leaders*

Throughout the year members of the PHI family volunteer to serve others in what are often called mission projects. These may be local, national or international efforts to reach out to meet the needs of the less fortunate. Volunteering in a local soup kitchen, working with Habitat for Humanity, doing construction work in the gulf coast, or serving in a foreign country, the PHI family reaches out to help. This comes to mind in June because this is the month that my wife Rhonda and I spend time in rural Honduras in a medical mission sponsored by the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church.

The benefit of doing this kind of work is obvious in our neighborhood, our society and the world. But I have heard the question related to serving in mission projects, "Would it not be more efficient to take the money that we spend on travel and other expenses and just send a check to pay someone else to do it in our place?" In some cases it might be more cost effective and more convenient for us to write a check and mail it in. Money is always needed to do mission work. But this approach misses two major benefits of personal involvement.

One of the recurring themes that I have heard from people who have volunteered in the hurricane Katrina disaster is the impact of their personal presence. People who are struggling to rebuild their lives need to know that they are not forgotten. Being there personally conveys to people in need that you care about them. The power of this encouragement lingers long after the mission trip is over. Secondly, personal involvement changes the perspective and life of the person who serves. Our outlook is altered when our thoughts are less centered on our own needs. In the book *Gross National Happiness*, Arthur C. Brooks cites a study on how a person's outlook is affected by volunteering. It concluded that people who volunteer in service to others are 42% more likely to claim that they are

very happy when compared to those who do not volunteer. Helping someone else can actually lead to a more satisfying life.

You might be wondering why this is a topic for Reflections on Leadership. How will volunteering make us better leaders? One of PHI's four primary leadership values is Servant Leadership. In our foundation documents on leadership and in past Reflections we have articulated what this means in the day-to-day behavior of leaders. Like most of you I am involved in a variety of educational events throughout the year on the best way to serve seniors and to do my job better. Unfortunately none of the educational offerings on leadership at the state and national level are focused on servant leadership.

It is not easy to stay in touch with servant leadership and keep it on the forefront of our thinking as leaders when everything in the world around us is focused on technical expertise, status, power, and privilege. I believe that spending time serving others outside of our work environment is like taking a refresher course on the virtue of being a servant. Mission projects require that we give up the title and authority that may accompany our respective leadership role and concentrate on meeting the needs of another human being. Comforting a crying child or relieving someone's pain or hunger can be a powerful lesson that can influence our attitude as leaders for the rest of the year. It can also better sensitize us to PHI's mission of Christian understanding, compassion, and a sense of belonging.

There is no shortage of places to volunteer to help someone else. The educational opportunities in the school of servant leadership are all around us. But we must take the initiative to embrace them if we intend to be true servant leaders. If we make the effort, the results will surely follow.

Recently I experienced a vivid example of the impact of servant leadership in two contrasting situations. The first was a contact from a staff member of one of our affordable housing units. She informed me that the husband of one of the apartment residents had been in a nursing facility (not a PHI location) had been ill for some time. He had received good care, but she was distressed to hear that when he was near death that the facility neglected to call the family when it was evident that he was in his final hours. When the family was finally called, they could not get there in time, and this very devoted family was unable to be with him when he died.

Later that day I received an e mail describing how a similar situation was handled at the Presbyterian Home at Hollidaysburg. When a resident in the nursing center suddenly took a turn for the worse in the middle of the night they immediately notified her son and daughter-in-law. Unfortunately, the resident's husband was home in bed with his hearing aid out and could not hear the phone despite several attempts to contact him by Cindy McMullen, the nurse in charge. Because of the precarious medical condition, the resident's daughter-in-law did not want to leave her side. Denny Clarr, who worked on the 1st floor giving medications, was asked to go to the resident's home and get her husband. He left the facility and was able to awaken the resident's husband and bring him to be with his wife and family. Fortunately the resident recovered, but the willingness for these leaders to reach out and personally go the extra mile speaks volumes about the character of the leadership closest to the resident. The power of servant leadership!

Steve

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July 2008

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## What does a Leader Look Like?

