



Posted on Thu, Jun. 17, 2010

Columbus receives Servant-Leader City award at conference

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It's not about the coffee.

That's not only the title of a book by Howard Behar — the retired president of Starbucks North America — but it's also a lifestyle choice for him.

"Leading with compassion never stops," Behar said Wednesday, speaking to a lunch crowd of several hundred during the "Servant Leadership: Ethical, Practical and Meaningful" pre-conference at the Columbus Convention & Trade Center. The conference will continue two more days in Atlanta.

During the conference, Columbus was given the Servant-Leader City award for its permeation of the teaching and practice of servant leadership. This is the first time the award has been given.

Leaders from the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in Indiana brought the award here, and specifically honored retired W.C. Bradley Co. chairman Bill Turner.

Turner thanked many in the community who made the honor possible. After accepting the award from Columbus City Councilor Skip Henderson, Turner told a story about his grandfather, the late W.C. Bradley, whom he called "a farm boy who had a knack for making money."

W.C. Bradley owned and operated the old Eagle Phenix Mill. During the Depression, Bradley sometimes used script, to "pay" workers so they could get by.

Local merchants honored the currency. "He did it so people could eat," Turner said.

The Center for Servant Leadership at the Pastoral Institute organized the day. It included tours of three sites in the area, a luncheon and afternoon workshops at the trade center.

The modern-day movement of servant leadership can be traced to Robert K. Greenleaf, for whom the Indiana center is named. He died in 1990. For most of his career, Greenleaf was an executive with AT&T.

At the beginning of his hour-long speech, Behar introduced a Hebrew saying: "tikkun olam," which means "repair the world."

"That is what servant leadership is all about. Fortunately or unfortunately, our jobs will never end because there is always more repair work to be done," he said.

His three main points of advice: Wear one hat, the person who sweeps the floor should choose the broom and care like you really mean it.

To the first point, Behar means: Figure out your mission and implement it; and define what kind of legacy you want to leave. No matter what your "job" — from a homemaker to the leader of a school — once you define these things, you will find life easier to negotiate.

"Honesty" was one of the first ways Behar sought to be known and to conduct himself at work.

"I always had a place to go back to, to measure my progress," he said.

The leadership style seems to have worked for him. In his 12-year career at Starbucks, Behar helped grow the company during a period of fast-paced change. Behar joined Starbucks in 1989 when it had just begun to venture outside the northwest. Initially vice president of sales and operations, he grew the retail business from 28 stores to more than 400. He was then named president of Starbucks Coffee International in 1995. