THE BULL, THE CHINA SHOP, AND FORGIVENESS

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Although empirical data supporting the significance of servant-leadership abounds, in practice it is often an intangible art, a carefully executed dance of persuasion and stewardship, of empathy and healing, woven together with grace and humility. When the steps of this dance fall out of sync with the music of the community, alienation occurs, to the detriment of both the leader and the led.

In 2004 I was recruited to work at a resort on an island in the Caribbean. The managing director of the island was a gentleman who had been a mentor during the early days of my hospitality career. Over the years we had become quite close and I considered him to be more family than friend. His request that I go to the island and "straighten things out" was a great professional compliment. However, instead of accepting the employment offer in a spirit of humility and service, I neglected to consider the impact of my arrival on the existing staff. This misstep resulted in a difficult experience riddled with dissonance and degradation, for both my colleagues and myself.

Shelter Cove (a pseudonym) is a small, private island located in the Caribbean. The sole occupant of this island is a resort of the same name. The resort is made up of hotel rooms, beach-front villas, private homes, and a world-class spa. When the private homes are not in use by their owners, they are part of the rental pool for resort guests. The average daily rate for a hotel room starts at $500 per night, and for the villas, $3,000 per night. The resort guests are "A-list" corporate executives, Hollywood stars, international sports icons, and other notable (and notorious) members of worlds of fashion, politics, journalism, and literature. A staff village is set in the center of island houses approximately 100 expatriate workers from Australia, Great Britain, Bali, and the United States. The managing director (MD) had arrived approximately six months prior, replacing a very popular but ineffective

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predecessor. Over the course of his six months, the staff community went from having no Americans to having Americans installed in all but one senior position. I was the last piece of the puzzle to arrive. My position was newly created; capitalizing on my background in both operations and sales, I was to develop a new division on the island that focused specifically on the private homes. Therefore I would be taking slivers of work from various departments, including guest service, sales and reservations, food and beverage, boat transportation, building maintenance, and spa operations.

Whether it's a small business group around a conference table, an extended family around a dinner table, or a group of colleagues thrust together in a small-town environment, simply bringing a group of people together does not in and of itself create a community. Forming a community requires shared values and an appreciation of the importance of "working cooperatively and caring about one another" (Kouzes and Posner 2003). Trust is a core construct in a healthy and effective leader-constituent relationship (Caldwell and Dixon 2009; Kouzes and Posner 2010). The constituents of such a community are best served with a leader who is servant before leader, who shows the way through nurturing relationships, one person at a time (Spears 2004), and who is willing to be vulnerable (van Dierendock 2010).

Using servant leadership and restorative justice as a framework, this paper explores the alienation I experienced in this work environment, the leadership errors that I made, and the breakdown in my relationship with the MD. I will also describe the role of forgiveness and restoration in the aftermath of our separation, and the subsequent healing that has taken place.

THE BULL

Arriving on Shelter Cove was a heady experience. I was tackling my first five-star luxury property, and although I had several years' experience in living as an expatriate in a spousal role, this was my first international work experience. On my arrival it became clear that the MD was under a great deal of pressure to make some significant changes at the resort. The financial situation was not a good one, but despite the removal of the previous MD, the staff seemed to be content with the current state of affairs. The MD was not the patient, fun-loving man I had come to be close friends with. Instead, the pressures of the situation had added an autocratic edge to his leadership style. In a servant-leadership model, change is driven in a relationship hallmarked

by trust between leader and constituent. This atmosphere of trust assumes leaders will act in the best interest of the follower, and in turn, followers will act in the best interest of the organization (Melchar and Bosco 2010). Autocratic leadership can work well with new employees who are being trained in very specific tasks (Yukl 2010). However, when it is used exclusively, trust evaporates and the potential for dehumanization and oppression increases. Paulo Friere observes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2010), "The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination" (p. 58). He adds, "the dominant elites, on the other hand, can—and do—think without the people—although they do not permit themselves the luxury of failing to think *about* the people in order to know them better and thus dominate them more efficiently" (131).

