

The Best Leaders Know Who They're Really Serving

It isn't shareholders



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In the summer of 1968, my mom ordered a new bookshelf for the living room. She was very excited, as new furniture was rare in our house. Though we were comfortable, money for nonessentials was tight. This bookshelf came in a box and required assembly.

One evening, as the unopened box sat out in the garage, Mom and Dad went out to dinner and a movie (which was unusual for them). I wanted to surprise them, so I went out in the garage and pulled out the 30 wood pieces and the nearly 100 nuts, bolts, and screws. Dutifully following the multipage instruction manual, I put that bookshelf together, all by my 10-year-old self.

Then it dawned on me, I had built it in the garage and Mom wanted it in the living room. Undaunted, I decided to move this massive bookshelf right where I knew she wanted it. I

inched that thing out of the front of the garage, turned the corner with it, inched it down the sidewalk, into the family room, through the utility room and the kitchen, and into the living room, right where she wanted it. I quickly set up Mom's knickknacks, some of Dad's books, wired up the stereo, and I had one of Mom's favorite records playing when they walked in the door. My dad was speechless. Mom cried. *Joy.*

For many years, I thought joy in business, as I found it, was related to my earliest experience with technology. From Singapore to Berlin to Paris, when people asked me where my joy came from, I would tell them about discovering programming in 1971 and the joy of typing a two-line program into a computer and it clacking out "HI, RICH" on a teletype. But the more I thought about it, I realized that interaction was only a small part of my joy. I remembered that bookshelf story and it occurred to me... joy comes from serving others, with the work of our hearts, our hands, and our minds.

If you consider some of the best business stories you've ever heard, you will likely see a pattern emerge. A team will work so hard, so diligently, and perform above their pay grade when focused on something worthy, something bigger than themselves, and something that isn't about self-gratification, but about serving others. As leaders, we must first see for ourselves, and then envision for others, what kind of joy we wish to deliver to the world.

People often ask me where to start a meaningful leadership journey. I suggest beginning by considering one critically important question: Whom do you serve?

This seems like such a simple question. It isn't. The three obvious answers—our customers, our employees, and our investors—actually miss the entire point. A heart of service directed at those obvious stakeholders is still “self-serving.” Of course, we serve our customers; they are the ones who provide our revenue and ultimately our profit. Of course, we serve our employees; they do the work necessary to serve our customers well. Of course, we serve our investors; they provide the capital necessary for serving the other two groups. We do want to serve all these groups.

In order to identify an inspiring and lasting version of joy, however, we must look further than those stakeholders. If we don't, we run the risk of chasing only profits, awards, and recognition, or big stock-price gains.

You've probably heard the oft-told story of the three bricklayers. They were working, all three laying bricks, when a curious passerby asked what they were doing.

The first man answered gruffly, “I'm laying bricks.”

The second man replied somewhat proudly, “I'm putting up a wall.”

But the third man said enthusiastically, “I'm building a cathedral.”

I'd like to take this just a bit further. It is likely in cathedral-building days that the third bricklayer would die before the cathedral was complete. He would never see the results of his labor. But one day that cathedral might be the spiritual home of his children and grandchildren. His endeavor was worthy

because he knew who he was serving and that his work was bigger than him.

Consider a life insurance company. Whom do they serve? The easy answer would be they serve policyholders. And yes, that is true. But there is little joy derived, beyond commissions, by selling the next policy. Selling policies is the lifeblood of the organization.

A life insurance company serves people they will seldom ever meet and people who will never pay them a single dime: the *beneficiary* of the policy. In fact, at the moment of first contact, their customer has passed on, and the person on the phone is in a moment of great need, looking for tremendous service, and potentially a big check. They have just lost someone who is very dear to them. They may have been financially dependent on that person, and their life partner was thoughtful enough to have purchased a policy to protect them. This stranger is now calling the life insurance company expecting compassion, understanding, thoroughness, organization, and care. They have a story to share, a sad one, and they have hope that the person answering the phone fully understands how difficult a time this is. Delivering that service well can produce joy for your team beyond measure.

Imagine how different this would be if such a company decided to outsource claims handling to the cheapest provider possible and instructed them to assume fraud as a first line of defense in every conversation. This is what happens when we substitute service for efficiency.

At the McDonald's in the Delta terminal of Detroit Metro Airport, there is an older man, Mike, who cleans up after the busy travelers. If he notices you don't have a napkin, he'll ask

if he can get you one. Then, he'll chat you up about something and finish by wishing you a great and safe flight. I often found myself thinking, "What a remarkable person, to bring this kind of effort and attitude every day to work. They are so lucky to have him (and so am I!)."

One day, I went there for my favorite combo and Mike wasn't working that shift. Another, much younger man was performing Mike's job and was wheeling out a big load of full garbage bags from the back. He went right by my table. Then, an astounding thing happened... he asked me how I was doing and whether I needed a napkin or anything else. He then wished me a safe flight before continuing his journey to the dumpster.

I have eaten at many (too many) McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants in my life—and this behavior stands apart from all others I have ever witnessed. Is it possible that the two nicest guys (one younger, one older) in the fast food industry just happen to work in one of the least relational places (a busy international airport) on the planet? I'm having trouble believing it is a coincidence.

Mike no longer works there, but I tracked down the manager of that McDonald's on one of my subsequent trips at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. I asked about Mike and his kindness. He thanked me for noticing. He told me they were in a highly competitive environment and a little kindness and caring can go a long way to getting people to change their choice.

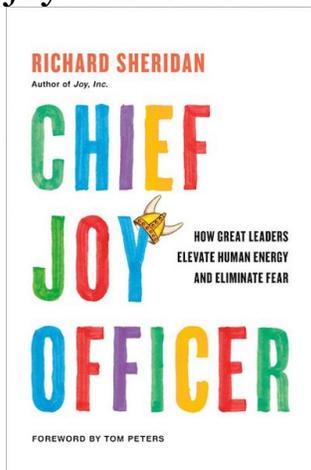
If you could bring joy to a franchise of one of the largest fast food empires in human history, particularly at a place as transient as an airport, full of busy people impatiently rushing from city to city, you can do it in your team and your

business. That servant leadership attitude can start anywhere and with anyone.

Leadership author Lorin Woolfe says it so well:

The ultimate test for a leader is not whether he or she makes smart decisions and takes decisive action, but whether he or she teaches others to be leaders and builds an organization that can sustain its success even when he or she is not around. True leaders put ego aside and strive to create successors who go beyond them.

Once we have a clearer picture of who we serve, and what delight looks like for them, we leaders must make that joyful intent clear to those on our team. This can't be done in a one-time speech or a poster on the wall in the lunchroom. It must be lived and breathed every day. We will serve our teams by defining joyful service to others in our specific context, but to truly serve them, we need to teach them how to look for this joy in their own day-to-day work.



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