STICKY LIKE BUTTER

The Language Surrounding Corporate Social Responsibility Is Uninspiring and Therefore Not Embraced

— MATT KINCAID

> When we listen to the whispers, we free ourselves from
> the limiting belief that only some people have the
> answers, that only some people are worth listening to. As
> we tune into this chorus of whispers, as their voices
> become more confident and clear, we discover we are an
> incredibly talented choir, able to take on more challenging
> music.
>
> —Margaret Wheatley, 2011

The research discussed in this article began with an interest in examining the relationship between servant-leadership and social responsibility. In my time both owning and working within companies, I had become familiar with different perspectives and opinions on social responsibility, and had witnessed first-hand the struggles that organizations often experience in attempting to carry out effective strategies. Perhaps the biggest observation that fueled the motivation for

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this research, which I later found to be supported by various empirical studies, was that despite the many steps being taken to promote positive change in the business world in the name of social responsibility, there was minimal evidence to show that these steps were highly effective. Knowing this, it was the outliers that I was interested in, the companies providing some evidence that socially responsible business practices did produce favorable results. My hope was to understand the perspectives of the leaders in these organizations, and then to package their wisdom in a way that could be passed on to other organizations that were less successful in social responsibility efforts.

I first began learning about companies that were deemed socially responsible in the marketplace by various indicators and reviews. It became quickly apparent that companies operating by principles that emphasized putting people first rather than profits were in the upper echelon in this category. I also learned that the majority of these organizations were succeeding financially. These discoveries led me to narrow my focus on leadership frameworks that advocated putting people first, rather than profits, which quickly anchored me to servant-leadership.

The goal of this research narrowed to a focus on understanding what exactly servant-led companies did that allowed them to operate in more socially responsible ways than the majority of their competitors. In other words, the research sought to gain a deep understanding of the essence of corporate social responsibility from a servant-leadership perspective. Bearing in mind that much of what I wanted to learn was

centered on people's viewpoints, the research was qualitative in nature in order to allow for shared dialogue with participants, and in turn, hopefully a deeper understanding. The specific research methodology was hermeneutic phenomenology, which lends itself to an environment where a deep level of engagement during the interview process can be achieved, as well as great deal of post-interview reflection.

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The research participants consisted of three male and three female leaders who had either previously held, or were currently holding, the position of president, vice president, or CEO within their organization at the time of this research. Each participant also worked in a unique industry relative to the others, which was intentionally done to gather insights from a diversity of perspectives. Additionally, an even mix of small, mid-sized, and large organizations was chosen (two of each). The participants, their genders, and the respective industry in which they operate, as well as the size of their organizations, are shown here:

1. Howard, male, coffee industry, large organization
2. Cheryl, female, agriculture industry, large organization
3. Rich, male, higher education, mid-sized organization
4. Cindy, female, city government, mid-sized organization
5. Mike, male, health and wellness industry, small organization
6. Jennifer, female, sports and recreation industry, small organization

WHAT THE STUDY REVEALED

Frankl (2000) commented,

> No doubt, our industrialized society is out to satisfy all human needs, and its companion, consumer society, is even out to create ever new needs to satisfy: but the most human need — the need to find and fulfill a meaning in our lives — is frustrated by this society. In the wake of industrialization, urbanization tends to uproot man from traditions and to alienate him from those values which are transmitted by the traditions. (p. 141)

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of corporate social responsibility from a servant-leadership perspective. The study sought to understand why, in the midst of satisfying human needs, as Frankl put it, so many people in organizations seem detached from the idea of putting people ahead of profits. The ever-present low levels of veracity in corporate leadership beg the question of whether leadership based on respect, loyalty, integrity and love is possible in today's marketplace. Yet in the midst of this, tremendous stories of people leading companies by putting the needs of others ahead of their own can be found. This research aimed to identify these leaders, sit at their feet, and learn from their stories.

