

Leadership is the people business

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By Laura Rehrmann

With panache and purpose, Seattle Rotary President Mark Wright launched his year of service to our club. He did confess that the night before his first meeting he had a nightmare that our club was meeting in a church and about 20 of us attended. So even a veteran journalist and television anchor steps up to the podium in the President's role for the first time with some trepidation. However, the dynamic and thoughtful meeting that followed gave us a good indication of President Mark's vision and leadership ahead.

Former Rotary President Bill Center gave the invocation, inviting all interested members to join the Invocation Committee to kick off our meetings with prayer from a variety of faiths, inspiration, or reflections. All are welcome.

Linda Rough led us in an a cappella version of the Star Spangled Banner and President Mark acknowledged special guests including his wife, Jamie, son, Austin, and King 5 executives in support of his community service. Mark's mentor of 30 years, Glenn Johnson, faculty at WSU's Edward R. Murrow School of Communications, was also a special guest and Mark invited him to say something memorable. "Another Cougar first down," he bellowed and many recognized his voice as the veteran play-by-play announcer at Cougar games.

We were honored to welcome new member, Yochiro Yamada, consul general of Japan, introduced by Rob LoBosco. Mr. Yamada has served around the world: Moscow, Poland, New York City, Brussels and Kenya. Rob recounted that Mr. Yamada is looking forward to serving in Seattle because of our open and welcoming kindness, the diversity and dynamism of our community, the global health focus, and the focus on equality for women.

President Mark introduced and interviewed the first speaker in a Leadership Development series he is launching this year. Howard Behar, retired President of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International worked at Starbucks for 21 years as the company grew from 28 to 15,000 stores on 5 continents. His goal from the beginning was to make a coffee company a people company where the employees are not just an expense, they are the asset. He trusted people with the truth, he respected them, and he always remembered that "we are in this together."

President Mark asked what was his earliest memory of work and leadership. Mr. Behar said it was the experience of working alongside his father in their small grocery store in Seattle's University District. eight-year-old Howard stood by his father's elbow as a customer's bill was totted up. His father sent him to the back of the store to get two baskets of strawberries and the customer left with his purchases. Howard told his dad that he had not charged the customer for the strawberries. His father's reply, "not everything we do in life do we get paid for. These people are our neighbors and friends

and because it is the Depression, they are having a hard time. We have to learn how to treat others.”

Mr. Behar learned in his first job at Grantree Furniture that he had to learn who he was, what his values were. He had to grow from “unconscious competency” about leadership, to “conscious competency.” Only then can you teach others, first by knowing oneself, then knowing one’s own values, and then turning those values into actions. At 1,000 Trails as the new president, he faced severe financial difficulties and resulting layoffs. He learned to tell the truth to employees and trust them with the truth and they will work hard with you to solve the problems.

At Starbuck’s he was famous for writing birthday and anniversary cards to employees, as many as 3,000 a month, many with handwritten notes. “I believe it’s the small things that matter and that make it a human place”. He read every comment card written by customers and when he saw three comments from different parts of the country that called Starbuck’s arrogant and know-it-alls about coffee, Behar paid for those three customers to fly to Seattle and he facilitated a company-wide meeting to tell employees exactly what “arrogance” felt like to customers. Out of the customers’ honesty, and the following Q and A session, Starbucks’ came away with a “just say yes” attitude to all customers. Making a coffee company a people company meant that being truthful and transparent with employees would serve the customers best.

Over his Starbuck’s career he said that he gave up managing, and focused on people. His day job was people, his night job was the business, he said.

Howard Behar never forgot the example of his immigrant parents who arrived in America not speaking English and worked hard to serve their neighbors; Howard Schultz never forgot the poverty he grew up in when his father’s best job was delivering diapers; and Orin Smith, the third Starbuck’s executive, never forgot his single mother’s hard work to raise her sons. Out of these experiences they believed that we all live in one world, community matters, and as a company, you cannot shirk your responsibility to help other people have a better life.

President Mark closed the meeting with a call for feedback from members on the meetings, his leadership and Rotary issues. Members can send their input to seattle4feedback@gmail.com. Despite warnings from previous President Bill Center to be careful what you wish for, and laughter from the audience, President Mark stood his ground and closed his first very successful meeting.