

A NEW CALL TO STEWARDSHIP AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

THE NONPROFIT WORLD HAS RECEIVED A WAKE-UP CALL. HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND?

BY JENNIFER WALKER

The events of September 11, 2001, slashed the fabric of our society with the emotional equivalent of a sledgehammer to the head. A new world came crashing in on us, and the nonprofit sector did not remain unscathed.

Many fraudulent solicitors took advantage of the tragedy and tarnished the image of nonprofits. Even such stalwart groups as the American Red Cross and Salvation Army were embroiled in public relations quagmires as people questioned their administration of funds. By association, nonprofits across the board felt the pinch. The credibility of every nonprofit organization in the United States came under scrutiny.

In the aftermath of what many would call a wake-up call to the nonprofit sector, what is expected of its leaders? One focus is the role of stewardship as it pertains to servant leadership. Stewardship and servant leadership are closely linked concepts that reflect a growing trend within many organizations.

Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term servant leader to describe leaders who understand that they are servants first and who strive to meet the highest-priority needs of others. While most traditional leadership theories are behaviorally

based, servant leadership emerges from a leader's principles, values, and beliefs.

Stewardship, which may be defined as holding something in trust for another, is one of the critical characteristics of servant leadership. In Greenleaf's view, CEOs, staff, directors, and trustees all play a role in holding their organizations in trust for the greater good of society. Stewardship requires the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, to those around us.

Nonprofits should increasingly be prepared to see their stewardship practices revealed in the media. In this new era, people expect a greater accountability—one that goes beyond stakeholder values and customer service. People now insist that nonprofits continually respond to the public's expectations. In this respect, servant leaders must be performance-oriented.

The marketplace is demanding that organizations transform themselves. Stewardship can help nonprofits do so by redistributing power. The dispersal of power is a key to building the next generation. Nonprofits can help spread power by enlisting citizen participation, organizing communities, and facilitating a society in which people on the "outside" can bring their talents to the center.

According to Peter Block, stewardship is the vehicle for achieving fundamental change in the way organizations are governed. With the practice of service at its core, stewardship offers choice and spirit to employees so they can offer the same in the marketplace. When leadership is seasoned with service, it signals a like response from followers.

The events of September 11, 2001, left an indelible imprint on the way nonprofit organizations conduct business. A commitment to stewardship and servant leadership will equip nonprofit leaders to guide their organizations through this new world. ■

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