

Reflections on Leadership

Celebrating 82 Years of Excellence 1927-2009
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Accepting Criticism

One of the most difficult things that leaders have to deal with is how to give and accept criticism. The leader who is unable to give criticism is like the captain of a ship who is unable to move the rudder to correct the course of the vessel, drifting aimlessly. Likewise, a leader who cannot accept criticism is by definition out of touch with reality. It would appear that few people would like to give or receive criticism, yet it remains an essential ingredient in the work environment. While I will be dealing with giving and accepting criticism in two separate issues of Reflections on Leadership, they are clearly linked together. I have never observed anyone who was unable to accept criticism from others who also constructively used criticism as a leadership skill. So before we deal with how leaders provide critical feedback, I would like to explore how leaders accept criticism from others.

There are two different aspects of receiving criticism that are important for leaders to consider – one is personal, the other is related to the organizational climate.

Taking it Personally

For many people, the difficulty in receiving criticism has its roots in personal insecurity. A leader needs to be secure and strong enough to admit to being wrong in the past, and open to the possibility of being wrong in the future. Does this mean that good leaders are tormented by self doubt and indecision? Absolutely not! Confidence is an important part of leadership. Recognizing the potential for making bad decisions and being open to feedback from others is simply acknowledging the balance between our human fallibility and the requirement to make choices in the role of leader. A wrong decision is rarely catastrophic, but failing to accept criticism and learn from your mistakes almost certainly is.

Accepting criticism does not mean that every critical remark or opinion is valid, or that leaders should change their

behavior based on what is popular at the moment. Criticism can also come from many different directions at the same time. Many great leaders have held firm in the face of intense criticism. In her book "Team of Rivals," Doris Kearns Goodwin paints a picture of Abraham Lincoln as a president that embraced his political opponents – many of whom disagreed with each other. Lincoln had the wisdom and strength to receive their advice and criticism and accept or reject their ideas in the light of his own moral compass. In this regard he was a model for every leader to follow.

In my experience, the key to gaining value from criticism usually comes down to a few simple questions:

- What are my motives in this situation? Am I open to the possibility that I might be wrong?
- Do I feel threatened by criticism and if so why?
- Have I resisted the temptation to harden my position or rationalize my own behavior to deflect this criticism?
- What are motives of my critic? Is the advice tainted by self interest? (This does not necessarily mean that they are wrong, but does require a more skeptical approach).
- Is the critic reliable? Can I trust that he or she has the best interest of the organization at heart?

Creating the Climate

Going beyond personally dealing with criticism is how to prepare an organization to productively use criticism from internal and external sources. This begs the question - what is the best way to create a climate where criticism is welcomed and properly utilized?

Those who aspire to leadership positions often have strong personalities. The need to achieve can drive leaders to work long hours, argue passionately for what they believe is right, and persevere in the face of obstacles that would discourage others

from moving forward. Unfortunately, the very characteristics associated with strong and effective leadership can be barriers to receiving dissenting opinions and criticism. Who wants to tell the boss that their pet project is likely to be an embarrassment or needs to be reconsidered in the light of changing circumstances? Recently I read of an autocratic leader who told his senior management team that honesty was what the company needed to move forward. He exclaimed, "I expect each of you to tell me the truth – even if it costs you your job." Such a climate can only crush dissent (now and in the future) and deprive the organization of the insight and intellect of its employees.

Effective leaders create a climate that values constructive criticism. We can assess whether or not we have created such a climate by answering a few simple questions. For example, is the bearer of bad news rewarded or punished? Are people who offer criticisms considered to be team players or are they labeled as negative? Is there an attempt to respond to critics when they weigh in with their concerns, or are they left out of the decision making process at troubleshooters?

In the end, we must acknowledge all leaders need honest critics who care about them. I am reminded of the quote from John Gardner, "Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers." In a more contemporary vein, the lyrics of Billy Joel reflect the need for honesty in personal and professional relationships. Honesty is such a lonely word.

Every one is so untrue.

Honesty is hardly ever heard,

And mostly what I need from you.



Steve

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PRESBYTERIAN
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February 2009

Giving Criticism

In the last issue of Reflections on Leadership the ability to receive and offer honest and constructive criticism was highlighted as an essential component of good leadership, and being able to accept criticism is the starting point for every effective leader. In this issue we will focus attention on the other half of the equation – the use of constructive criticism as a leadership tool.

Whether it involves an annual performance review or correcting unwanted behavior, most leaders go out of their way to avoid the unpleasant task of criticism. There are a lot of reasons why leaders are timid in fulfilling this responsibility. It always seems to be a bad time to have a difficult discussion with someone. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings – some people have low self esteem. The criticism may not do any good because the person is a poor listener. We hope that problems will go away by themselves. The list of excuses is almost endless. Unfortunately issues that are left unresolved almost always get worse.

The effects of avoiding criticism can be summed up in an experience that I had with a department head well over 30 years ago. This normally easy going middle aged manager stormed into my office with the following complaint:

"I have had it with Sally. She is impossible. For the past year I have been hoping that things would get better, but today was the last straw. She might be the slowest moving person on the planet. Her co-workers are always complaining that they are doing her work, and I believe they are right. Today 4 other employees visited me at the end of the shift to complain about her laziness. I have to do something. I think the time has come to terminate her employment. Even though she has worked here for two years, she obviously is not cut out for this work."

After looking into the employee file and discovering nothing but three positive performance reviews and no corrective action warnings, all I could say was that I was surprised that the record did not reflect the performance that was just described to me, and that all we could do was to provide an initial warning for defective work and outline what steps would be taken if she did not correct her behavior – a response that frustrated a department head who felt that he had already

given the employee a sufficient number of chances to improve.

In subsequent years I have heard many variations of this story, with similarly unhappy outcomes. I have always felt that at the core of this situation was a lack of understanding of the importance of positive and negative feedback, and our commitment to help each employee succeed in the work they have been hired to do. This approach is founded on several basic assumptions:

- **Transparency** – employees are entitled to be fully informed of the expectations we have for their work. This begins with their orientation and training, and continues throughout their employment.
- **Fairness** - With the exception of certain types of egregious behavior, everyone is entitled to the opportunity to recover when they have fallen short of expectations.
- **Compassion** – providing feedback in the form of criticism is more compassionate than watching in silence while someone continues down a path that may place their livelihood at risk.
- **Economics** - the investment placed in an employee is lost when they leave us (voluntarily or involuntarily) and we have to hire and train a replacement.

