

Leadership As Service

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In the June, 2005, Forbes magazine, publisher Rich Karlgaard wrote an article entitled: Two Paths to Leadership Greatness in which he asserts that in corporate America, autocratic leadership is out and the servant style of leadership is in.

Whether one's leadership style is that of a charismatic, driven icon or a "behind the scenes" individual who influences through relationships, the ongoing effectiveness of the organization will depend largely upon the motive for that service.

If that motive is merely for personal gain, professional status or financial benefit, the organization will begin to decline upon the exit of that leader. In the last decade, we have seen multiple examples of companies whose demise came at the hands of leadership simply because the executive officer's agendas were self-serving. While they walked away benefiting financially, the employees, customers, shareholders, as well as the economy of the country were left to suffer the consequences of their short-sightedness.

If a leader's motive for service 1) has a purpose that is greater than him or herself, 2) is the right thing to do, and 3) produces outcomes that serve the greater good, a very different phenomenon occurs....a dynasty that leaves a legacy. Helen Walton quoted, "It's not what you gather, but what you scatter, that tells what kind of life you've lived."

To be an effective leader through service, one must have a purpose greater than him or herself. The key to competitive greatness is to have a cause for which to live. People will follow a vision that is believable and one they can see that benefits them. From the top down, everyone becomes clear about their purpose and is compelled to sacrifice toward that end. In this environment, champions emerge contributing their unique, creative talent, calling others to a higher level of commitment and performance. Healthy competitiveness also occurs encouraging everyone to do their best for the sake of the organization with which all have come to identify. Most people want to be on a winning team that is on the cutting edge of their industry. They want to know that they have contributed to something greater than themselves.

Secondly, a service leader believes that it is never wrong to do the right thing.

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We have seen a “results at any cost” mentality in corporate America for so long that morale and loyalty have all but disappeared. Integrity is once again being advocated in an attempt to re-establish confidence in the character of American businesses. Imagine someone who does what they say they’ll do, how they say they’ll do it, when they promise it will be done and at a fair price!

The former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, who won 10 NCAA championships in 12 years, has written a book entitled: Wooden on Leadership. He maintains that success occurs as a result of getting your organization and its people to do the right thing. He observes that “ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to stay there.” If only Tyco, WorldCom, HealthSouth, Enron and countless other companies realized this. These four companies alone account for almost \$15 billion in fraud and thousands of lost jobs to our country.

Lastly, in order to be an effective leader through service, one must serve the greater good. Leaders who place their customers first will also ensure the success of their companies. It makes no difference how committed one is to a purpose or even doing the right thing, if a company loses sight of the ultimate needs of their customers. In Spencer Johnson’s, Who Moved My Cheese?, the temptation of getting comfortable with “business as usual” led to an unwillingness to change with the times. Examples of this include IBM holding onto the mainframe business and GM ignoring the small car companies of Japan to their own detriment. Subsequently other companies saw the need and served the greater good of their customers.

A service leader evaluates what they have done well and invites input for ways to improve to better serve their clients. Robert Staub III in The Heart of Leadership indicates that the paradox of leadership is that it requires being open to and learning from the followers, and in effect, being led. When this environment exists, everyone is engaged in attempting to ensure the success of the leader’s initiative and intentions.

To have a cause motivates us to action, to do what is right generates unrelenting passion and conviction, and to serve the greater good inspires us to make a difference. Leadership as service is a calling and a mission that many aspire to but only a few accomplish, because he who would be the greatest must first be the servant of all.

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