Some of the earliest attempts to study leadership focused on a search for the perfect description of a leader. It was believed that some people were born to be leaders and possessed a charisma that set them apart from the rest of humanity. A related theory of leadership was based on the premise that it was possible to study the behavior of effective leaders and to imitate them. While this may be a bit more encouraging to those of us who do not possess a magnetic personality, both of these approaches ignore the historical fact that great leaders have come in a variety of shapes and sizes – literally and figuratively.

There are, however, two valuable insights that we can take from these elementary views of leadership. The first is that the people we work with have their own expectations of what a good leader is and how one should behave. The second is that all of us have our own preconceived notions about leadership. Whenever I am asked to teach on the subject of effective leadership I like to begin with an exercise that consists of two questions:

- Think about the person you have worked for in your life who you consider to be the best leader you know. What characteristics describe this person?
- Think of a person you know who has been a particularly poor leader. What are the reasons you feel he or she was a poor leader?

Each person is charged with creating two lists; one profile of effective leadership and another description of ineffective leadership. What has always amazed me about this exercise is that people have a keen insight into the characteristics that are displayed by good and poor leaders. At the end of the exercise I challenge the students to keep both lists in their desk drawer and refer to it every morning. It becomes a “do list” and “don’t list” for leaders. While there is a lot more to be understood about the way great leaders think and behave and why certain approaches work, this list will cover many of the high points.

More recent studies of effective leadership have observed that great leaders have an internal compass or sense of direction – an awareness of the values that guide their behavior. In his book “Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel

Goleman calls this “Self Mastery” or an “Inner Rudder”. He further identifies a number of critical elements within the solid core of the strong leader:

- Self control – Managing disruptive emotions and impulses effectively.
- Trustworthiness – Displaying honesty and integrity.
- Conscientiousness – Dependability and responsibility in fulfilling obligations (which he later calls the “Quiet Virtue”).
- Adaptability – Flexibility in handling change and challenges.
- Innovation - Being open to novel ideas, approaches, and new information.

The Biblical reference to the importance of character is expressed in the qualifications for Elders and Deacons in the book of 1 Timothy chapter 3. In order to qualify as a leader a person needs to be “Above reproach, sober minded, self controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, well thought of by outsiders, dignified, not devious in speech, and not greedy for dishonest gain.” Two thousand years later, these are still the kind of words that show up in a description of what we expect of those who lead us.

Why is it important to understand what a leader thinks and feels? After all, isn’t it good enough just to behave like a leader should behave? If only it was that simple. Our motives count because they shape the way we see the world. To support this claim, Goleman cites a saying from India “When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees are the pockets”. Secondly, sometimes it is possible to believe one thing and act contrary to that belief. However, when pressure is added to the equation, the barrier between what we believe and the way we act crumbles or may even disappear. Since time pressure and financial pressure are present in nearly every leadership situation, it is impossible to fake your way to being a good leader. At best this is a recipe for inconsistency. In moments of fatigue and frustration it is easy to let your guard down and do something without thinking. One of the most damaging things that can be said about a leader is that he “talks the talk, but does not walk the walk”.

I have one final observation on the characteristics of a strong leader. Leadership is not about being a perfect person. All of us at one time or another have failed to live up to the standards we hold dear. Recognizing this reality, it is important to cultivate a strong sense of self awareness. In the book, “Heroic Leadership”, Chris Lowney cites the Jesuits as exhibiting the kind of inner reflection that is a key to developing an authentic and strong identity that is at the heart of their success as leaders. He observes that “Only those who know their weaknesses can deal with them or even hope to conquer them”. This may be the toughest part of being a leader - the realization that we are forever a work in process. It is also somewhat reassuring.

Many years ago in graduate school I had the opportunity to work during the summer for one of my professors, a highly respected, larger than life figure in the field of long term care. Going into the situation as a student I expected to witness perfection in practice. What I found was a truly remarkable individual and an organization that did many things right. But he also struggled with some things that trouble all leaders – finding and selecting the right employees, getting team members to place the goals of the organization above their competing interests, and finding ways to engage every employee in the mission of the organization.