Why do leaders avoid offering criticism when we know it is the right thing to do? In addition to the excuses listed above, many of us can recall personal examples of criticism being poorly done and know how it feels to be unfairly criticized. So the question is how can we change criticism from a negative to a constructive experience? I think it is best to start with a few questions:

- What do you hope to accomplish with your criticism? Do you have clear goals in mind?
- Have you evaluated the training received by the person? Was it adequate and complete? Is it reasonable to assume that the expectations for performance were clear?
- Will your silence be more harmful to the individual and the organization in the long run than the discomfort of the moment when the conversation is held?
- Are you truly committed to helping the other person? As a nurse I have heard health professionals say "This is for your own good", but doubted whose good was best served by

whatever was going to happen next.

- What is your relationship with the other person? Do they perceive you as being honest and straightforward with them and committed to their success?
- Are you as free with praise as you are with criticism? Have you noticed when they have performed well and expressed your appreciation for their work?

Honest answers to these questions will go a long way toward understanding how effective your criticism will be as a leadership tool in any particular situation.

I have a few general thoughts on leadership and criticism. The first is that what is in the leader's heart truly matters. Abraham Lincoln remarked that "He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help." In the book of Ephesians the Apostle Paul refers to "Speaking the truth in love." Paul knew that the truth without love can be mean spirited. For criticism to be used effectively the leader's heart must be right.

Secondly, the person on the receiving end of criticism must recognize the leader's good intentions. Lainez, the secretary to the Jesuit founder, St. Ignatius Loyola, put it this way "For [criticism or feedback] to be successful it will help much if the corrector has some authority, or acts with great affection, **an affection that can be recognized**. If either of these qualities are absent, the correction will fail."

Take the time to understand the other person's point of view. Criticism takes on a different tone when tempered by empathy. Walking a mile in someone else's shoes can transform the tenor of criticism from negativity to helpfulness.

Finally, be direct enough so that the message is clear. The risk of being too direct is that you may become harsh. The risk of being too subtle is that your message will not get through. I am reminded of this delicate balance in the observation of Frank Clark – "Criticism is like rain. It should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots."

Steve

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The Pursuit of Excellence

The leadership books that seem to sell best are the ones that offer a sweeping vision of the future, a bold new strategy, or an idea that sends everyone in a completely unexpected direction. We all would like to think that it is the big picture that matters most. And sometimes that is true. But in the daily grind of providing leadership in a mission driven service organization like Presbyterian Senior Living, excellence in leadership is often measured by how well we do the little things. As I tell every newly hired leader in our new manager's orientation program - The pursuit of excellence starts with doing the basics right. Only after we do the basics correctly can we begin to focus on innovation.

What does this mean in our day to day life as we serve seniors? Among other things it means that meals are timely and that hot food is hot, and cold food is cold, and the people we serve are clean, warm, and secure. It means that medicine, therapy and personal care are delivered on time and with tender words of encouragement. It also means that we respond quickly when called by a resident or family member, and that our response is courteous and reflects an authentic concern.

Sometimes when I interview people who have an interest in the field of serving seniors, I discover a desire to immediately start out near the top of the organization. Even though they are fresh out of college or are making a mid-life career change from a completely unrelated field, they claim to "see the big picture" and feel prepared to assume a major leadership role. This is a puzzle to me, since it is the opposite of my own life experience.

At a relatively early age my parents taught me that there was honor in hard work, and that a sacred vocational calling was not limited to "religious occupations," like being a pastor or church worker. If I carried my faith and values with me, every job had the potential of being sacred. They also emphasized that the key to being given greater responsibility in life was found in a quote taken from the parable of the Talents in Matthew chapter 25. The master who returns to find that two of his servants have done well in his absence remarks, "Well done, good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much." Instead of looking to start at the top, the key was to do your best wherever you happen to be.

My first job in health care was as an orderly at the Sisters of Mercy Hospital in Port Huron Michigan, giving bed baths and performing other personal care tasks on a medical floor. While doing this work and going to nursing school, I was recommended by the hospital director of nursing to be a chauffeur and personal assistant for a member of the hospital board of directors who was recovering from fractured ribs and a stroke. Working as a chauffeur to the president and chairman of the board of a public utility involved many of the same personal care responsibilities, but it also was my first contact with the business world and began a business education that would be needed many years later.

After graduation from nursing school, my wife and I moved to Pennsylvania where I began to work for Presbyterian Homes as a registered nurse. This eventually led to becoming a director of nursing and later an administrator of one of the organization's smallest locations. After moving to Oxford to open Ware Presbyterian Village and spending almost 3 years as the executive director of that new campus, I was chosen to be Chief Operating Officer and 15 years later, Chief Executive.

In the process of working in these various roles I discovered that every position in the service of others can be a rewarding experience, filled with joy and challenges. In fact, looking back over the past 40 years, many of the most personally satisfying moments have been spent comforting a dying resident or giving a back rub to someone who was confined to their bed. Relieving someone's physical discomfort or fear of being alone, nourishing a hungry person, providing a clean and safe environment, or discovering a moment of joy with a person of limited physical or cognitive ability is the great stuff of life. Unless you understand the value of this work, you cannot support and lead a team dedicated to caring and compassionate service.

Sometimes faithfully doing the little things can have far reaching consequences that

we may never see or fully appreciate. In the book, *Cure for the Common Life*, Max Lucado provides a vivid example.

What seems small to you might be huge to someone else. Just ask Bohn Fawkes. During World War II he piloted a B17. On one mission he sustained flak from Nazi anti-aircraft guns. Even though his gas tanks were hit, the plane did not explode, and Fawkes was able to land the plane. On the morning following the raid, Fawkes asked his crew chief for the German shell. He wanted to keep a souvenir of his incredible good fortune. The crew chief explained that not just one, but eleven shells had been found in the gas tanks, none of which had exploded. Technicians opened the missiles and found them void of explosive charge. They were clean and harmless with one exception. The exception contained a carefully rolled piece of paper. On it a message had been scrawled in the Czech language. Translated, the note read: "This is all we can do for you now." A courageous assembly-line worker was disarming bombs and scribbled the note. He could not end the war, but he could save one plane. He could not do everything, but he could do something. So he did it.

The message of achieving excellence is this:

- Every job and every person at Presbyterian Senior Living is important. As a leader we must affirm this importance, especially to those who do the tasks that are less visible and may be overlooked or taken for granted.
- From a personal standpoint our work can, and should be, a sacred calling. If we view work in those terms, it is easier to be the kind of role model that is required for effective leadership.
- The pursuit of excellence is simply being faithful and consciously doing our best - wherever we are. It is the way that we can make a difference in the lives of others, and it is the key to being given the opportunity for greater responsibility.



