

On Leadership: The Custodial Leader

By Michael L. Venn and B. Keith Simerson

This is the third article in a continuing series of articles on leadership.

Our friends who captain ships tell us that, during storms, waters of the Great Lakes are some of the most dangerous in the world. For many generations ship captains have relied on the guidance of the lighthouses to lead them from danger toward safer waters. These lights, these custodians of safe passage, are always there in times of need.

The Potawatomi Lighthouse on Door County's Rock Island was the first federally funded Wisconsin lighthouse built on Lake Michigan. Its first keeper, David Corbin, tended it from 1838 – 1852. Many benefited from his efforts: captains and crews, passengers, merchants shipping their wares, and consumers buying the shipped goods. Corbin was a true custodian of the lighthouse; making certain the light was always shining.

As with Corbin, to be effective in the role of Custodial Leader, you must desire to keep the light of leadership shining and work to make sure that when you eventually leave, the light is shining as or more strongly than when you began. The role of Custodial Leader is the first we will explore in depth and we will do this with the stories of two significantly different leaders, Lord John Browne and Fred Rogers.

Lord John Browne, CEO of BP, is not the typical CEO of an oil and gas giant. His vision for BP—to convert the natural resources of our planet into energy in a sustainable way for the purpose of raising the standard of living of third world countries in a for-profit manner—extends well beyond being profitable.

For his vision, Lord Browne is well respected by a majority of environmentalists. Browne has increased funding to investigate non-petroleum sources of energy and several years ago broke with the industry by admitting that there was enough evidence to cause concern about CO₂ emissions impacting the climate. As a result, BP leads the industry in voluntarily reducing greenhouse-gas output with their fuels.

Browne also takes steps to make certain the lessons of the past are not lost. Throughout numerous mergers that have occurred under his watchful eye, he has refused to allow the company to slide back to the bloated, centralized structure that almost led to the demise of British Petroleum in 1990.

However, Lord Browne believes his most important responsibility is to develop people for today and the future. Technology to connect people, an organizational structure that allows them to work together, and performance standards that encourage leaders to seek assistance from other leaders all ensure the strengths of today's managers and employees are applied to future challenges and opportunities.

Each and every weekday since 1968, Fred ("Mister") Rogers invited us to visit his neighborhood. At the time of his death, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" was being broadcast into the homes of millions of young viewers and their families and was the longest-running PBS program. However, Mr. Rogers' vision went well beyond entertainment. An ordained minister, he felt television could be used to reach out to young people and give them a solid foundation for a good life. He wasn't satisfied with the short-term goal of entertaining you today; he went for the long-term goal of improving your life.

Mr. Rogers regularly turned down opportunities to commercialize himself and his show. He instead focused on what fueled his success: a message that nurtured and guided the developing personalities of young children. This approach not only lived beyond Mr. Rogers, but has also positioned his company, Family Communications Inc., to continue to succeed without him. FCI was recently awarded grants to fund projects for addressing how girls learn math and for training caregivers on how to handle anger in children (for over thirty years an important theme of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood).

The mindsets and behaviors of Lord Browne and Fred Rogers reflect what we call Custodial Leadership. In short, the Custodial Leader:

- Considers long-term impact.
- Focuses on what has fueled business success.
- Considers his or her impact on the environment.
- Ensures key challenges and triumphs are remembered.
- Makes certain today's strengths are applied to tomorrow's challenges and opportunities.

Above all else, the Custodial Leader strives to sustain for the long-term and make certain the light of leadership never burns out.

Thus, we consider the alpha and omega of leadership to be Custodial in nature. Leaders must begin first with a deeply engrained desire to extend their leadership beyond their time. Such leaders take steps to make certain their actions contribute not only to current success, but also to future success. That is the alpha. The omega is the sum of all the leader does, the results of all the leader's decisions and actions...ending in the reality that what he or she leaves behind is either better or worse for their having been there.

Our next article will introduce you to Strategic Leadership, one of five traditional leadership roles we consider to be a key “driver.” Absent Strategic Leadership, many organizations remain rudderless as they attempt to navigate unsafe waters typically referred to as “the business world.” Enjoy the holiday season and feel free to contact us at Leadership@TradewindsConsulting.com.

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