Be a Servant Leader

William Pollard, Chairman Emeritus of ServiceMaster outlines the role of the servant leader to deliver continuous improvement.

William Pollard
Chairman Emeritus, ServiceMaster

The first time I was confronted with a lesson of servant leadership was when I was recruited to join ServiceMaster. I'd practiced law for ten years and had served in the administration on the faculty of Wheaton College right here in Wheaton, Illinois. I was ready to go back to the practice of law when I was recruited to join ServiceMaster.

Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner were participating in the recruiting. Ken Hansen was the chairman; Ken Wessner was the president of the company. They were both great salespeople. At that time, ServiceMaster was a small public company. They created a great picture of what it could be, and in the process of painting the picture in the recruiting process, they implied many times that maybe some day, I might be able to lead this company.

So I decided, that last day of the interview, that I would press them because I was going to give up the opportunity of going back to a law firm to come here to a new environment, and I needed to know what I needed to get done in order to become president and CEO of this company. How long would it take, what were the obstacles, and what was the competition? I just wanted to assess the whole situation before I said yes.

Well, I started to press Ken Hansen, and after about five minutes he looked at me in the eye and said, "Bill, the interview is over." And Ken Wessner ushered me to the front door of ServiceMaster. And I left ServiceMaster, and I said, "I guess I've blown this opportunity, and I'm going back to practice law."

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me up, and he said, "Bill, do you want to understand what happened in my office the other day?" and I said, "Sure!"

He said, "Will you have breakfast with me tomorrow morning?" And we did. At that breakfast meeting, he said, "Bill, if you want to come and contribute, you'll have a great opportunity; but if you're coming for a title or a position, forget it."
And then he launched into a discussion on what it meant to be a servant leader in ServiceMaster. I learned some lessons: never give a title or a position to someone who can’t live without it; always be willing to walk in the shoes of those you lead; and never ask somebody to do something that you’re not willing to do yourself.

And Ken, in his own way, tested me. The first eight weeks of my time at ServiceMaster was not spent in my role as a senior officer but out doing the service work that our service workers did every day. I had many experiences during that time, reminding me of the importance of those service people; my reliance upon them. And little did I realize when I was doing that work, that some day it would involve over two hundred thousand people that we either managed or employed in doing service work.

Servant leadership was a learning experience for me, and it was a continuing learning experience for me. One of the things that happens typically in organizational behavior is that as your responsibilities grow, so do the trappings of office. And often the trappings of office -- whether it’s a corner office literally, whether it’s the size of car you drive, or whether you get a parking space, or whatever it is -- keep removing you from the people whom you’re leading and whom you’re responsible for.

One of the ways in ServiceMaster that we kept reminding ourselves of the importance of being willing to serve was by initiating a “We Serve” day. And so everyone in the company at least once a year had the responsibility to go out and deliver one of our services. It didn’t make any difference whether you were a senior officer, whether you were working in the accounting department, or whether you were working in information technology; whatever your job was in the company, part of your job was to go out and deliver our service.

TAKEAWAYS

- Servant leadership is a continuous learning process, and its values must be instilled in every member of the organization.

- As leaders get farther away from the in-the-trenches responsibilities, it’s easy for them to become removed from the people for whom they are responsible.

- Leaders should always be willing to walk in the shoes of those they lead and should never ask anyone to do something they would be unwilling to do themselves.