

Leadership Qualities: Human Resources

Dr. Kenneth Boa

Robert Roberts writes about a fourth grade class in which the teacher introduced a game called “balloon stomp.” A balloon was tied to every child’s leg, and the object of the game was to pop everyone else’s balloon while protecting one’s own. The last person with an intact balloon would win.

This is a zero-sum game. One person wins; everyone else loses. The success of one causes the failure of others. The object of the game necessitates a winner-take-all mindset. Everyone else is someone to be rooted against.

Balloon stomp is survival of the fittest – a true Darwinian exercise. The fourth graders in Roberts’ story entered into the spirit of the game with vigor. Balloons were relentlessly targeted and destroyed. A few of the children clung to the sidelines like wallflowers at a middle school dance, but their balloons were doomed just the same. The entire battle was over in a matter of seconds, leaving only one balloon inflated. Its owner was, of course, the most disliked kid in the class.

It’s hard to really win at a game like balloon stomp. In order to complete your mission, you have to be pushy, rude and offensive.

Roberts goes on to write that a second class was introduced to the same game. Only this time it was a class of mentally handicapped children. They were given the same explanation as the first class, and the signal to begin was given. But the game proceeded very differently. Perhaps the instructions were given too quickly for children with learning disabilities to grasp them. The one idea that got through was that the balloons were supposed to be popped.

So it was the balloons, not the other players, that were viewed as enemies. Instead of fighting each other, they began helping each other pop balloons. One little girl knelt down and held her balloon carefully in place, like a holder for a field goal kicker. A little boy stomped it flat. Then he knelt down and held his balloon for her. It went on like this for several minutes until all the balloons were vanquished, and everybody cheered. Everybody won.¹

Who got the game right, and who got the game wrong? In our world, we tend to think of another person's success as one less opportunity for us to succeed. There can only be one top dog, one top banana, one big kahuna. If we ever find ourselves in that enviable position, we will fight like mad to maintain our hold on it. A lot of companies fail to enjoy prolonged success because the people in charge have this "balloon stomp" mentality.

But in God's new community, the rules change. He gets top billing. We're just here to serve his purposes, and we do that most effectively by elevating others and humbling ourselves. The business world is just now grasping the concept of servant leadership, especially in the field of human resources and HR development.

A Community of Growth

Jesus certainly understood the importance of managing and developing people. According to the apostle Paul, the risen Christ himself called those who would serve as the foundation stones of his church:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-13

¹ Robert Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 156.

Christ endowed each believer with unique spiritual gifts. In addition, he gave the church special individuals whom he had particularly gifted for spiritual leadership.

Paul emphasized Christ's authority to distribute these gifts. Jesus ascended into heaven so that he might fill "the whole universe" (v. 10). This matchless Christ gave special gifts to his people in order to enhance the building of his church. Of course he didn't impart those gifts merely for the enjoyment of the recipients. Jesus gifted people so that they could exercise these abilities in a way that would "prepare God's people for works of service" (v. 12), works that would bring glory to him and enjoyment and satisfaction to his people.

Jesus beautifully planned that those works of service, performed by his own people, would build up the body of Christ "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13). What a wonderful use of the gifts of leaders – to help themselves and others attain "the fullness of Christ"!

It is true that we come to faith as individuals, but from the very beginning the Bible's message is clear: It is not good for man to be alone (cf. Genesis 2:18). We speak often of the God-shaped void that is built into people. It is this yearning for something "other" that drives us to God. But when we come to God and allow him to fill that void, he places within us a "community-shaped void." We come to faith alone; but we grow in Christlikeness among others.

Sin separated us from God, but it didn't stop there. Our separation from God ultimately led to our being separated from each other. Sin has brought conflict and division into every realm of society, from the first relationship between Adam and Eve, through the first family to the divergence of communities and the hostility of nations. History is the story of our alienation

from God and our resulting alienation from each other. Only through the work of the Holy Spirit can we be brought back into connection with God and community with one another.

