

## *Mission Centered Board Leadership* Are You Being Recruited to Serve on a Board?

Before many were recruited to serve on the board their lives were likely filled with work, play, struggles, and challenges. At times people might have wondered “How can I accomplish everything?” Or others could have been bored thinking, “What should I do next?”

Perhaps they felt a real restlessness about world events or struggles within the community asking, “How can I be of service?” Like many, maybe, they were too busy to give this much thought. Moving forward in life there is the recognition that it goes by very fast and with that understanding, people seek new levels of awareness and meaning.

### **Who am I?**

Many people define their existence based on vocation, family status, or faith decisions. It is often within these contexts that individuals begin answering important questions, “Who am I?” and “What is my life purpose?” or “What am I seeking?” The answers to these questions begin to serve as a framework for everything that we do in life. If we don’t spend the time necessary to explore these questions the likelihood is great that we will not fulfill our real potential.

Purpose in life can be reflected in everything we do, not only in our volunteer work but in our vocation and other personal relationships. In gathering a fundamental understanding about purpose we become better equipped to respond to the world and the demands it places upon us.

### **Am I demonstrating my purpose in Life?**

As individuals explore their role within the world of service and charity it requires that they come to a conclusion that life purpose is in part the sharing of one’s gifts, talents, and resources with others in need. Beyond this sense of sharing comes the understanding that not only do we have something to give but those around us have something to share as well.

People become connected in a way that celebrates the existence of others and find that rather than being independent, they are in fact interdependent. This understanding of meaning is critical to the individual who serves on a non-profit human service board in that it is likely a reflection of the mission of the organization. The concept of interdependence could just as easily be applied to business. All businesses need employees, customers, and vendors to fulfill stated goals. Finally, this understanding of interdependence can be applied to all organizational structures regardless of mission.

Several years ago I was cultivating a substantial benefactor (I will call him Joe) to a charitable organization. By this time, he was in his early 80’s and often reflected about issues of meaning and purpose. Joe told the story of starting out as a floor sweeper for a certain industrial chemical company and eventually rose to the position of Chairman.

He worked his way up the ladder by selling chemicals to businesses throughout the Midwest. Joe made it his mission to learn everything there was to know about these chemicals. It was not uncommon for him to refer his customers to the competition. When I asked him why, he explained, “I found that in certain circumstances the competition had a better product. I really wanted the best for each of my customers. I wanted them to know that they could always come to me and that I would never steer them wrong.”

Joe went on to explain, “This sometimes angered my bosses but in the end I sold more chemicals than anyone in the history of the company. People learned that they could trust me. They knew that I really cared for them and wanted the best for their business. I guess it all worked out because I was the chairman of my company for the last 15 years of my career.”

When people understand their purpose in life they begin to attempt to apply it to everything they do. That understanding of purpose becomes their call to a life of service to others. In short, they learn to love and be loved in a new way.

As they live out this understanding of purpose it becomes possible to transform their environment. And the question becomes, “How does the environment in which we work, live, and play create the opportunity for experiencing new levels of service to others?” At this point, life becomes more dynamic, always changing and moving based on action and reaction. Things do not stand still, and our existence is infused with a stronger sense of purpose.

We begin to make real eye contact and start asking those around us, “How are you?” As we read the news or watch TV, images of homeless and hurting individuals have new meaning for me. Finally, we ask, “What should I

do?”

In recent years our world-wide community has had several opportunities to respond to human suffering and need. I'll never forget January of 2005 when the tsunami hit along the coast of Indonesia and Sri Lanka killing over 200,000 people. The response from around the world was a powerful demonstration of compassion in action. Gifts came from millions of individuals who wanted to help. The tsunami became for many a wake-up call to serve others in need.

These events, while they are devastating and beyond people's imaginations can serve as a call to compassion. Each individual has an opportunity to respond to that call through action or inaction. Each is presented with an opportunity to serve, and a door is opened to more fully explore meaning and purpose. For some these powerful events have a way of creating an existential crisis, forcing the individual to ask the question, "What should I do?" for what seems to be the first time.

A few years ago I was consulting at a Mission in New York when we received a call from a local dentist. Days earlier he had watched a report on the local news about how the mission was serving the needs of homeless women and children. The story had a powerful impact on him. It had created an open door to re-examine his life. He was a collector of Corvette racing cars and turned this hobby into an obsession.

The dentist finally decided to gift these cars to the mission so that they could sell them and use the dollars to serve the poor. He explained to the executive director of the mission, "My hobby started out innocently enough. I thought it would be neat to own one of these cars. Before I knew it I was collecting them and more of my time and thoughts went into the direction of this collection. I began to lose direction as to what my real purpose was." It was a liberating experience for the donor and served as a symbol for how we can lose focus on those around us. After he gave the cars to the mission he stated, "I feel like a slave who was set free."

