

The Invisible Medal: A New Approach to Servant Leadership

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Leadership: Simply reading the word invokes images of characters throughout history or people from our past that have influenced our journey.

Throughout my adult life, I have both studied and taught leadership and have found leadership to be deeply personal. Each time I ask a classroom of people to define the word, no two definitions have ever been the same. Each of us is unique with different life experience; therefore, the way we define leadership not only defines how we wish to lead, but also how we wish to be led.

During my three decades of service as a Marine Corps officer, I found the purest form of leadership is in serving others, often referred to as servant leadership.

Servant leadership is more than simply fulfilling people's needs. Serving and leading with a higher purpose requires us to first look inward to identify our foundational **purpose** and **values**. We should reflect on our life's **crucibles** and understand the **leadership philosophy** born from those challenges. When leadership dilemmas emerge, we can weather the storm because our principles have been built on solid ground. Such self-reflection allows us to lead with authenticity.

Beyond leading authentically is genuine care for others and helping them achieve their full potential. When you make a difference in someone's life, you will have earned the greatest of awards...**the Invisible Medal**.



Throughout my recently released book, *The Invisible Medal: Leading with a Higher Purpose*, I share stories and leadership lessons from the deserts of the Middle East, the rain forests of Nicaragua, the low country of South Carolina, and many more places around the globe. The following is taken from a portion of Chapter 1.

The Invisible Medal is the realization that the success we enable in others is greater than any personal accolade. The visible medals I once wore on my chest are nothing compared to the invisible medals I wear upon my heart. Invisible medals will be earned if we focus on **people and relationships**, view life as a **stewardship**, and **recognize that everyone has potential**.



People and Relationships

Servant leaders naturally focus on others first. They have matured from inward (self) focused to outward (others) focused. Servant leaders ensure needs are met and people are enabled to

achieve their full potential. As a junior officer, I certainly focused on the Marines under my charge. “Looking out for your Marines and their welfare” is a core Marine Corps principle. However, deep down, I was also focused on being a successful Marine. My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was highly technical which required significant study and training. The paradigm I experienced was a never-ending internal tug of war being both self-focused and others focused.

Servant leaders learn to handle this dilemma by measuring their success through the success achieved by those entrusted to their care. Maslow’s hierarchy describes the levels of personal needs culminating with self-actualization. I have often wondered what comes after self-actualization and now realize, the next step is to focus on others, helping people rise through Maslow’s hierarchy ultimately achieving their own self-actualization. When the servant leader helps another person achieve self-actualization, they will have earned an invisible medal.

Life as a Stewardship



Throughout my military career, I have attended countless "change of command" ceremonies symbolizing the transfer of command from one officer to another. The pomp and circumstance of these ceremonies is impressive, complete with a band, military formations, speeches, and a "pass in review."

At almost every single change of command, one or both speakers will talk about the "**stewardship of command.**" Webster’s defines stewardship as “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.” Commanding Officers understand their time in command is

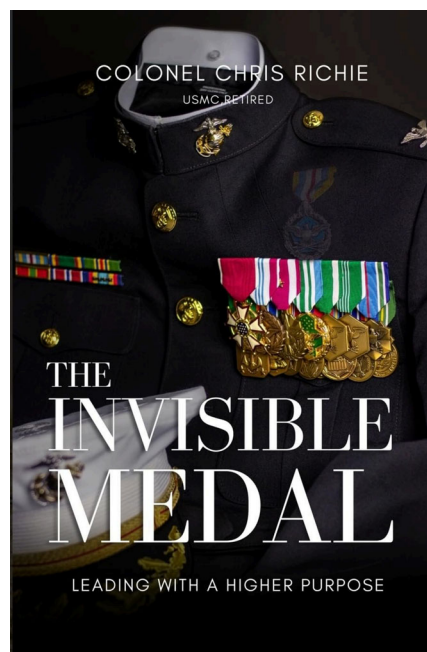
finite, anywhere from 18-24 months; not long to make an impact, to truly get to know people and provide the leadership they and their families deserve, or to accomplish the organizational mission, while improving the lives of those under their charge. Simply put, to leave the command in better shape than they found it. Those who truly excel will not only achieve that worthy goal, but they will also leave behind a legacy. They will have impacted lives in such a way to have inspired them to be the best versions of themselves. Commanders understand their stewardship is not about them; it is all about their organization and the people who run it.

Since my military retirement, I have found a strong comparison between the stewardship of Command and what I call the **stewardship of life**. Life is a stewardship because human life is sacred and something special that has been entrusted to our care. Every human has been given

the gift of life. What we do with our life is our gift to humanity. Much like the finite period of command, life is also finite. Whether we live for 20, 40, or 80 years, how did we steward those years? If our time is spent investing in others, helping people achieve their full potential, earning invisible medals, then I believe you leave behind a legacy far more valuable than any savings account. Life is a book full of chapters; when we are gone, the book remains. What will matter most is not the money we leave behind but rather the positive influence we had on the lives of others. How many invisible medals have we earned by helping others.

Everyone has Potential

Every human is born with at least one thing in common, **Potential**. Have you ever been inspired by stories of people who overcame incredible odds to achieve greatness? A common denominator in most of these stories is that they had a mentor, someone who devoted time to help them achieve their potential. There is such strong potential in every human being. That potential will lie dormant until a leader comes along who can ignite the spark and inspire them. Somewhere in the halls, offices, or cubicles of your organization is a person who could become a President, an inventor, a professional athlete, a servant leader. That same person can take what they have learned from you and pay it forward to another person, thus unleashing potential in others and positively impacting our world.



Clearly, not everyone will become the next Einstein or President; however, everyone—with the right mentor—can achieve their full potential. Servant leaders view every person in their organization as unique, and full of potential. Observe, I used the word everyone. Not just those we think are high performing, high potential individuals, but everyone. Everyone can be a high potential performer if they have the right leader.

When you make a difference in someone's life, they will carry that positive energy home to their families, to their friends, their co-workers, members of their church or kid's soccer team. Your positive influence will lead them to influence others and in no time, there will be an entire wake of positive energy created just because you took the time to make an investment in one person. This is perhaps the greatest of any pyramid scheme ever to be created...and we all win.

*In addition to his role as Director, Auburn University Human Resource Development, **Colonel Chris Richie** is a leadership instructor for the Auburn University Harbert College of Business, a member of the Auburn NROTC Alumni Board of Directors, Vice President for the East Alabama*

chapter of the Military Officer's Association of America, member of the AU Credit Union supervisory committee, and former board member for the Alabama Military Hall of Honor.

During a military career spanning three decades, Chris traveled the world and led thousands of people during times of peace and war. Possessing a deep passion for servant leadership, he is a sought-after keynote speaker, an award-winning military author, and a two-time Amazon Best Seller. He has taught leadership, ethics, and culture at both the graduate and undergraduate level and enjoys sharing his experiences with university employees, military personnel, college students, non-profit organizations and businesses. His focus is on making a difference by inspiring others through storytelling, teaching, mentoring, public speaking and writing.

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