Uncharacteristically, and rather unwittingly, I began to adopt that same autocratic edge to my own leadership style. Gone was the understanding that my role as a leader was to grow people into becoming healthier, stronger, and more autonomous (Greenleaf 1977). As the leader of the private estates, I would be dealing with the resort's most VIP residents and guests. I failed to recognize the resentment that existing staff members would feel toward me personally because I had been selected for a prize position. Although an experienced manager, I had yet to develop to the level of leader whose actions were reflexively those of a servant-leader, and therefore failed to submit to "voluntary subordination" (Phipps 2010, 157). Instead I was serving others only when it was "convenient or personally advantageous" (157). In addition, I had completely failed to understand the impact that having a minority group take control, particularly a group of Americans—viewed as Friere's (2010) "dominant elites"—would have on this multicultural organization. And most importantly, I did not take the time to share myself with the others, to show that "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound" (Tutu 1999, 31) with theirs. I had become "bloated with an exaggerated sense of self" (Kouzes and Posner 2007, 347), thus earning the distrust of the staff I had come to lead.

THE CHINA SHOP

Because of its remoteness, Shelter Cove is not only a workplace but a society. A conflict with a coworker did not necessarily conclude at the end of a shift. After-hours time was spent in communal dining and recreation areas. This delicate balance meant that its leaders needed to extend beyond the day-to-day

operations and influence the well-being of the community as a whole. This organizational stewardship is best carried out in an environment of prosocial and altruistic behavior (Barbuto and Gifford 2010), and when this does not happen, as Greenleaf (1977) has observed, trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult to maintain. Given the small size of the island population, it was highly susceptible to the negativity of gossip, politics, and backstabbing. As a leader, my role was to build a healthy community (Melchar and Bosco 2010). Instead, my poor leadership of the project I was brought to spearhead contributed to the communal tendency toward negativity and tore at the fabric the entire community.

My social isolation grew quickly. The second in command on the island was the hotel manager (HM), a gentleman from Great Britain who was the only non-American still in a leadership role. Two months after my arrival he invited me to dinner. Despite my clumsy entry, he saw that I had intrinsic value beyond my operational contributions as a worker (Spears 2010), value that had not begun to flourish. He kindly and frankly addressed my situation, explaining the bigger picture to me, including the resentment of key staff members who felt they should have had the role, the overall anti-American feelings, and, most painful for me to hear, the perception by the staff that I was arrogant. The HM was taking an important step in building community through essential dialogue. As a person of influence on the island, his willingness to build a bridge through "the will to listen and to evoke listening" (Ferch 2012, 162) was a critical turning point in my experience there. I left the dinner with a new friend and a fresh outlook. I will forever be grateful to him for that dinner. The HM displayed a great deal of love for me that evening. As a true servant-leader he looked past the political trouble he would have from staff that might view him as a traitor. He showed a commitment to me as an individual and as a valued partner, rather than an inconvenience (Caldwell and Dixon 2010). He reached out and made taking care of me his highest priority, seeking my growth with compassion and empathy (Sipe and Frick 2009). From that night forward he and I became community partners. By giving me his public "seal of approval" for the rest of the staff to see, it was clear that we were not enemies, and in Lincoln's words, "If you make a friend of an enemy, do you have an enemy any longer?" (Ferch 2012, 163).

At his suggestion, I sought out some of the key staff members who were particularly wounded by my arrival. During these conversations I worked toward interpersonal acceptance: to understand their feelings and admit my wrongdoings, even when met with anger and hostility (van Dierendonck 2011). Although I am an extremely private person, I tried hard to open myself and

provide unlimited liability of love (Greenleaf 1977), just as the HM did for me. I had no clear successes here. I was met with a great deal of suspicion because of the way I had been brought in, because I was American, and because of my own behavior. My overtures to my colleagues were met with mixed results, in that some said they were willing to restart our relationship with a clean slate. But others, the vast majority, found it difficult to move from their "stance of . . . bitterness" toward a stance in which they were "no longer focused on how [they've] been wronged" (Ferch 2012, 46). I had no choice but to demonstrate my remorse through my behavior, adjusting my style to one of community building and consensus. In short, I was shaking off the cloak of autocracy that had enveloped me from the beginning of my time at Shelter Cove.