Rather than being discouraged to discover that the giants of the field occasionally fall short, I was comforted to realize that even the most extraordinary leader can struggle with applying leadership principles in every day situations. When we understand this, we are set free from the expectations of perfection to blaze our own authentic leadership path. The ability to lead is not a gift from heaven, nor is it the ability to imitate someone else’s success. It is a combination of a strong ethical foundation, a love of people, and hard work – a description that sounds well within the reach of most mortals. What does a leader look like? If you really want to know, look in the mirror.

Steve

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RETIREMENT AND SENIOR  
CARE SERVICES

August 2008

## Leadership and Vision

There is a lot of attention given to the role of vision as a critical element in leadership. Leaders who are termed "visionary" are considered to be among the best in their field. But what does it really mean when we say that someone is a visionary leader? Clayton Christensen in his book "Seeing What's Next", suggests that leaders can predict change even when there is no hard data to guide decision making and offers some theories on how this can be done. Others suggest that leaders with vision possess a special gift or intuition. If this is true, what about the rest of us that do not feel the least bit clairvoyant?

The need for vision in leadership has always been critical. Moses, the premier example of leadership in the Old Testament, was able to articulate a vision of the Promised Land that sustained the Children of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. Proverbs 29:18 tells us that "Where there is no vision, the people perish (KJV) or "Where there is no prophetic vision, the people are discouraged" (ESV). Organizations that lack vision in leadership are often described as confused, demoralized, or without direction.

Visionary leadership has been called a combination of insight and foresight. From my perspective every person is capable of visionary leadership if they take the time to cultivate several critical skills:

- Sorting through a complex set of facts or circumstances and recognizing the difference between what is important and what is extraneous – like listening to music and distinguishing the melody from background noise.
- Staying focused on what is important without getting distracted by side issues. A wise southerner once told me – "Young man, never forget the main thing is the main thing".
- Synthesize information from various sources to find themes and connections that help to understand what your present and future customers and employees want.

- Seeing the world through the lens of possibilities instead of a series of obstacles. This becomes the foundation for innovation and taking calculated risks.
- Communicate in a way that inspires others, engaging them to work with you to shape the future, recognizing that people are inspired by leaders who articulate a vision of what they intend to accomplish.

The role of optimism in visionary leadership is an interesting part of the equation. Douglas MacGregor's theory X and theory Y from the 1960's was essentially a description of the pessimist and optimist as a leader. Theory X described people as basically lazy, must be constantly watched, and motivated primarily by fear or coercion. Theory Y described people as basically responsible, with a sense of pride in their work, capable of self direction and self control, possess problem solving skills, and are willing and able to use their imagination and creativity at work. MacGregor contended that the leader's point of view was the lens that altered his or her vision.

As important a sense of optimism is to success, purely positive thinking can result in a loss of discernment. For the eternal optimist, everything will be OK if we just put a positive spin on everything - there are no disappointments, just opportunities.

In his book "Good To Great" Jim Collins interviewed Jim Stockdale, who was a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1965-1973. When asked how he survived longer than any other prisoner of war of that era, he remarked that he "never lost faith in the end of the story". When asked who did not make it out when he was able to endure, Stockdale said – "the optimists". This may appear to be a contradiction. Aren't optimists the people with vision? The answer is found in what Collins calls the Stockdale Paradox – "Retain faith that you will prevail regardless of the circumstances, and at the same time – confront the brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be". The

optimists who ultimately gave up forgot the second half of the equation.

What does all of this mean as we aspire to be visionary leaders?

- Be positive – but never back away from confronting the real problems that face you or your team at any given time.
- Take time to listen to those around you and, to the extent possible, engage others in shaping a vision of the future.
- Make sure that your vision is consistent with the rest of the organization, and take action to work out inconsistencies when they appear.
- When you have a picture of what you would like the future to look like, devise a strategy to overcome the obstacles that stand between you and the desired goal.
- Put together a plan to communicate your vision and test it out to make sure that it is clear and concise.
- Take the initiative and move forward with a sense of purpose and urgency.

Do visionary leaders make mistakes? Absolutely. Recently I read an interview with a wealthy investor that had incorrectly predicted several changes in the stock market. When asked how he could be wrong so often and still be so successful, he remarked, "It is because I am quick to realize when I am wrong."

