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Lessons Learned from *Mother Teresa*

I jumped headfirst into the direct selling industry in fall 2005. In the years since, I can't think of another industry where more time and effort are spent developing a corporate and field culture.

If that causes you to think of power suits, rushed lunch meetings, and the host of "Dilbert" cartoons you've enjoyed over the years, I wouldn't blame you. After all, I had worked for some exceptional *Fortune* 500 companies prior to joining Univera. *Corporate culture* was embedded into my business vocabulary, but the term wasn't always viewed in a flattering light.

It wasn't until I began working at Univera that the word *culture* took on a positive tone. Our company encourages a culture of respect, integrity, listening to and helping others—a term we refer to as *servant leadership*. Let me be clear; we're far from perfect, but I've loved the opportunity to work in a company that shares this aspiration.

This is what I love about our industry—that culture is sustained by heart and driven by purpose.

Altruistic terms adopted by the business world, such as *servant leadership*, are often rooted in more selfless endeavors, and my awareness of and adherence to Univera's credo is no different, although I didn't know it as *servant leadership* at the time.

In the summer of 1996, I had the privilege of volunteering at one of Mother Teresa's "Missionaries of Charity" homes

in Kolkata, India. After a month of working with the poorest of the poor, I gained a perspective that changed me as much as any other event in my life—including the birth of my two daughters, the passing of a newborn son and the experience of living in Manhattan during 9/11.

The reason for the impact is difficult to describe, but I attribute it largely to the impact that a spirit of service can have on both an individual and an entire organization.

During the first two weeks of this new year, I was blessed with the opportunity to go back to Mother Teresa's home in Kolkata and again take up the call to serve those most in need. (This was a personal commitment I made to pursue some of my dreams in different arenas of my life in 2009.)

During my brief time there, I started my mornings working at "Dya Dan," a children's orphanage for kids with mental or physical disabilities. If you have kids, it's an environment so "primitive" that you wouldn't leave them there for a day, or even a few hours. Yet, for these kids, it's a home of laughter and joy. It's paradise, relatively speaking.

My afternoons were filled by Mother Teresa's first love, a home called "Nirmal Hriday," more commonly referred to as "The Home of the Sick and Dying." It's a very rudimentary hospice where people go to pass from this life to the next. It's a home that has very little light, the walls speak with muted echoes, the facilities

smell of a combination of infection and disinfectant—yet it's also a home of hope and compassion.

Rather than trying to put a new spin on often-discussed topics such as corporate strategy, leadership development and even our industry's advantage in light of the current economic collapse, I hope instead to share some of the life and business lessons I learned during my most recent journey to this place, thousands of miles away.

"If you judge people, you have no time to love them." —Mother Teresa

When you arrive in Kolkata, despair, more than anything else, greets you—thousands living on the streets, unimaginable poverty. From the vantage point of an outsider, poverty—whether in India, North America or elsewhere—can be something easy to pontificate on, point fingers of blame and even engage in bitter partisan debate while sitting safely on the sidelines. I was reminded that it's much more difficult—emotionally and physically—to actually *do* something about it.

Similarly, at work, it's sometimes hard to listen without making a judgment. Whether it's financial trouble, leadership problems or emotional baggage to simply listen and love someone is an exceptionally difficult thing for most of us to do. For some, it's a God-given gift. Yet I think for most of us, it's a skill that takes effort to develop; we experience both the need and the blessing that can arise from compassion and grace. Listening also needs to be coupled with honest accountability. Often, we're better with the judgment side of the ledger than the grace side—until, that is, it comes to ourselves.

Perhaps the greatest impact I experienced during my time at the Home of the Sick and Dying was to see, firsthand, the many patients in the home—some of whom were there as a result of their own circumstances—who were able to live their final days experiencing love and compassion.

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Regardless of their past, their poverty, or their personalities, there was no judgment, no criticism, no "rehab" program to get them restarted on a life of significance and meaning. Behind the scenes, never a word was said among the sisters or volunteers about what led them to this final destination. They were there. It was home, and that's all that mattered.

In my professional and personal life, there's an easy carry-over of this particular theme. Many people in my life are "home," and how they got to this place doesn't really matter.



"One of the greatest diseases is to be nobody to anybody."
—Mother Teresa

There's a lifestyle component to our industry that we sometimes feel we need to sell the opportunity. There's nothing wrong

with lifestyle; nice homes, comfortable cars and exotic trips are all part of our industry at various times. There's a balance, of course, but even Mother Teresa once said, "There must be a reason why some people can afford to live well. They must have worked for it. I only feel angry when I see waste."