### **What are my distractions?**

Mother Theresa used to tell the story of a rich woman from Calcutta. This woman was a benefactor of her mission but in many ways was not fulfilled. One day she visited Mother Theresa and stated that she admired her and wished she could be more like that remarkable model of compassion. Theresa sized up this woman and noticed that she was wearing one-thousand dollar saris; by contrast she wore six-dollar saris.

She then said, "I have an idea, from this point forward why not buy \$500 saris and give the difference to the poor?" The woman looked at Theresa, paused and said, "Yes, I think I can do this." A year or so passed and the woman came back to Mother Theresa full of life and stated, "You will never guess what, I am now buying only \$200 saris!" Mother Theresa just laughed and clapped, encouraging the rich woman on her new journey of serving the poor.

What are our distractions from being of further service to others? For many it can come in the need for power and wealth or simply too much of anything. For others it might be too little action or work. It might be what first seems as an innocent hobby becomes an obsession. The question might be, "What is robbing us of our peace?" These distractions often generate anger, greed, obsessions, guilt, or some other unresolved conflict. By identifying distractions people now have the power to choose what to do with the problem. As they release these distractions from their lives, it is then possible to achieve a measure of peace.

It is from the position of peace that people are able to serve and in a very real way be served as well. By understanding the answer to this question we can begin to prune away those dead branches of our life that bear little fruit so that we can be freed to serve others.

### **What are my passions?**

In sorting out the questions of purpose and meaning, people create a new dialogue with the world around them and see life in a new way, identifying distractions like the dentist from New York. As we struggle within this experience we are given a new view of life that enables us to focus more on others.

We begin to see pain, suffering, and the needs of others, no longer pushing it away or denying its existence. The urge to serve and the birth of compassion as a way of responding to the world continues to grow. Within this new level of understanding people are invited to examine their passions.

Who do you identify with? Before going further, it is important to understand that the desire to serve others is a call to action. This call can be expressed within all of the important relationships in our life. This experience called passion leads to a compassionate response that can be shared with family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

As we think more about serving others through a volunteer capacity, or even a second career, it is important to note that sometimes people run away from personal pain through acts of charity beyond the boundaries of home. It is

useful to attempt to first examine the needs of those around us and build a solid foundation of inter-relationships before moving forward. That is not to say that people can ever create perfection within the home or job, but there must be some measure of peace that allows them to incorporate new life in voluntary service to others.

With all of that said, the question still is, “What are my Passions?” Is it youth, the homeless, the disabled, the aged and forgotten? Could it be the culturally and economically disadvantaged? Or is it students of any age group? Whatever the cause it will be important to move into an understanding of the people who are served by that cause. In the meantime, we have the opportunity to find that same passion for co-workers, customers, friends, family, and neighbors.

How do we identify with the people represented by a specific cause? Can we place ourselves in their shoes? Do we see how we are connected to these people and how they are connected to us? Do we believe that there is something of significance that can be gained by being in relationship with these people? Do we sense that the people served by an agency can teach us as we teach them?

The recognition of interdependence becomes the basis for building a bridge to the other which is the building block of compassion. That is not to say that all of these questions can be answered from the beginning. In fact, it takes time serving as a volunteer to gain greater access to these questions and their answers. It is important to move into voluntary service understanding that we are entering into a new experience of interdependence.

Further, there is so much that people who are served by agencies can teach volunteers and board members. It really does not have to be a one-sided relationship. Sometimes the lessons are hard to understand but they do create new meaning. Years ago my wife Beth and I served as volunteers on the Salvation Army’s bread truck that served the poorest areas of Detroit. It was New Year’s Eve 1992, and we fed over 1,000 men, women, and children from the back of that truck.

That night I made contact with many of those faces. Sometimes I saw pain and heart ache, but other times I witnessed a peace that truly surpassed my human understanding. How could there be any peace within this devastation? Yet many of the children we came in contact with that night demonstrated hope, gratitude, and compassion. They made eye contact, thanked us for the food, and in a real way fed us with their presence.

I did not understand what I have just shared until a week or so later. Teaching our 8<sup>th</sup> graders at my upper middle income suburban church, I noticed something that I had never seen before. Looking into those young faces I saw pain, tiredness, and stress. It was the pain and tiredness that comes from the stress of busy schedules and pressure to achieve. Had I not known the difference I would have assumed that the faces I saw New Year’s Eve should have been switched with the faces I saw in our suburban church.