At PHI we believe that visionary leadership is needed at every level of the organization. This is not a luxury. Our commitment to excellence depends on it. Being a visionary leader is not about having a special gift or the ability to predict the future with certainty. It is about paying attention, setting goals, and decisively moving ahead. Hard work, but well worth it.

Steve

# Reflections on Leadership



RETIREMENT AND SENIOR  
CARE SERVICES

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## C O U R A G E

In the last issue of Reflections on Leadership, the need to confront the reality of the environment was highlighted as an essential element of visionary leadership. However, there are leaders who are adept at identifying and describing problems that need to be addressed, but have difficulty moving from awareness to action. The insight and foresight of visionary leadership must be combined with the courage to take action.

A number of years ago I heard a teacher describe her principal as the worst leader ever. He was a pleasant person - kind and considerate to his team members. But he could not make a decision. He was constantly changing his mind, most often influenced by the last person to speak with him. The effect on the teachers was demoralizing. Even when he made a decision everyone was reluctant to move forward because they knew that he would not stay the course if there was any objection raised by a teacher, student or parent. It was her opinion that he was a great guy, but lacked the courage to be a leader. Unfortunately this story is not that uncommon. The language may vary a bit - terms like unsure, lacking self confidence, indecisive, timid, vacillating, or a slow decision maker are ways we describe leaders who lack courage.

We are inspired by leaders who display courage when the going gets rough. The images of Moses standing up to the ruler of Egypt; David as a young shepherd, running to meet the giant warrior Goliath armed with only a sling and 5 smooth stones; or the Apostle Peter fearlessly proclaiming his faith before the same people who had crucified Jesus, are Biblical examples of courage under fire. Deep in our hearts, we all want to be a person of courage.

This begs the question - Is courage just within reach for these larger than life figures, or is it in all of us? It is comforting to know that even these courageous people had moments of fear and doubt. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness after fleeing Pharaoh's court as a young man and resisted the call of God at the burning

bush. Later in David's life he was reduced to living in a cave, hiding from his enemies. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times in the hours before the crucifixion.

What is this thing we call courage, and where do we learn about how it works? The lessons are often found in the most unlikely places.

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

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

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

What is the point of this childhood story? First, we learn courage in a variety of ways, and some of the most vivid lessons can be unpleasant. Whenever I have been tempted to avoid dealing with a difficult situation I am reminded of this experience, and my

mother's words "sooner or later you have to face the music, it might as well be now." This and other similar lessons have led me to the conclusion that it is not a good idea to build your strategy around running away from a problem. Even in difficult situations, stand up to it and take action.

Secondly, I learned something about how to teach courage to those you care about. After confronting the schoolyard bully I had an interesting conversation with my mom. My initial reaction was "Mom, what were you thinking? I thought your mom was always supposed to be in your corner." She explained that she had selected the terms on which I would have to confront this bully. She was watching from inside of the house and could have intervened had things gotten out of control. If it had happened several blocks away, the safety net would not have been there. Providing a safe place to make a courageous decision is a good way to nurture leadership skills in the people you work with. Give a person room to take risks, grow and develop, but protect them from a catastrophic consequence.

Courage can be a misused virtue. It can be used as an excuse for taking foolhardy risks or stubbornly clinging to an idea that is not working in spite of evidence to the contrary - subjects to be addressed at another time.

Not all of us are called to be heroes, but we all can have courage in our role as a leader. How? By doing what is right when it is not popular or convenient, speaking up when being silent is easier, or facing hard issues squarely and resolving them instead of procrastinating. When I think of courage, I am reminded of the title of the song by Jana Stanfield - **What would I do today if I were brave?** Something to think about.

Steve

# Reflections on Leadership



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## Two Eyed Leaders

We live in what is referred to as the information age. From the printed media, radio, television, and the internet we have access to more information than at any time in human history. In his book *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman contends that the speed and ease of transmission of information is the great leveler that will usher in a new age of opportunity for people around the world – a phenomenon that he calls Globalization 3.0. This argument is built on the basic assumption that information leads to knowledge, and knowledge leads to success.

