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Service Leadership
by Ken Embley, CPPA

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.” - Max DePree

This time of year always brings to mind my favorite holiday character, Ebenezer Scrooge, and my favorite holiday saying, “bah humbug.” Yes, I actually do like the bah humbugging Scrooge but between you, me and the wall, it is also fun to see Scrooge emerge from the realities of the late 19th century to serving others and changing life’s circumstances with acts of kindness.

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—do I dare say—Scrooge. Leaders who will complete the job without regard for themselves.

Service 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. My guess is that if Dickens added a few chapters to his classic, Bob Cratchit would be even a better man because of the constructive influence a changed and service oriented leader like Scrooge would have on Bob and the Cratchit family.

A service leader is a custodian or steward who performs the task of watching over that which is placed in their trust 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.

Service leadership means not only maintaining the vision of and faith in those ideals, beliefs and hopes expressed in Dickens A Christmas Carol, but living those values as an 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.

In the end, Dickens’s Scrooge learned to be a leader through his service to other. Forgive me Mr. DePree, but I am going to end with an emphasis on the concept of service.

“The first responsibility of a service leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the service leader is a servant.”

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