That experience helped me to more fully understand how important it is to connect with people. It is simply not enough to read a story in the newspaper and think I understand an issue or a people. There must be an effort to establish a relationship.

When I interviewed the executive director of a charity that serves adults with disabilities in Toronto, he explained, “Before we invite anyone to serve on our board he/she must be able to tell me a few life stories about the people we serve. That means the prospective board member must really get to know the people we serve and feel a deep sense of commitment to their lives. I have found that without this level of human understanding, the board member is not likely to serve at the level of leadership we need.”

It is important to note that the organization in question is significant in size and yet it requires a board that is deeply talented, connected, and engaged in the work of the agency. Finally, the understanding of passion can be applied to any organization. The point is we need to develop a level of commitment for people that will ultimately benefit from the services the organization delivers. In short, we need to establish a love for the customer. Without this attachment it is difficult to truly comprehend need and take on the risk that is sometimes required for moving an organization forward.

### **What are my strengths?**

Every person is uniquely gifted with talents that have served him/her well over the past many years. What are those abilities? Many of these gifts may have been strengthened by their passion to achieve. The question becomes, “Are we willing to use these assets for a specific cause?”

In thinking about these gifts and the possibility of wanting to put them to a new use it is important to understand that our talent can either be used to help or harm the mission of an organization. The harm occurs when we do not take the time to learn about the mission and people who are served. If we approach a situation only from the role of the authority/expert we do not allow the organization to teach us what we really need to know in order to be of

help.

Real leadership comes from our ability to be transformed by a mission of purpose, so that our personal assets will become accessible and used in the most relevant way. We must first become a student of mission before becoming able to teach. When offering suggestions it becomes important for the board member to ask the question, “Is what I am suggesting in any way compromising the mission of the organization?” It is up to the executive staff of the organization to be honest in their response to that question.

Recently, I was working with an organization in the northwest that was going to add a new residential program for poor seniors next to a homeless drug rehabilitation program for women. Their plans included the development of a new green space between the facilities. A board member who was in the construction business reacted negatively to the concept, suggesting “It is a stupid idea, I know something about land use there is no need for this, there is adequate outdoor recreational space across the street.” The board reacted to her complaint and the process was slowed down several months.

Eventually this organization moved forward with their plans. At the time I asked the executive director how the board member was recruited. He explained, “Well she is a friend of a board member and has done some volunteer work at the agency.” I asked, “Has she demonstrated a desire to get to know the organization and the people it serves?” The executive director responded that she did not. The real problem here is that neither side took the time to fully understand the other. This conflict could have been minimized by fully examining the talents of the board member in question and determining how she might be best suited to serve this organization. Further, the board member needed to become more knowledgeable about the organization before offering such strong advice.

-

### **What cause or group is calling me to service?**

What group of people are you beginning to identify with? Do you see yourself standing in community with these people? Are you willing to be a student and teacher at the same time? Are you willing to serve? Now might be a good time to reflect on the following questions:

- Who am I?
- What is my life purpose?
- Am I living out this purpose with others around me?
- What has been their response?
- How does their response change my understanding about purpose?
- Am I feeling called to expand my life through additional acts of service?
- What expertise and experience do I possess to share in service to others?
- Am I motivated to offer this expertise and experience to help fulfill mission?
- Are there distractions in my life that will hinder me from fulfilling the call to serve?
- What group of people do I feel called to serve?
- What do I know about these people?
- What have they taught me?
- Why do I want to be of help?

Take the time to explore these questions. As people move forward, their answers become the basis of a plan that can help guide them to a position of making a difference in the world. Without your passion there can really be no mission

### **About Mark R. Fisher**

Mark is dedicated to helping a variety of organizations answer the question, “How do we build a community of compassion?”

The focus of his practice has come from a lifelong experience of working with volunteers, donors and staff. He began to realize that the similarities between each of the participants of an organization were more significant than the differences. “By building unity between volunteers, donors, staff and care receivers our ability to achieve full potential increases.”

His counsel has helped raised nearly \$750,000,000 in private support and generated thousands of stories in the

media. Mark earned his doctorate from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan with a dissertation entitled, "Compassion in Board Decision Making." He has been a guest speaker and presenter at numerous conferences and has served on a variety of non-profit boards. He is the author of *Mission Centered Board Leadership* which can be purchased on his web-site, [www.markfisher.com](http://www.markfisher.com).

To learn more about how Mark R. Fisher can assist your organization you can reach him at (248) 207-1312 or at [bellfisher@aol.com](mailto:bellfisher@aol.com).