Steve

Reflections on Leadership



Delivering Quality in Difficult Times

April 2009

For most not-for-profit senior care providers, the commitment to quality is a given. It resonates with our most deeply held values and is one of the reasons we have chosen to work in this field of endeavor. But putting these values into practice can be a challenge in times of economic hardship and uncertainty. The realities of life have a way of stripping away the flowery words and platitudes and confronting us with hard choices. For example, how can an organization sustain a high level of quality and care for people with limited incomes in the face of declining financial support from Medicare and Medicaid? Do we simply cut expenses and uphold our commitment to persons with few resources, or do we resist the pressure for reduced costs and serve fewer people needing subsidy? Or what about the effect of the housing market on CCRC sales and the cash needed for capital projects? What level of reduction in capital expenditures will further exacerbate problems with marketing? How do we continue commitments to quality improvement programs when budgets and staff hours are being reduced - especially if economic uncertainty or lack of funds becomes a convenient excuse to abandon quality improvement efforts or reduces access to people with limited incomes?

The truth of the matter is that scary economic times can be a time of growth. Significant change in organizations and individuals only occurs in the presence of desperation or inspiration. In the rare occasions when both are present - economic hardship and enlightened leadership - remarkable things can be achieved.

Lead with Quality

The commitment to quality must never waiver. Presbyterian Senior Living's commitment to provide quality services is prominently illustrated in our mission statement, vision statement, organizational values, and commitment to AAHSA's Quality First Initiative. It is demonstrated by the active collection of consumer input and measurement of customer satisfaction and expectations, evaluation of performance as compared to external measurement and benchmarking, a commitment to quality improvement and accreditation, and meeting all applicable state and federal regulations. In a more practical vein, organizations that cannot distinguish themselves by leading with quality eventually will be reduced to a commodity - which results in competition purely on price.

Elevate the Vision of Your Team

As leaders it is our responsibility to make the case for improved quality, even in the presence of financial hardship. Inspiration comes from elevating the vision of those we work with so they understand clearly how their daily work has an impact on the greater good and

the mission of the organization. This is not just about philosophizing. It is connecting the dots between the large and meaningful things of life and the small details that most of us work with every day. The value of doing the little things well can only be found in the connection with a more noble purpose. Leaders who fail in this basic leadership task will not break free of the bonds of mediocrity.

Challenge the Assumption that Quality Improvement and Cost Reductions are Mutually Exclusive

One myth that is reinforced by frequent repetition is the slogan "you get what you pay for." The implication is that if you pay less, you will have to be satisfied with something inferior. Great (and financially successful) organizations do not accept this proposition. Whether it is new construction techniques, technology applications, or retooling a process by eliminating distracting and unnecessary steps that are driven by habit rather than essential need, there is always an opportunity to simultaneously save money and provide better service. Peter Drucker, never one to mince words, expresses it this way:

Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not quality because it is hard to make and cost a lot of money, as manufacturers typically believe. This is incompetence. Customers pay only for what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes quality.

Ask your customers what they consider key indicators of quality service and make a list of them in rank order. Compare that list to your organizational spending patterns. This will prevent the mistake of being guided by unfounded assumptions about the nature of quality and what we need to do to meet our customer expectations.

Execute with Efficiency

Many organizations confuse values with methods and equate a change in method with abandoning sacred values. Values must be rock solid, but, the methods to achieve quality need to be extremely flexible. Develop ways to illustrate how a process can be altered to achieve outcomes that deliver the quality people want and need without affecting the underlying values of the organization. The application of simplicity and accountability to every process - from food service delivery to handling complex medical problems can result in lower costs and improved outcomes. Tom Peters of In Search of Excellence fame contends that "Almost all quality improvement comes via simplification of design, manufacturing... layout, processes and procedures." This also means that we must attack the cost side of the equation with the same

enthusiasm as the creative side. We should be as excited about the flawless execution of the basics as we are about the program that breaks new ground. This enthusiasm for flawless execution must be reflected in the way we recognize outstanding achievement and what leaders reward with their time and attention.

Use the Brainpower of Your Staff

Enlist your staff to identify ways to improve service and save money. A staff that is inspired by the vision of doing better and aware of the consequences of continuing to do the same old things, must be empowered to put ideas forward and take the initiative to make changes where they are needed. If we do not empower our staff to make the changes that circumstances require, the predictable result will be frustration, anger and helplessness. Agree on the most important measures of success in quality and efficiency and set up regular times to review these with team members at all levels. The information should be timely enough and the contact frequent enough to encourage mid course adjustments.

Lead by Example

Focus on overhead - the back room activities that are less visible to consumers. There are two reasons for this. First, by making hard decisions about the areas that are close to us, we will understand the process that we are expecting to push through the rest of the organization. Secondly, leadership by example will generate the respect you need to implement change throughout the organization. You also illustrate the seriousness of the situation and your personal commitment to making change happen.

Conclusion

Recently I heard the CFO of a large organization talk about the painful staff cuts that were required due to a drop in revenue. He concluded that in spite of the pain, that the process had a positive outcome. He said "we learned something about ourselves that we would never have learned without some measure of financial stress. The reductions required us to become more organized and we have actually improved quality in some key areas. While it was hard to do, we are better for the experience."

We can view these difficult and challenging times as an opportunity to grow and learn or something to endure. Our ability to deliver quality in the face of hardship depends on choosing the former rather than the latter.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



May 2009

Handling Pressure

The December issue of Reflections focused on how a leader who projects a calm demeanor under stress can change the atmosphere in the organization. I would like to go beyond the public face of leadership – being calm in stressful situations, and explore some of the internal dimensions of being a leader – how we as individuals and leaders handle pressure situations.

Leadership is fairly easy when things are going well, or if there is time to quietly reflect before having to make a decision. But leadership, especially on the front line, is rarely easy. Leadership is often tested in the crucible of scarce resources – usually time and money. Both can be a source of intense pressure. By almost any standard of measurement we are living in pressure packed times.

Pressure has two main effects on leaders. First of all it can have a negative effect on the quality of the leader's on the job performance and his or her life away from work. None of us are immune from feeling stress. Even the strongest and most admired leaders throughout history have felt the effects of intense pressure at some time in their life.

Pressure is known to alter a leader's behavior. In my college days there were business related tools to examine effective and ineffective leadership styles. Through a series of carefully worded questions researchers attempted to measure what was called a leader's primary and secondary leadership tendencies. The primary style was supposed to be evident when everything was under control. The secondary style was the behavior the leader reverted to when under pressure. Primary and secondary styles were rarely the same, and understanding tendencies under pressure was considered a key to avoiding a drop in leadership performance.

The personal impact of excessive pressure is also well known – loss of sleep, loss of appetite, becoming impatient and short tempered, and a host of stress related medical issues – all dangerous to your physical and emotional health. However, the relationship between diminished performance as a leader and the personal impact of stress is not a perfect correlation. Some leaders do not seem to feel the effects of stress personally, but they are known to be carriers - everyone around them is stressed out by their unreasonable or erratic behavior.