Now that we are united with God and with other people in his body, we can grow up into the people we were designed to be. But it is in the context of community that this transformation occurs. In his sovereign wisdom, God has seen fit to grace his body with all the spiritual gifts necessary for our total transformation; however, no one person has all these gifts. Each person plays a vital role in bringing some unique contribution to the table. Full participation is necessary for a body of believers to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

There is, perhaps, no greater longing in the heart of a man or a woman than the longing for significance. In the movie *Gladiator*, as the Roman army prepares to engage the last of the invading barbaric hordes, the Roman general Maximus cries out, “What we do now echoes in eternity!”² We all want to make a difference, to leave a mark, to invest in something that will live on long after we’ve shuffled off this mortal coil. God knows this, and his desire is for us to have that longing fulfilled. He established his church for this very purpose.

Jesus told his followers, “[A]part from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5b). The severity of the words is like a slap in the face. Without Jesus we can do nothing. Well, we could build a business and a comfortable nest egg. But from Jesus’ perspective, those things are nothing. Only the things done with and for him are worthwhile and have any chance of lasting. The marvelous part of God’s administration is that he has gifted each of us and equipped us to engage in something that really will echo throughout eternity. By taking the Word of God, which will last forever, and investing it in human beings, who will last forever, we can leave an indelible mark on the halls of history. What higher calling can there be than to become like

² Dewey Gram, *Gladiator*, based on a screenplay by David Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson, *Gladiator* (New York: Onyx, 2000), p. 24.

Jesus and equip others to do the same? This is our glorious privilege: to assist others in developing their Christlike potential.

Gifted from Birth

In what ways is God a manager and developer of human resources? Since God created us, he knows our aptitudes and abilities better than we do ourselves. Since God loves us, he wants us to move toward the fulfillment of our potential. But we cannot do this without personal commitment to the centrality of Christ in our lives.

God commissioned Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, and, in spite of Jeremiah's reticence, the Lord assured him that he would be adequate for the task:

The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

“Ah, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.

Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The Lord not only called Jeremiah for this ministry, but he also equipped and empowered him to accomplish it. This is a consistent theme with God: He never calls a person to something unless he also will equip and empower that person to accomplish it. In the same way, God equips each of his adopted children with a singular mix of temperament, education, background, aptitudes and abilities; and he couples this mix with a distinctive sphere of influence. In this way, each of us is entrusted with the dignity and responsibility of a unique ministry to others.

Just as God knew Jeremiah, so God knew us and set us apart before we were formed in the womb. “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Ephesians 1:4-5). Long before we drew our first breath, God was active in our lives, even knitting our bodies together (Psalm 139:13-16). In eternity past, God looked down the corridor of time and saw each of us. He created us all with specific personalities, abilities and gifts. Then he placed each one of us in a specific place and a specific time for a specific reason. No matter what you may have been told by some thoughtless parent, teacher or coach, you are not an accident. God created you intentionally.

There are only two possible reasons for your presence here on earth and the circumstances in which you find yourself. It is, in the words of Thomas Howard, either “Chance or the Dance.”³ Howard writes, “The myth sovereign in the new age is that nothing means anything.”⁴ If we are only products of time and chance, then nothing has any meaning. But, if we were created for a purpose and placed in our present context by a strategically-thinking, sovereign God, then everything is infused with meaning and purpose. Suffering and joy are of equal value if they both lead to a redemptive purpose.

God created us and called us “for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:12), and this purpose is realized when we come to know and enjoy him. Only when we seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33) can we be fully the people God meant us to be. For those of us who have been raised up with Christ through the merciful and gracious gift of salvation, we are, for the first time, truly alive. Only now can we do the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do (see Ephesians 2:1-10).

³ Thomas Howard, *Chance or the Dance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

As you look back on your own mental, emotional, moral and spiritual development, what evidences can you see of God's work in this process? What people and resources did he particularly use to shape you into the person you have become? In what area of your life do you sense the greatest need for further development? What resources are available to bring this about?

