

Servant Leadership

BILL TURNER

One of my friends tells a story about going to an outdoor lobster roast when his wife said, "Oh, I just feel awful seeing that man throw those live lobsters into the boiling water." Overhearing, the cook turned around and said, "Don't worry about that Ma'am; they're used to it." That's kind of the way I feel about the first part of my life.

The assignment of running my grandfather's company was given to me at birth. I had been chosen. When I was eight years old my grandfather dictated a letter to his secretary who typed it on the company letterhead for him.

My precious grandson, I wish you were able to fully appreciate my love for you and just what an important factor you are in the lives of our entire family and how anxious we are to have you qualify for all the wonderful things that we have in mind for you in years to come. Your failure in your future responsibilities would a take a great deal of sunshine out of the lives of several people I know. You are now eight years old and I want you to commence thinking about the important things of life and endeavor in every possible way to become worthy of the great responsibility that will become yours in the years to come.

That's pretty hot water for an eight year old!

The advantage of being chosen early in life was that I began observing how my Grandfather and my Dad ran the company. The problem was at the time, so I thought, that they didn't seem to do anything. Most of the time they just walked around and listened to other people tell *them* what to do.

There were a couple of things they did that impressed me though. During the Great Depression, they kept our mills running – even though they weren't selling the goods. When

the money ran out, they issued script so that the people working in the company could buy something to eat. My mother made bags of fruit and candy for the children of the mill families, so they would have something at Christmas. After the businesses recovered, my father and grandfather started their own charitable foundations which we have merged into the Bradley-Turner Foundation.

When my turn came to lead the company, I tried to follow their example, and I think that I was probably better at walking around and listening than they were, because I really

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didn't know what to do! Besides, I had worked in just about every department of the bank and the Bradley Company during my high school and college years. So I had a lot of bosses out there that were perfectly willing and ready to tell me what to do.

At that time there were some strong forces working in my life that really changed me forever. The first one was when Mack Anthony, the minister of our church some 52 years ago, asked me to take a teenager's Sunday School Class. I told him I was not equipped in any way morally, intellectually or spiritually to take that class. He said, "There are only two conditions I ask of you. One is that you be real and the second is that when you talk about Jesus you tell only what you know and know that you know, and you'll be amazed at how your knowledge will increase." He was right. I have done that now for a long, long time and it has definitely shaped my life and the life of everyone close to me that I love and my company too.

A second force was my wife Sue Marie. She taught me to be a real person and to face reality. She taught me the real meaning of unconditional love which goes beyond marriage and family into every area of our lives.

In my early thirties, I began to experience a meaninglessness and emptiness in my life. The thought of getting up every morning just to go make a buck seemed pretty dismal to me. I think that for the first time in my life I really prayed a serious prayer. Shortly after that I received a phone call from, of all things, an old boyfriend of Sue Marie who invited me to go with him to Miami to a laymen's leadership institute. For some reason I went, and there was a group of Christian businessmen who shared how they had made a ministry out of their business careers because of Jesus Christ in their life.

I remember the last night of the conference alone in my room. I got on my knees and prayed this prayer. I still remember it. I said, "Lord, I really don't want to want to have you come into my life, but I give you permission to change my want to want to, if you want to." He did.

When I returned home I began to think of ways how, if I stayed at the company, I could give meaning to what I was doing. I sat down and wrote out a few things that I wanted to do, and I still have them in my desk and look at them occasionally.

First, I wanted to create an atmosphere for growth in the company where everyone could grow spiritually, intellectually, and materially. I identified my primary task as responding to the needs of those that were actually doing the work. Out of that goal has grown the Employee Assistance Program at the Pastoral Institute where over a 100 companies in Columbus today are committed to protecting the psychological and emotional

welfare of their workers and their families. It also had much to do with the creation of the St. Luke United Methodist Church Child Development Center.

I felt that everyone had the same need for meaning in their life that I had so I decided that I would consider my leadership successful only to the degree that everyone in the company felt that they were contributing to building a better world.

That was some forty years ago and I am amazed at how the Holy Spirit works. Until six months ago I did not realize that at the time I was going through this, struggling for meaning in my own life, Robert Greenleaf, who was Vice President of AT&T's management and research department, had begun writing essays on servant leadership which eventually led to the establishment of the first Center for Servant Leadership in Indianapolis.

Around that same time, an Episcopal priest named Bennett Sims who was at Emory at one time and was also in the Navy at the same time that I was, began writing his own material on servant leadership and helped establish the Institute for Servant Leadership in North Carolina. A lot of seeds that had been sown were beginning to sprout in a variety of places.

Robert Greenleaf pointed out that when a servant leader concentrates on building people up, the system essentially builds itself. The test of a servant leader is, "Do the people grow and become servant leaders themselves?" Contrary to the normal model in business where you have a hierarchy with the leader at the top and everyone below the leader clamoring to get to the top, stepping over each other along the way, in a servant leader organization, the pyramid is inverted and the leaders place themselves at the bottom. Looking back, I can see that is what my grandfather and dad were doing. I pray it is what I have done and it is what my successors will do because I think it is based solidly on the wisdom of Jesus when he said, "The greatest among you shall be the servant of all."

