



Serve Your Way to Greatness

By:

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Once a month, Charlie met with the entire management team of The Courage Place through the magic of video-conferencing. He could almost maintain the same feel of personal closeness that had developed in the early days, even though now there were more than 300 locations across the United States and Canada, with the first European center scheduled to open the following year. Several years earlier, the company had gone public by selling shares of stock to its members in a direct public offering. Now, the monthly management meeting was also open to member-owners by means of a special Internet hook-up.

For the most part, going public had been a tremendous step forward for the company. The sale of stock had provided capital that was essential for maintaining an aggressive schedule of opening new centers, as well as developing new product and service lines. More important in Charlie's eyes, when members "graduated" to become part-owners of The Courage Place, their commitment and enthusiasm increased geometrically. The downside of going public was a natural tendency for many Courage Place managers to focus more on quarterly earnings and the stock price than on the core service business. Today, Charlie wanted to discuss not just the business of service, but also the philosophy of serving.

As he always did, Charlie began by addressing some of the concerns that had been raised by managers during the previous month, and by answering questions that had been sent to him by owner-members via e-mail. Charlie used this period to get people to relax, lighten up, and think about things from a new perspective. From his years of public speaking, he had learned that before you can teach somebody something, much less influence them to change ingrained attitudes and habits, you must touch them emotionally. This warm-up period was his opportunity to synchronize people emotionally.

"Because we are in the business of helping people create better lives for themselves, The Courage Place has always attracted people who have an incredible service orientation. Now, that's a good thing – those are exactly the kind of people we want to attract. But

in the early days, when we were just getting this business started, I had to continuously remind people that even though we had a powerful service mission, we still were a business, and as a business, we had to make a profit. I used to serve on the board of a local hospital, and Sister Julia always reminded us board members of her favorite maxim: ‘No Margin, No Mission.’ That aphorism is every bit as applicable in our business as it is in healthcare. We must make a healthy profit so we have funds to reinvest in new and improved programs to serve our clients more effectively, and to keep reaching out to bring new members into the fold.”

Charlie looked at his notes. Even after all these years, he still believed in the maxim of Mary Kay Ash that the shortest pencil was better than the longest memory. “But Sister Julia’s formula also works in reverse; No Mission, No Margin. If we lose sight of the mission that brought us all into this business in the first place, if we begin to let the quality of our service slip, we open the door for someone else to come in and take our business away from us. Without the mission, our margin – our profits – will evaporate.” At first, Charlie had found it difficult to speak to a camera with the same passion and enthusiasm that a live audience brought forth. Now, however, he was able to quickly get into the flow by imaging the faces on the other side of the camera – the hundreds of managers participating in the live interactive video conference, and the thousands of member-owners watching on the TCP website. “My friend Mitch Matsui introduced me to the poetry of McZen. They’re quirky and full of paradox, but they contain great wisdom about life. Here’s one of my favorites:”

Someone with a job is never secure.

Someone with a calling is never unemployed.

“That’s so true. In today’s turbulent world, nobody can go to work for a company and be confident that just by being loyal, reliable, and competent they’ll still be there in twenty or thirty years. Quite to the contrary, the chances of that happening are slim indeed. Even the CEO is accountable to a board, and boards everywhere – including the board at The Courage Place – are becoming more demanding, and willing to replace a CEO who doesn’t perform.” Charlie smiled at the fact that, even though he’d started the company, he still had to answer to someone else for his performance.

“While job security may be an illusion, finding the security of a calling is rock solid. If you see your work as a calling, and not simply the means to a paycheck, there will never be a day in your life that you can’t find meaningful work to do.” Charlie laughed as he continued: “Of course, there might be days when the pay is low – we’ve all done more than our share of work-for-free when we were between jobs – but there is always work to be done. In one of the great books of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes goes through all the pleasures of life; material wealth, party times, power, knowledge, everything. In the end, he finds, it’s all meaningless, all vanity. There’s nothing new under the sun, he

says, it's all dust in the wind. So where *does* Ecclesiastes find meaning? Why, in his work. Whatever work your hand finds to do, he says, do it with all your might."

"Much more recently, another poet – Kahlil Gibran, author of *The Prophet* – wrote that work should be love made visible. We must all strive to see our work as a calling, and to put love into that work so that it becomes an outer manifestation of our inner love for the work and for the people we serve. If we do that, I'm convinced the bottom line will grow naturally and we will all prosper. With the new responsibilities we have to our member-owners, we naturally feel more pressure to maintain profits and keep the stock price going up. Trust me," Charlie laughed, "I feel this more than anyone. I have one board member who goes on line the minute the stock market opens each morning, and then phones me up to tell me what our stock price is as that moment."

"We must manage our business effectively, but must never fall victim to the siren song of the market. There are many companies that march to the drum of their own long term vision rather than dance to the piper of Wall Street. Companies like ServiceMaster, Hewlett Packard, Johnson & Johnson, and many others have made the commitment to put their people first – to serve their employees, customers, and communities – and trust that profits and higher stock prices would follow. On the other hand, an obsession with profits, with numbers instead of people, can actually be counterproductive." Charlie went on to tell the story of Mad Dog Dunleavey, whose single-minded focus on doing what he thought Wall Street wanted cost him his job, and very nearly destroyed the company.

