

Seeking the Right Applause

One of my bookmarks carries a thought that has stayed with me throughout my years in leadership: “It doesn’t matter if the world knows, or sees or understands, the only applause we are meant to seek is that of nail-scarred hands.”

Leaders are exposed to opportunities to generate applause. It can come in the form of commendation from the board, approval of our decisions by employees, recognition of our institution’s work by communities, admiration of our leadership abilities by coworkers, and words of appreciation from family and friends.

As public figures we receive both unjustified criticism for the failures of our institutions and unmerited praise for their successes. The true calling of leadership requires us to accept the criticism and direct the undeserved praise to where it should go. That is, our job is to take the blame for mistakes made by those under our leadership and redirecting the praise to those most responsible for our success. In this way we keep ourselves in balance, never taking the criticism too personally and not accepting the praise too easily.

But this balance is very difficult to maintain. Yet keeping this balance leads to the relatively unusual experience of finding freedom in leadership—a central concern of this book.

Steward leaders are free! We can know freedom from the tyranny of self-preservation and advancement only as we accept criticism and redirect praise. The success of the steward leader lies significantly in his or her ability to keep this twofold movement of leadership in balance.

Leaders who cause pain lose trust and dishearten their people. Leaders who absorb praise produce resentment and sacrifice motivation. Two significant temptations come into play here. The first is the fear of rejection that causes us to run from confrontation. It comes when we desire to make everyone happy and to measure our performance, our effectiveness and our

“leadership” by others’ approval. We are motivated by the idea that good leaders will not generate conflict and that rejection of our performance as leaders is a rejection of our personhood and character.

The second temptation is to lead by reacting. We see which way the wind is blowing and steer in that direction, regardless of the situation. [My comment: In other words, leading or making decisions based on public or popular opinion rather than on what is right or what is best at the time.]

[We do this because] we do not want our people to be anxious, or to question our decisions or to disagree with our reasoning. We want harmony and unity, which is commendable. But left unrestrained, this desire causes us to sacrifice courage, vision and risk taking. It brings us momentary applause but destroys us in the end.

To paraphrase a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Some leaders worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there some forget themselves into immortality.”

So we must ask ourselves just what kind of applause we are seeking. If human applause serves to validate, affirm and encourage us, we also find that it binds us, boxes us in and ultimately strangles us. When our daily self-worth and the measure of our effectiveness come primarily from the reaction of those with whom we work, we are finished as leaders.

Consider how many decisions you are called on to make in any given day—some in private, some in meetings and some in the public arena. Every day come multiple opportunities to make applause-generating decisions. Sometimes the temptations to make them are enormous, especially when considering the price to be paid if other alternatives are chosen.

Now consider how often God’s will and following his Word point you down a different path. This path is the journey of the steward leader. True leadership takes place at the intersection of doing what God is telling us to do and doing the expedient and popular thing. It is there that we know to whom we are looking for our affirmation. The goal of the steward leader must be to go to bed

every night with a clear conscience and a right heart before God. God asks only one thing of steward leaders: that we seek with all our hearts to know his will and respond obediently and joyfully.

Before taking on one of my leadership positions, I spent a couple of hours with a man whom I respect for his wisdom and leadership abilities. He gave me encouragement and good advice, and before I left, he told me something that both inspires and haunts me to this day: “Scott, in whatever you do, always strive to be a man that God can trust.” I now believe that the man or woman God can trust is the one who seeks only the applause of nail-scarred hands. For that person, the cultivation of reputation carries no value.

Rodin, R. Scott. The Steward Leader: Transforming People, Organizations and Communities (pp. 23-24). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

- “It doesn’t matter if the world knows, or sees or understands, the only applause we are meant to seek is that of nail-scarred hands.”
- “In this way we keep ourselves in balance, never taking the criticism too personally and not accepting the praise too easily.”
- Steward leaders are free! We can know freedom from the tyranny of self-preservation and advancement only as we accept criticism and redirect praise.
- Leaders who cause pain ***lose trust and dishearten their people.*** Leaders who absorb praise ***produce resentment and sacrifice motivation.*** Two significant temptations come into play here. Can you think of an example of each?
 - The first is the fear of rejection that causes us to run from confrontation.
 - The second temptation is to lead by reacting.
- Can you think of an example where this has happened? We want harmony and unity, which is commendable. But left unrestrained, this

desire causes us to sacrifice courage, vision and risk taking. It brings us momentary applause but destroys us in the end.

- What does this mean to you? “Some leaders worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there some forget themselves into immortality.”
- What is this true? “When our daily self-worth and the measure of our effectiveness come primarily from the reaction of those with whom we work, we are finished as leaders.”
- Why is this important? “God asks only one thing of steward leaders: that we seek with all our hearts to know his will and respond obediently and joyfully.”
- Why is trust so important here? “Scott, in whatever you do, always strive to be a man that God can trust.”