



THE POWER OF

WE vs. I

By Kathy Kramer, CFE, CMP

The keynote speaker for the conference was due to give his presentation and one could feel the excitement in the air. After all, he is a respected industry leader and an accomplished professional who oversees a very successful event in his city. (To protect a revered gentleman, let's refer to him as John Doe.)

Arriving early and settled into my second row center seat, I was armed with my notebook and pen feeling sure I would be taking copious notes. After a rousing introduction, John Doe took the stage.

Although I was anticipating savoring every word of Mr. Doe's presentation, minutes into his delivery, I felt myself shrinking in my seat and the enthusiasm and the huge smile on my face, fading. Mr. Doe was standing in front of his colleagues, all intent on hearing him deliver a message about successful leadership and impart trade secrets that we could take back home to make our events better. Unfortunately, all I could hear coming out of his mouth was the word 'I'. Repeatedly, he would say I did this, I did that, ... you get the picture. This guy said he did all these things – not once did I

hear him mention the contributions of his team or say the words "we". For a while, to squelch my inner anger and disbelief at his pompous performance, I made a game of counting all the "I's he said. Fifteen minutes into his presentation I stopped counting at 125 "I's!!!! Can you really say "I" 125 times in fifteen minutes when you are talking about your organization?

My first thought was if you were part of his team, how damaging his speech would have felt if you were in the audience hearing all the great things he did. I was quite sure his team put in a lot of hard work and many late nights to ensure their event was a success, for their leader to take all the credit. All I could think of was how turned off I was by the focus on himself and that I, yes "I" won't ever want to work for or with a guy like that!

How could this be? As an esteemed industry leader did he not understand the power of We vs. I. Was his guiding leadership philosophy not tied to servant leadership, rather self-serving leadership?

Do self-centered leaders really understand the damage they are causing in their organizations and how this narcissistic behavior is alienating them and slowly destroying the organization and their ability to lead people by this blasphemy of self-promotional I-ism? The unintended consequences of self-serving leaders who focus on the use of "I" instead of "we" are destructive to organizations in many ways.

- 1. It puts the Team Second:** When given the opportunity to highlight accomplishments, isn't it best for the organization if the leader is highlighting the team "we" over the individual "I"? When there are opportunities to talk about our organizations, your conversational default should be set on "we" not "I" because it is reflective of a team effort.
- 2. It Masks Efforts of Others:** Even if the accomplishment, big or small, is completely an individual achievement, chances are others were doing things that contributed to this success. Accomplishments, especially organizational ones should not be diminishing and demoralizing to those who contributed to the task.
- 3. It Promotes Selfishness:** If a leader is perceived as getting ahead by promoting themselves over the team,

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others will duplicate these tactics. The net result is an increasingly self-centered organization with decreasing teamwork. As a matter of survival, teams will work in silos resulting in decreased communications and the reduction of organizational innovation because everyone is fearful their ideas will be swooped up and “management” will take all of the credit.

4. It Decreases Morale: If your team is demoralized they are also most likely demotivated. In fact, most employee exit surveys tell us that the reason a person leaves an organization is because of indifference with a boss who doesn't show appreciation for their efforts.

Leaving the conference disappointed and somewhat upset by this experience, but also more motivated and determined to continually ensure that my conversational default is set on “We” not “I” when given an opportunity to talk about my organization.

Let's face it, we all live with the reality of boards of directors, shareholders and stakeholders, and bosses who hold us accountable for profit and productivity, while portending to pay equal homage to things such as employee and customer satisfaction, as measures of success. It can be all too easy to get caught up in the latest profit and loss statement and loose site of our real role as leaders. Frustration can too easily lead to thoughts such as, “I will just do it myself” or “If I want something done right, I will have to do it myself”. These are cop outs and the old, outdated habits of “I” centered leadership.

Robert Greenleaf, the father of servant leadership, described servant leaders as:

“A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform.”

His words are as true and relevant in 2017 as they were when he first proffered his theory of servant leadership in 1970.

If we are to be true servant leaders how do we define the differences and move from “I” to “We” leaders? How can we live the principals rather than just pay lip service to them? How do we shift the focus from our success, to the success of others?

Remembering that just because we think we can do some things better than others, it doesn't mean we should and this is one of the most basic ways we serve those on our teams. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are the custodians of our teams, not the controllers; it's imperative to serve with and for our people in order to keep the organization thriving, relevant and successful.

General Electric's Jamie Irick said in *Discover Your True North*, “If you want to be a leader, you've got to flip the switch and understand it's about serving the folks on your team. This is a very simple concept, but one many people overlook. The sooner people realize it, the faster they become leaders.”