"It's the great paradox of service. About twenty-five hundred years ago, Confucius said that if you want to be successful, the best way is to help other people be successful. It was true then, and it's true today. Another Chinese philosopher, Chuang Tzu, said the only way to find happiness is to not do anything calculated to achieve your own happiness. In other words, to lose yourself in the joy of work for its own sake, and to helping others be happy." Charlie laughed and shook his head. "It's a paradox that I've had a hard time getting my kids to understand. Achieving real personal happiness may mean missing out on a lot of opportunities to have fun. Conversely, people who spend all their time trying to have fun often end up miserably unhappy."

Charlie took a call from one of the newer managers. "We've been asked by one of the local schools, which happens to be in a lower income community, to put together a program that will help them teach their students some of the emotional skills required to succeed in the workplace, and as entrepreneurs. I really want to do it, but I'm having a hard time justifying the resources that would be required, especially since for some strange reason, my employees are pretty insistent about being paid on a consistent basis. How do you suggest I evaluate a situation like this?"

“That’s a great question,” Charlie replied, “and a very important one. First of all, let me say that there is not a one-size-fits-all answer, and that you have to evaluate your own individual circumstances. Having said that, let me point out that opportunities for gain frequently come disguised as calls to service. What you need is some creative thinking. Is there a local corporation that would be willing to sponsor the program? Can you donate the program to the school, but in return have them sponsor a companion program for parents with a modest registration fee to help you offset your costs? In return for you doing the program, will the school offer membership in The Courage Place as an optional benefit to its faculty and staff? With a bit of imagination, you can often find a win-win solution that allows you to be simultaneously profitable.”

The next caller was Jan Marcheson, who operated a very successful Courage Place center in San Francisco. She often asked the tough questions that were on everyone’s mind. “You know, Charlie, I buy in to everything you’re saying a thousand percent. But sometimes I feel like the guy who forgot he’d gone down to drain the swamps because he’s so busy fighting off the alligators. Some days, I feel like a hypocrite because I’m out there in the classroom telling people to face their fears with courage and determination, and then I go back to my office and close the door and just darn near collapse under the weight of my own fears. How do you walk the talk when you don’t even feel like you can get out of the wheelchair?”

Charlie thought for a long moment. “Let me say two things about that, Jan. First, you *are* walking the talk. There’s not a person involved with The Courage Place who hasn’t at one time or another felt overwhelmed by their fears and problems. If I’m wrong, please feel free to interrupt. Charlie paused for a moment, but there were no arguments. “It takes incredible strength and courage to close the door to your office behind you, to lock your fears and your problems inside, and to go stand tall and proud in front of an audience and give them the inspiration to pursue their dreams. How could you possibly empathize with their problems if you didn’t occasionally walk in their shoes, or sit in their wheelchairs?”

“The second thing we must recognize is that many of us came to The Courage Place because courage is what we ourselves most needed. By teaching it, we gain it. Many years ago, Dr. Jared Mitchell shared with me a learning philosophy he’d picked up in his surgical residency, which still keeps me motivated to teach before I may feel ready: *See one, do one, teach one*. We must never forget to apply in our own lives what we teach others as part of our core curriculum; that caring is the antidote to anxiety, and service is the treatment for adversity.”

“Most of the world’s great wisdom is in the form of paradox, and service brings us face-to-face with some of the great paradoxes of life. Like this one: service begins with self. If you don’t have faith in yourself, if you don’t treat yourself with respect and have a solid sense of self-worth, it’s unlikely that you’re going to provide meaningful service

to other people. At the same time, service transcends self. Many of you are members of Rotary, and as such have adopted the motto *Service Above Self*. When you adopt an attitude of service and sharing, the focus of your attention shifts from your own mostly imaginary problems and onto someone else's mostly real problems."

"A related paradox is this: you have to get out of yourself to find yourself. To achieve success and happiness, you must simultaneously reduce your self-consciousness and increase your self-awareness. In other words, to stop seeing yourself as the center of the universe, and at the same time do a better job of paying attention to how your attitudes and actions affect other people. You've all heard my lecture on the fear of success, which is far more toxic than the fear of failure. One of the most powerful weapons I know of to overcome fear of success is a commitment to serve other people. The more fervently you adopt this, the more successful you become, and the more service you can provide to other people. This will remove any doubts of whether you deserve success, or whether your success comes at the expense of others."

"I'd like to close with two final points. First, service always springs from an attitude of gratitude - thankfulness for what we've been blessed with in the past, for what we have right now, and for the future blessings we anticipate. There's nothing you can't be thankful for, even your weaknesses and the adversities that cross your path, as these often help guide you toward the destiny that is authentically yours. Finally, when it comes to service striving is more important than achieving. Someone once asked Mother Teresa why she wasted her time helping the poor, since there were so many of them, and she could never be successful at eliminating their problems. In response, she snapped that she was not there to be successful; she was there to be faithful. Ultimately, our service is a reflection of our faith. And as *The Bible* says, genuine faith is always reflected in action. It's a big part of what The Courage Place is all about."

As he usually did, Charlie ended the meeting by outlining some of the company's key plans and priorities for the coming months. Driving from the studio back to his office, something Alan Silvermane had said many years ago popped back into his head: "Dream Beyond the Dream." Charlie knew that the time would soon come when he'd turn over the reigns of The Courage Place to someone else, and he would need to start thinking about what service he would provide during the next phase of his own life.