

WITH PURPOSE

The Work of Leaders

by Joe Smerkers

I have been laboring over this story for several days now, trying to find the right words to tell you how to become better leaders. This morning two stories arrived at my doorstep in the Times Union that exemplify rather than prescribe the work of leaders. I share them with you, plus some personal comments.

ROBINSON STILL AFTER A TITLE, BY STEVE CAMPBELL

"In the real world, David Robinson is what an honorable man aspires to be. Robinson is an officer and a truly gentle man, with the moral compass that steers him toward what is right and away from what is wrong. He is devoutly religious, without the self-righteous trappings. He is astute and educated enough to understand that there is a great big world outside the confines of a basketball court."

"The Admiral is a navy man to the core. He wants to see the world, experience it, improve it. He is a 30-year-old man you'd want your son to emulate and your daughter to marry. He reads books that have more words than pictures, plays instruments..., does public service announcements. If Mister Robinson were in charge of all the neighborhoods, people would walk the streets with cheer instead of fear. People would open their doors, not bolt lock them. A heart would belong on the sleeve, not tucked away where nobody can get to it."

"In the make-believe world where Robinson makes his living, his strength of character gets mistaken for weakness. Even if nice guys don't necessarily finish last, they rarely finish first. This nice guy hasn't won a National Basketball Association championship — hasn't even come close."

"Robinson wants to win an NBA championship. He doesn't need to, and certainly not at any cost. Robinson seemed more pleased by his appearance on 'Sesame Street' than by his 1994-95 Most Valuable

Player award. Give him the choice between being a role model and wearing a championship ring, and it's a no-brainer."

"You can have all the rings you want, Robinson said. You can have all the records you want in the books. But what really lasts is the impact you have on people's lives. When you die, it's neat to be a trivia question for somebody 20 years from now. But in all honesty, that's not what it's all about."

"You know what he really is? He's the greatest role model this league has, and we don't use him enough. ' [Robinson's coach Bob Hill]"

"In any world worth living in, David Robinson doesn't need a championship to prove his worth as a player or a man."

MARCH HOPES TO STRIKE A CHORD, BY CHRIS STURGIS

"School Superintendent John Yagielski 's middle-of-the-night car fire was arson, according to the Saratoga County Sheriff's Department."

"A local community group has another word for it: terrorism."

"I don't see any difference between firebombing a bus in Jerusalem and setting fire to John Yagielski's car 10 feet from his house, said Rabbi Harry Levin of Congregation Beth Shalom, a conservative Jewish synagogue in Clifton Park."

"Levin also is a member of CHORD, Celebrating Heartfelt Open-minded Respect for Diversity, which is planning a march in support of Yagielski."

If there's something positive that can come out of the negative that happened to me and my family, then I'm for it, Yagielski said."

"CHORD also is asking residents to show loyalty to Yagielski by putting his name on their mailboxes, as if to say, I love my neighbor as I love myself so if you're going after John Yagielski you might as well go after me."

In 1977 when I first joined General Electric I was given a speech to read that a Vice President had just given to the Corporate Audit Staff. It dealt with what he felt were ingredients for personal achievement in business and for career success in GE. One of these characteristics had to do with the readiness to seize opportunities. He said, "At certain times, factors come together in business to present specific opportunities - moving trains that can be boarded....You may not have seen anything in your career yet that looks like a special opportunity, and I wouldn't advise you to spend your time looking for special opportunities! But I firmly believe special events come eventually to everyone. Only a few seize them - only a minority of people have the attitude of constant readiness to capitalize on them."

What is it that I found common in these stories that exemplifies, at least in part, the work of leaders?

I suggest the answer lies in their individual understanding of purpose. Both David Robinson and Rabbi Harry Levin have the strength and values to act with purpose outside of Self. Today we spend so much time doing, we forget what our purpose should be.

Many of us throughout society have become slaves to positions of power, material possessions, and personal dreams of glory. "Instead of regarding the satisfaction of our material desires as the means by which we could live and function as a human being, we [have] taken these satisfactions to be the final end and aim of life....whenever we [have] to choose between character and comfort, the character building was lost in the dust of our chase after what we thought was happiness." (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* by *Alcoholics Anonymous*).

In *The Age of Paradox*, Charles Handy comments on how we have confused our means

and ends, and extends the concept of purpose to organizations. "My business school in America was wrong, I am now convinced. The principal purpose of a company is not to make a profit, full stop. It is to make a profit in order to continue to do things or make things, and to do so ever better and more abundantly."

Yes we need to make profits. But we need to understand that profits and personal accomplishments are yardsticks. And we need to complete this thought with a question: Yardsticks for what? What is our purpose? What difference will we make as leaders and organizations in the lives of those we serve? To lead, as Handy says, "we need to clean up our logic."

David Robinson and Rabbi Harry Levin have purpose. They also have jobs with yardsticks. One is a basketball player and one a Rabbi. They understand one is a means to an end; and that on special occasions a moving train comes along which allows them the opportunity to make a difference.

And they are at peace with this.