

True Leadership (Serving - Chapter 4)

n/a

Ready:

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many.

Matthew 20:26-28

Set

From his study of leadership, Pat Williams is convinced that there are seven sides to being an effective leader. The first is vision, or the ability to see down the road. Next is a gift for communicating that vision. Williams also says that people skills are an important leadership trait. This includes a true heart for people and a genuine interest in their lives. The next three qualifications are character, competence and boldness.

As the senior vice president of the NBA's Orlando Magic, Williams certainly has built a lengthy career by displaying a high level of acumen in those six areas. But it's the seventh characteristic that he says makes the better-than-average leader a great leader.

"There are many six-sided leaders out there, and they're doing a good job," Williams says. "But to be a leader for the ages—one that will never be forgotten, a leader who will go down in the history books—the seventh side of leadership must be there. That is called a servant's heart, although I like the verb form better—a serving heart. When a man or woman in leadership has a serving heart, that person will always be remembered."

Over the course of history, there have been many seven-sided leaders. Some notable figures that immediately cross Williams's mind include the Old Testament hero Joseph, along with such other historical figures as William Wilberforce, Dr. David Livingstone, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Ghandi, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President Ronald Reagan, Billy Graham, John Wooden and Senator Robert Kennedy.

And then there's R. E. Littlejohn.

If you've never heard of Littlejohn, don't feel bad. Williams didn't know who he was either until 1965, when he went to work for the Philadelphia Phillies' farm club in Spartanburg, South Carolina, a team owned by Littlejohn. As a budding executive and rookie general manager, Williams immediately became enamored with the wealthy businessman who made his money in oil transportation.

Previously, Williams (a seven-year Army veteran) had spent two years as a minor-league

catcher with the Phillies, preceded by a successful stint playing college baseball at Wake Forest, where he was part of the 1962 Atlantic Coast Conference Championship team and was later inducted into the Wake Forest Sports Hall of Fame.

Despite the densely compacted life experience Williams brought to Spartanburg, it was nothing compared to the invaluable lessons he would learn from Littlejohn—his first true leadership mentor.

“Mr. Littlejohn had an enormous impact on me,” Williams recalls. “He modeled servant leadership in front of me every day. He was wealthy and successful, but you never would have known it. People gravitated to him. He had a marvelous quality called wisdom, and people sought out that wisdom. He had a gentle, loving spirit. He loved the Lord and genuinely cared for people and put other people first. I just saw him modeling serving leadership. It left a huge impression on me.”

In late February 1968, Williams committed his life to Christ at the age of 27. Shortly thereafter, his career would take a trip on a fast track to success that included earning a master’s degree at Indiana University and a doctorate from Flagler University. Williams was also eventually inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame in Delaware, the state in which he was raised.

Yet the faith he embraced—thanks to Littlejohn’s example—helped him come to terms with the true meaning of life. And the “enormous change” that Williams experienced that day allowed him to see things from a completely different perspective.

“Up to that point, everything had been about me,” he admits. “Then I realized that once Christ comes into your life, it’s others first. That’s how He lived His life, and that’s the model He left for us. So I think at that point you really begin to change in your priorities.”

After his stint within the Phillies’ organization, Williams spent the next three years doing similar work with the Minnesota Twins. Then in 1968, he made the move to the NBA, where he’s been ever since. Williams’s stops have included Chicago, Atlanta and Philadelphia, where he worked with the 1983 World Champion 76ers.

In 1987, he cofounded the Orlando Magic and helped lead them to the NBA finals in 1995. The following year, a prominent national magazine named Williams one of the 50 most influential people in NBA history. Perhaps that honor had something to do with the fact that 23 of his teams have made the playoffs and 5 of them have reached the finals.

Williams has also been involved in high-profile trades that involved the likes of Pete Maravich, Julius Erving, Moses Malone and Penny Hardaway. He has also been a part of staffs that have drafted Charles Barkley, Shaquille O’Neal, Maurice Cheeks, Andrew Toney, Darryl Hawkins and Dwight Howard. Williams gave several prominent coaches—including Chuck Daly and Matt Guokas—their first coaching positions, and 12 of his former players have become head coaches while 17 former players have become assistant coaches.