But sometimes in our industry and in life, we border on the worship of lifestyle—corporately, in the field, or personally. This serves as a distraction from some of life's greatest sources of meaning—and, ultimately, can lead to one of life's greatest afflictions: loneliness.

In Kolkata, there were children who were content, happy and fulfilled. The others, in contrast, were destitute, forgotten and lonely.

I'd like to suggest it was food or cool toys or something tangible and "fixable" that brightened a child's disposition, but that just wasn't so. Those children who were happiest experienced a level of love and attention that made them feel they had value. Worth. Significance. Adapting Mother Teresa's expression, they were enjoying "being somebody to someone."

Rank advancements, new enrollments, compliance and retention are all vital things. Without them, none of us have a viable and successful business, and independent associates don't have a meaningful source of income.

Yet I think we are tempted to look at advancement as the next source of meaning or the step that will spark true contentment. For others, the draw might be something material, it might be a title, it might be experiential; but regardless of what "it" is, one thing I was sharply reminded of is that "it" is not the ticket to happiness.

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The opportunity we have to take small steps can change the world.

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*“Do not wait for leaders;
do it alone, person to person.”
—Mother Teresa*

During my first and second visits to India, I had a near identical experience and awakening. I remember walking to the Home of the Sick and Dying, through a part of town called Kalighat (which is also home to a very popular Hindu temple).

As I walked, I saw thousands of people on the street. Thousands. Babies—literally newborn infants—sleeping on cement with nothing; begging children, blind as a result of unspeakable horrors inflicted upon them intentionally by adults in an attempt to amplify their appeals for help; innumerable bodies, frail and afflicted with malnourishment at best, and deadly diseases at worst.

As I continued to walk, the sights and sounds became more stirring, and my soul became discouraged. I felt a sense of helplessness and hopelessness I've rarely, if ever, experienced. In the past, I always felt in most situations that I had a sense of control or an impact-based solution. But in this case, the farther I walked, the more I saw, the deeper the extent of extreme poverty, the more I felt there was absolutely nothing meaningful I could contribute.

Yet, when I walked through the doors of the Home of the Sick and Dying, I saw 65 men laying there whose lives, at that moment, I could impact. I remember Mother Teresa saying, “Just one, even if you can help just one....” It was with this memory of her voice, coupled with the experience, which led me to understand during my time with the Missionaries of Charity that you *can* make a difference, by helping just *one* person.

This was a profound idea for me as I came home. Many problems around the world, in my country and even in my local community, are not easily fixable. But what I clearly realized is that there's no reason I can't have an impact on that one person out there, somewhere, who needs a voice, a friend, an ear, some time, a meal. And most likely, what they really need is love.

There exists no rational reason why I, as a human being who has been given so much, can't simply take another few steps to help that one person who needs it most, whether in my company, field organization, church, family or community—or randomly on the path in front of me.

What I learned about real, undying and unyielding acts of service from Mother Teresa was shared with me by her in the '90s and restated this most recent trip by Father Abello, a priest involved in her cause who, to this day—after many decades—spends time with the volunteers.

She shared with me and a few of the volunteers the following observations.

“You're welcome here for two reasons,” she began. “One is the witness you can share. You come from a place that those staying at the Home of the Sick and Dying view as heaven. And they feel they're living in hell. So, when you come from your heaven to invest time and love with them in their hell, they must ask themselves the question ‘Why would someone do this for me?’ when the world views them as worthless. The person that asks that question dies a very different death than the person who never gets to ask themselves that question.”

She continued, thoughtfully.

“Two, you are welcome here because of the change that you can become. You are going back home to a place that we all know is not heaven; in fact, your people suffer as much of the loneliness and hopelessness as anybody. If this will make you a better person—help you find purpose—then you will have benefited tremendously, and you will have received a gift as a result of your service.”

As I flew the long journey home from too short a stay in Kolkata, I realized the impact of Mother Teresa's words.

Ultimately, there are two gifts—what we give and what we receive—which comprise some of the characteristics of servant leadership. Often, we describe it in seemingly sterile adjectives or simple nuances, like “be nice to your wife/husband,” but during this last trip I learned from the sisters and other volunteers there's a much deeper meaning to a spirit of service.

The opportunity we have to take small steps can change the world. We make an impact by sharing compassion and love—particularly with those who need it the most, and often these are the very ones who can't or won't reciprocate. It is, therefore, vital that we support and nurture a culture where the dignity and respect of every individual—regardless of rank, title, money or stature—is viewed as sacred.

Servant leadership, I learned, might be a lot of things. And at times, we might be tempted to think of servant leadership as even a few great things. But what I learned about servant leadership was best stated by Mother Teresa:

“There are no great things, only small things with great love.”

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