The Responsibility of Developing Others

Leadership is a privilege but also a responsibility. In Scripture, to be a leader is to be a steward who manages the resources that are owned by the Lord. When we build the lives of others and participate in the development of their potential, we are acting as faithful stewards of our divine responsibilities.

During the time of his first Roman imprisonment, Paul continually served others by teaching and equipping them. One of the many people who visited Paul while he was under house arrest was a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus had robbed and escaped from his master Philemon, a Christian who lived in Colosse. Paul led Onesimus to Christ and then walked him through a process of personal discipleship. As a result, this former thief and runaway became a man of dignity and character. When the time came for Paul to send Onesimus back to Colosse to be reconciled with Philemon, he sent with him a brief letter (Philemon), which spoke of the transformation that had occurred in this former slave's life. The letter appealed to Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus but also to receive him as a brother in Christ.

Effective leaders take pleasure in managing and developing the capabilities of people around them, and they are not threatened when some of those people move beyond them. These leaders always look for potential in others, treating even difficult people with dignity and considering the possibility of unleashed capability in them.

Jim Collins is considered one of the premiere authorities on what separates good companies from great ones. Having invested more than a decade of research into the topic, he has written four books, including the classic book on leadership qualities, *Built to Last*, which appeared on the *Business Week* bestseller list for more than six years! In his book *Good to Great*, he discusses various levels of leadership. What he calls a “Level 5 Leader” (the highest level of leadership) is someone who “builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.”⁵ When these leaders are asked about the key to the success of the company, they never look at themselves. They “channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.”⁶ Level 5 leaders “want to see the company even more successful in the next generation, comfortable with the idea that most people won’t even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts.”⁷ Great leaders, Collins says, are modest – almost shy – and avoid talking about themselves, preferring to celebrate the contributions of others, but this should not be confused with timidity or passivity. On the contrary, Level 5 leaders demonstrate an amazing “determination to do whatever needs to be done to make the company great.”⁸

Unlike Collins and his team, we should not be surprised to find that leaders who make the most lasting contribution to their companies and society are characterized by both humility and passion. These are simply biblical principles of leadership at work in the marketplace. A biblical worldview insists that everything we have has been given to us (which should lead to humility) and that we will one day be called to give an account of our stewardship (which should

⁵ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

lead to passion). Jesus saw great potential in his disciples, potential that might have been overlooked by others, and he transformed them by investing his life in them.

Barnabas did the same in his relationship with Saul. He worked to develop that potential until he had the pleasure of seeing his disciple Saul become Paul, the disciple-maker (Acts 11:22-30; 12:25-14:28).

The Value of Others

How this actually works in everyday life is one of the thorniest areas of leadership. How do we interact with people in a way that develops them, cares for them, protects them? Some of the loudest proclamations of our values are made in the human resource development arena. Reflection on the insights of Paul offers a great starting point as a leader enters the morass of issues surrounding what might appear to be a “lose-lose” aspect of leadership:

We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

1 Thessalonians 2:6-12

Organizations practice human resource management and development for at least one of three reasons: (1) To avoid lawsuits and fines; (2) to protect and maximize the investment they have made in people; (3) because they are dealing with human beings. All three are legitimate, but only the third reason is a constant. Abused employees may or may not sue or file complaints. It

may or may not cost an organization anything to replace them. But they are always human. It is a core Christian value that humans, created in God's image and redeemed through the death of Jesus Christ, are priceless possessions of Almighty God. How then should we approach managing and developing them when they have been entrusted to us?

When leaders consider how they think and act toward people whose lives and careers are under their control – whether in the area of wages and benefits, development and advancement opportunities, comfort and safety (does the list ever end?) – God's Word exhorts them to treat those followers as human beings. Paul defined his relationship to the Thessalonians both as a mother (v. 7) and a father (v. 11). He made decisions concerning particular followers in Thessalonica by asking himself, "If this were my daughter or son, what would I do?" Not a bad starting point.

Planning for the Future

Solomon urged his readers to cultivate those skills necessary to achieve success in life:

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor."

