

PILLAR VII

Moral Authority

—Stephen Covey

Moral authority requires sacrifice.

A Servant-Leader is worthy of respect, inspires trust and confidence, and establishes quality standards for performance.

- Values moral authority over positional authority.
- Empowers others with responsibility *and* authority.
- Sets clear, firm yet flexible boundaries.
- Establishes, models, and enforces quality standards for conduct and performance.

Core Competencies

1. Accepts and Delegates Responsibility
2. Shares Power and Control
3. Creates a Culture of Accountability

Becoming Worthy to Lead

In college I (Don) was once part of a team charged with the task of building a float for the homecoming parade. Our elected foreman had worked construction during the previous summer but was not a strong leader. To be fair, we followers did not give him much of a chance. We were being goofy—joking, joshing, and jiving. Not much was getting done, and we had little time left. Then, we gradually noticed Larry, who was quietly picking up two-by-four boards

and nailing them into place, stopping to ask others how he could help with their jobs, working with grace and efficiency to make the take shape. He did not lecture the rest of us knuckleheads, whip us into shape, shame us, or order us around. He simply worked.

As Larry moved among us we eventually quieted down and got to work. He became the project leader by example. He proved his trustworthiness and dedication to our shared objective. He earned moral authority.

Moral authority is different from formal authority. Formal authority is the power a person holds because of his or her position. It usually includes the discretion to hire, fire, promote, demote, or correct. A CEO holds formal authority, just like a parent. Lurking in the background is the threat of coercion to make things happen, even if the person with the position would prefer to operate collaboratively. Robert Greenleaf believed the background threat of coercion could sabotage a leader's ability to persuade with open hands. He even turned down some promotions because he feared the formal authority that came with them would interfere with the most precious kind of power—moral authority. Greenleaf understood that moral authority is not something that automatically comes with a position, or even with a claim to moral authority. It is something one *earns* by following the other six Pillars of Servant Leadership.

Specifically, your followers *grant* you moral authority when they see that you consistently:

- act as a person of character with humility, integrity, and a base of spirituality,
- put people first through acts of care and concern, mentoring, and serving,
- communicate skillfully with empathy and an open heart for feedback,
- collaborate compassionately, honor diversity, build effective teams, and face conflict,
- exercise foresight, nurture creativity, inspire and support an audacious vision, and

- think systemically, considering the greater good while acting strategically in complex environments.

Stephen Covey puts it this way:

Moral authority is another way to define Servant Leadership because it represents a reciprocal choice between leader and follower. If the leader is principle-centered, he or she will develop moral authority.¹

A person with moral authority acts as servant. Robert Greenleaf summarized the principle in this famous passage:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led.²

If Greenleaf is right, the importance of moral authority goes beyond the esteem it brings to individuals. It could mean the survival or demise of entire organizations. This is already happening. During the era of Enron and similar scandals, billions of dollars were lost and thousands of lives disrupted because the public lost its trust in the basic moral authority of organizations. Other scandals are always aborning, even if they do not receive similar publicity. The need for moral authority prevails.

Moral authority is not to be confused with the trait of being moralistic, which is too often expressed in shallow commands like "Do what I say, not what I do." Every parent knows this approach does not work with children, so why would it work with adults? A moralistic person frequently, and often unconsciously, operates out of the ego. A moral person operates out of love—love of self and others.

My (Don's) friend Melinda is not a moralistic person. She responds to problems by listening first rather than judging first, but she is certainly moral. Melinda taught me of the value of acting in a moral way *even when no one is looking*. Like many Servant-Leaders, Melinda expects more from herself than she does from others.

I called her one day and commented that she sounded sleepy. "I've tossed and turned all night," she said, "thinking about a situation with my health insurance." Melinda lost coverage when she left a job to start her own business and had been shopping for a new policy. She had had an interview with an agent who asked a minimal number of questions, all of which she answered honestly, but she did not volunteer much beyond what was asked. Most people would say, "Hey, smart move, Melinda!" but she did not see it that way. Melinda is generally of sound body, but like most 58-year-olds, has had a few health-related issues along the way. She did not want to be in a position she called "out of integrity" by not disclosing everything on an insurance application.

"It's interesting that not so long ago this wouldn't have bothered me" she said. "Now I'm like the princess in the Princess and the Pea fairy tale." She had to refresh my memory on that one.

"The Princess and the Pea" is a Hans Christian Andersen story. In it, a prince searched the world for a true Princess (with a capital "P"). He found plenty of princesses, but there was always something about them that did not ring true. He wanted the real deal.

One night during a terrible storm a young woman knocked on the gate of the king's castle claiming she was a real Princess and needed a place to stay. The old queen thought, "We'll find out how real she is!" and arranged a test. She cleared off a bed and put a pea on the wooden board that held the mattress, then piled twenty mattresses and twenty elder-down beds on top of it. The stack of bedding was so high that some illustrations show the Princess climbing a ladder to get to the top of it.

In the morning the Princess was asked how she slept. "Horribly!" she said "Heaven only knows what was in the bed, but I was lying on something hard, so that I am black and blue all over my body." That was when everyone knew that she was a real Princess, because

Like the Princess, Melinda has learned that the price of being moral—in essence, the price of royalty—is to suffer the bruises of sensitivity. Melinda is a Person of Character (Pillar I) who has learned to pay attention to her intuition (Pillar V) and taken radical responsibility for her own values *first*. She has learned that a prickling awareness accompanies the attempt to be a thoughtful, congruent "good person." It is too late for Melinda to sleep soundly—to literally be unconscious—about issues that define her core values.

After awakening with the bruises caused by the pea under her mattress, Melinda called her insurance agent and started over. She later told me that if she did not have credibility with herself when no one was looking, she did not see how she could have it with others while the world watched.

Credibility is a key ingredient of moral authority. James Kouzes, co-author of *The Leadership Challenge* summarizes the importance of credibility in a leader:

All the techniques and all the tools that fill the pages of all the management and leadership books are not substitutes for who you are and what you are....My colleague Barry Posner and I have been collaborating on leadership research for nearly fifteen years, and we keep learning the same thing over and over and over. We keep rediscovering that *credibility is the foundation of leadership*. It's been reinforced so often that we've come to refer to it as the "First Law of Leadership."

When you reflect on the people who have moral authority, you will recognize a common thread in their demeanor, one that Greenleaf called *awareness*. Peter Senge and his co-authors wrote a book about it titled *Presence*. Awareness—or presence—is a disturber, said Greenleaf, but it is also a grounding state of mind. Our friend Jeffrey Dols wrote a poem about it.⁴

Cell Phones, PDAs and Other Assorted Gadgets

When you take your dog for a walk,
walk with your dog.

Be present to your dog.
Be present to your walking.
Stock quotes can wait until you get to work.

When you take your kids to the ballgame,
watch the game with your kids.
Be present to your kids.
Be present to the game.
Straggler emails can wait until morning.

When you visit the Grand Canyon,
enjoy the Grand Canyon.
Be present to the beauty.
Be present to the vastness.
Describing it to your friend in New Jersey can wait
until later.

When you and a friend watch the sun disappear over
the ocean,
marvel at the beauty of the sunset.
Be present to your friend.
Be present to the waves.
You can place your pizza order after the sun goes down.

When you decide to spend time alone with God,
spend time with God.
Be present to God all around you.
Be present to God within you.
Be present.
Be.

Jeffrey's accessible images remind us that if we wish to live lives
of moral authority, we must first be in the room, really be there,
immersed in the reality of the people and environment, open to the
moment, aware of the past and the future but not focused on them.
This quality of presence is frequently commented upon by people
who have spent time with Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, and other
great spirits. But you can also find it in Servant-Leaders in your

community who have somehow carved out a way of being present
in our fast-paced digital world.
Servant Leadership is not only about one's *being* but also about
one's *doing*. The remainder of this chapter will present three key
competencies that describe how people with moral authority act in
organizations.

1. Accepting and Delegating Responsibility

Do any of these statements sound familiar?

- "They made that decision, not me!"
- "I wouldn't touch that project with a ten-foot pole. Let
someone else wreck her career with it!"
- "Word has come from on high!"
- "If you want something done right, you've got to do it
yourself!"

Life is messy, and we cannot control all the messes. It is easier
to blame someone else for bad decisions than to roll up our sleeves,
jump into the chaos and do what we can to help, like Larry did
building the float. Most frequently, some person or group of people
called "they" is to blame for the problems. "They" are going to
have a lot to account for on judgment day!

On the other hand, when we *must* do something and are to be
held accountable, it is tough to trust anyone else to follow through.
For many people, delegating responsibility to others is harder than
accepting it for themselves.

That was certainly true of Jane, one of my (Don's) smart, com-
petent former bosses. As head of our department, she was respon-
sible for all outcomes. She willingly accepted that responsibility but
could not bear to put her fate in others' hands. Her greatest asset—
her competence—became her greatest liability because she knew
she could always do a project better than anyone else. Those of us
who worked for her recognized that, while it was true that only she
could complete a project in the precise way *she* wanted, but it was
not true that no one else could do it ably and efficiently. Funny how
we see those things in others but not ourselves!

Both of these attitudes—blaming others and withholding delegation—reveal a victim mentality. The belief that “someone else is in charge and I can’t do anything about it” makes you “dust in the wind,” in the words of the popular song. It also means you are denying your God-given gifts to the universe, which is an affront to the Creator in any religion. Remember the words of the popular poster in the 1960s: “God Doesn’t Make Junk!” When you cannot delegate responsibility to others, you are also making yourself a victim—of your own limitations and your often-hidden grandiosity.

Make no mistake: there *are* real victims in the world, of crime, abuse, war, illness, and, yes, victims of stupidity in the workplace. The real question is how will you respond? Do you choose to remain a victim or change yourself—and the world—for the better?

In his classic book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck makes the point that most suffering in life is the result of an attempt to avoid pain. Do not take on that risky project and you will not fail. Do not delegate responsibility to others and you will not be disappointed in the outcome. Peck observes that avoidance of pain solves nothing in the long run. Suffering goes underground and pops back up in the most peculiar places. The same challenges will occur again and again until we address them head-on, with honesty, discipline, and integrity.

People with moral authority will be asked to accept more than their share of responsibility because they are trusted, even when others do not always agree with them. If time permits, they give it their best shot, and take every project personally. They humbly ask others to help them improve areas of weakness, keep an open mind about possibilities, and understand that some of their best contributions can come through playful creativity, quiet reflection, reframing of issues, and asking better *questions* rather than only focusing on answers to the old questions.

When it is time to delegate responsibility, Servant-Leaders take on partners rather than subordinates. They offer clear guidelines and remain available to support the people they have asked for help.

In fact, they see themselves as *servants* to their helping partners. Robert Greenleaf summed up the issue of responsibility in his essay *The Servant As Leader*:

Who is the enemy?...Granting that fewer evil, stupid, or pathetic people or a better “system” might make the job easier, their removal would not change matters, not for long....In short, the enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non-servant.⁵

The skills of delegating responsibility are easy to learn—be clear with expectations, provide the necessary resources, agree on a deadline, be available to help. The biggest hurdle is the decision to delegate, in trust and without micromanaging.

For a Servant-Leader, no magic formulas can make the acceptance and delegation of responsibility risk-free, or even doing the right things. There is only this: the gentle but persistent guidance mantras will assure you are doing things right, or even doing the right things. There is only this: the gentle but persistent guidance of love.



Ask Yourself

If I want others to give me moral authority:

- Do I *really* trust others to be responsible, or do I only trust myself?
- Am I generally “in integrity” with myself?
- Do I feel like a victim because others ask me to do so much? If so, how can I set appropriate boundaries?
- In the next week, will I accept the challenge to delegate two tasks that I prefer to do myself?



2. Sharing Power and Control

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lished from the beginning of an enterprise. When Franklin saw a need in the community, he first tested a possible solution by presenting a paper on the subject to a group of twelve close colleagues who called themselves the Junta. Cool, rational discussion followed, all out of the public eye. If the idea seemed worthy, Franklin began laying the groundwork by discussing it informally with people in the community and seeing to it that favorable articles were published in his newspaper.

When interest reached a critical mass, others began a campaign to enlist subscribers who would each contribute a small amount over several years to make the thing happen. Franklin preferred that others take over public leadership of projects, for two reasons: (1) wide public support made success more likely because more people would invest their personal time to make the project happen, and (2) he wanted the focus to be on the project, *not* on Benjamin Franklin. Using this strategy, Franklin established the first circulating library in America, the first firefighting company, a hospital, the University of Pennsylvania, and a score of other worthy institutions.

Robert Greenleaf preferred a similar approach during his years as an AT&T executive. In fact, Greenleaf considered himself most successful when no one realized he was the originator of an idea!

Both Greenleaf and Franklin learned that they would not win every issue this way, but they would win most of them, and in the process would increase moral authority, a precious commodity for the next campaign.

In this book, we use the phrase "share power and control" because people can easily understand it in the context of a typical hierarchical organization. But let us look at that phrase more closely. In reality, it reflects a form of zero-sum thinking: some people have power and others have less. Those with more decide to give some of it away, which can be a scary thing to do, because the person who gives away power may be less able to control outcomes.

Several dangers lurk in this mental model. First is the notion that there is only a limited amount of power available, and sharing it diminishes the one who shares. In truth, sharing power only increases the abundant currency of power for everyone, and the

That idea seems nonsensical, but look at it using an image shared by Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper: Imagine a picnic scene on a hot, August day. Janet is the keeper of the cold lemonade and her job is to be sure everyone who wants a drink is satisfied. Two-hundred people are waiting in line with empty cups. Janet has no helpers so she pours until her pitcher is empty, takes a break to refill, and then pours again. She wants to be sure the job is done right, without spilling a drop, so she refuses all offers of help. She would not want to be responsible if others wasted lemonade! Finally, after hearing grumbling from the thirsty crowd, Janet allows others to help. They find extra pitchers, fill them, and wander around, filling glasses. Every pourer becomes a lemonade leader. Leadership becomes a shared territory. If there are any problems with the lemonade's quality or delivery the pourer can try to solve it on the spot. The lemonade leaders can still go to Janet and work out a solution with her for the really sticky issues—like running out of sugar! Most importantly, the mission of the work—to slake thirst with lemonade—is being accomplished in a more efficient way. If Janet had shared power and control from the beginning, the problem would not have grown so large. We are all Janet at times, but we can all be lemonade leaders.

The second danger of the zero-sum model lies in its implied paternalism. The person "above" graciously gives away power to those "below," thereby establishing a kind of parent-child relationship. This smacks of co-dependence or, even worse, flat-out dependence. It is not good for the soul. Paternalism makes leaders prone to grandiosity and tempts followers to use sneaky tactics or outright sabotage to get what they want.

Whenever possible, a Servant-Leader practices a more radical kind of power sharing, one that sees every player as an important part of the enterprise rather than as a tool to carry out the leader's wishes. This kind of leader, first, serves the common vision, which is created, supported, and frequently revised by employees themselves rather than by a small group of top executives on a weekend retreat. Second, the Servant-Leader also serves everyone in the organization by teaching, nurturing, listening, and arranging for individuals and teams to take real responsibility at the highest possible levels. Through all this he or she also "goes out ahead to show

the way"—Greenleaf's definition of a leader—using traditional tools of analysis supplemented by intuition, foresight, collaboration, and a concern for the common good.



Ask Yourself

- Do I secretly feel good about having power over others? If so, what is one thing I can do differently *today* to share power with others?
- Using the example of Benjamin Franklin, where can I allow others to assume more public visibility as leaders of an enterprise? As a beginning, where and how can I enlist broad support from the beginning of an issue rather than struggle for "buy-in" after a decision has been made?
- How can I transform the ego needs that cause me to seek power *over* others—we call it the "power payoff"—into a different kind of satisfaction that comes from having power *with* others? (Greenleaf said that we all have ego needs. A Servant-Leader finds alternative ways to satisfy them.)



3. Creates a Culture of Accountability

How do you create a culture of accountability? Codes of conduct can be useful, but are not enough. After all, Servant Leadership is a journey for seekers, not a code for conformers. Cultures of accountability are created and sustained through moral principles, stories, congruent policies, ongoing learning, and celebrations.

Moral Principles

Greenleaf believed an organization should begin with solid, enduring moral principles rather than rules. The classic example: since 1901, the Nordstrom retail chain has done just that by evolving a culture of radical accountability with one simple principle found on a sheet given to new Nordstrom sales people on the first

day of training. It reads: "Use your good judgment in all situations. There will be no additional rules. Please feel free to ask your department manager, store manager, or division general manager any question at any time."

Nordstrom's strategy for advertising is to let their customers do most of it by word of mouth, and reinforcing their impeccable customer service through stories, like these:

A woman with one leg approached a Nordstrom salesperson and bet they would not sell just one shoe. She lost the bet, and Nordstrom gained a customer for life.

A man tells the story of how his "personal" Nordstrom salesman encouraged him to take home a suit and see how his family liked it before he paid.

A customer left her plane ticket at the store and her salesperson rushed to the airport in a cab to get it to her before the flight left.

Top salespeople keep databases on their customers, send birthday and anniversary cards, and develop genuine friendships. Patrick McCarthy, co-author of *The Nordstrom Way*, says "A relationship is everything. It's a heart experience. Most companies are head experiences—bean counters are running them. When the heart is running them, it becomes exciting."

Nordstrom's total culture supports these outrageous acts of relationship and service. It is the job of the salesperson to do the right thing and the job of managers to back up their salespeople.

Great customer service alone does not make a servant-led company, but it is impossible to operate an organization on the principles of Servant Leadership and not give terrific customer service. This is one way an entire organization acquires moral authority in the eyes of the world.

Stories

Insurance companies that survived the Great Depression tell stories about how they did the right thing back in the Thirties and lived to tell the tale. The stories of two companies, one in Wisconsin and the other in Indiana, are similar.

Few folks had money to buy insurance in those days, which meant very little cash came in to replenish the company's coffers. Financial reserves set aside to pay claims dwindled to dangerously low levels.

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There will be no additional rules. Please feel free to ask your day of training. It reads: "Use your good judgment in all situations.

The company was in trouble when a natural disaster hit, or there was an unusual string of deaths that demanded immediate payment of benefits. To meet the claims, the company's top executives mortgaged their own homes and, in one case, lower-level employees joined them. Both companies survived, and stories about holding to principles in tough times became part of their corporate cultures, because they encoded the deepest values of the organizations.

Tom's of Maine is a company that makes personal care products from natural ingredients and takes care to secure supplies only from ethical providers who treat workers fairly. In 1992, in an attempt to reduce reliance on petroleum, the company replaced a petroleum-based derivative in a deodorant with a vegetable-based glycerin. Half of their customers were satisfied with the new formulation but half complained. A recall would cost \$400,000 and affect growth plans. What to do?

The company looked to its mission statement: "to serve our customers by providing safe, effective, innovative natural products of high quality." By that standard, they decided that even the old formulation didn't make the grade. So Tom Chappell authorized a recall. He wrote to thousands of customers, apologized, and sent a free sample of the new product.⁹

This story, and many others at Tom's of Maine, support Tom Chappell's belief in "common good capitalism." Unlike many in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement, he does not believe in quantifying a "second bottom line" that measures human good. "Goodness is not a bottom line," he says. "It's not reducible, it's not measurable, it's only something you can feel and affirm, and it's not measurable, it's only something you can feel and affirm, and share.... We're talking about a business strategy that employs your head to do the calculations and the shrewdness, and your heart or spirit to be in respect and awe of the wonder and beauty of goodness in nature, in people, and so on."¹⁰ His words would mean nothing unless there were stories to back them up.

Congruent Policies

TDIndustries, a Dallas-based firm that designs and installs heating and air conditioning equipment, has followed the principles of Servant Leadership since the mid-1970s and has evolved procedures consistent with their values.

For example, evaluations at TDIndustries are multiple-layered. In conversations with supervisors, Partners (all TD employees) are called "Partners") are honestly praised for tasks well-done and given suggestions for "future areas of growth." Then it is the Partner's turn to comment on her goals, what she appreciates about the supervisor, and areas that could be improved in the supervisor's performance—*from the CEO to the supervisor*. Supervisors understand that their role is to *serve* the needs of those who report to them. Others in the organization are free to submit comments about *anyone's* performance—and the maintenance personnel, but most frequently this is done in personal conversations. One of the criteria for all evaluations—"How am I doing as a Servant-Leader?"—is: "How am I doing as a Servant-Leader?"

Meetings at TDI are conducted in an open fashion. Every Partner learns deep listening skills and is expected to practice them in meetings and personal encounters. When possible, the designated leader asks for a "Plus-Delta" evaluation. First, everyone is invited to comment on the "pluses" of the meeting—what went well, what was learned, whom they appreciated for contributions, positive comments on the process, etc. Then, participants are asked for the "deltas." Delta is the letter in the Greek alphabet that stands for change, so rather than dwell on the negative aspects of the day's meeting, team members are asked what they would like to change, in a *positive way* in future meetings. When the team is dismissed, every Partner has had a chance to be heard.

TDIndustries has evolved dozens of large and small policies that support the principles of Servant Leadership, including open accounting and sharing of financial statements on a monthly basis. Some of the policies are tough, like the zero-tolerance policy about lying, stealing, and drug use.

Policies congruent with Servant Leadership business partner once said,

stage. As the CEO of a TDIndustries business partner once said,

Ongoing Learning

"You don't train for integrity; you hire for it!"

There has always been a strong minority of Spanish-speaking people in Texas. Historically, most companies simply expected those people to learn enough English to get by, but Partners at

TDIndustries decided they should also learn Spanish, and the company offered free Spanish classes for Partners. It was "the right thing to do" according to one executive, and also a profitable thing to do since Partners could communicate more effectively with customers.

This is a learning organization. Workshops allow Partners to stretch their skill sets. Seminars pass along the latest wisdom from leadership and management disciplines. Managers do not hoard information, or complain about the cost of learning, even though the company is hyper-vigilant in all its expenses.

All new TD Partners receive training in Servant Leadership. Technical training is supplemented by periodic refresher courses in the practice of Servant Leadership in the workplace. Partners even help create the training, like a series of homemade videotapes that contrasted "The Old Guard" way of doing things with "The Servant Leadership Way." The video series was premiered at a gala celebration.

Celebrations

Servant Leadership is often seen as a serious, sober subject, but Robert Greenleaf himself once said, "If it ain't fun, it won't get done," and by all accounts he had a marvelous, quirky sense of humor. When he was a youngster, Greenleaf was not able to experience many celebrations because his parents had little money and did not make a "big deal" of rituals of celebration. As an adult, he could have followed their model, but decided instead to give himself and his family what he had missed as a child. He pulled out all the stops to decorate the house for Valentine's Day and other holidays. At work, he fostered an atmosphere of enjoyable companionship, even though he was a natural introvert and was not a gushy person. He carefully chose co-workers to plan formal celebrations and initiated his share of informal ones.

Servant-Leader celebration is more than staging an office Christmas party. Just ask Southwest Airlines. Southwest created a Culture Committee to ensure that *fun*, and that Southwest value called "LUV," is integrated into all aspects of its operation. At their annual Heroes of the Heart celebration, Employees (Southwest always capitalizes the words "Employees" and "Customers") honor their unsung heroes, like the Gate Agent who leased a private plane

to fly a Customer to emergency medical care after she broke her leg on the ramp. Other Southwest celebrations abound at their centers around the country.

As a loyal Southwest Customer for years, I (Don) have witnessed many events that show how those LUV folks bring Customers in on the fun. I remember the pre-flight safety speech by a flight attendant who said passengers were perfectly welcome to smoke as long as they did it out on the wing! But my favorite memory happened on an Easter Sunday. The plane was pulling away from the ramp when a Flight Attendant dressed as a bunny popped out of the galley and hopped up and down the aisle wishing everyone a happy Easter!

Celebration is a natural expression of the joy and passion that undergirds moral authority.

Every organization must create its own culture of accountability, guided by its most important moral principles and supported by stories, congruent policies, ongoing learning and celebrations. Creating such a culture requires patience. Nordstrom evolved its DNA of customer service over more than a hundred years. No one can do it alone, but you can start here, now, where you live and work.

Setting Quality Standards for Performance

The examples from Nordstrom, TDIndustries, Tom's of Maine, and numerous other servant-led companies teach us five things about how to set standards for performance, to establish benchmarks that will earn individuals and companies moral authority.

1. The most powerful performance standards arise from the deepest values found in the company's mission statement. If the mission statement only contains sentences like "Our mission is to return shareholder value," work to have it changed.
2. Top performance results when employees are trusted to use their own creativity and passion to implement details of enduring principles, and are backed up by their supervisors.
3. Even though no one is perfect, the performance of top officials should be congruent with the highest standards, or

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after residents—"the people who do the important work," as she put it. At the first staff meeting, she called together her team and said, "The residents have social workers, family members and ombudsmen looking out for them—even people at the state level—while the corporate staff needs to look after the health of the entire organization. As I see my role, I'm the only person whose job it is to look out for you."

They tested her and found she was serious. "With working class people," she says, "you have to *earn* moral authority—I mean, big time! I try to demonstrate a work ethic, to keep my promises, never break my word or betray a confidence. Always be fair. Never play favorites. Be even-handed with people. It's not that I've never slipped. I have. But that's the policy I pretty much stand on." Jai conducted surveys and initiated conversations to find out what jobs people preferred, when they would like to start their shifts, even what was *fun* for them. Then she did her best to match the people to the jobs, and was successful more often than not.

Jai was not imposing a model of change management or trying to "invert the pyramid." She was simply operating from her Scandinavian common sense and her own sense of engagement. "My crew's purpose is to serve our clients and my purpose is to serve them. Doesn't that just make sense? It may sound odd to some people, but it's *fun* for me to try and make people more happy and satisfied in their jobs. It's not that I'm purely magnanimous. In my head, that's just logical—that's how you manage people and get results."

The word "fun" appears frequently in Jai's conversation, reminiscent of Greenleaf's dictum: "If it ain't fun, it won't get done." It even appears in the Environmental Services Purpose Statement her crew lives by: "To do the best possible job in the least amount of time with the least amount of effort, the least risk to personal safety, and the least disruption to the residents' lives while having the most fun." Jai finds fun in situations where others tear out their hair. "I love that tension between upper management and the front-line staff," she says. "It's crazy-making. It's so stressful sometimes. You work on resolving the tension but you'll never get there. That's why it will continue to be challenging."

She is an advocate of the people she serves and sees herself as one of them. "I hate elitism. People like cleaners are the closest

thing we have to a lower-caste system. It's open season for jokes about maids, butlers, and janitors. I don't need to tell you how inverted our value system is when football players are paid extravagantly but someone who cleans up after a resident has an accident gets paid next to nothing. Look at your quality of life. Who's more important? The whole culture is trying to tell these people, 'You're just a housekeeper.' You're never *just* a housekeeper! Their leader needs to keep chipping away to convey how important they are."

Jai is an early adopter of the latest technologies for her crew and sees that as one more way of serving them—and her organization. She also demands accountability. "I don't give up on people easily. I usually spend 12–18 months trying to help those who lack good judgment or a strong work ethic, but some people you just have to cut loose because they have such a negative impact on the organization."

On Politics and Persuasion

A concern for regular working folks extends to Jai's political life. She absorbed in her bones the area's history of populism and progressive politics, and finally decided to run for office. "There was way too much conservatism and nonsense going on in local government," she remembered. "The city spent about \$100,000 just to keep the Ten Commandments in a city park and I thought, 'Hey! That's my money!' But in my heart I mostly just wanted to serve." She attended several seminars on Servant Leadership and, like so many others who have discovered Greenleaf's ideas, realized that she was a Servant-Leader all along, even if she had not been familiar with the language.

Ms. Johnson's preferred mode of power is *persuasion*. I asked her to summarize her "big tent" strategy for gaining agreement in politics and on the job.

- "Always start with what you can agree on. If you can't get everyone to see the value, you're chasing the bus right out of the gate."
- "Put a moral spin on things by emphasizing that this is the right thing to do. You change human behavior from the

heights. I don't preach. I just try to talk to people in a way that persuades them."

- *Support the case* with accurate statistics, case studies and financial details. "You can sell some people on the soft side, and others on the hard side, so also sell it for its good business and economic sense."

- *Don't demonize others or assume moral superiority for yourself.* The newspaper profile quoted colleagues who said that Jai practices what she preaches on personal and environmental issues. "Right!" she laughs. "With my chlorinated swimming pool and my cigarettes! The courage of my convictions is an area that needs work." That kind of honest humility is precisely the reason people trust her, but they also know she is dead serious about being as congruent as possible. "I think Aristotle's argument that *ethos* [one's character as revealed by actions] is the most powerful persuasion tool."

- *"I can never listen enough."*

Her approach *works*. When Councilwoman Johnson and a colleague argued for a resolution to support the eco-friendly principles of "The Natural Step," a Swedish system for reducing dependence on nonrenewable resources and synthetics, they emphasized core values everyone could agree upon and then connected the dots with statistics, real-life examples, outside experts, and realistic financial projections and listened respectfully to opposition voices.¹³ To the surprise of many observers, the issue passed.

La Crosse citizens might be stunned to know that Jai Johnson is a dyed-in-the-wool introvert. "It taps my energy to run for political office," she says. "It's not natural for me to be on stage or television. Maybe I wouldn't be so exhausted if I learned to live outside my comfort zone a little better." Yet, her influence soars when she stands up and speaks from her heart rather than from a political playbook. That is what happened when she addressed people from a progressive political action committee who were interested in running for office. "I wasn't polished and I didn't toe the party line. I just spoke honestly about how I won my race. Later, people came up to me and said, 'I didn't think I could do this but now I think

maybe I can, because you're just like me.' I didn't get much feedback from the organization that invited me, though. I didn't follow their party's manual to a 'T'."

Sustained by Spirit

How does a Servant-Leader like Jai get up every morning and face the challenges of a full, complicated life of management and politics? She just does it, but it is not always easy. "I get angry at times. Frustrated. Some days I wish there was a pill I could take so I didn't care so much, just for a couple of days, but it's just not my nature. But despite the struggles, the rewards are great and very personal to me. Like when a client compliments my departments. When an employee says, 'I'm glad you're my boss,' that's the ultimate compliment and the greatest motivator for me."

When an employee says, "I'm glad you're my boss," that's the ultimate compliment and the greatest motivator for me." Jai Johnson is her own person. She is a homeowner and a solid citizen, with no husband or children. She has studied religion, but rather than relying on doctrine, likes to quote the ethic in the song *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*: "Be good for goodness' sake." Aristotle would agree. She is funny, thoughtful, committed and absolutely authentic—a person of spirit. Greenleaf once wrote about this quality in a leader:

Spirit in a leader, as I see it, is the quality that leads him to risk and venture; this is communicated to the timid and the less venturesome who are energized to follow. Spirit directs the leader when the going is rough, or uncertain, or hardy, arduous, and gives strength and assurance to the less hardy. Spirit sustains the leader in long depressing periods for the things are not going well. Spirit armors the leader for the stress of crisis and the unexpected. Spirit is an aspect of inner strength.

From my limited view of things, folk in the full spectrum of belief and non-belief, from atheists and humanists to the most orthodox evangelicals, possess the qualities. I can't see that it makes much difference.¹⁴

Jai Johnson believes that Servant Leadership is a path well-suited for local electoral politics, but wonders how well a “true people’s candidate” would fare in larger arenas, given the political maneuvering she’s witnessed. She does not believe Servant Leadership is a magic bullet ideology for either politics or important issues. “You know what a magic bullet is?” she asks. “A good start! But I do see sustainability as having the potential to unite people at a time when most issues divide us, and it goes way beyond the environment for me. If you could link the Servant Leadership approach with sustainability, that would be extraordinary.”

Some have urged Jai Johnson to run for office in the state legislature, or even the United States House of Representatives. She’s not so sure. “There’s plenty of building to be done locally,” she says, “and no one in Washington would understand my Feingold and cheese jokes!”



Ask Yourself

- Do I feel any call to exercise my role as servant in a wider arena?
- How does my way of operating compare to Jai’s model for using persuasion?
- What sustains me every day to get up and act as servant in spite of the challenges and disappointments?