While the argument is compelling, it has always made me a bit uneasy. We do live in a time where we have more facts and information at our disposal. But more complete knowledge does not always result in success. Many leaders today are awash in information, rich in knowledge, but woefully lacking in wisdom. Losing knowledge in the blizzard of information, and wisdom with the accumulation of knowledge has been expressed by T.S. Eliot in “Choruses from the Rock.”

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Even though this was penned in 1934, it appears to be a profound and timely observation for our world today.

In an earlier reflection on leadership and vision, visionary leadership was called the combination of insight and foresight. But where does insight and foresight originate? Foresight is most often found in knowledge that comes from an awareness of history and context, and the study of emerging trends. Insight is found in wisdom. One could say that visionary leadership is the combination of knowledge and wisdom.

I have a friend who has lost vision in one of his eyes. The vision in one eye is still excellent, and he has remained active – playing golf and doing most of the things that he has done throughout his life – but it has not been easy. Having vision in only one eye has been an adjustment, because it has

deprived him of depth perception. It turns out that we need both eyes working together to be able to accurately judge distances and to see the world in three dimensions. When it comes to leadership we need to see clearly through two eyes - knowledge and wisdom. Unfortunately we live in a world of mostly one eyed leaders.

### Knowledge and Wisdom

Knowledge is important. Good leaders are always marked by a natural curiosity and desire to learn more, collecting and organizing information in the pursuit of knowledge. At PHI we routinely review research and cutting edge ideas that are being tried out elsewhere to see if they apply to PHI's mission. This search for knowledge is an essential and constant process as new information and facts emerge. But especially in leadership, the accumulation of knowledge is insufficient. We all know of intellectually gifted people who are poor leaders. I believe that even though these very bright people possess a great deal of knowledge, they can be as limited as those who only see with one eye.

Wisdom on the other hand is defined as being marked by deep understanding, keen discernment, and a capacity for sound judgment. While knowledge can tell us what is happening. Wisdom can tell us why something is happening through the power of acute observation, deduction, and discernment. Wisdom also has more staying power than knowledge. Chuck Swindol has observed that knowledge is important, but ever changing. Wisdom, when acquired, lingers.

But if wisdom is important to effective leadership, how does one acquire it? In my opinion, the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is by far the best place to look for the keys to finding and applying wisdom. So what does the author of the book of Proverbs tell us about how to gain wisdom? The first thing we are told is that “the fear (reverential trust) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The origin of wisdom is beyond values derived from human feelings, knowledge or experience. The Apostle Paul expressed it this way in chapter 10 of the

second letter to the Corinthians, “When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.” True wisdom is founded on something sturdier, solid and more durable than the feelings of the moment. We all need a point of reference outside of ourselves as an anchor when everything else is shifting.

An illustration of this principle is provided by Bill George in his book *True North*. He recalls a story by Andrea Jung who was feeling the pressure of time as she made an important career decision. As she struggled to make up her mind, she received an important piece of advice from one of her board members. “Follow your compass, not your clock.”

Left to our own devices we can be tempted to follow the clock (which is ever changing) when we should be focused on the compass (which gives us an unwavering sense of direction). As a reminder of this principle I keep a small brass compass by my telephone. When pressured by the clock (or the telephone), I focus on the compass. Every leader needs a reliable compass. We need to know right from wrong and to distinguish selflessness from selfishness. Wisdom protects us from the variations of our emotional state and the pressure that surrounds us.

Solomon, the writer of most of the book of Proverbs knew what it meant to lead with two eyes. His prayer in the first chapter of II Chronicles on assuming his new role as leader of his country was “Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people.”

So the lesson on visionary leadership is this. Don't be a one eyed leader – if you want to see the future in three dimensions use both eyes. Strive for knowledge – acquire wisdom.

Steve

# Reflections on Leadership



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## Winning Teams

As I write this reflection, the World Series is underway. The two best teams in baseball are vying to become champions of what has been called America's pastime. What strikes me about watching this spectacle is that while there are stars on every team, the team with the most individual stars is not guaranteed the victor's crown. In fact, there are a number of teams with more star players that are watching the game on TV along with the rest of America. To emphasize the point, one of the teams in the Series has one of the lower payrolls of any team in baseball. There is something about putting a team together that is more than just collecting the most talented people in any field of endeavor. What is true of a baseball team is true of all organizations. This has led me to think about how we select members of the PHI team and how each of us as leaders can improve the performance of our team.