Proverbs 4:1-9

If there was one thing the father in Proverbs 4 wanted his son to acquire, it was wisdom. If the son were to possess wisdom, he would find life, safety and honor. This father was single-minded. Rather than urging his son to pursue success and recognition, he exhorted him to "get

wisdom;” “not forsake wisdom;” “esteem” and “embrace” wisdom. Carrying out his father’s ideals would no doubt require serious effort and diligence. But if the son did acquire wisdom, the benefits would flow from it like water from a cup.

Like that father, effective leaders urge those under their charge to develop the skills that will lead to their success. Instead of focusing on the characteristics of success, they focus on people. They create a culture that enables people to develop the wisdom needed to do their work with excellence.

In their book *SuperLeadership*, Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims, Jr. note that a “true SuperLeader will develop an ability to recognize the culturally relevant needs of employees today – not yesterday – and devote significant effort to deliberately orchestrate an organizational culture for high performance and development of people.”⁹

Attention to individual decisions and details is essential to human resource development. But Manz and Sims remind us of Solomon’s essential point: Don’t miss the forest for the trees. All of the details must combine to create a culture that affirms, “You matter. You count. The leaders recognize and appreciate your contribution and will care for you as a valuable asset of this enterprise.”

Wisdom is skillful living, and one vital component of wisdom is the God-given ability to see the true nature of things. That being the case, the wisest thing we can do is treat things according to their true value. The most foolish thing, then, would be to treat temporal things as though they were eternal and eternal things as though they were temporal. Yet we see it happen every day; reasonably intelligent men and women give their lives in exchange for things that are completely trivial in the end. There is no crown waiting for them at the finish line; they conclude their journey with the taste of ashes in their mouth.

⁹ Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims, *SuperLeadership* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 195.

Wisdom embraces the eternal perspective. Wisdom reminds us that we are not home yet. We are aliens, pilgrims, strangers on this earth whose home is in the celestial city. Wisdom forces us to invest our lives in things that will endure – God’s Word and God’s people. When we are brought into our heavenly dwellings, there should be people there who were touched by our influence, waiting to welcome us home.

God has created us to know joy, peace and goodness. These are things we experience in community with others. As we each share our unique gifts with one another, we know a greater sense of contentment and fulfillment. For example, someone who is musically gifted experiences joy as he shares that gift with others; we, too, experience joy as we bask in the gift being shared. Together we can all be grateful to our Creator for bestowing the gift in the first place and allowing the musician to share it with us.

There is, however, one sure way to lose the joy and peace of the moment: envy. To envy the joy of the musician, to harbor resentment or wish that it was you in the spotlight, to compare your gift with the musician’s, to feel as if the greater another person’s gift is, the less your gift shines. A life of constant comparison leads to a joyless, peace-less existence.

We are all made to see and do things in a distinctive way. No two people have the exact same perspective on things; nor do they have the same mix of gifts and temperaments to offer. When you find your place of service within the community of faith, you know the peace that passes understanding, the abundance of life in Christ. Offering yourself in service to others brings an overwhelming joy. And God has made you to know the joy of receiving and celebrating the gifts of those around you. Only as you offer your gifts selflessly and receive the gifts of others humbly is your joy made complete.

John the Baptist's final comment in Scripture is this: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, KJV). This is not a statement of resignation. This is the joy of the wedding's best man who realizes that the bride has now entered her destiny. This is John's final contribution to the upside-down kingdom of God where the humble are exalted.

There is a reason why Christmas is celebrated on December 25. It's not a historical date, but neither was it chosen at random. Though it may be a few days off, it's set to correspond with the winter solstice – the time when daylight begins to increase. The birth of Jesus means light has broken into our dark, wintry world. Before electricity, longer daylight hours were a great gift.

Historically, the church calendar has set the birth of John the Baptist on June 24. It's not a historical date, either, but neither was it chosen at random. That's the time of the year when days begin to grow shorter and the light begins to wane. Every year, the church calendar repeats the sentiment of John's final words: "He must increase, but I must decrease."