



RIDERS ON THE STORM

IMPORTANT PLAYERS WITHIN ANY ORGANIZATION MUST REMEMBER THEIR CRUCIAL ROLE IN PERILOUS TIMES—AND STRIVE TO EXEMPLIFY THE PRINCIPLES OF “SERVANT LEADERSHIP.”



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ALTHOUGH 2020 BEGAN with promise and optimism, we were all soon thrown into an unexpected global crisis that sparked tremendous uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Our health and welfare were threatened to the core. The economy took a dramatic downward turn. The COVID-19 pandemic has since dragged on much longer than most people initially expected. It's likely that 2020 will not go down as a good year for the Best Lawyers featured in this issue.

Those chosen as Best Lawyers typically serve as leaders, mentors, and role models in their law firms. During a time of crisis, these Best Lawyers' adherence to the principles of “servant leadership” has never been more vital. As stated by one of the founders of the servant leadership model, Robert K. Greenleaf, “a servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong.” While traditionally leaders are at the top of the organizational pyramid, servant leadership inverts the pyramid with the leadership at the bottom of the pyramid and clients and employees at the top. Simply put, a servant leader's role is to help position others to be successful. Law firms, in particular “Big Law” firms, and lawyers benefit greatly from adherence to the principles of servant leadership.

What are the key characteristics of a servant leader in a crisis? The first is an awareness of the difficult challenges your organization and colleagues are facing. Such awareness should foster empathy, patience, and recognition of the need to step up and serve. Next, it's important that a servant leader project foresight, inclusiveness, decisiveness, transparency, and optimism. Yes, optimism: faith that these difficult times will indeed end and that better days are ahead.

A servant leader's success will ultimately be measured by the success of the organization, not on his or her own particular triumph. A crisis brings out both the best and worst in an organization. Its strengths are more apparent, but unfortunately, its weaknesses are as well. Mistakes that might otherwise have passed unnoticed are now visible in the cold light of day. So, use the crisis to focus your organization on what's most important. Your objective should not be mere survival but to come out of your troubles even stronger.

In a crisis, servant leaders should do several vital things:

1. *Bring people together around key themes:* In formulating these themes, it is important to get broad input from your colleagues. Once determined, communicate these themes regularly to establish common ground, using

them as the building blocks for more specific actions still to come. You will find that if you first build a consensus around these common themes, it is much easier to get a consensus on more difficult decisions. Certainly, emphasizing the themes of safety, organizational continuity, teamwork, collaboration, and adaptability have worked well for organizations throughout the pandemic.

2. *Make decisions and promptly communicate them.* Never is it more important to make decisions and to communicate them with transparency than in a crisis. A critical part of that communication must include a specific explanation of why you are

effective leader must be committed to ensure the organization makes timely decisions. Particularly in a law firm, this means having a functional organization with a good decision-making process. You can't predict the future with perfect clarity, of course, but you can be reasonably certain that challenging situations will move much faster than you initially anticipate. Even decisions you think you'll have ample time to consider will often require attention on a more expedited timetable than you initially planned for. Like navigating a fast-moving river in a small craft, you'll have little time to look behind you or to either side—you must focus on

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making a decision. If they do not understand the rationale behind a decision, people will come up with their own explanation, and it may or may not be accurate. It is far better to accurately provide the actual basis for the decision even if you know some people will not agree with it.

In a crisis of this magnitude, the need to make critical decisions always seems to come more quickly than expected. Importantly, the

the rapids up ahead.

3. *Have empathy and accept empathy.* The pandemic has affected people differently. We may all be in the same storm, but many are in different boats. Some are navigating the crisis in good shape, while others are suffering greatly. At all times but particularly in a crisis, it is important to seek to understand and have empathy for a colleague's personal situation. While you may not have all the answers to a

predicament, it is important to listen and try to understand it.

Finally, to be your best, you must also take care of yourself and that includes accepting the concern and empathy from others. Use the care and concern that you receive from others to help you through the low moments and fuel your resiliency. During a time of trouble, servant leadership can be a heavy lift, and it may feel as though the entire weight of the pyramid is pressing down with the point squarely on your back. A servant leader's role may take on more than his or her share of the weight, but a true servant leader encourages others to be a part of the journey and to share the burden of charting the best course. You should not—and cannot—do it all yourself.

Recognize that you will grow during any time of peril, particularly one as long-lasting as this pandemic. If you stay healthy and safe, you can take something positive out of it. People may grow tired of the phrase “never let a good crisis go to waste,” but they understand the need for expedited change when one occurs. Stress points can be occasions for promoting greater acceptance of new ideas and processes. In the end, if you exercise your own servant leadership well, enduring a crisis can bring greater organizational confidence as well as deeper self-awareness. ●