The exploration of literature on both corporate social responsibility and servant-leadership provided the foundation for this study. With regard to corporate social responsibility, Blowfield and Murray (2008) provided a backdrop for literature in the field. The scholars asserted, "No single definition is sufficient enough to capture the range of issues,

policies, processes, and initiatives" that comprise corporate social responsibility (Blowfield & Murray, 2008, p. 16). Accordingly, they offered categories, or key pillars, for organizations to focus on that were applicable to the diversity of businesses that characterize today's economy. These pillars are a framework for organizations to abide by in order to ensure that they practice business in socially responsible ways. Case studies affirmed these key pillars manifested themselves in the marketplace as a checklist, benchmarks that companies adhered to (Burchell, 2008; Epstein & Rejc Buhovac, 2014; Matten, 2007; Visser, 2007). As expected, research also showed many organizations were falling short of checking all the boxes on this list and that the consequences of such behavior can be considerable (Epstein & Rejc Buhovac, 2014; Hawkins, 2006; Tillman, 2009).

With regard to servant-leadership literature, the writings of various scholars provided a thorough understanding of its characteristics, as well as how a person in a top leadership role within an organization who embodies the philosophy behaves. From the paramount writings of Greenleaf (2002) and Spears (1995, 1998, 2004) to the work of other esteemed scholars (Block, 1993, 2006; Covey, 1998, 2002; DePree, 1995, 2003, 2004; Ferch, Spears, McFarland, & Carey, 2015), servant-leadership was shown to be an ethically based way of leading others when its principles were fully embraced. Greenleaf (2002) observed,

> In a relatively short period our society has moved from a society of individuals to a society dominated by large

institutions. Many of the critics of society do not see our problems as caused by this shift and by the failure of trusteeship in these large institutions. As a consequence we have a crisis on institutional quality, not so much from depredations of "evil" people as from sheer neglect by the "good" people. (p. 65)

With Greenleaf's observation in mind, this study set forth to gather insights from servant-leaders who understood the ever-important role of the *institution as servant*.

The interviews in this research provided the opportunity to collect data that would allow for careful analyses of the lived experiences of operating an organization from a servant-leadership basis. During the data collection process, all six participants provided compelling stories, each one saturated with rich insights about successfully practicing business in a responsible way — financially, environmentally, and socially. In each instance, the organizational leadership team had acted as a servant to its employees and its surrounding communities, shown by the notion of responsibility integrated into every action and policy within these companies. Using their stories, this study aimed to determine whether the notion of social responsibility in servant-led organizations aligned with ideas in the literature I had reviewed on corporate social responsibility.

After the data collection process had been completed, three distinct themes emerged in the data analysis portion of this research, with the most prevalent being that the language surrounding corporate social responsibility is uninspiring and

therefore not embraced. This notion is further examined in the ensuing section.

CURRENT CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY LANGUAGE AND EFFORTS ARE UNINSPIRING AND THEREFORE NOT EMBRACED

Spitzer (2000) professed,

> After coming to an objective definition of "person," one might ask, "Why should we concern ourselves with matters of the heart?" The answer is that even though an objective definition gives solidarity, stability, and certitude, it does not give freedom. Even though it gives evidence and grounding, it does not move one to care or concern. If we do not make an earnest attempt to set our hearts free, indeed, if we do not even know how to set our hearts free, we will not be able to move our most objective, most correct, and most complete ideas into reality. We'll be all dressed up with no place to go. (p. 55)

Similarly, Heath and Heath (2007) remarked, "Good ideas often have a hard time succeeding in the world" (p. 5). They went on to explain, "To a CEO, 'maximizing shareholder value may be an immensely useful rule of behavior. To a flight attendant, it's not. To a physicist, probably clouds are fascinating phenomena. To a child, they are incomprehensible" (p. 57). What both Spitzer and the Heath brothers illustrate is that so often we attempt to communicate messages and push ideas out into the world without fully considering both what our appeal is, and who our audience is — without considering

"matters of the heart," as Spitzer explained. Crafting messages that matter to people, connect to them, and "stick" in their minds takes conscientious awareness, deep discernment, and deliberate effort (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 8).

Nakai (2006) offered, "Effective leadership goes beyond even one's intellectual capacity; rather, it is founded on a gifted ability to connect to the common sense of those with whom we live and work" (p. 216). Similarly, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2004) asserted, "No matter what leaders set out to do — whether it's creating strategy or mobilizing teams to action — their success depends on *how* they do it" (p. 3). They added, "Even if they get everything else just right, if leaders fail in this primal task of driving emotions in the right direction, nothing they do will work as well as it could or should" (p. 3). Considering the assertions from this series of scholars, the fact that the participants in this study reported very low levels of engagement with terms such as *corporate governance, legal compliance,* and *environmental management* was telling. Moreover, when asked to define the term *corporate social responsibility,* none of the six participants had a readily available response. While each person did formulate an answer after a period of silent thought, most of them first provided the disclaimer that the topic was not in their realm of expertise. Interestingly, when examining the actions of their organizations, every one of them was doing all of these things in an expert way — managing their organizations conscientiously, abiding by the law, and providing stewardship to their communities. Despite behaving consistently with what

corporate social responsibility literature outlines as key principles, participants were not able to summon a meaningful connection to the any of its key pillars, or at least to the language used to portray its key pillars. This suggests that the terms and corresponding communication efforts typically used to convey what corporate social responsibility is, and why it is important, are not interesting enough to be engaging or meaningful enough to be memorable, even to its leading practitioners.

In recent years, literature on corporate social responsibility seems to be attempting to influence people's behavior by creating awareness of social issues, which seems logical at first glance. However, as Nakai (2006) offered, "The most effective leadership goes beyond behavior. Even though effective leadership is realized through displayed actions, it can be neither totally mimicked nor totally copied" (p. 215). Nakai went on to explain that people must be reached in a deep and meaningful way if any type of long-term change is to take place.

Covey (2002) pointed out that this type of deep and meaningful engagement is one key reason that servant-leadership has been so successful.

> I believe that the essential quality that sets servant-leaders apart from others it that they live by their *conscience* — the inward moral sense of what is right and what is wrong. That one quality is the difference between leadership that works and leadership — like servant-leadership — that *endures.* (p. 4)

Certainly there are examples of organizations practicing business in socially responsible ways, but as Covey pointed out with regard to *enduring* leadership, the same can be said of *enduring* corporate social responsibility. The significant factor that differentiates *participation in an act* and *embodiment of a behavior* resides in the "inward moral sense" of right and wrong — one's conscience. This rich and meaningful persuasion toward the embodiment of a new way of behaving that we see in servant-leadership appears to be lacking in corporate social responsibility efforts.

Much of the discourse on corporate social responsibility seems to be attempting to convey its merit by pushing it onto people in an often-unconscious and sometimes consciously autocratic way, a subtlety one might say is anchored in coercive power and reward power tactics. Coercive power rests in the ability to administer punishment or provide negative reinforcement (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 137). In corporate social responsibility, this takes the form of fines and various other penalties for unethical behavior and environmental degradation. Reward power is the ability to deliver something of value, either tangibly through money or other perks, or intangibly through support and recognition (pp. 137-139). In the world of corporate social responsibility, this includes things such as ratings and rankings on various indices.

Goleman et al. (2004) contended that coercive tactics such as threats and punishments, and reward tactics such as monetary bonuses, almost always produce short-term change, but fail miserably to obtain long-term results. The authors

stated, "If learning is forced on us, even if we master it temporarily, it is soon forgotten" (p. 99). They added, "When a person has been forced to change, the change will vanish once the browbeating ends" (p. 102). Attempts to influence behavior through coercive and reward power work only for short periods of time because eventually people typically become disengaged as a result of working for leaders who manage through the power that their position affords, rather than through personal characteristics such as listening, honesty, integrity, and persuasion.