There is a second effect of pressure that is not as fully

appreciated. Pressure is not always a negative factor. The best professional athletes in the world will confidently state that when the game is on the line, they want the ball in their hands. The most extraordinary athletic feats occur when someone rises to challenge and with a coolness that enables them to make the play that sets them apart from their peers. The same is true in nature. Extreme heat and pressure creates diamonds from lumps of coal. Pressure can also bring out the best in human behavior. The response to the 9/11 attack on New York City, and the exploits of the pilot and crew of US Air Flight 1549 are a remarkable testimony to how pressure packed situations can bring about the most extraordinary and heroic response.

If leaders must learn how to handle pressure, how can we learn to thrive under pressure instead of experiencing its negative effects? I believe there are some helpful lessons to be learned from deep sea diving. First of all, I do not engage in nor am I recommending this incredibly dangerous pastime – which is riskier than skydiving or bungee jumping. What I know about deep sea diving I learned from Robert Kurson's book, *Shadow Divers*, the fascinating true story of the 1991 discovery of a sunken German U board, U-869, off the coast of New Jersey.

Deep sea diving is all about handling pressure. At sea level the pressure is at approximately 14.7 lbs. per square inch (one atmosphere of pressure). This increases by one atmosphere every 33 feet below the surface. As a part of the discovery of this U boat the divers reached a depth of 230 feet – near the limit for a human being to survive. Three divers died in the attempt to identify the sunken vessel. These are the rules they lived by that I believe apply to the pressures of leadership:

- There is no substitute for preparation and training. Develop and follow a well conceived plan. Be prepared for the unexpected and have an alternate plan in mind. Confidence in the presence of pressure comes from being prepared – anticipating what will happen next and putting solid training into practice.
- Know your limitations. In diving this involves knowing how long and deep a diver can dive and how many dives per day the human body can endure. In leadership this may involve the complexity of the task, the personal skills required

for success, the time involved in reaching the desired outcome, etc. When you reach what you believe to be one of your limitations it is important to ask for help.

- Keep your emotions under control – Panic is the enemy. In deep sea diving panic that results in thrashing about can stir up the silt on the bottom and reduce the visibility to zero. Focus on the goal or task rather than the fear of failure. Fear may provide a burst of energy, but it rarely results in the clear thinking that is essential to adjusting to adversity and solving complex problems.
- Do not neglect the need to decompress – Ascending too quickly from the pressures of the deep to the surface can be fatal. Response to pressure requires regular rest and respite. It is not possible to sprint the entire length of a marathon, have a football team run the two minute drill for an entire game, or sustain the work pace and high staff morale of a snow emergency all year long. Leaders need to find a way to leave their work problems at work and cultivate an outlet away from work that serves as a relief valve.
- Be aware that impairment can accompany pressure – Starting at a depth of 66 feet divers begin to have an impairment of motor skills due to nitrogen narcosis, which becomes more severe with increasing depth, leading to an eventual loss of mental acuity and judgment. When working under great pressure in the work place it is possible to lose a sense of perspective. In such situations we need to look beyond ourselves and seek the perspective and wisdom of others.

Finally, the leader's attitude is critical. Helpless victims can never lead others. Even when confronting the most intense situations, effective leaders must believe that they can have an impact on the circumstances around them. Grace under pressure is a powerful leadership tool. But it is not something you can buy or borrow. It only comes from within.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



June 2009

Facing Your Giants

Recently I had the privilege of visiting the place where the conflict between David and Goliath took place – the valley of Elah in Israel. For those who have not read the story in recent years, it can be found in *1 Samuel Chapter 17, verses 1-54*. It is rich with detail and drama as a titanic struggle between good and evil. For a few minutes I was able to touch the stones in the stream where scholars believe the young shepherd boy David collected 5 smooth stones in preparation for fighting the giant Philistine warrior Goliath. The images were striking. I could almost feel the drama of the story unfolding, imagining the thoughts of a shepherd selecting the stones that he was going to use in this life or death conflict.

In his book, *Facing Your Giants*, Max Lucado uses the story of David and Goliath to illustrate that personal and professional challenges require the same strength and courage as challenging a giant on the field of battle. It is his contention that eventually everyone has to face a giant at some time in their life, and the lessons that can be learned from this Bible story can be applied to other seemingly insurmountable problems. Grief, family conflicts, economic failure, shattered dreams, ethical dilemmas, and loneliness are just a few of the issues that he identifies as common giants that require an uncommon response. This resonates with my experience. If you take the time to listen to those around you, almost everyone has a story that includes particular issues or times in their life when they were severely challenged by circumstances or individuals that pushed them to the point of despair.

What does this story have to do with Leadership? First of all, leaders often struggle in the work they are called to do. Challenges can take many forms, like threats in the market place, financial pressure, the need for immediate and dramatic change, deciding who to trust and how to delegate when the margin for error is slim, disappointment in or betrayal of a co-worker, delivering bad news to the people you lead, or doing the right thing when the result is costly. The list goes on and on.

Recently I heard a vivid example of courageous leadership in an interview with former Marine, Donovan Campbell, as he described his platoon's experience in Iraq in the book, *Joker 1: A Marine's Memoir*. He noted that he had two basic objectives as the leader of his platoon - completing the mission with integrity and bringing his men home safely. One afternoon while on patrol, his platoon was attacked by a rocket that struck a group of nearby civilians, killing or wounding more than 20 children. He was faced with the dilemma of evacuating his men, knowing that another attack was inevitable if they remained in place, or staying to protect the school where the children were being held until medical attention could arrive. He chose to keep his men in place to protect the children, which ultimately cost the life of one of his soldiers. This is what a leader does when facing a giant.

What are the lessons in leadership from the story of David and Goliath?

- We, like David, must be convinced of the rightness of our cause.

- The role of faith in overcoming fear is critical. David was confident that God would help him to carry the day.
- Years of preparation often precede the challenge before us. David was not foolhardy. He had successfully defended his flock from lions and bears.
- Be authentic. David was not comfortable, nor would he have been successful had he chosen to use Saul's sword and armor. His tools were simple, but they were familiar to him.
- Run to meet the challenge – choose your battle ground.
- There is no room for conceit in victory. David was aware that God was the source of his strength, and did not take credit for the outcome. We all know that there will be times in life when we will be confronted by our own giants. They may come in the form of illness, death of a family member, a testing of our values, or someone or something that may seem to be influenced by the forces of evil. In such circumstances, recalling the story of David and Goliath can be a great comfort.