Beyond his success in the sports world, Williams has also become known as one of the nation’s most popular motivational speakers and authors. But perhaps even more impressive is his active lifestyle, which boasts weight training and running. In fact, he has completed 38 marathons over the past decade, including 10 successful attempts at the Boston Marathon. On top of that, Williams participates in a Major League Baseball fantasy camp where he has caught for such Hall of Fame pitchers as Bob Gibson, Gaylord Perry, Tom Seaver and Phil

Niekro.

Yet nothing speaks to Williams's success quite like his role as a devoted husband and father. He says it was that weighty responsibility that vastly increased his knowledge of serving.

"After I became a father was another huge turning point," Williams says. "Our family kept growing and growing and growing, and we ended up with 19 children. I certainly learned in that world that you're constantly in a serving position. Now it's starting again with the grandchildren."

Of Williams's and wife Ruth's 19 children, 14 are adopted from four countries. While they are now all adults, there was one point in the family's fascinating history where 16 of the children were teenagers at the same time. This storybook angle has drawn attention from such national publications as *Sports Illustrated*, *Reader's Digest*, *Good Housekeeping* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Williams's family has also been featured on such TV programs as *The Maury Povich Show*.

Williams has also learned about serving leadership by teaching an adult Sunday School class at First Baptist Church of Orlando. He also says that his longtime partnership with Fellowship of Christian Athletes has been another integral part of his public life. While in Philadelphia, he established the local FCA chapter there during the 1968-69 season. When he moved to Chicago, he helped facilitate the FCA's burgeoning work there. Upon moving to Atlanta, Williams plugged into a pre-existing FCA chapter before spending another 12 years with the 76ers, where he remained a key player in the organization's growth.

"Over the last 40 years, many of the most rewarding experiences have been with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes," Williams says. "FCA involvement over the past four decades has probably been as fulfilling to me as anything that I've done while serving the Body of Christ."

Williams says other educational opportunities have come from spending significant time with some modern examples of the serving leader. Legendary college basketball coach John Wooden and Orlando Magic ownership chairman Rich DeVos are two men in particular that Williams sites for their exemplary public and private service. In fact, he was so inspired by their examples, he wrote books about both men.

To this day, Coach Wooden—who coached the UCLA Bruins to an unprecedented 10 consecutive NCAA titles—continues to amaze Williams. "John Wooden is the most successful coach of all time," he states. "He's set records that will never be touched. But Coach Wooden is a servant. He has a caring heart. He's got a great love for other people, and he's never too busy for anybody. He's never too important for anybody. It's a beautiful thing to watch."

Another one of Williams's favorite examples of serving leadership is the world-famous evangelist Billy Graham. He has been privileged to speak at two of Graham's crusades but has been even more blessed to see firsthand what kind of selfless humility it takes to truly have a servant's heart.

"I do a radio show in Orlando every week, and I once interviewed Ruth Graham, who is Billy Graham's youngest daughter," Williams recalls. "She had just written a book, and I was interviewing her about the book. Toward the end of the show I asked her just to reflect on her famous father. I asked Ruth to share some insight into her dad and why he was unique. Ruth

Graham, in that wonderful North Carolina drawl, said, 'My daddy knows who he is—a flawed human being. In Daddy's mind, he's still just a farm boy from North Carolina.' And I thought that just captured it beautifully."

His impression of Graham was solidified even further when he traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina, where he was able to visit the Billy Graham Library and grounds, which were opened to celebrate the minister's storied life. "You go through the barn and his boyhood home," Williams describes. "Here's probably as famous an American as we've ever had in the past 100 years, and yet he just views himself as a country preacher from Charlotte. I like that quality very much. That truly appeals to me."

As impressive as Williams's list of mentors might be, in his opinion there is only one person who can be described as "the epitome of the serving leader." Williams is especially struck by the simple instruction and humility expressed by Jesus in Matthew 20:26-28. Yet even Williams's closest friends and confidantes had a hard time grasping this particular teaching that flies in the face of conventional wisdom and challenges human nature's deeply ingrained selfishness.

"Jesus had a very interesting philosophy," Williams says. "This is my version of the Scriptures, but basically He said to His disciples, 'You want to be great? Want to get to the top? Want to be number one? I'll tell you how. Go out and serve other people.' I can just imagine how shocked they were when they heard that, because they were probably no different than anybody today. 'That's not what it says in this motivational book I'm reading, Jesus.' But that was His approach."

