

1-1-2009

All for One & One for All: Understanding servant leadership

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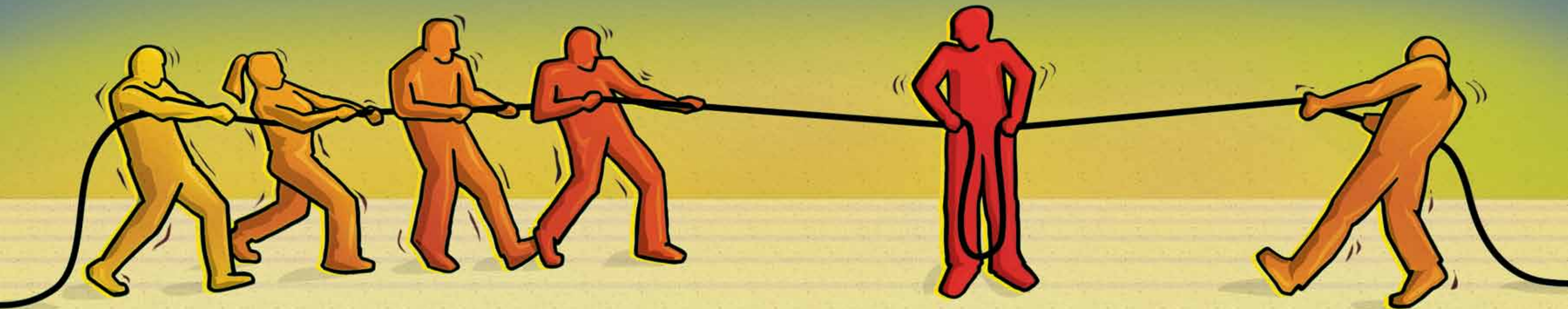


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Recommended Citation

Cafferky, M. E. (2009). All for One & One for All: Understanding servant leadership. *Columns The Magazine of Southern Adventist University*. 61(1), 12-13.

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All for One, One for All

by Michael E. Cafferky, School of Business and Management

UNDERSTANDING SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Nurse manager Susan* stood in my office doorway, question marks sprouting from her eyes. She had just reported to me what some of her employees had proposed and was unsure whether their idea was good.

Their idea: instead of Susan doing the scheduling, let the nurse aides take responsibility as a team for scheduling as well as for making last-minute adjustments when employees call in sick.

I encouraged her to give it a try. She provided the team with a regular meeting time to hammer out details. Shifts were negotiated and assigned as a team, who did their best to accommodate individual scheduling needs of employees.

One of the informal leaders took on the task of “encouraging” fellow employees who called in sick. The encouragement quickly took on the form of: “You made a commitment to us for this shift. If you are really sick, then stay home and get well. But if you are just calling to take today off, that is not acceptable. We are all in this together.” It wasn’t long before employees who played hooky for a scheduled shift got the message from the team: Don’t leave us in the lurch! We will support you, but you support the team.

What happened next was remarkable. Turnover dropped, and the number of “no shows” declined. Morale improved. Quality of care improved. The quality of Susan’s work life improved. The nursing home spent less on overtime pay and employee recruitment.

Individual vs. Group

You may have experienced the same tension as Susan did—that of meeting the needs of the individual at the same time as meeting the needs of the group. Sometimes called individual-community tension, this is a problem that exists in every organization and at every level of society around the globe.

What Susan witnessed is that the essence of leadership is not leadership from a manager to front-line employees but leadership with front-line employees.

In the Bible, Moses faced this tension point when the tribes Reuben and Gad came to him with a proposal: let them settle on the east side of the Jordan River, since it offered the best land for raising animals (Numbers 32:1-32). The trade-off to this would be that Reuben and Gad

would be less able to help or be helped in common defense. In the end, Moses granted Reuben and Gad’s request to settle on the east side of the Jordan River but only on the condition that these two tribes would first assist the other 10 tribes in securing their new homeland.

Paul was a proponent of freedom in Christ (Romans 6:18; Galatians 5:1), but freedom does not mean license to become a burden to the group.

It All Begins With Creation

The Biblical teaching on wholeness goes all the way back to creation. God created Adam as a whole being; body, mind, spirit were interconnected. However, wholeness by nature is not complete when seen only in terms of an individual human.

“It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18, NKJV) applies as equally to the marriage relationship as it does to the relationship between the individual and others in the community.

As a leader (whether official or unofficial), God gives you the privilege of continually standing in front of this great work of social-

structure “art” as you carry out your work. Caring for the needs of one person while also respecting true wholeness by watching out for the needs of the group (and not forgetting your responsibility to humanity) gives tangible expression to the idea of what it means to be made in the image of God.

The Example of Covenants

It has been suggested that Christians use the Biblical covenant as a model for leadership. Indeed, these covenants were both individual and communal in nature.

For example, consider the covenant between Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:43-55). The men made individual promises not to harm each other. But why? Look at verse 43: “And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, ‘These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children...what can I do this day unto these.’” The purpose of the covenant was to protect a community that was loved by both men to make sure neither would do something to bring pain and grief to the group.

What affects one affects all, and the commitments made in the covenant are commitments made to all who are affected.

The Incarnation Model

Through the incarnation, when Christ became both fully human and fully divine, an example was given on how we should relate to each other.

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something

What’s a Leader to Do?

Here are some guidelines to help you balance the tension between the individual and the group.

1. Pray for God to give you wisdom from thoughts others have to share as well as your own thoughts.
2. Take each situation as a process that is unfolding, and remain open to consider the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual as these come to be understood.
3. See in every complicated leadership situation the opportunity to explore your own humility by sharing leadership with followers.
4. Recognize that in every complicated leadership situation, God is calling you to participate with Him as co-creator of innovative solutions that will help both the individual and the organization.

to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:4-7, NIV).

Just as Christ was fully human and fully divine, Christian leaders can be fully individual and fully members of the group. As such, a leader has personal interests as well as group interests. In following Christ’s model, leaders will humble themselves toward both the individual and the community as a servant.

A Calling Like No Other

As a servant, your work is to encompass the mind, heart, and soul of the company as well as that of the individual employee. Only in this broader context of creation, covenant, and incarnation can true servant leadership in an organization be understood.

Sometimes you, like Susan, let front-line employees take the lead. You become follower. This does not require that you give up authority. It simply means sharing leadership with followers. At the end of the day, it’s not your authority

that makes the difference; it’s through sharing both the leadership and followership process with others in the organization that the most effective means can be found to manage the needs of individuals and the needs of the group.

The calling of the Christian leader is like no other calling. True, many can serve as leader under particular circumstances and as follower in many circumstances, but not everyone is cut out to be a covenantal leader. Not everyone can in humility serve both the individual and the organization (especially when the goals of each conflict) over the long haul across many issues.

When you accept the call to lead, like Solomon your prayer life takes the journey toward wisdom because you know that you don’t have all the answers to the big questions. This is truly a spiritual work. The work of leaders watching out for the needs of the organization and at the same time caring for the needs of the individual, willing to lead and willing to follow, is the same kind of humble ground upon which Moses and Joshua stood when God called them to serve. ✧

*name has been changed