Pink (2009) revealed that to motivate people and create lasting behavioral changes in any area of life, "carrots and sticks" are not enough, and in fact are often dangerous (p. 13). He noted,

> Carrots and sticks can achieve precisely the *opposite* of their intended aims. Mechanisms designed to increase motivation can dampen it. Tactics aimed at boosting creativity can reduce it. Programs to promote good deeds can make them disappear. Meanwhile, instead of restraining negative behavior, rewards and punishments can often set it loose — and give rise to cheating, addiction, and dangerously myopic thinking. (p. 13)

Pink's comments stem from analyzing 30 years of studies, 128 experiments in total, from which he concluded that tangible rewards have a "substantially negative effect" on intrinsic motivation. Pink asserted that this finding is one of the most robust ever in social science, yet one of the most ignored (p. 39).

This type of "dangerous myopic thinking" and subsequent behavior can be seen in the landmark corporate collapses that have occurred since the early 2000s, nearly all of which resulted from the tenacious pursuit of rewards by their top executives (Achbar & Abbot, 2004; Tillman, 2009). To curb the temptation of this type of thinking, several participants in this study cited the value of formulating a mission statement based on your most esteemed values, and then always holding yourself and your fellow workers accountable to the mission. This provides a greater purpose for existence than just the pursuit of money. One participant explained,

> Anytime money is your number one reason for doing something, it's going to be tempting to cut corners, to do things that are unethical, to do things that hurt other people. You're always going to be confronted with choices of making money or doing the right thing.

Rather than offering extrinsic incentive such as rewards or punishments, these insights suggest intrinsic meaning must be cultivated and fostered if long-term social responsibility efforts are to take hold. On the topic of developing intrinsic meaning and motivating others, Covey (1998) observed:

> The leader does this by engaging the entire team or organization in a process that creates a shared vision that inspires each to stretch and reach deeper within themselves and to use their unique talents in whatever way is necessary to independently and interdependently achieve that shared vision. (p. xii)

Covey's sentiments become particularly important in the global business world given the far-reaching influence that so many companies have. For this motivation to take hold, bases of leadership power that inspire and persuade rather than control and coerce are needed — power that resides in the leader, not in the leader's position.

Block (2006) asserted that institutional change requires a new way of thinking about the distribution of power, purpose, and rewards. This is one area where the compelling thinking of servant-leadership shines. DeGraaf, Tilley, and Neal (2004) claimed, "A key characteristic of servant-leadership is reliance upon persuasion rather than positional authority or power in making decisions within an organization" (p. 145). Two such sources of persuasion that influence from a basis of knowledge, trust, and loyalty are *expert power* and *referent power* (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, pp. 141-142). Expert power is based on a person's ability to supply needed information and skills, and is "particularly important" in our culture (p. 141). Referent power is role model power, and is highly influential because it depends on the follower's feelings of "affection, esteem, and respect" for the leader (p. 141).

Covey (1998) proclaimed, "The more I study and try to apply the principle of servant-leadership, the more I am inspired by the power of the individual as the programmer" (p. xvii). Servant-leadership literature teaches that its power to influence rests completely in the person, as he or she willingly chooses to give up positional power to serve his or her followers. The very nature of this framework offers a platform

on which to create and cultivate meaning. Landry (2008) wrote, "Under the auspices of servant-leadership, people grow as individuals and find meaning in and through their work" (p. 219). Notions of coercive and reward power are not relied upon by an authentic servant-leader, and therefore hollow tactics stemming from positional exercises of power, which achieve only short-term obedience, are not employed.