Who we chose to be on our team may be the most critical decision we make as leaders. If we get that wrong, there is little else that we can do to deliver a successful result. Jim Collins uses the image of "getting the right people on the bus" to illustrate the importance of selecting the right team members. He also talks about getting people in the right seats. This is a great analogy. However there is a complicating factor. Complex organizations cannot be compared to one bus. They are often a fleet of busses (that we call work groups or teams) that must travel in the same direction. To make matters worse, people on one bus must often interact with people on other busses. In this environment, how we select people to get on one of the fleet of busses must be consistent and take into account the needs of the larger organization. It is not enough to have one department or work group be successful. We succeed or fail together. Great service is a positive and seamless experience.

So how do we decide who gets on our team? Typically there are three things that are the focus of an employment interview:

- **Intellectual and physical ability** – is the person smart enough and to grasp the complexity of the work to be performed and physically able to do the required tasks?

- **Expertise** – does the individual display the range of skills that can be specifically applied to the job in question?

- **Experience** – Has the individual demonstrated the capacity to do the work in other settings? Does their work history suggest that they will be a reliable team member?

However, we all know that this is not enough. We have all selected people to fill positions that looked like a great hire when we used the above questions, only to discover later that they were not the right person for the job. There are other considerations that are harder to evaluate:

- **Humility** – This is a virtue that is not widely admired or practiced. The simplest way I can express the idea is whether or not the person is focused on others or if they think the world is all about them. In his book "Its Not About Me" Max Lucado likens this understanding to Copernicus discovery in 1543 that the earth was not the center of the universe. It changes the perception of your own importance and position in the cosmos. I recall seeing a billboard on an interstate highway, designed to recruit registered nurses to a nearby hospital with a message, "Working as a nurse at XYZ hospital is all about you." I wondered what the care was like at a hospital where all of the nurses had the opinion that working at the hospital was all about them. This is not the life of service that was emphasized in my nursing education nearly 40 years ago.

- **Self awareness** – We need team members that are confident in his or her abilities, but aware of their own imperfection. Lack of confidence can cause all kinds of problem behavior – defensiveness, hypersensitivity, inability to take responsibility for a problem or concern, and the need to be right all of the time – all incompatible to developing a cohesive and high performing team. Having a realistic appreciation of your strengths and weaknesses is a key to being an effective leader or team member.

- **Relational orientation** – respect for others, empathy (the ability to see the world from another person's perspective), recognition of other's strengths and abilities and a willingness to help someone else succeed. This critical talent can be tainted by our naturally competitive instincts. I heard someone once say that when you walk a mile in someone else's shoes, you have the benefit of being a mile in front of them and possessing their shoes. This is the opposite of seeing the world from another's perspective!

Consistently applying these additional standards will go a long way to making sure that we are getting the right people on our own bus, and on all of the busses that are part of the PHI family.

When it comes to team building, it is not enough to just select the right people as your team members. Leaders must apply the same criteria to themselves as they do to those we add to the team. I have a few simple questions connected to the selection criteria listed above that I routinely use to assess my own effectiveness as a team leader:

- When given a choice between making myself look good or uplifting one of my co-workers, what do I choose to do?
- Can I acknowledge my own imperfection or take responsibility for an unsuccessful outcome without becoming defensive or feeling depressed or inadequate?
- Do I really listen when someone else is expressing a point of view that is different or contradictory to my own, or do I mentally focus on responding or rebutting their arguments while they are speaking to me?

We live in a culture that seems to focus on the question "What is in it for me?" most people will agree that there are few things in life that are more satisfying than being on a high performing team. If you doubt that statement, just look at the celebration in the locker room of a newly crowned championship team in any sport. Our work environment may not provide an occasion to break out the champagne, but we all want to be a part of achieving something special.