Those three verses alone make for a powerful illustration of the character of Christ. But what's even more interesting is to read the Scriptures that lead up to that paradoxical statement. Back in verse 20, Jesus was approached by the mother of disciples James and John (also known as the sons of Zebedee). She asked Jesus if her sons could sit next to Him in His kingdom—one on the right and the other on the left. It was this mother's misguided request that led Jesus to explain the true meaning of leadership.

But it went way beyond sermons and talking points with the Savior. All it takes is a brief perusal of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—to understand what kind of serving leader Jesus was during His ministry on Earth. He consistently put others first by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, teaching His followers, washing His disciples' feet and showing love and compassion for the unlovable.

The ultimate example of Jesus' serving heart can be found in Matthew 26 (see also Mark 14 and Luke 22), in which Jesus went to a place called Gethsemane to pray with His disciples. He knew that the time of His death was near. In those moments, Jesus struggled with His humanity like never before. He cried out, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

Even after enduring grueling and torturous experiences on the way to His crucifixion, Jesus still remained true to His serving spirit as He hung from the cross. In Luke 23:34, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus' contrite, forgiving spirit pales in comparison to the cutthroat leadership that is typical of the management style often found in modern-day corporate America. Williams, however, believes that the current corporate philosophy is slowly but surely being phased out in

exchange for the biblical alternative.

“So much of the time we’re presented with leadership being a dominant force, overwhelming people or browbeating them or intimidating them,” Williams says. “But I don’t really think that’s leadership. I think that’s called assault and battery. I would suggest that the days of Attila the Hun leadership are over, as are the General Patton days. They’re gone. And as leaders, we’ve got to avoid the temptation to adapt that style, because in the long run it demeans people and degrades people.”

Williams says that leaders who feel the need to use domination and intimidation in order to get others to follow them are usually bound by pride and selfishness. Sometimes that attitude is actually born out of the individual’s struggle with self-worth and inferiority. Other times, it simply boils down to entitlement issues that infiltrate the soul like a ravenous cancer.

“We’re always battling that,” Williams says. “So many men and women, when they get promoted into a leadership position—they become the head coach or they become the athletic director or they become the CEO or the high-school principal—so many cannot handle an overflowing cup. They begin to inhale all of this stuff. And let’s face it, with leadership there are some good things. There are some perks. Leaders get parking privileges and golf-club memberships and executive washroom keys and some really good stuff. But that good stuff has ruined more leaders than anything else. When we really begin to think that by divine right, this is all mine, that’s the beginning of the end. Any sense of a humble spirit is obliterated.”

The Bible is clear about what happens to leaders (or anyone for that matter) who allow selfishness and pride to control their actions. Proverbs 16:18 tells us that “pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.” Isaiah 2:11 prophecies that “human pride will be humbled, and the loftiness of men will be brought low.”

Yet those seeking to be serving leaders can find solace in truths found in passages such as Proverbs 11:2, which suggests that “when pride comes, disgrace follows, but with humility comes wisdom.” And along with that wisdom, the recognition of those golden opportunities to serve others can be much more easily found.

“At the end of the day, that’s really what you’ll be remembered for—what you contributed to other people’s lives,” Williams says. “That triggers my speaking and my writing. Every time I write a book or deliver a message, I want it to make a difference in people’s lives. To get feedback later, you can’t put a price tag on that. It’s still the most uplifting experience I get in life.”

Go

1. Pat Williams names seven keys to successful leadership. What components would you add to or subtract from that list? Name some people (living or dead, famous or not famous) who you think embody the qualities of a great leader. Which of those individuals would you say exhibit signs of the serving leader?
2. Read Matthew 20:20-28. In this story, how did James and John (and their mother) perceive the benefits of being a leader? How did Jesus’ teaching on leadership contrast in comparison? Do you think leaders generally tend to embrace or struggle with the concept of serving? Why or why not?
3. Read Matthew 26:39. In this passage, Jesus is just hours away from making the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Can you describe a time when you wanted God to pass the cup of

responsibility to someone else? How did you gather the strength to carry on with God's will for your life? What was the end result of that sacrifice?

4. Read Proverbs 16:18. What does this Scripture tell you about people who allow pride to keep them from a life of service? Can you describe some times in which your pride caused you to fall?
5. Read Proverbs 11:2. What benefit can be found for those who choose humility over pride? In what ways might wisdom help you to become a better leader? How can wisdom lead you to more opportunities for serving?

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Bible Reference:

Luke 23



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