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Thoughtful Leadership

By Randy Hain, Managing Partner of Bell Oaks

In today's professional landscape, the term "thought leadership" can be interpreted any number of ways. You see the phrase included in a company's laundry list of expertise areas, or voiced throughout the course of a strategy meeting. Some business executives embrace the concept more than others, and many bring it to life in a way that benefits the bottom line. Based on my understanding of the subject, I have come to define it this way: Thought leadership is the creation and advocacy of an original idea that stimulates change for the benefit of an organization.

But has thought leadership itself become a cliché? Is it a tired and overused buzzword in corporate America? What does it really mean? I suggest we consider a more evolved version of thought leadership—one of *thoughtful leadership*. One that reflects the enlightened self-interest that should be part of business today, both externally and internally. Consider this quote from David Kelley, philosopher, teacher and writer: *"A truly productive person is motivated not only by the monetary return for his work but also by the satisfaction of creating value in the world. The money one earns is a social recognition of that value but cannot replace one's own judgment and commitment as its source. In the same way, there is a satisfaction in creating value in one's social environment, a satisfaction that remains even when the value cannot be returned in the form of a definite trade."* – An excerpt from his article titled, Generosity and Enlightened Self-Interest.

The External Focus

Recently, I was invited to serve as panelist at a business forum on thought leadership. As the meeting progressed, it occurred to me that many in the room were looking for ways to connect thought leadership with winning clients and making money. It's a logical correlation to make, but one that poses risks and challenges. My take on thought leadership is that it must emanate from a *pure place* in order to be authentic and credible ... thereby making it more about *thoughtful leadership*.

Andrew Dietz, president of Creative Growth Group (www.creativegrowthgroup.com), makes this observation about the appropriate application of thought leadership: *"Thoughtful leadership is a critical step when evolving from selling services to building relationships. It is the act of sharing intellectual capital to benefit clients and help them grow. It distinguishes your firm in an otherwise cluttered market and demonstrates your point of differentiation as an expert and advisor. Thoughtful leadership must be driven by the desire to establish long-term relationships versus affecting the bottom line."*

If you want to be perceived as a thoughtful leader, impart your ideas and intellectual capital for the benefit of others. This selfless investment can range from articles, white papers and case studies to forum sponsorship, speaking engagements and discussions over a shared meal. I believe people recognize when an ulterior motive is at hand. Dare to be different. Make your thoughtful leadership flow from a genuine desire to give voice to your ideas and the hope that your opinions will make a beneficial difference in another person's life or business.

WWW.BELLOAKS.COM

☎ 678.287.2000 ☎ 678.287.2001

One Glenlake Parkway, Suite 1000, Atlanta, Georgia 30328

Thoughtful leadership is not just about selflessly sharing your *own* ideas. Why not promote the great ideas of others? I have found one of the best ways to invest in clients and friends is to make a gift of a book that has made a positive impact on me. Sending interesting and relevant articles or white papers written by others shows that you have taken an interest and actively listened to their preferences and desires.

Also, thoughtful leadership may be demonstrated through helpful introductions. We all have a specialty of some kind to offer. When clients and friends need help in an area outside your core expertise, why not make an active introduction to another professional who can lend a hand? Think about individuals in your network looking for a new job or needing help of a personal nature. Making any kind of thoughtful connection is easy and a genuine act of kindness that will be best received when there is no expectation of compensation.

Thoughtful leadership is greatly needed in the realm of our local communities. Thoughtful leaders, selflessly investing by actively helping non-profits and charitable organizations, can make a dramatic impact as good stewards. Think about causes that affect you, your team or your company ... then act.

Charlie Douglas, J.D., AEP, CFP® is a nationally recognized expert, author and professional advisor in the estate and wealth management industry (www.strategicsteward.com). He shares these thoughts: *“Corporate Stewardship begins with the mindset that our duties to shareholders, customers and the community are best discharged when we see ourselves as God’s trustee. Much like the laborers in the Lord’s vineyards, we too, are called to high standard of management in the marketplace. As faithful stewards, it takes more than just simply seeking to maximize profits through self-interest. It takes an understanding that we have a responsibility beyond the immediate marketplace, and beyond providing for only our family’s wants and needs. It is inspiring to know that when we go to work in association with others we can positively influence and impact the unspoken needs of many both here and abroad.”*

Charlie’s point is clear—we have a responsibility to be good stewards in the communities where we operate our businesses. But, donating to earn a tax break is not enough. We have a responsibility to utilize our influence, expertise and time to leave a lasting legacy of good works.

The Internal Focus

Being a thoughtful leader to the people in your charge will perpetuate a work environment that is highly productive and poised for growth. Just as thought leadership must emanate from a pure place in order to be authentic, thoughtful leadership must also be approached with a genuine desire to lead and support others in the same authentic way. Thoughtful leaders are committed to creating a culture based on love (not fear), clear and uncompromising values, passion for investing in and developing people, and inspiring their team to pursue high-minded goals and visionary ideas.

