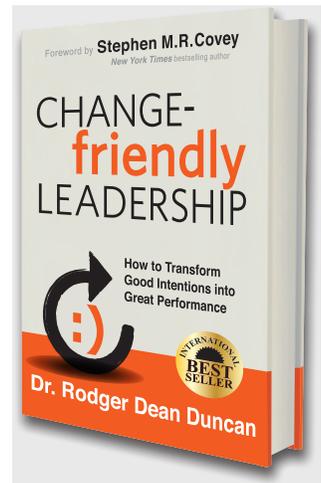


Section ONE

BONUS•POINTS



Think Like a Patriot, Perform Like a Steward

By Dr. Rodger Dean Duncan

Political correctness – at least the contorted, silly version – is not high on my list of obligatory behaviors. I’ve certainly never deliberately used language likely to offend or disrespect, but I generally refuse to participate in society’s love affair with euphemisms.

For me, a garbage collector is a garbage collector, not a “sanitation engineer.” Collecting garbage may not be glamorous, but it’s a necessary and honorable occupation. If my garbage collector went on strike I’d miss him a lot sooner than I’d miss a sportscaster or politician who walked out on the job.

But there’s at least one verbal adjustment that I gladly make. In describing someone’s employee or assistant, I no longer use the term “subordinate.”

Oh, the word “subordinate” certainly doesn’t have the negative history of words with racist or sexist overtones. But it does have a discriminatory nuance or two. For some people, the word “subordinate”



smacks of inferiority or subservience. They believe the term implies that the leader is superior and the “subordinate” is, well, inferior. So to

avoid the linguistic discomfort, I often use the term “direct report” because it helps clarify the relationship without suggesting lowliness or inadequacy.

Technically speaking, of course, everyone is a subordinate. Even the CEO is subordinate to the board of directors and the shareholders. (Some CEOs don’t *act* that way, but it’s still true.)

In typical hierarchical organizations, though, the term “subordinate” is troublesome in other ways. The subordinate paradigm breeds passivity, not proactivity.

See if you recognize some of the subordinate paradigm’s telltale expressions:

“I only work here.”

“You’ll have to ask someone else.”

“That’s against our policy.”

“My supervisor won’t let me do that.”

“Management made that decision.”

“I’m not authorized to do this.”

As long as people think of themselves as subordinates, their decisions and actions are governed by someone else’s approval, policies, and habits. But absentee leadership is no leadership at all.

My colleague Dave Hanna tells a story that illustrates the sometimes sad results of the subordinate paradigm.

Dave was sitting in a rental car shuttle late one day at the Kansas City Airport. Just as the van was about to depart for the airline terminals a man ran up, huffing and puffing, and pounded on the door. The driver opened the door and the man boarded, looking desperate. “Thanks so much,” he said to the driver. “I’ve been stuck on the interstate for the past hour because of an accident. My plane is scheduled

to leave in seventeen minutes. Can you get me to the gate in time to catch it?”

“What airline are you on, sir?” the driver asked.

“United.”

“Oh, that’s in terminal C, sir. We have to stop at A and B before we go to C.”

“Please! This is the last flight to my home tonight!” the man pleaded.

At this point Dave and the one other passenger in the van glanced at one another and answered the passenger’s unspoken question. “Ma’am, it’s okay with us if you take this gentleman to his terminal first. Our flights are later.”

The driver replied firmly, “I’m sorry, sir, but our management sent out a bulletin stressing that under no circumstances are we to deviate from going to A, then B, then C in that exact order.”

So the van dutifully stopped at terminal A, then at B, then finally headed for C.

This is an example of mindless compliance.

Where safety and other critical issues are at stake, compliance is of course very important. But in many instances, absolute, undeviating compliance is little more than a cop out—a handy excuse for not stretching to provide good service.

The steward paradigm is a much more productive mind-set. While the subordinate’s paradigm is “I just work here, I’m really not in charge,” the steward’s paradigm is “I own this job. My role is to help others in every reasonable way.”

Dave illustrates with another story, this one also involving a shuttle van.

He and three colleagues arrived in Houston at 2 a.m., bone-weary and eager to get to their rental car. Getting no response on the telephone “hot line” in the terminal, they walked outside to see if the shuttles were still running. They were. But after waiting



long enough for other rental car shuttles to pass by twice, *their* shuttle failed to appear. Finally, Dave approached the Avis van driver and asked, “Is (Company X) still open?” “Yes,” the Avis driver replied. “I saw people in their office as I came over.” Then, recognizing the plight of these non-customers, the Avis driver offered to drop Dave and his friends off at his competitors’ gate.

The focus of subordination is about taking orders and unwavering compliance with policy. The focus of stewardship is about earning and maintaining trust and proactively looking for ways to serve.

Subordinates tend to operate from a “have to” mentality. Stewards tend to operate from a “want to” mentality.

In an atmosphere of stewardship, something wonderful emerges: discretionary excellence. Discretionary excellence comes when people do the right and reasonable thing even when nobody is watching.

As Dave Hanna points out, the steward paradigm is the antidote for the lack of faith in today’s institutions. It elevates our thinking from the details of the moment and keeps our focus on maintaining our stakeholders’ trust.

If (when) situations arise that were not foreseen when policies and procedures were defined, the steward paradigm enables us to adapt to fulfill our mission, to serve the customer, to cut costs, to eliminate bottlenecks, and to do the myriad of other things so critical to robust performance.

It’s been said that the difference between a politician and a patriot is that a politician looks ahead to the next election while a patriot looks ahead to the next generation.

So it is with those of us who work in organizations. We must see ourselves not as someone’s subordinate, but as stewards serving the needs of others today and beyond.

“*I own this job. My role is to help others in every reasonable way.*”