

***In this article Michael McKinney sets out an understanding of several different types of leader – from Custodian thru' to Stewardship.***

***Please enjoy.***

## **The Focus of Leadership: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest**

By: Michael McKinney

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American newspaper commentator Walter Lippmann defined leaders as "the custodians of a nation's ideals, the beliefs it cherishes, of its permanent hopes, of the faith which makes a nation out of a mere aggregation of individuals."

*Custodians.* The word means a keeper, a guardian, or a caretaker. It is a proactive word that implies action on the part of the bearer. Custodians hold something in trust on behalf of others. It is not a behavior motivated out of self-interest.

A custodian then, is an individual who upholds what is best for all people even if it may not be in their own interest to do so. A custodial role must be approached as a temporary role, preserving something greater than the self—principles of enduring and lasting value. This is an attitude of mind that focuses on the task at hand and not on what the leader may gain from the position. It implies a caring and concerned relationship between leaders and followers; individuals motivated by their constituents' best interests.

This idea seems at odds with what we see happening around us today. In all too many arenas, we see many of our leaders holding nothing in trust for those they purport to serve but advancing only their *own* ideals and hopes. Today, it is often difficult to tell if our leaders are serving themselves or us. And it is all too common to find leaders simply helping themselves to privilege and power. Mismanagement, deceit, greed, and frying-pan-into-the-fire problem solving all beg the question, "Where are our leaders leading?" "To whom can we look to for the direction we need?" Is Lippmann's statement merely an idealistic, unrealizable dream?

### **CHOOSING SERVICE OVER SELF-INTEREST**

Throughout time, leaders who have exhibited the proper kind of *custodianship*—leaders who have sought service over self-interest—have been held in high regard. We gladly look to them for direction and guidance in times of indecision, turmoil and trouble.

One such custodian stood out in the Fifth century BC. The Roman army was surrounded. The country was in need of a leader who would seize the moment and turn the situation defeat into victory. They called upon a man who was out plowing his field, a farmer. He came. He saw. He conquered. He went home. Cincinnatus gained fame for his selfless devotion to his country. This half-legendary hero of the Roman Republic gave his all in a time of crisis and then gave up the reins of power when the task was done and went back to his plow.

In more modern times, America's first President, George Washington, considered "the Father of his Country," provides a paramount example of this same kind of custodial leadership that Lippmann espoused.

Washington was an aristocratic gentleman farmer of distinctive character. When called upon to defend the interests of a fledgling nation as Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary Army during the American War of Independence, he rose to the challenge and persevered against all odds. Then, after eight and a half years of being the most powerful man in America, he resigned his commission and returned to his agricultural pursuits.

Not surprisingly, he became the reluctant, yet automatic and unanimous choice for the first president of the United States. He served two terms. His final and perhaps greatest act of service to his country was that like Cincinnatus, who he had often been compared to by his contemporaries, he stopped serving and retired back to his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Washington is remembered for his strength of character and discipline, his loyal patriotism, his principled leadership and selfless devotion to public duty. He held in trust for the American people the very values and beliefs that made their nation possible without regard for his own gain.

In reality, true leadership is and has always been a selfless action. It involves taking yourself out of the picture and considering the needs of others. It is a way of thinking that takes other people into account even when your own needs are pressing. It asks what is right or best in the wider interest. Few would doubt the need for more leaders like Cincinnatus and George Washington today. Leaders who will complete the job they were asked to do without regard for themselves; leaders who will lead and not merely register the popular will of the people. Yet it would be difficult to build a consensus as to how a leader might do that; how a leader might be a custodian of or hold in trust a nation's or a group's values and beliefs.

How might we answer this question in a world that has seemingly grown unmanageable? Today our world is faced with serious, even life-threatening problems of a global nature. Where will we find the wisdom necessary that might be applied to modern civilization's most pressing dilemmas?

## **LEADERSHIP IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS**

Clearly, leadership is an issue that affects all of us. Not only are we impacted by it, but also, we are all called upon to exercise it. Whether we are called upon to be involved in leading government or business, guiding young minds, leading a family, standing for what is right, or organizing a dinner, a carpool, or a household, everyone has a leadership role to play. We are each thrust into many different leadership roles again and again, throughout our lives. We are each called upon to be custodians of what is right and good, lasting and of value, for those in our care.

Surprisingly, this idea of custodianship even runs through the writings of the Renaissance writer often thought to be one of the most cynical yet most observant

political thinkers of all time, Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli insisted that leadership was virtuous only if the good of the community was sought out and achieved above all else. A good leader, in other words, was a steward of the community.

When we are called upon to lead, what kind of custodian we will be depends greatly on what we understand a custodian to be, on how we think about other people, and on how we determine what is right and worth holding in trust.

The word *custodian* as we are applying it here is the same as the word steward that we find in the pages of the Bible and used throughout history. A custodian or steward performs the task of watching over that which is placed in their trust by the one who owns it or for those who will benefit by it. It is a service performed for others. It is not about ownership or control. It is not a technique. It is who the leader *is*. It is an attitude—a state of being—a way of looking at the world. But it is not the passive, hands-off leadership that some have attributed to this way of thinking. It is a component of leadership that leaders were not intended to function without.

In the context of what Mr. Lippmann is talking about, it means not only maintaining the vision of and faith in those ideals, beliefs and hopes but, living those values as a model and example for others to follow. It means raising the sights and holding the focus of those we lead such that they are empowered to reach their potentials. It means enabling people by getting the roadblocks out of their way and often out of their thinking. To do this, of course, the leader must grasp the larger picture at all times and hold the course for the benefit of all.

