

THE CHALLENGES OF LEADERSHIP IN A GLOBAL AGE

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GREETINGS

Mr. / Madam Chairperson

Graduates of the IRS Mentoring Program

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for your kind invitation to speak to you today, and congratulations to those of you who have completed your mentoring program.

I believe I can safely assume that it was a worthwhile experience, which, ultimately, will yield positive results at both the individual and institutional levels.

For my part, I consider myself lucky to be participating at this level since it is an opportunity to delve for a while into critical issues relevant to all of us who are in positions of leadership.

The quality of leadership at all levels, in every endeavor and at every epoch has always been important. It is unwise therefore to even make a comparison on the nature of the challenges we face, vis-à-vis 20 or 30 or even 100 years ago.

What we can safely say is that we have significant challenges that our predecessors did not have; globalization for example—the contraction of the world, into a global village literally, the movement of people, money and technology all across the world; increased competition in business and trade and the quality of human resources, and the urgent need for all of us to be more comfortable with diverse cultures, races, ethnicities, religion and other variables.

Certainly, our ability to rise to these challenges, ultimately, will be determined by our commitment to lead with vision and purpose and an awareness of the context in which we operate.

Fortunately, many of those qualities are already on display here today.

For, this mentoring program is itself an act of visionary leadership. It is so because someone with unusual insight, saw the value of such an offering and took the necessary steps that has resulted in our coming together in this way, both to celebrate this stage in the lives of some employees, as well as to have a timely, and thought-provoking discussion of what makes good leaders and how those who lead and those who follow can work together in a positive and cohesive manner for the benefits of institutions.

In every sphere of our lives we can see the impact of effective leadership. Equally, we can see those instances where the leadership has been less than stellar.

From contemporary experiences--and I will leave you to come up with some examples of your own, from religion, corporate America, politics or any other spheres—we can conclude that the persons (s) in authority were not necessarily the best leaders.

Indeed, some of us have even questioned how some people come to hold the positions that they do hold, or have held.

They do or have done because many individuals aspire to leadership for completely selfish reasons. They are aided in their aspirations by money, connection, social standing and even a good education.

But, it does not necessarily mean that having ascended to positions of significance at the workplace or in the society at large, that they have the skill, the acumen, the motivation, the character or the depth, quality and purity of thought and

motives that will allow them to make real and positive contributions.

In contrast, there are the servant leaders, who beyond what seem like innate ability to lead with compassion, humility and wisdom, have cultivated effective skills and their best human qualities and, consequently have and will impact their organizations and society without the trappings or the rewards of authority.

There are many of both kinds in every organizations; it is to the latter to whom we owe growth, positive changes and sustainability.

But, let us explore for a moment the concept itself.

Leadership implies a relationship between two individuals at the very basic level. Beyond that, there are more

complicated and disconnected relationships between leaders and followers primarily because of more complex organizational structures.

Think of Churches, Schools, counties, states, countries and the relationship between those at the very top and those who follow.

Regardless, leadership at these levels is commonly taken to mean the person in authority. He/she is in charge of processes; has the responsibility to influence, inspire and guide and is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the institution.

I don't know how many of you are Red Skins fans?

If you are, you would have been watching the team over the years, taking note of the ups and downs, and seeing as well how these correlate with the quality of its leadership.

Hall of Famer Joe Gibbs has been among the team's most successful coaches ever, having led them to two Super Bowl Championships before his retirement in 1993.

In the ensuing years, the team seemed to have lost its sparkle. Despite many changes at the level of coaches and players, the Skins seemed in a downward spiral for nearly a decade-- until Gibbs came out of retirement in 2004 to coach again.

It took some time, but by the end of the last season, it was clear that the team was energized and focused, and ready to be champions again. If you were watching, you would have seen them in the playoffs this year.

Although the team did not make it to the finals, they got close enough, so much so that coach, players and fans alike

began to feel that another Super Bowl victory was quite possible after years in the wilderness.

After all the maneuvering, all the bickering, all the hiring and firing of expensive quarterbacks, it was the leadership factor that made the greatest difference in the end.

Those who know Gibbs talk about his unrelenting work ethic, his demanding leadership style and his emphasis on respect and excellence from his players. And, there is little doubt of his understanding of human nature and his technical competence as a football coach.

In other words, based on theories of leadership, Gibbs possesses many of the classic competence of an excellent leader:

1. He is technically competent; he knows his job and the skill sets of his players/employees.
2. He knows that it is his responsibility to guide his organization to new heights. And, he knows that when things go wrong, he is ultimately responsible and responsible as well to take corrective action, and move on to the next challenge.
3. His knowledge of the field and of his team allows him to make effective decisions.
4. He sets good examples; he is a good role model for his players/employees.

5. He knows the value of caring for his players and he looks out for their well-being. This is fundamental to human nature and is typically reciprocated with respect and loyalty.

6. He knows the value of communication and of having tasks clearly defined, supervised, and accomplished.

7. He knows the value of rigorous training-- as a team

8. And, he knows that in order to win, every member is important and every effort needs to coalesce around that common goal.

As it is with Gibbs and his Red Skins, I believe that those whom we seek to lead—followers-- for want of a better word, will rally around that common goal if they have confidence in their leadership, faith in its vision and appreciation that sincere efforts are being made to take their organization where they all want it to go.

There is really no better analogy to explain the interdependence of leaders and followers than that of a sports team and one like the Red Skins.

At every level, we are able to see the co-dependence of one member upon another, as well we can see how winning is a team effort and how cohesiveness, or the lack of it, can impact the organization on a whole.

This set of dynamics is really no different in any other institution except that the chain of command may be more

complicated, the interdependence of unit upon unit or department upon department, less visible, and the ultimate goal less defined and less commonly accepted.

This latter variable, the absence of clearly defined goal, are often among the weaknesses of many institutions, particularly government or non-profit institutions where the bottom line is not the common rallying point.

And, it is unfortunate that in this scenario, many of us are often unaware or uncaring of the differences that the quality of leadership makes to our institutions.

Many of us do not seem to take seriously the fact that those whom we seek to lead are looking to us to be exemplars, to be principled in both our personal and professional lives and to inspire our workforce, particularly those who are younger

and inexperienced, to bring out their finest qualities and best talents for their own sake and that of our organizations.

It is especially unfortunate because, more than ever, our institutions, our country and the world need people of vision and integrity, who are committed to a way of being.

Indeed, our experiences over the past two years, have taught us that in public life, we need more than armchair leaders; we need people who are willing to make the sacrifices that go along with the privileges of being in charge.

Although there are challenges inherent in being “the head that wears the ground,” the reality is that having attained positions of power and authority, an effective leader can make tremendous difference to his organization and the world. History is replete with examples: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Gandhi,

Gorbachev, Mandela, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Pope John Paul II.

Their styles, motive, context and contribution were all different, but all possessed a vision of how they could make more rationale the human condition, and all had the vision, wisdom, intellect and courage to make it happen.

As we explore the challenges of leadership today, my admonition to all of us would be, to lead within a framework that honors the best of ourselves and those whom we seek to lead.

This involves a conscious recognition on the part of the leader and authority figure, that he/she is both servant and leader, and that every employee is in fact a human being whose contribution is integral to the success of the organization.

The principles of servant leadership, developed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 and later revised by Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center, provides a very useful framework for those interested in effective leadership and positive outcomes.

Essentially, this framework embraces the idea that the leader serves the people he/she leads and that they are an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end.

Those who embrace these principles believe they are effective because the needs of followers are so looked after that they reach their full potential and perform at their best.

The essential principles of servant leadership are:

1. The servant leader is a listener

All leaders are valued for their communication and decision making skills. He/she knows to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said).

2. The servant leader empathizes

This is a recognition that every person needs to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirit.

The good intentions of workers should be embraced and their humanity not rejected, even when one is forced to reject their behavior or performance

3. The servant leader promotes healing

Implicit in the compact between the servant-leader and led is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something that they have in common

4. Awareness

The servant leader is strengthened by general awareness, and especially by self-awareness.

5. The servant leader is persuasive

Servant-leaders rely on persuasion, rather than positional authority in making decisions. Servant-leaders seek to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This is one of the biggest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership.

6. The servant leader is a conceptualizer.

This is the ability to nurture and dream and to see beyond day-to-day realities.

7. Foresight

This enables servant-leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence

of a decision in the future. It is deeply rooted in the intuitive mind.

8. Stewardship

The servant leader recognizes the role of CEO, staff, directors, and trustees as central in holding their institutions in trust for the great good of society.

9. Commitment to the Growth of People

Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, they are committed to a personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each individual within the organization.

10. Building Community

Servant-leaders are aware that the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives, has changed our perceptions and can lead to displacement. Consequently, they seek to identify ways to

build community among those who work within a given institution.

Like any theory, servant-leadership is criticized for many reasons and no doubt, it has its weaknesses. But, I see no contradictions between these principles and the outcome we seek as effective leaders.

As leaders, the 21st century is demanding an approach to relationships that above all, affirms and uplifts the value of every human being and oppresses no one—not even in the interest of the bottom line.

After all is said and done, therefore, the greatest challenge we face is to lead with humility, wisdom, integrity and creativity—to never lose sight of the fact that the good of the whole supercedes the desires of the few.

And if we can keep our heads, when all around us others are losing theirs, it will be well.

Thank You.