In one of my favorite books, Heroic Leadership, author Chris Lowney has written a business case about the Jesuits, identifying them as one of the most successful *companies* in history. One of the four “pillars of success” that serve as the foundation of the Order started by Ignatius Loyola is their commitment to building a culture of love. Lowney says: *“Everyone knows that organizations, armies, sports teams and companies perform best when team*

members respect, value and trust one another and sacrifice narrow self-interest to support team goals and their colleagues' success. Individuals perform best when they are respected, valued and trusted by someone who genuinely cares for their well-being. Loyola was unafraid to call this bundle of winning attitudes 'love' and to tap its energizing, unifying power for his Jesuit team. Effective leaders tap its power today as well."

It is important to understand that the love being described here is *agape*, the Greek word for love that means *charitable* or *selfless* love. The other pillars of success described in the book—self awareness, ingenuity and heroism are critical, but few things define a thoughtful leader more than their ability to foster a love-based culture.

Dean Harbry, managing partner of TROVE (www.troveinc.com), a coaching, leadership development and assessment testing firm in Atlanta, recently shared with me his view on this topic: *"The DNA of a true thoughtful leader is empathy, self-control and a powerful drive to develop others. Some would say it's a calling but I rather view it as a discipline. True love is choosing what's best for another, not simply feeling an emotion. Our own ego-driven nature sometimes make the issue more about 'us' than 'them.' Simply, skilled thoughtful leaders always put others first, manage distressing emotions and reframe interpersonal interactions through the lens of love—willing the highest good for others."*

Nearly every company has a values statement, but rarely can the typical employee recite it, or even articulate ways in which the company practices its own values. Values must be more than a plaque on a wall or a bulleted list on a web site. They are defining and guiding principles, and it is important that personal and professional values are aligned. Although faith is critically important in defining values, they can and should transcend any one religious affiliation. My Catholic faith is vitally important to me, but the values of our 38-year-old company should and do appeal to anyone who prizes integrity, teamwork, loyalty and selfless investment. Thoughtful leaders will work hard to live up to their values and make sure the clients and employees in their circle of influence will always feel the positive impact of those values.

Dion DeLoof is president of Anteo Group, a highly-regarded technology staffing firm named one of the Best Places To Work in Atlanta the last three years. He shares this perspective: *"We have an opportunity to affect lives deeply every day as technology recruiters that make job and career matches between candidates and employers. Conducting business around our value set is the most important responsibility we have to our clients, candidates and peers. If sales alone were our primary focus, all those that interact with us would sense it. If selflessness, honesty and integrity are our core values, people pick up on that clearly too. Actively look for opportunities to demonstrate you are a thoughtful leader. Great things happen to good people who proudly communicate what they represent."*

Thoughtful leaders invest in and develop the people they lead. One of the most counter-intuitive aspects among many companies today is the focus on sales first, people second. Logically, you'll never achieve optimum business results without a motivated, trained and inspired team who feels sincerely appreciated, developed and mentored. Fear based leadership is doomed to fail. Peter Drucker, author and management guru, once said, *"No executive has ever suffered because his subordinates were strong and effective."*

As the leader of an executive search firm, I can share with absolute certainty the overwhelming majority of candidates we interview want to leave their jobs because they aren't receiving this selfless investment, mentoring and personal development from their companies.

One of the best ways to demonstrate your commitment to a successful work culture is to show your people charitable, selfless and unconditional love (or agape). Help them develop into the best versions of themselves through aiding their personal growth and watch your retention dramatically improve. Think you don't have time to invest in your team? Weigh this investment against the thought of leading a team with open positions that is underachieving and performing poorly. Thoughtful leadership will fix this problem.

Inspiration and vision casting are effective tools of the thoughtful leader. Inspire your team to practice many of the external manifestations of thought leadership discussed earlier in this article-sharing ideas, selfless investment in others, active stewardship, etc. Rallying your team to pursue high minded goals and visionary ideas will increase teamwork, improve retention, boost morale and absolutely drive better results. Read some recent studies about the *millennial generation* and you will learn that they crave inspiration, vision and everything else the thoughtful leader has to offer.

In conclusion, I challenge you to rethink your approach to thought leadership. As a "thoughtful leader" you will begin to consider more ways your actions can help others; selflessly investing in people without an expectation of return. Share your great ideas as well as the ideas of others freely with clients, friends and employees. Connect people in your circle of influence just because it is the right thing to do. The community will be grateful as you wield considerable influence to help those in need. Your team will respect you for investing in them and putting their interests ahead of your own. Overall the quality of your relationships will improve dramatically with a more thoughtful approach. And by the way, your business will thrive when you cease to pursue direct financial gain from your thought leadership.

You are already a leader, why not be a thoughtful one?

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Randy Hain is Managing Partner and Shareholder of Bell Oaks (www.belloaks.com), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He has an established track record of leading successful searches and building teams in diverse industries and functional specializations ranging from individual contributors to C-level leadership. He has played the lead role in hiring, training and developing of one of the most successful search consultant teams in the business, and has earned a reputation as a values-based leader who invests heavily in his colleagues, candidates and clients. Randy's deep sense of community is reflected in his work and that of the Partners of Bell Oaks. He may be reached at rhain@belloaks.com or (678) 287-2031.

With a nearly 40-year legacy in executive search, Bell Oaks specializes in identifying, attracting and hiring professionals to critical positions with companies across the country. Founded in 1970, the national firm has particular expertise in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, and manufacturing/operations/engineering. Bell Oaks is consistently ranked as one of the leading search firms in the South and was recently named one of Atlanta's Best Places to Work by the Atlanta Business Chronicle for the second consecutive year.