Next to the compass and picture of my wife and family I now keep a rock on my desk. Taken from the brook in the valley of Elah, it serves as a symbol of faith and readiness for whatever the future may hold.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership

 PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING

Always Faithful

Summer 2009



Exeter, England



Lviv, Ukraine



Semper Fidelis

The Latin term *Semper Fidelis* has been used as a slogan for families and other groups as far back as the 14th century. In 17th century England, it was on the coat of arms of the city of Exeter, in Devon and was also used about the same time in reference to the Ukrainian city of Lviv. But to Americans, it is famous as the motto of the United States Marine Corps. According to the Marines web site, "the motto distinguishes the Marine Corps bond from any other. It goes beyond teamwork - it is a brotherhood and lasts for life. Latin for "always faithful," *Semper Fidelis* became the Marine Corps motto in 1883. It guides Marines to remain faithful to the mission at hand, to each other, to the Corps and to country, no matter what." This is a motto that describes a culture of honor, valor and self sacrifice. The term is well chosen, because it embodies a deep seated desire for and admiration of people who honor their commitments and do not waiver in the face of adversity. Always Faithful...

One of my favorite activities is to participate in employee recognition events throughout the year. The structure of these events is fairly simple - there is a luncheon provided where people gather to enjoy food and fellowship, there are a couple of brief remarks, followed by the introduction of each person who is getting a service pin or other recognition for length of service. The person's supervisor provides a summary of their history as an employee, and outlines the special qualities that make the individual such a valuable part of the team. It is an understatement to say that the stories are inspiring. Some of the words bring tears to your eyes.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to present my first 45 year service pin. I have given out several 40 year pins, but never a 45 year pin. As one might expect, the story that corresponds with a 45 year term of service is remarkable.

For the past 45 years, John Bumbaugh has been a maintenance employee at Quincy. Hired at age 19, he has been the very model of faithful service. There were many words used to describe him when he received his 45 year pin - kind, caring, humble, conscientious, and faithful. I was struck by his extraordinary attendance record. John has not missed a day of work for the past 25 years. I am of the opinion that the record is even more impressive than advertised. On the day in 1984 that is recorded in his file as his last absence from work, John reported for work as scheduled, but left at noon because he was sick. He did not miss a day of work, just the last few hours of a day.

As is typical of many of our maintenance staff, John is a man of few words. However, in our brief conversation he did tell me this, "I didn't always feel like going to work every day for the last 25 years. There were days that I was tempted to stay at home. But I knew that they needed me, and it was important for me to be there to do my work." Always Faithful....

In this day and age when the headlines are devoted to flashy people who possess remarkable talent, I find myself drawn to the Cal Ripkin's of the world. The heart of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team for more than 20 years, Cal would have been an all star and hall of fame player in any era. While his baseball talents were formidable, he is remembered for something even more extraordinary. Cal has the record for the most consecutive games played by any player in the history of major league baseball. He played in 2,632 games in a row, first at shortstop and later third base, both demanding positions. In the days after the game when the record was broken he is said to have remarked that it was not that big a deal, because a lot of people go to work every day and work hard with no complaint. This may be a true observation, but in the sports world, it is exceedingly rare. Always Faithful....

Faithfulness is also Biblical virtue. "The faithful man will abound with blessings" is the promise of Proverbs 28:20. In Matthew chapter 25, we read the words of the appreciative master in Jesus parable of the talents. "Well done, good

and faithful servant" is considered to be the ultimate compliment. In chapter 19 of the book of Revelation the words used to describe the returning Christ in His triumphant reappearance at the end of days is "Faithful and true." Always Faithful....

Being faithful in the work you do is not flashy, does not grab headlines and may occur more rarely now than in previous generations, but that does not diminish the need for or value of faithfulness. Great organizations recognize that consistency is as important as innovation, dependability is as critical as talent, and daily execution as essential as a clearly defined strategy. Organizations of all kinds would do well to lift up the virtue of faithfulness as the path to excellence.

In our calling to be leaders, we are expected to be faithful. Leadership is not a right, it is a sacred trust. In First Corinthians, chapter 4, it is expressed this way, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." How can you spot someone who is "Always faithful?" It is fairly simple.

They are people who:

- Uphold the mission as the first priority
- Put the needs of others before their own interests
- Are loyal to their team, and inspire loyalty from their team members
- Are consistently truthful in all of their dealings
- Model dependability - can be counted on, no matter what

Faithfulness is not reserved for the heroic, the rich, the powerful or the famous. It comes in all shapes and sizes and is needed in every corner of society. In our families, in our communities, in our places of worship, in our chosen work, in all of our life commitments - Always Faithful....

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



August 2009

Remembering – *The Artist's Hand*

Recently I read that there are four persons who have been documented as having perfect memories. Perfect memory defined as having total recall of the events in their lives. When questioned, they can remember exactly what happened to them on any given day, including what they were feeling at the time. I heard an interview with one of these individuals, and it is a remarkable gift. For those of us who find our memories less reliable with advancing years, the prospect of total recall seems very attractive.

After reflecting on this a bit, I am undecided about whether this is a gift or a curse. In my experience, emotionally healthy people tend to easily remember good things about their lives, while their recollection of painful events is less vivid. Conversely, we all know people who can recall painful moments in excruciating detail, and tend to frequently dwell on these unhappy thoughts to the exclusion of more positive memories. This is one of the mysteries of the human mind.

Forgetfulness can actually be a blessing. As human beings we are defined by what we remember and dwell on. I enjoy playing golf, but my game can only be described as an adventure. One of my former board members described it as "Long and wrong." I have 5 distinctly different golf swings, but I never know which one is going to appear ahead of time. This means that in one round of golf I will unleash a barrage of errant shots, but about 3 or 4 shots will be nearly perfect. The key to my enthusiasm for golf is a selective memory. Some golfers can recall every shot on every hole when they finish a round of golf. I can easily recall the 3 or 4 good shots, while the rest quickly fade into oblivion. There are exceptions, like the fateful encounter with a goose from 75 yards away – but that is a story for another time. The point is, if I had a perfect memory, I would give up golf in a heartbeat.

What is the intersection between a selective memory and leadership?

Maturity and strength - There are things in everyone's life that are best forgotten, like the

intentional or unintentional slights that often occur in work relationships, broken trust, or emotional wounds that remain from an unpleasant experience from long ago. Effectively dealing with these issues often involves starting with a clean slate that is only achieved with a dose of forgiveness. Forgiveness involves selective forgetfulness, and a great deal of strength. Gandhi expressed it this way, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." The ability to forgive and forget is one of the most important virtues of a leader. One of the basic principles of discipline in the work place is being able to put the subject of the discipline behind and move forward. One of the surest ways a leader can permanently alienate a team member is to continually bring up a lapse in behavior long after the fact.

Balance - Leaders need to keep their teams on an even keel, smoothing out the highs and lows. The extended memory of a failure can be depressing and tempt your team to give up or avoid taking risks in the future. Excessively dwelling on the accolades from a smashing success can lead to a self satisfied complacency that is the sure road to a decline in performance, and possibly failure. Good leaders help their teams to learn from their mistakes or enjoy the sweetness of success but not be preoccupied by the memory of either experience.

Innovation and focusing on the future –The memory of past success can become a rut that causes us to discard the new and cling to the old. The Apostle Paul, one of the most remarkable figures in human history, knew this to be true. In chapter 3 of his letter to the Philippians he states "But one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." It is important to learn lessons from the past, but success comes from applying lessons learned to what will happen in the future. A good leader knows when the last drop of juice has been squeezed from the lessons of a past experience and to leave the pulp behind and move forward. Endlessly circling back to the past is frustrating, unproductive, and all too common in ineffective leaders.

Vision and innovation is drawn from concentrating on the future. The image of leaders choosing to look forward or backward was eloquently expressed by my good friend from Texas, Ken Durand, who simply says, "It is always good to ride a horse in the direction in which it is going."

Finally, what you remember is the key to a happy and satisfying life. It is hard for a leader to be extremely unhappy in their non-work life and have a complete transformation during work hours. What we chose to dwell on and what we discard is kind of like having your own personal art gallery.

Remembering

Images and colors splashed on canvas in the mind:
The home, the hearth, the family, the treasured ties that bind
Are scenes that give us pleasure as time slips quickly past:
Recalled in muted shades of light and darkness at the last.

Our minds are a collection of the memories we keep.
The golden days of laughter, dark thoughts that make us weep.
We choose the art to ponder in the gallery of life;
The portrait of our parents, the sculpture of a wife.

We start each day with fresh supplies, blank canvas and life's oil;
Creating memories of love, joy, sadness, pain, or toil.
The art is not reality, but our perceptions stand
As tribute to the character that moves the artist's hand.

Our memories contain the canvas of our lives, and the pictures we paint every day are the images we will recall in the future. These recollections will shape our behavior as human beings and as leaders.

You are the artist. Create a work of beauty.

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



September 2009

Personal Responsibility

A few weeks ago when I reached into my pants pocket to retrieve my car keys, I found a little piece of paper that said "inspected by number 14." This seems to happen to me whenever I wear clothing for the first time. Apparently it is commonplace for companies that manufacture clothing to have a quality control program that includes a final inspection process. The inspector is identified by number so that if a defect is discovered later, it is possible to locate the individual that should have caught the mistake. This led me to thinking about the subject of responsibility in the work place.

Leaders are expected to deliver results. In autocratic environments where one person gives all the orders and constantly checks up on his or her subordinates, responsibility is vested in the leader. Everyone else just does what they are instructed to do. Self directed work teams are at the other end of the spectrum. Self directed work teams are empowered to make decisions and implement them, and team members are individually and collectively responsible for the result. Regardless of the model of organizational leadership, the method of determining who is responsible for critical outcomes is a key ingredient. This is not an abstract concept – it is the essence of quality.

In his book, *The Grand Weaver - How God Shapes Us Through the Events of Our Lives*, Ravi Zacharias quotes Gary Laferla as he tells the following story about a sailor on the USS Astoria taken from the records of the United States Naval Institute after the Second World War:

About 0200 hours a young Midwesterner, Signalman 3rd Class Elgin Staples, was swept overboard by the blast when the Astoria's number one eight inch gun turret exploded. Wounded in both legs by shrapnel and in semi-shock, he was kept afloat by a narrow lifebelt that he managed to activate with a simple trigger mechanism.

Around 0600 hours, Staples was rescued by a passing destroyer and returned to the Astoria, whose captain was attempting to save the cruiser by beaching her. The effort failed, and Staples, still wearing the same lifebelt found himself back in the water. It was lunchtime. Picked up again, this time by the USS President Jackson (AP-37), he was one of 500 survivors of the battle who were evacuated to Noumea. On board the transport, Staples, hugging that lifebelt with gratitude, looked at that small piece

of equipment for the first time. He scrutinized every stitch of the lifebelt that had served him so well. It had been manufactured by Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, and bore a registration number.

Given home leave, Staples told his story and asked his mother, who worked for Firestone, about the purpose of the number on the belt. She replied that the company insisted on personal responsibility for the war effort, and that the number was unique and only assigned to one inspector. Staples remembered everything about the life belt, and quoted the number. There was a moment of stunned silence in the room and then his mother spoke. "That was my personal code that I affixed to every item that I was responsible for approving".

Imagine how it would feel to realize that you were personally responsible for insuring your son's survival because his life belt worked not once, but twice. Furthermore, you are reminded of thousands of mothers of sailors who are counting on a lifebelt working properly for their sons and daughters in a time of crisis. The powerful impact of personal responsibility!

So the question is – how can we capture the essential elements of responsibility and apply it to our work with Presbyterian Senior Living? The issue is not finding more efficient ways to micromanage people. Even with advances in technology, no one can personally manage every detail to assure a quality result. However, if a sense of responsibility can be instilled in every person on the team, quality will be woven into every part of every process of providing a service. If this can be achieved, quality will be present even when the leader is not. I have some thoughts about how to foster a high level of responsibility in those we lead:

Articulate the mission of the organization. The call to serve seniors is more than honest and rewarding work. It is critically important to those that depend on us, and reflects our higher calling as people of faith and members of a caring community. The mission focus starts with the person being served instead of the individual departments and work groups that deliver service. Connect the fulfillment of the organization's mission to the specific tasks performed by each person on your team.

Emphasize the value of every position and appeal to pride in workmanship. Every job is important and must be done well. Doing a job well involves engaging the whole individual - body, mind and spirit. A few years ago I heard one of the most discouraging comments ever expressed to an employee. "Just pay attention and do what I tell you to do. Everything else is above your pay grade." Translation- your work is unimportant, disengage your brain, we don't need it. Imagine how demoralizing that is to a person!

Develop a vision of an expanded team. A narrow vision of who is a member of your team can lead to poor performance. Illustrate how different departments or work teams interact and how cross departmental efforts can help everyone to become more effective in their respective roles.

Cultivate the concept of assumed responsibility – if you see something that needs to be done – assume that you are responsible to do it. Create an environment where people take action rather than let something fall through the cracks. Later on you can figure out where the system breakdown may have occurred that led to the service problem.

Encourage candor in problem solving. Trust and openness in work relationships are the foundation for identifying problem areas without placing blame. If an individual team member is not behaving responsibly, someone must be willing to confront this shortcoming to preserve a model of shared responsibility.

Establish systems that minimize the potential for errors. Leaders are often guilty of perpetuating systems that are rife with opportunity for failure. Identify problems that occur frequently and streamline the processes and communication patterns that will make errors less likely.

There is a natural tendency to avoid or try to shift responsibility when things are not going well. That is why it is important to talk about the role of personal responsibility in our day to day work before a crisis occurs. After all, not everyone is fortunate enough to have their mom conduct the final inspection of their life vest. The people we serve are depending on us. It is **our** responsibility.


Steve

Reflections on Leadership



October 2009

Doing and Being

Around our house we talk about having two kinds of vacation experiences. One is what we call a “doing” vacation where we have a lot of busy activity – seeing new sights or engaging in activities like hiking, etc. This is contrasted with what we refer to as a “being” vacation, where the purpose is to relax – either around the house or in a place where reading books, absorbing sunlight, or stretching out in a hammock is designed to recharge the batteries so we are refreshed before we resume a busy schedule.

Some time ago I saw a photograph taken in New Zealand of a sign on the side of a building that said, “Department of Doing.” It appeared to be the office of a business or some government bureaucracy. I wondered if there was a parallel “Department of Being” that was more reflective in nature. One can only hope that those responsible for doing have the ability to tap into the wisdom of those who are thinking.



In our personal and professional lives we are faced with a similar dilemma. In the rush of daily life we can be so consumed with our list of tasks that we do not question whether what is on the list is really the most important things we need to accomplish. On the other hand, when faced with a large and complex task or a traumatic circumstance we can lose ourselves in reflection and succumb to what can be called the paralysis of analysis. The truth is that we need both sides of the “Doing – Being” equation in order to be a balanced person and leader.

Like many things in leadership, there is a strong Biblical parallel. The most famous contrast between “Doing” and “Being” is in the story of Mary and Martha in the Book of Luke. Like many siblings, these sisters were not alike. When Jesus visited their house, Mary took the time to listen to Jesus teaching, while Martha rushed around the house tending to the duties of serving her guests. The Bible described it as “distracted by much serving”. When Martha asks Jesus to instruct Mary to help her with the work, he replied, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her.”

Every leader needs to pause and reflect, to understand what is important in life and the work we have been called to do - this is the “good portion” that is essential to effective leadership. Taking action without being anchored in solid values and beliefs will almost certainly result in going astray at some critical moment. I recall a description of the management philosophy that emphasized action as the primary virtue of leadership as “Ready, fire, aim.” The message is to “shoot at something – anything will do.” This is what happens when action is taken without reflection.

However, there is a problem when reflection becomes an end in itself. Values are useless if they are not translated into action. Those who cannot switch gears to turn intentions into tangible results cannot claim to be effective leaders. James understood the need for action when he wrote in the New Testament that those who claim to have faith must act on what they know and believe to be true. The quality of a person’s inner life is always demonstrated by their deeds. His exact words were, “faith without works is dead.”

How to maintain a balance between Being and Doing is one of the critical problems of leadership. It is easy for leaders to get out of balance – either

by becoming so caught up in the doing, that they neglect the reflective part of leadership, or becoming so introspective that they never get on with the formation of plans and execution of the details that inevitably make the difference between success and failure.

In the book, *Heroic Leadership*, Chris Lowney describes the Jesuits and the secret to their success as being based on four pillars - Self Awareness, Ingenuity, Love, and Heroism.

He further defines what the application of these four pillars meant in practice – selecting and molding their recruits into leaders who:

- Understood their strengths, weaknesses, values and worldview;
- Confidently innovated and adapted to embrace a changing world;
- Engaged others with a positive, loving attitude;
- Energized themselves and others through heroic ambitions.

From my perspective, this seems like a perfect balance between Being and Doing.

One of the reasons we spend so much time articulating and refining our organizational culture and values is to meet the challenges ahead. Confident and focused leadership can only come from a solid foundation. In spite of the economic uncertainty and threats that surround us, our mission and values have prepared us to innovate, adapt, and reach for success, even when the decisions are difficult and the path ahead is steep.

The imperative for action is this – in an ever changing world the future does not belong to the big and strong, but to the swift and flexible. The speed at which we turn our philosophy and values into tangible results will determine whether or not we will excel in the face of adversity.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



November 2009

Dealing with Adversity

At some time or other, every individual, family, or organization has to deal with adversity. There is probably no more compelling story of the power of faith and the strength of will to overcome loss than the story of Joni Eareckson Tada. Born and raised in Baltimore, she was poised to go off to college as a 17 year old high school graduate, when a swimming accident in the Chesapeake Bay left her paralyzed from the neck down. From the depths of despair and self pity, she has led a remarkable life as the author of more than 20 books, radio host, painter, and disability advocate. Watching her interview on Larry King Live, it is hard to imagine a more accomplished individual. Her insight into how she daily overcomes the adversity of paralysis is humbling to all of us who are discouraged by smaller problems in life.

Working with older adults who face the dual challenges of age and illness we are often confronted with the profound differences between individuals in their response to adversity and loss. We all know of two persons faced with similar circumstances who display remarkably disparate outcomes – one who manages to live a rewarding and happy life, while the other wallows in hopelessness. I believe that this difference often boils down to where you focus your attention. Those who focus on what they have lost become trapped in a cycle of despair. Those who focus on the strengths that remain find a platform for growth, achievement, and a rewarding life. We know this to be true, because it is the way we plan therapy and nursing interventions to get people back to their maximum functional level.

How does this relate to leadership, and why is it important to hear this message now?

Let me answer the second question first - Why now? Many organizations are going through a period where the harsh economic environment require leaders to make difficult decisions, reengineering work processes and eliminating positions that are no longer considered essential to achieving the organization's mission. This explanation is rather antiseptic sounding, and does not convey the full impact of what these cost reduction efforts mean. Cutting expenses spent on products and outside services is one thing, but when positions are eliminated we are dealing with real people, including those leaders know

personally. The impact on individuals and families should weigh heavily on all leaders faced with making hard decisions. Also, when leaders have to rearrange the workload and reassign duties, they are usually pushing the staff that remains to change in ways that will take them out of their comfort zone. It is hard to go through any change like this without feeling a sense of loss.

Secondly, as a leader, your team will be looking to you for cues as to how to move forward. Leaders set the tone for what happens around them by the way they react to their environment. This was one of my earliest lessons in leadership as a 17 year old orderly, working on the 3-11 shift on a medical floor of a hospital. Absent any formal training in leadership or any awareness of leadership skills, I realized that there were two kinds of nurses in the hospital where I worked. One type of supervisor displayed an overwhelmingly negative outlook and low expectations. Arriving at the nurses station, our introduction to the shift was as follows, "Well folks, it looks like we are in for a rough night. Someone called in sick, and they are not sending us a replacement. I am going to spend the next hour making some calls to express my unhappiness. Maybe if I make enough noise, things will be better tomorrow night. Good luck!"