Several things have become crystal clear for me over the years of working within a developing atmosphere of servant leadership. Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right."

With every endeavor there are obstacles. If you dwell on the negative it will kill the positive in an organization every time, just like a single drop of vinegar can ruin a bottle of the choicest wine. There is always a way around an

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obstacle. Problems are our invitations to growth. The difference between the two is a single choice that aims us in the direction of life.

Secondly, I learned that blaming and making excuses for making excuses is a way of abdicating responsibility for oneself. It is just that kind of self-justification which Jesus frequently pointed out stifles the spirit. Making excuses and assigning blame are fatal attitudes for anyone who is in a position of leadership. Morale plummets as everyone else begins to do the same thing. It's just the opposite of empowering everyone to draw on their strengths to find a solution that benefits all.

Thirdly, I learned that solutions to problems are not always found by those behind the biggest desk. One of the best ways to lead is by constantly asking advice from others. There is an immense amount of creativ-

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ity in people if we will just stop and listen. The so-called "problem" of motivation in an organization is not how to fill people with zeal and interest but how to draw it out of them by honoring and eliciting their capacity to contribute to the common good according to their gifts. We grow to love what we invest in, and we tend to invest where we feel we can make a difference. A servant leader's job is to find out what this is from everyone in the organization and help them give it. Where this is done consistently, you will find

an organization where each person feels response-able and creatively engaged with the best of their ability.

Fourthly, I've learned that there is no limit to what is possible when we don't care who gets the credit. When you give power away, it empowers everyone around you. You wind up with even more power than you had before because people feel appreciated and useful. Trust grows in the absence of attempts to control. The integrity in an organization built on trust and empowerment of persons to contribute is the greatest competitive advantage of any business, especially in times of stress and real hardship. Jobs for people and corporate stewardship depend on profitable operation. Profit is certainly a key ingredient, but it is a means rather than an end. As Jesus pointed out, "Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and all these things which Your heavenly Father knows you need in order to live, will be given you as well." It's when businesses reverse this order and seek first profits above human meaning and well-being that the whole thing goes awry, just as it does in a single individual's life.

Finally, and most importantly, I have found that servant leadership organizations attract the kind of people who want to be servant leaders themselves. These are people who are motivated by the enduring power of love. In decision making, the first question any servant leader should make is, "What is the loving thing to do?" As Fr. Bennett Sims (now Bishop Sims) once pointed out, "Not only are there servant leaders, but the organization itself can also become a servant." When a certain critical mass is reached, there is an astonishing zest, creativity and productivity that occurs - whether in the home, or in a class, or a business. It just keeps on affecting things around it like a leaven, and the final result is far greater than any sort of monetary reward - a bonding among persons grows and a whole community may begin to show the fruit of diverse gifts being brought forth to bless the whole. We're beginning to see a kind of grass-roots supported renaissance happening all over the place in Columbus, Georgia and it is a joy to behold.

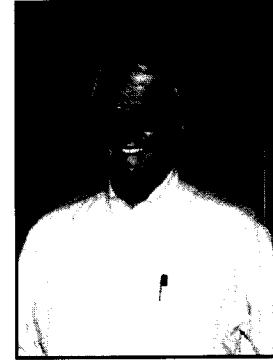
One of my favorite stories is about Jerry Kramer who was an all-pro guard for

the Green Bay Packers during the days when they were winning the National Football League every year. The reporter asked Jerry about the secret of their success and everyone thought that he would say "We've got the greatest coach," or "We've got the greatest players," or "We're in the best condition." What he said very simply and quietly was, "It is because we love each other."

I believe servant leadership really defines the very character of God. God loves and to the extent that we respond in kind, all things work together for the good of every organization. John Steinbeck said that all sin is an attempted shortcut to love. When organizations try to find that shortcut to profitability by neglecting the fundamentals of servant leadership, I believe they sin. The consequences of this sin are enormous. In the end, God owns the vineyard, and we are all paid the same wage, regardless of what we do or where we fit into the organization-

al hierarchy. It is a matter of appreciating and using our gifts and the gifts of everyone else in the organization for the good of all. There is no shortcut to this.

Fifty years later, my prayer has changed only a little. Now I ask God to help me see and change those areas of my life where my "want tos" are still in control. For me, the most difficult part of the Lord's Prayer is "Thy will be done." I guess in a way, I'm still learning what it means to be chosen for a job I am not sure I know how to do. I figure if I keep looking for what God is doing by asking lots of questions and letting the activity of the Holy Spirit active in the people and events around me "tell me what to do," eventually I'll get the hang of this leadership thing. After all, I'm only 75. When it comes to servant leadership I'm still just a kid.



About the Author

William B. Turner is former Chairman of the Board and Director Emeritus of the W.C. Bradley Co. He has worked with teenagers counseling and teaching in St. Luke United Methodist Church for 52 years. Six children, twenty-one grandchildren, a beloved wife of fifty years and a host of other opportunities rejuvenate him constantly. In addition, we are grateful to have him as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Pastoral Institute, Inc.