The language of servant-leadership, and the promise and hope that its fulfillment offers, seem to be articulated in a far different manner than that of corporate social responsibility; it appears to come across as enticing and inspiring in most instances, rather than as dry and uninteresting. This difference is integral to this research. Insights gleaned from this study suggest that many organizational leaders are disengaged from both the literature and the dialogue on corporate social responsibility because it fails to resonate with them in a deep and meaningful way. Corporate social responsibility, as a whole, was reported by participants in this study as imposing and autocratic, not well-articulated, and simply not purposeful enough to inspire people. These observations provide a great insight for corporate social responsibility advocates — language and tactics centered on more authentic and effective bases of power seem to be received more openly.

What was particularly interesting about this research was that half of the participants indicated that they never felt compelled to learn about the specific topic of corporate social responsibility. In fact, they openly acknowledged they had never sought to behave in accordance with what literature

describes as socially responsible business practices, and all participants admitted they were unaware of the key pillars of social responsibility provided by Blowfield and Murray (2008). This did not mean the ideas were unimportant to them, but rather that they never felt compelled to learn what industry experts deemed to be socially responsible behavior. This omission was explained by the fact that taking a tactical approach to social responsibility was never considered, and therefore was never viewed as a goal with specific benchmarks to learn about and achieve. Furthermore, at the onset of discussing the topic, several of the participants expressed that they did not care for the term *corporate social responsibility*. One person boldly stated, "I hate the term *corporate social responsibility*!" Another proclaimed, "*Corporate social responsibility* is the term that is accepted, but it's too one-sided — too easy and too simple."

The detachment from social responsibility language and efforts of participants in this study suggests that the adoption and long-term embodiment of its principles are unlikely to take hold in a widespread manner across industries. As Goleman et al. (2004) noted, "What organizations everywhere need now is to realize the benefits of primal leadership by cultivating leaders who generate the emotional resonance that lets people flourish" (p. xi). Accordingly, this research suggests that until the benefits of this emotional appeal are realized, a significant percentage of organizations will continue with business as usual, paying little attention to social responsibility ideas and initiatives.

In a discussion on the writings of Robert Greenleaf, the man who coined the term *servant-leadership*, Rieser (1995) asserted, "The most powerful thing that Greenleaf does is to unlock the often suppressed need inside us to serve others by evoking the figure of the servant" (p. 55). Rieser's statement is only one of many in servant-leadership literature that portrays a compelling image, one that engages people and is "sticky" (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 12). DeGraaf et al. (2004) affirmed, "The power of the servant-leadership model lies in the ability of its ideas to inspire us to collectively be more than the sum or our individual parts" (p. 134). Ferch (2005) expanded on this notion by offering,

> The idea of the leader as servant is rooted in the far-reaching ideal that people have inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but also, beneath this striving, a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human. (p. 98).

He added, "A common experience of being led from the traditional model is one of dominance or control, while the experience of being servant-led is one of freedom" (p. 99).

This is the shift that needs to take place in the corporate social responsibility movement — from dominance and control to empowerment and freedom. This research suggests that a genuine movement of building socially responsible organizations, and in turn, stronger and more sustainable communities, is being significantly hindered by an ineffective attempt to convey a meaningful message. The very mediocre track record of corporate social responsibility efforts and the almost complete absence of affirmations towards it, as

compared to an embraced and embodied idea like servant-leadership, provide us with much to consider.

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Matt Kincaid holds an MBA and a PhD in Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University, and is an Associate Professor of Business at Heritage University. Dr. Kincaid's work on servant-leadership has been published in multiple international scientific journals, and his debut business leadership book, *Permission to Speak Freely: How the Best Leaders Cultivate a Culture of Candor* was published in 2017 by Berrett-Koehler. Dr. Kincaid has led the efforts of four startup companies and worked as a strategic planning consultant for an array of Fortune 500 companies. As a top-rated professor and speaker, he has given talks, facilitated workshops, and delivered leadership development programs to Mission Support Alliance, McDonald's, Lockheed Martin, Evanta, Qualitel, the U.S. Department of Energy, The Washington-Alaska Healthcare Association, the Hanford Patrol Management team, and many others.