

## leadership instalments

### The Power of Sacrifice

By Dan Gaynor

**WITH CHRISTMAS APPROACHING I'M GOING TO INDULGE** as I have before in a seasonal leadership illustration. We'll examine the timeless and powerful principle of sacrificial leadership through the Christmas classic, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

The film tells the story of George Bailey, a small town man with big ambitions to attend university, break free of his town and see the world. When George's father dies and he steps in to save the bank his father founded, he must sacrifice. He is bound to the town and the people he sought to leave. George's character, and his choices, are contrasted against Henry F. Potter, "the meanest, richest man in town." Henry Potter owns the other bank and most of the rest of the town.

George's decision to put his dreams on hold begins a life of sacrifice, and as George sees it hardship, that reaches its climax when his absent-minded uncle misplaces an \$8,000 bank deposit and George is threatened with bankruptcy and jail. Standing on an icy bridge he is ready to take his own life when his guardian angel intervenes by allowing him to see how the world would be had he never been born. George discovers just how many lives have been changed by his life and the sacrifices he made.

George is a leader, his community is formed of the many people he has served over a lifetime. Henry Potter is also a leader, his community is formed of the many people he has exploited over a lifetime. These are two contrasting and irreconcilable leadership focal points. Some leaders put their interests first, others put the people and mission they are leading first. George's mission is to build affordable homes to relieve people of the oppressive rents Potter charges - two leaders, two missions. In the end, George is rewarded when the townspeople he has helped sacrifice to raise the money he needs to make the deposit and balance the books. This is the way leadership works - so much of it is reciprocal. Because George sacrificed, his community sacrificed for him.

Sacrifice comes in many forms and even seemingly small sacrifices send big messages. The annual company Christmas parties that are taking place at this time of year serve as a good example. Every year I hear the same complaint framed as a question: Why is it my boss is not coming to the party this year?

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It's a good question. Each year I hear leaders tell me that the weekend party is on their time, not company time, so they shouldn't have to attend. Employees only see that they don't come first.

Each time, I remind leaders that sacrifice is part of the job description. If you don't want it don't sign up. Great leaders put the interests of their teams first. They don't take the perks and the benefits and then skip out on the responsibilities. And yes, being there for the team outside office hours for a company event is part of the job. Why? Because people don't turn the clock off on relationships. Everything you do either builds stronger more committed relationships or weaker ones.

Many younger leaders learn this lesson with time. It took some time for George to discover that what he thought of as hardships were actually blessings. As we experience the relationships that grow from sacrifice we come to appreciate that sacrifice feels good for great leaders. Some leaders never get there - they never reach greatness. Reflecting on George's life, Clarence, his guardian angel tells him, "Each life touches many other lives." Each leader touches many other lives, some like George Bailey, some like Henry Potter.

Merry Christmas

#### Discussion Questions:

1. How well have you met the test of sacrifice?
2. What are the areas in which leaders are called to sacrifice?
3. What were some of the sacrifices you have seen other leaders make?

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