Being a servant leader is a life long journey in which every day, and in every way, we must remember and practice the guiding principles of Servant Leadership.

1. Listening. Traditionally, leaders have been valued for their communication and decision making skills. Servant leaders must reinforce these important skills by making a deep commitment to listening intently to others. Servant leaders seek to identify and clarify the

will of the group. Ask questions, instead of providing solutions in group settings. The next time you want to instinctively provide someone the solution, stop and ask them a question as to their opinion for the solution first and truly listen.

- 2. Empathy.** Servant leaders strive to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirit. It's important to assume the good intentions of employees/partners and not reject them as people, even when forced to reject or call into question their behavior or performance.
- 3. Building Community.** Do employees feel a strong sense of community? Servant leaders have a strong sense of community spirit and work hard to foster it into an organization. They demonstrate this by building an organization that functions as a community.
- 4. Awareness.** General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant leader. Do others believe you have a strong awareness for what is going on? Servant leaders have a strong sense of what is happening around them. They are always looking for cues from their opinions and decisions. And because of this, they know what's going on and will rarely be fooled.
- 5. Persuasion.** Servant leaders rely on persuasion, rather than positional authority in making decisions. They seek to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. A servant leader is effective at building consensus within groups.
- 6. Conceptualization.** Servant leaders seek to nurture their creative abilities to “dream great dreams.” They have the ability to look at the organization, and any issues within the organization, from a conceptualizing perspective. This means the leader must think beyond day-to-day realities and seek a delicate balance between conceptualization and day-to-day focus.
- 7. Foresight.** Foresight is a

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characteristic that enables servant leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision in the future. Having this foresight is deeply rooted in the intuitive mind.

8. **Growth.** Do employees believe that you are committed to helping them develop and grow as individuals as well as employees? Servant leaders have a strong commitment to the growth of people. They believe that all employees have something to offer beyond their tangible contributions. They find ways to help them reach their true potential.
9. **Stewardship.** Ensuring as the leader, that you take responsibility for the actions and performance of your team. This might be the only time "I" is acceptable language as a leader.....as in I am ultimately accountable for the performance of team members in the organization; I understand where we made mistakes. Servant leadership is about setting people up for success, and allowing space for the best performances. Develop the skills and potential of those you lead by asking them what they want and what they need to thrive.
10. **Calling.** Do employees believe that you are willing to sacrifice self-interest for the good of the organization? Servant leaders have a natural desire to serve others. This notion of having a calling to serve is deeply rooted and value based. Servant leaders desire to make a difference for others within the organization that will impact the lives of employees, the organization and the community – **never for their own gain.**

It takes courage and vulnerability to be a true servant leader. We have to fully show up and risk being completely transparent when developing the leaders of tomorrow. Brene Brown, in her ground breaking book *Daring Greatly*, says "Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness."

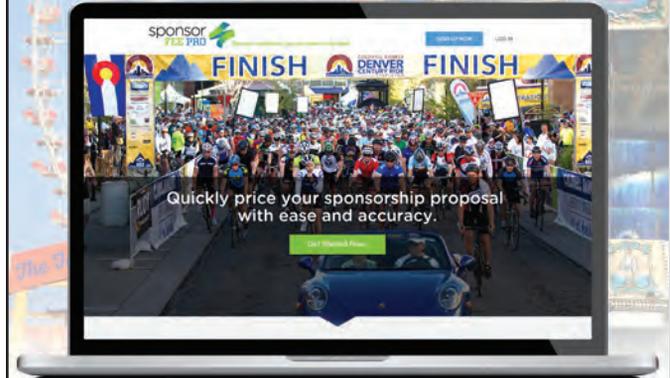
Above all else, servant leadership is about being human. It is being honest, acting ethically and inspiring confidence and commitment. It is showing up every day, wholeheartedly and warmly. It is walking the walk in the shoes of your team. It is making an emotional connection with your people. It is genuine care and concern for every member of the organization. It is compassion and it focuses on others first.

Martin Luther King said, "Life's most urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

As servant leaders, the most important thing we can say every day and to everyone is "What can I do for YOU?"

Kathy Kramer, CFE, CMP, has been the CEO of the OC Fair & Event Center, in Costa Mesa, California since January of 2015. The OC Fair & Event Center produces the annual OC Fair that attracts over 1.3 million guests annually and is rated in the top 10 fairs in the US. Kathy has spent her entire career in venue and event management with a broad range of experience including convention centers, arenas, hotels, performing arts and special events.

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