

Integrity—

To Know What Is Right and to Do It

Right and Wrong

Several weeks ago, I had the opportunity to give a lecture on ethics at the Wharton School of Business. I talked about the soul of our firm and reviewed how our objectives to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably provided a source and standard for seeking to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong.

Most of the questions at the conclusion of the lecture related to how one determines what's right or wrong. A number of students felt that God is too religious to be an appropriate source for a standard of ethics in business. Most agreed, however, that a moral compass is needed and that one litmus test of whether something is right or wrong is whether there is a benefit or harm to the people affected.

I have often asked the question of how one determines right and wrong when interviewing people for leadership positions. The responses lead me to conclude that many business leaders have not thought deeply about the source of their ethic or integrity.

The story of Joseph, son of Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham, is the story of a man of integrity. Because he was favored by his father, he was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. He became a faithful and incorruptible servant and manager for his Egyptian master and then was unjustly accused. Sent to prison, he was a patient inmate and effective leader and manager for the warden. He was true to his faith in God when called before Pharaoh and proved to be an honest and prudent ruler of the land of Egypt. From his privileged position, he became a forgiving and generous provider for his brothers and family in their time of need.

No matter the circumstances, Joseph could be trusted. The God he loved was the source of his righteousness and his faith was reflected in his leadership. He knew what was right and he did it.

It was Socrates who said that an unexamined life is not worth living. As we have examined the question of integrity and the development of character within ServiceMaster, we have concluded that a person's humanity cannot be defined solely by his physical or rational nature. It is unique in that it also has a spiritual side. It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our integrity, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good and evil, to make moral judgments, to love or to hate, to develop a philosophy of life that provides an ultimate framework for doing the right thing even when there are no prescribed rules or when no one is looking.

In his classic work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn concluded that it was not possible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it was possible to recognize and constrain it. For him, the source of truth and constraint came from God, an authority above himself.

Starting Point

Our starting point also is with God. This does not exclude those who do not believe in Him, but it does require each of us to

determine what is our basis for doing right and avoiding wrong; what is our reason for doing good and treating people with dignity and worth.

For us at ServiceMaster, it is all about people; what they are doing and who they are becoming as the subject of work, not just the object of work. Put into practice, this means that:

- ✦ Truth cannot be compromised.
- ✦ We all have a job to do and no one should benefit at the expense of others.
- ✦ Everyone should be treated with dignity and worth.
- ✦ We work to create value for our customers and owners.
- ✦ We all must be willing to serve others.

For us as leaders of the firm, it also means we should always be willing to:

- ✦ walk in the shoes of those we lead;
- ✦ accept and learn from their differences;
- ✦ be available when they need us;
- ✦ be committed so they can rely upon our promises;
- ✦ be transparent in reporting our performance and admitting our mistakes;
- ✦ be role models of righteousness in our private as well as our public lives;
- ✦ follow the example of Joseph so that, no matter the circumstances, we can be trusted.

These are the standards of integrity that, as a board, we also should use to measure our performance. In your packet of information today is a copy of a new booklet titled *Doing What Is Right*. We are using this as a training tool in our expanded educational program on this subject. Please give me your feedback.

In closing, remember the words of Proverbs 14:2, “He whose walk is upright fears the Lord but he whose ways are devious despises Him.”

POINTS TO PONDER:

- ✦ A person’s humanity cannot be defined solely by his physical or rational nature. It is unique in that it also has a spiritual side. It is this spiritual side that influences our integrity.
- ✦ A line between good and evil passes through every human heart...it is not possible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to recognize and constrain it.
- ✦ Our starting point with God does not exclude those who do not believe in God, but it does require each of us to determine what is our basis for doing right and avoiding wrong; what is our reason for doing good and treating people with dignity and worth.

Questions:

- ✦ Does your business have a code of ethical conduct? Upon what is it based? Does it have any application to your conduct outside the work environment? Should it?
- ✦ Is explaining your code of conduct part of the hiring process? How is it communicated within the company?
- ✦ In what practical ways does your board hold company leaders accountable for ethical behavior?