The key to great teams is relatively simple. Select the best people and put them on the right seats on the bus. If you are privileged to be the driver of the bus, model the behavior that you expect from the rest of your team.

Steve

# Reflections on Leadership

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## Thermometer or Thermostat?

Good leaders are often described as calm, cool, and collected when under pressure or in a time of crisis. When things go wrong (as they often do) the need for excellence in leadership becomes acute. History is filled with vivid examples of leaders who, through sheer strength of will, prevailed in the face of great adversity. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are a few of the most obvious examples. While we do not compare ourselves to these extraordinary leaders, the ability to impart a sense of calm when the going gets rough is essential at every level of leadership.

It is my opinion that there are essentially two types of leaders – thermometers or thermostats. Thermometers measure and reflect the temperature of the environment. If the temperature is high due to the stress of time, scarce resources, or staffing shortages, they mirror the attitudes of those around them. When everyone is down and morale is low, they exhibit the mood of the moment. However, it would be a mistake to assume that leaders who are thermometers are neutral. They can actually make the situation worse, accentuating whatever is happening in the surrounding environment.

Thermostats on the other hand do much more than provide a measurement of how others are feeling. They actually change the temperature around them, adding heat or cooling things down to restore balance to the environment. When morale is low, they lift it up. When people are harried and short tempered, they impart a sense of calm. When faced with the pride of achievement or the praise that follows success they remind those around them of the dangers of smugness and arrogance and the need for humility.

Some people are natural thermostats. Many years ago I heard a story from a proud mother that illustrates this principle.

*When my son John was at the beach with his family, his son stepped on a sharp object and cut his foot. Dressed in only bathing suits and towels, they rushed off to the hospital to get stitches. When John entered the emergency room carrying his son he spoke to the nurse about their needs. At some point in the process the nurse at the desk inquired of my son "Are you a pastor?" When he replied that he was, the nurse said that she could tell. Bursting with pride she exclaimed, "Even dressed in a bathing suit and towel, people can tell that my son is a pastor. Isn't that wonderful?"*

Knowing her son, I knew what she meant. John is a thermostat, carrying with him a level of calm and kindness that was easily identified, even in a medical emergency. This quality is evident when he visits the sick and grieving. Dressed in a bathing suit or a sports coat and tie, people just feel better when he walks in the room. Unlike most people, he does more than reflect the atmosphere - he changes it by his presence.

Unfortunately, this is not a talent that comes naturally to most of us, and we have to be intentional about cultivating this skill. I have a few practical suggestions to become a better leader in this regard:

- Project an air of confidence – things may be difficult but the sky is not falling. Place things in perspective. This is probably not the worst moment in human history.
- Listen patiently to those around you without jumping to a premature judgment or conclusion.
- Cultivate an attitude of empowerment - personally and for the rest of your team. Resist the temptation to see yourself or your team members as innocent victims of circumstance.
- Do not waste precious time or energy on fixing the blame for whatever has gone wrong. In most situations there is usually enough blame for a number of

people to share. Good leaders put the past behind them by accepting responsibility, even when they did not cause the problem at hand. Focus attention on the future and what can be done now to make the situation better.

- Engage others in the problem solving process and give them a stake in the outcome. Encourage your team members to be flexible and take initiative. Praise and reward those who actively participate in reaching and implementing a solution.
- Be organized. Break large problems down into smaller, more manageable parts. Understand and map out the sequence necessary to overcome the obstacles to success.
- Be decisive – take action when an acceptable solution has been identified. Few problems improve or are resolved with procrastination.
- Later, reflect on steps that can be taken to prevent the stressful situation from being repeated.

Being an effective leader in times of stress is much more than rising up in response to a single event. Over time leaders develop a reputation of either handling stress well or making things worse by overreacting. Having the reputation as a leader that projects a "calming atmosphere" will influence the behavior of others on your team. If those we lead can count on our calm and measured approach and resourcefulness as a problem solver, we can expect them to adjust to our desired temperature - even in the most trying circumstances.

So the question is this. *Are you a thermometer or thermostat?* The choice is yours. If you want to lead people effectively, there is only one answer to this question. **Be a thermostat.**



Steve