## **UNDERSTANDING SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

In the widening chasm between what we want and expect from our leaders and what we are getting, it seems only natural to take a hard look at leadership itself. And many do. Finding the leadership we see around us lacking, our traditional views of leadership might seem to be archaic. Out of what can only be frustration, we often find many traditional ideas tossed out for new and myopic ideas of what leadership is all about. Due to real and perceived problems with what we have seen leaders doing, the faults of the old views seem sufficient to float the new. The self-serving nature of many of the leaders we have looked to in the past, have led some to call for more passive, follower-driven leadership.

One such version has called for *replacing* leadership with a concept called "stewardship." Although this might look at first blush to be what Mr. Lippmann was referring to, it is not. Neither does it refer to the biblical concept. Stewardship cannot replace leadership because indeed it is an integral part of it.

This *nouveau-stewardship*, as we will refer to it here, has as a guiding principle, the belief that others have the knowledge and the answers *within themselves*. As such, there is no need to manage other adults. No need to teach others how to think, behave or conduct themselves. While this sounds very appealing, democratic, liberating and almost mystically primal, it is naïve. We know from experience that people do not always act in their *own* best interest.

All of this might sound arrogant to an age that has placed in higher esteem personal

knowledge over external guidance. As the structures and institutions that have traditionally provided us with external guidance are dissolving—the family, schools and religion—the desire to believe that we are our own best source of wisdom and will act in our own best interest, is strong. Theoretically, it would seem to make sense. Practically, it has never worked in any sustainable way. Human studies have shown that we all take our cues not from the realities of the environment, but from our own biases, desires, perceptions, and distractions. A function of leadership then, should be to help followers create a more accurate and constructive view of reality by painting the larger picture.

## WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP?

The *nouveau-stewardship* model is based on a myth that leadership—where direction, vision and guidance comes from the top of an organization—creates a dependency on the part of the followers and removes personal responsibility and satisfaction. But does it really?

When the concept of *nouveau-stewardship* is presented, it most often claims to have roots in the Bible. Perhaps so. But then proponents of this *nouveau-stewardship* go off on a tangent that the Bible never intended. When the concept of stewardship is first presented in the Bible, in Genesis 1 and 2, Adam was instructed to "dress and keep" the physical creation God had made. Not a passive hands-off approach. Adam was to apply God's Laws and thinking to the physical realm he created. Adam was expected to do something. In living with it, he was to make changes in accordance with higher laws and thinking other than his own.

In the same way, when *we* are given any other leadership responsibility, we are responsible for maintaining a set of standards that is line with higher laws. Again, we are not to impose our own thinking, wants and desires on those we lead, but to apply those standards that are the best for the whole as authored by God. Naturally, this is implemented with respect for and two-way communication with those the leaders serve.

True leadership, not to be confused with dictatorship, does not take away an individual's freedom, choice, accountability, or responsibility. Just as the leader is to be serving and taking into account the ideas and needs of those they lead, those following that lead are to be doing the same thing. In doing so, they, along with the leader, practice self-restraint, develop character, integrate discipline, and practice love and respect for other people. This creates a kind of self-leadership at all levels of the group. It promotes a self-leadership environment where all are empowered and working toward the good of the whole because it is in the best interest of all.

Daniel Goldman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, refers to this kind of concern for others feelings, ideas and opinions, as *empathy*. But, he cautions in a *Harvard Business Review* article, that "empathy doesn't mean a kind of 'I'm okay, you're okay' mushiness. For a leader, that is, it doesn't mean adopting other people's emotions as one's own and trying to please everybody. That would be a nightmare—it would make action impossible. Rather empathy means thoughtfully considering employees' feelings—in the process of making intelligent decisions." In other words, true stewardship or custodianship means taking others' ideas and feelings into account

while holding in trust—keeping as boundaries or guardrails—the groups ideal's, beliefs and hopes. Ironically, an attitude of service keeps the leader aware of other's needs while in turn enabling them to become better leaders.

The *nouveau-stewardship* model sounds right on the surface, but it plays out more like a defense mechanism than a constructive method to get leadership thinking back on track. As Mr. Lippmann correctly defines, leadership is truly about choosing service over self-interest. Leadership properly performed is not a consensus-building exercise but an exercise in outgoing concern for others including defining and setting boundaries as needed.

## LEADERSHIP'S FIRM FOUNDATION

What is critical to the leadership process and its success, is where those values come from that determine those boundaries. They can't come from a single individual. Nor can they come from the collective whole. Where do we get the ideals, the beliefs and the permanent hopes that Mr. Lippmann wrote of, that define the boundaries—those guides that mold and shape us?

George Washington believed that those values and boundaries came from God. In his first Inaugural Address he asserted that "we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that *disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.*"

Again, our boundaries must come from something outside of ourselves. That something is God. An effective leader has an agenda designed to produce results, but is guided by a core of values that come from outside and not from within. This process is maintained by means of the leader's integrity or custodianship of those values.

Stressing the need for integrity to an outside core of values in the performance of proper leadership, John Adair, Visiting Professor of Leadership Studies at the University of Surrey and Exeter in England, states, "Although it is impossible to prove it, I believe that holding firmly to sovereign values *outside yourself* grows a wholeness of personality and moral strength of character. The person of integrity will always be tested. The first real test comes when the demands of the truth or good appears to conflict with your self-interest or prospects. Which do you choose?"

Perhaps it is time to apply those "eternal rules of order and right", those values, to the leadership roles we must perform and lives we do lead. Everyday activities are opportunities to demonstrate and illustrate the values and beliefs for which we must be custodians. Thus, the element of *empowerment* is introduced into our lives. *Every* person becomes in some sense a leader.