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“I’LL GET THE MAIL”... WHY NOW IS THE TIME FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP

by Jim Dickson, CEO and Founder, Sanctuary Wealth

Our office is closed. All our partners are working from home. Sound familiar? And probably like your company, Sanctuary Wealth is holding daily meetings with our senior management team. The other day, it came up that, thankfully, the USPS is continuing to deliver the mail. But before our mail-forwarding request kicks in, there’s a good amount of mail piling up at our empty headquarters. There will be a surprising number of business checks in that mail. We can’t have client money sitting dormant, but I also didn’t want to send an employee into the office to retrieve the mail, exposing that one person unnecessarily to coronavirus risk. So I said, “I’ll get the mail.” I didn’t consider this to be an especially gallant move; it was just the way I was taught to think and act. Leadership starts at the top, and that includes serving the company and its employees.

I was introduced to this mindset during my many years at Merrill Lynch, back when the firm was known as “Mother Merrill” internally. During those years, I was one of many fortunate employees who had the extreme benefit and pleasure of working for a series of mentors who consistently taught us how to do the right thing, always putting people first. I learned to do this as an employee, as a manager, as a senior executive, and yes, even as a person. I will attribute my step-up-and-serve first mentality to these three men: John Thiel, Lyle LaMothe, Dan Sontag. Individually and collectively, they taught me about the impact that leaders can and should have on their employees – beginning with

how they put their words into action. There are plenty of catchy platitudes to be spewed when it comes to taking charge or leading the way. But no words are as memorable or meaningful than the actual actions taken by leaders. My mentors taught me: when times get tough, ask yourself and others, how can we serve?

You don’t need to be in a leadership position to be a leader. And you especially don’t get to be a leader because you’re first in line, the last to speak, or the lucky one with a corner office.

Leaders – and specifically the ones we need today – are defined by the actions they take. And those actions speak loudest when they’re done for someone else’s benefit. Be it your colleagues, your neighbors, even strangers.

This servant leadership is often witnessed at times of turmoil and disaster, when regular folks step up in unexpected ways. Not to be heroes. But to help lead the way forward.

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Many of us know the 9/11 stories of all those people who came every day to St. Paul’s Chapel at Trinity Church to help and support the teams of firefighters and police, EMTs and construction

workers, searching Ground Zero. Those people weren’t asked or anointed, they simply saw a need and stepped in.

Another New York story found superstorm Sandy bearing down on the city in late October of 2012. In the beach communities of Rockaway and Breezy Point, hundreds of senior citizens lived in homes that were at risk of the fatal sea surge, until people – neighbors, family, strangers – just people showed up and helped move them out of harm’s way.

Out in California in 2018, wildfires were devastating the landscape, taking lives indiscriminately. In the fatal November Camp Fire, many residents had no clear means of escape. Yet fellow citizens found them and created miraculous evacuations – saving the lives of people they didn't even know.

These might be dramatic episodes of servant leadership, but do they not illustrate a valuable lesson that can be applied to everyday living?

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It's simply this: serve your neighbor.

Today, the world faces an unprecedented pandemic. Though COVID-19 won't prove to be the most fatal or far-reaching, it's occurrence in our modern world of globalization, internet technologies, and digital communications,

has shown us much about our personal connectivity – to people right next to us, and to people we'll never meet.

But as we are all connected, do we not all hold an accountability towards each other?

And this is where true leaders are found -- in the knowing of how to serve, how to be useful, for the benefit of those we know as well as those we don't. Because with every action, we put in motion the momentum of impact. And when the action of a leader is a positive, servant action, it leads to a rippling of positive effects that can carry onward, whether through a company, a community or even a country. It becomes leadership by example, echoing the notion of 'pay it forward.'

Imagine then how – in this time of true crisis (not chaos) – everyone of us has the opportunity to step up and be a leader – by stepping in to help. Maybe a neighbor, maybe a stranger. Someone you're looking at right now, someone you'll never see. But every action has impact. And if people can take impactful actions, and embrace this concept as a way of life, then we can change our culture.

Culture can be influenced by many forms of leadership. It could be government and politics, or celebrities and entertainers, or corporations and causes. But culture can only be driven by people.

Now is the time for people – every one of us – to drive our culture to a role of servant leadership.

It is the right thing to do. Who can you serve?