In the midst of this, my relationship with the MD deteriorated. He had counted on me to deliver the results, quickly and efficiently. My stumble had made his life difficult, and his style continued to worsen into the depths of autocracy. Even as I began to amass small wins, my success was not enough to balance what he perceived as a threat to my loyalty to him—my friendship with the HM. Whereas the HM was leading altruistically, the MD, with his need for power focused on the institution, was leading egotistically with a high need for personal power (Whittington, 2004). In years past I had been able to walk into his office and have frank discussions with him. I tried this on several occasions, to share the insights my steps toward reconciliation had provided me regarding the culture on the island. I wanted to provide the same type of loving servant-leadership that had set me on a more peaceful path. However, he was growing more and more isolated, arrogant, and coercive; discussions such as this became impossible. Metzger (2010) compares this to Shakespeare's King Lear. A powerful man comes to a tragic end because he surrounds himself only with people who flatter him. He slowly but surely banishes the friends who try to tell him the unvarnished truth. Although the MD did not come to a tragic end, our friendship did. At the end of my contract at Shelter Cove, I did not ask for a renewal, nor was one offered. I was banished.

FORGIVENESS

During my experience at Shelter Cove, I failed to see my own impact on others, and my own faults, and did not take responsibility for the hurt I had caused and for which I needed to seek forgiveness (Ferch 2012). Because of the transient and global nature of the community, the "fluid and natural act" (Ferch 2012, 46) of granting forgiveness had not been achieved with my

peers. In the short life of our respective contracts with the organization, we simply did not have the time to develop a depth of relationship and interpersonal trust (van Dierendonck, 2011) that would allow me to properly demonstrate my remorse and commitment to real change. However, the primary casualty of the experience, my relationship with the MD, was within reach and deserved attention. A little over a year after my departure, I returned to Shelter Cove. I hoped to free both of us from the burdens of our recent past and the mistakes that so characterized it. During our earlier time, when he had been a mentor to me, he had willingly met my errors with empathy and the understanding that growth required failure and failure required forgiveness (Caldwell and Dixon 2010). We had had no contact during the previous year; my email advising him of my arrival and request for some private time was met with a polite response saying he looked forward to having a quiet drink, which had been our custom for many years.

In Wiesenthal (1997), Pawlikowski makes a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Pawlikowski's describes a structure that requires repentance, contrition, acceptance of responsibility, healing, and reunion (221). In preparing for our time together, I considered all that had occurred between us and realized the provoking event was my inability to successfully build a team and effectively lead the project. The MD had used a great deal of political and cultural capital in bringing me to Shelter Cove, and my actions made his life more difficult, not less. Thus, asking forgiveness began with an expression of true regret for my actions that started us down the slippery slope of alienation. He shared his anger and frustration with me, not in the harsh tones that characterized our final months together, but in quiet words cloaked in the affection that had once been the hallmark of our relationship. In the cool darkness of a Caribbean night, the journey toward healing and light began. After the visit, our communication returned, tentatively at first, and then in a more robust manner, sharing emails and telephone conversations. We are on opposite ends of the world now, but we are restored to a greater intimacy than we shared prior to our estrangement.

CONCLUSION

When the artful dance of servant-leadership falls out of step with the music of the community, dissonance and discord result. My experience at Shelter Cove was a watershed moment in my professional life that demonstrated the remarkable power of well-executed servant-leadership. Whereas

I sought to focus on the organizational objectives set forth by the MD, the HM sought to focus on being of service to me, and to the rest of the staff, by taking steps to create a collaborative culture (Sipes and Frick 2009). It was my failures there that marked the beginning of a transition that would lead me to the Organizational Leadership program at Gonzaga University, and to a level of professional success that I have not previously reached. As Ferch (2012) asks, so I too must consider on a daily basis, "Am I shaking off my blindness and committing to the long good road of change and reconciliation?" (123). Indeed, it is the ironic truth of servant-leadership that when one ceases to operate from a motive based in ego and personal power that one may achieve the greatest professional, and personal, success (Whittington 2004). I have not forgotten the other people at Shelter Cove, those with whom I have not been able to attain a restored relationship. It is something I revisit on a regular basis, to see if I can learn where they are now, what they are doing, and if they would consider hearing from me. Most importantly, this experience guides my daily leadership life. I am acutely aware of the fine line I walk every day between humility and hubris, arrogance and service. I have seen my worst attempt at leadership, and I now seek my best attempt on a daily basis.

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