The other nurse supervisor had a different approach to the same situation. "Good afternoon everyone, it looks like we are one person short tonight. We have our work cut out for us, so let's get busy. I have revised the assignments so that we all know what we need to do. Make sure that you help each other whenever possible, and let me know what I can do to help. I will check in with each of you later."

Both leaders got exactly what they expected from the same group of employees facing the same challenges. It is not hard to guess who I enjoyed working with and who I dreaded seeing if things were not going perfectly. Much later in life I discovered that the key difference between these two approaches to leadership was rooted in how focused a leader is on the importance of the mission and task at hand. In addressing not-for profit leaders, Peter Drucker said that the ability to lead "regardless of the weather" required a willingness to realize how unimportant we are compared to the task. For every leader facing tough

decisions, this is the heart of the matter.

This is not to say that if we gloss over problems that they will go away. It is appropriate to acknowledge the emotions of your team and to be sensitive to their concerns. The question is what to do next to keep them from becoming stuck and wasting precious energy on negative thoughts and unproductive activities. I believe that there are a few simple steps to moving ahead in the face of adversity:

- Make it clear that the mission comes first, and that our attention should remain on those we are called to serve.
- Outline the new reality. Acknowledge that the situation is not what it was, and that we will need to adapt to the circumstances that now exist.
- Set guidelines and limits on the expression of negativity. Emphasize that there will be no grumbling, blame placing, criticism of others, unfounded speculation, or rumors, especially around residents and family members.
- Focus on strengths and build solutions around those areas of strength.
- Encourage and reward those on your team who offer constructive solutions.
- Reach out to others in leadership positions to solve problems collaboratively whenever possible.
- Look for different ways to do things – reengineer work flow to eliminate duplication of effort, improve communication patterns, and use technology to produce tangible results.

Every organization is faced with the choice of looking backward at what was, or forward to what they can become. The quality of leadership is the primary determinant of which vision prevails.

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

Steve

Reflections on Leadership



December 2009

The Dangers of Success

In his book "What Got You Here Won't Get You There", Marshall Goldsmith outlines the reasons why being successful is often a precursor to failure. His premise is that success often prevents organizations and individuals from being more successful because they begin to believe that all they have to do is repeat what they are doing now to be successful in the future. This goes even further than Jim Collins, who calls "Good the enemy of the Great." If you follow Goldsmith's reasoning, even "Great can be the enemy of the Great". We all know the stories of rich and successful organizations that dominated their competitors, or even entire markets, and fell quickly from their lofty perch. The descent from success to failure can be swift and embarrassing, even for those who seem to have a knack for doing everything right. It seems that breathing the rarified air of success can lead to organizational altitude sickness.

How can success cause this to happen? I think there are several reasons:

Loss of Humility.

Successful individuals and organizations begin to believe that they are entitled to success or that it will automatically come to them because they are smarter, more talented, or work harder than everyone else. One foundation stone of humility is the understanding that there is a certain randomness that is present in all of life, including success. Some people call it luck. People of faith often call it providence. S. Truett Cathy is a great example of the awareness of being blessed. As the founder and CEO of Chick-Fil-A, he has been described as a real life Horatio Alger story – someone we may be tempted to call a self made man. In his book, "Eat Mor Chikin Inspire More People", he describes what he calls a "series of unexpected opportunities" on his way to building a 1,000 restaurant, billion dollar enterprise. Rather than claim credit for their success through hard work or genius, he simply states that when they responded to these opportunities "we found ourselves richly blessed." Great leaders come to terms with the reality that hard work, intelligence, and diligence are givens, but do not always result in success. The absence of these elements will ensure failure, but their presence will not guarantee success. Losing sight of this truth results in a loss of humility which ultimately leads to failure. The

book of Proverbs (16:18) puts it very succinctly "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Humility tells us that we are not entitled to success, and that in many respects, success is always a gift.

Inwardly focused vision – Success can cause an organization to look inward for the reasons for success. There is value in a period of inward reflection. Before taking on any new or large enterprise, it is always good to reexamine everything in light of the organization's mission and values. But the keys to future success are rarely found in an inwardly focused vision. The environment around us is teeming with information containing clues about what may happen in the future. Every environment changes, sometimes imperceptibly, but it changes.

In the days leading up to the battle of Gettysburg, the southern cavalry, led by J.E.B. Stuart was charged with the job of being the advance scout for General Lee and the confederate army. Unfortunately he was out of touch for several days, which led to a lack of awareness of the Union army strength and position. This failure placed the confederate leadership at a significant disadvantage with a tragic result. The parallels to organizational life are clear. Keeping a sharp eye out for change is crucial. Organizations that lose sight of the reality around them are at risk for disaster. No one is immune. The laws of nature (and the marketplace) are not suspended for anyone – no matter how big and powerful they may seem. This truth can be conveyed in a single word – Titanic.

Inhibited learning process – Learning is essential for every organization. The ability to recognize and embrace new ideas is at the heart of how organizations learn and innovate. We can and should learn from the success and failures of others. Successful organizations often begin to lose their grip on success when they start to underestimate their competitors. One way to combat this tendency is to visit a competitor with the express purpose of finding out what they are doing well and figuring out how to improve to meet or exceed their standard of excellence. One of the danger signs of a loss of humility and blindness to the environment is the inability to see strengths in a competitor. If we cannot learn from others in the marketplace the best we can hope for is muddling

through a period of mediocrity followed by the pain of failure.

Avoiding Altitude Sickness.

The lessons learned from failure are often forced upon us whether we like it or not. Learning from failure can be shocking, painful, and unavoidable. Learning from success can be harder, because the incentive to try something new and different is lacking. So the question is - how can we learn from success in spite of all of the pitfalls? A few obvious answers include:

- Recognize the inherent risk of success and keep yourself and your team on an even keel. Remember that things are never as good as you think they are when you are on top, and never as bad as they are when you are not.
- Constantly reinforce the message that past success may not be replicable, and that a new path may be required.
- Don't wait for a successful idea or pattern to break before you decide to give it an overhaul. If you wait, a breakdown is likely to occur at the worst possible moment.
- Go out of your way to seek out and pay attention to the opinions and ideas of others, especially those who are likely to challenge conventional wisdom. Encourage your team members to do the same as they seek to expand their field of vision.
- Do not succumb to the temptation to view your personal feelings or financial investment in the status quo as the reason for not embracing something new.
- Keep looking for incremental improvement as a part of your every day leadership responsibility, but understand that more sweeping changes are often the key to the future. Don't be afraid to shake things up a bit to avoid complacency.

Finally, there is a fine line between being in a groove or in a rut, and it is critically important for a leader to know the difference.

Steve