

Leadership—It's About Being a Servant

Several months ago, while teaching a ServiceMaster case study at the Harvard Business School, I was asked by one of the students, “What is the most important trait you would look for in your successor?” My answer was, “A person who had or could develop a servant’s heart.”

It was an answer that reflected the most important lesson I had to learn when I joined this company, and something that has been an ongoing learning experience. Servant leadership has not come naturally for me. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. While much has been written and said about servant leadership in recent years, ServiceMaster has had a longstanding commitment to this concept.

What It Takes to Be CEO

Ken Hansen, our former chairman, and Ken Wessner, our former CEO, were both involved in recruiting me. They initially wanted me to head up the company’s legal and financial affairs, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. In selling the job, it was suggested I would be among those considered for the CEO position.

The interview process took several months and as we approached what I thought of as the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I

pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could get the position, Ken Hansen stood up and told me the interview was over. Ken Wessner then ushered me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster that morning I concluded that it was over. I had blown an opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen invited me to breakfast to discuss what had happened. When we sat down, he said, “Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent upon a title or position, including the CEO position, then you will be disappointed. To be successful at ServiceMaster you will have to learn to put the interest of others ahead of your own.”

His philosophy of leadership was very clear: Never give a job or a title to a person who can’t live without it. Determine up front whether a person’s self-interest or the interest of others will come first. Know whether a person is willing to do what he or she asks of others.

I took the job, and Ken, in his own way, tested my commitment and understanding of what he had told me. I spent the first several months of my ServiceMaster career cleaning floors, doing maintenance and other work that was part of our service business. There were lessons to learn: the most important of which was my dependence on, and responsibility to, those I would lead.

Many other experiences during those first few months left their mark on me as to what our service people put up with every day and how others often view those who serve in routine assignments. Service people are often viewed as part of the woodwork. There have been times in my career when the faces of our service workers flashed across my mind as I confronted one of those inevitable judgment calls between the right and wrong ways to run a business. The integrity of my actions has to pass their scrutiny.

When all the numbers are added up and reported as results of the firm, they have to do more than satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They have to reflect the reality of

our combined performance; a result one can depend upon, a result that reflects a community built upon trust. Otherwise, I am deceiving myself and those I am committed to serve.

We Serve Day

Such learning experiences have now been incorporated into a regular program called We Serve Day. All our leadership and staff spend at least one day a year in the field performing one of our services. This opportunity to serve customers face-to-face is for everybody, including those we recruit into the business as senior officers and those who have been around for a long time.

Claire Buchan, our vice president for corporate communications, recently described her We Serve Day as hard work. She cleaned Greyhound buses and spent a long time scrubbing bugs off windshields. She claimed to be sore for days thereafter, but also said she gained a new appreciation for our service workers and found out how important it was to promote respect and dignity for them. By taking the time to experience the reality of our service, she was better able to communicate the value of the ServiceMaster way to the public. Claire is one of those special people whose skills and talents will take her beyond her present responsibilities.*

The theme of our annual report this year is “Leading and Learning by Serving.” The sculpture on the cover was created by Esther Augsburger and depicts Jesus Christ washing His disciples’ feet—a striking and practical example of servant leadership. This sculpture, and the granite wall behind it listing those who have contributed twenty-five years or more of service to our company, will be at the entrance of our new office facility at One ServiceMaster Way. It will be a reminder that our company has been built by those who have made career commitments to serve with a mission and a purpose.

In conclusion, listen to the advice Jesus gave His disciples on leadership as they were bickering over who would be the

greatest. “Kings like to throw their weight around and people in authority like to give themselves fancy titles. It is not going to be that way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior. Let the leader act the part of the servant.” (Luke 22:25-26)

POINTS TO PONDER:

- ✦ What is the most important trait I would look for in my successor?...A person who had or could develop a servant’s heart.
- ✦ Never give a job or a title to a person who can’t live without it. Determine up front whether a person’s self-interest or the interest of others will come first. Know whether a person is willing to do what he or she asks of others.
- ✦ “Kings like to throw their weight around and people in authority like to give themselves fancy titles. It is not going to be that way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior. Let the leader act the part of the servant.”

Questions:

- ✦ What do you think is the most important trait your company looks for in its CEO?
- ✦ Do you have some experiences to share of serving as a leader?
- ✦ If you could select a sculpture to put in front of your headquarters that accurately depicted the mission and purpose of your company, what would you choose?

*Claire left ServiceMaster with our blessing. As I write this, she is serving our nation and the world as the associate press secretary of the president of the United States.