



Vincent and Max De Pree: Growing in the Art of Leadership

[Max De Pree](#) is chairman emeritus of Herman Miller, Inc., a *Fortune* 500 company. He is the author of popular leadership books such as [Leadership is an Art](#) and [Leadership Jazz](#). He was named to *Fortune*'s National Business Hall of Fame, and received the Business Enterprise Trust's Lifetime Achievement Award. De Pree cites his commitment to his faith as the foundation of his approach to life, management, and leadership.

Defining Leadership

De Pree defines leadership as “liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible.” (1989, 1). He also identifies three actions that help leaders to embody this definition in their behaviors. For DePree the “first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the leader is servant.” (1989, 9).

According to De Pree, leaders must have a vision of where they want the organization to go. However, leaders also must recognize and be prepared to deal with the reality that their vision might be challenged by those who prefer things as they are. He suggests that leaders often find themselves out in front, challenging others to change the status quo, and possibly themselves along with it. He writes:

“Vision is the basis for the best kind of leader. I’m not talking here about the next quarter’s sales targets—that is no vision. But the tenders of vision are often lonely, usually unpopular, and frequently demand that others change. People with vision inject ambiguity and risk and uncertainty into our lives. They embark on voyages to the new world.” (1992, 39)

The Importance of People

De Pree says it is our beliefs and values that help us decide who matters and what matters (ibid.36). De Pree's attitude toward people in his organization exemplifies his values of inclusion and empowerment. He writes:

“A leader sets the example for openness and imagination and acceptance. A leader shows by example how to live constructively with eccentricity. She understands that creative people can be the most effective teachers in an organization...” (ibid.101).

At Herman Miller, evidence of De Pree's leadership philosophy was present everywhere. As one visitor to the Herman Miller factory described it, it was hard to tell one person from another in terms of her or his role: “People who seemed to be production workers were engaged in solving “managerial” problems of improving productivity and quality. People who seemed to be managers had their sleeves rolled up and were working side by side with everybody else in an all-out effort to produce the best product in the most effective way.” (1989, xx-xxi)

De Pree also questions contemporary approaches to “quality” in the workplace: “When we talk about quality, we are talking about quality of product and service. But we are also talking about the quality of our relationships and the quality of our communications and the quality of our promises to each other.” (ibid. 74)

Service and Justice

Service is a key element of De Pree's approach to leadership. He uses the image of a jazz band to illustrate his approach:

“A jazz band is an expression of servant leadership. The leader of a jazz band has the beautiful opportunity to draw the best out of the other musicians. We have much to learn from jazz-band leaders, for jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals.” (1992, 9)

De Pree is clear that leadership in nonprofits is about serving in hope, not power. This hope comes from a steadfast belief in our ability to realize our full potential, and to help others to do the same. He picks up this theme in his book, [*Leading Without Power: Finding HOpe in Serving Community*](#).

Another aspect of service and one of the competences in the Vincentian Leadership Model is working for social justice. De Pree speaks to how the leader experiences this call to justice:

“Justice requires that leadership be a posture of indebtedness. Leaders need to ask themselves the question, ‘What do I as a leader owe?’ Think of the leader's obligation to provide first for those on the bottom rung, not for those on the top rung.” (1992, 132)

Focus on task

Finally, as De Pree suggests, leadership is about motivating people to do what is required of them. It is about action. De Pree describes organizations as “collections of people and assets that serve a purpose.” (1997, 21). Words alone are not enough:

“Leaders certainly need to know where they stand. But *how* do leaders stand? A sound philosophy isn’t enough; we all need to connect voice and touch...leadership is constructive, the right actions taken in the context of clear and well-considered thinking. The active pursuit of a common good gives us the right to ask leaders and managers of all kinds to be not only successful, but faithful.” (1992, 9)

The Art of Vincent’s Leadership

It appears from what we know about Vincent’s own approach to leadership that if he were in conversation today with Max De Pree, they would find a lot upon which to agree.

From [Vincent de Paul’s](#) writings and actions, it appears Vincent was very clear on which beliefs and values motivated him. He prayed that his followers might have “a true sense of the value of your vocation and be motivated to such an extent that you will be able to persevere in it for the rest of your lives, serving the poor in a spirit of humility, of obedience, of suffering and of charity....” (1995. 19).

Vincent also had the ability to see the potential in others. He empowered his followers by giving them opportunities to help lead the organizations he created. He recognized that Louis de Marillac’s intelligence, energy and passion to care for others coincided with his own. In the years preceding the founding of the Daughters of Charity, Vincent spent time with Louise and often wrote letters to her. He offered guidance and helped her to find a life of balance that prepared Louise for founding and working with the Daughters of Charity.

Vincent would no doubt agree with De Pree that leadership is all about service. Vincent committed his life to serving the poor. Although he also worked among the wealthy, his goal was always to provide resources and care to those in need. Vincent often signed his letters, “your most humble and obedient servant.”

Vincent was very pragmatic and clear in his thinking about his work. He was thoughtful and nuanced in his ability to work with all types of people from different walks of life. He understood the great needs of his time, and that he served a purpose greater than himself. This in part explains why he was so faithful to both the cause and people he served.

Reflection Questions

What beliefs and values motivate your behavior toward others?

Do you find some people more easy to work with than others? Have you thought about the reasons for that?

Do you have a regular practice to help keep you focused on priority tasks? If not, what might help you to do that?

Resources

De Pree, Max. *Leadership Is An Art*. New York: Doubleday 1989

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_____. *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1997.

Like a Great Fire: Vincent de Paul. Editions du Sugne. 1995.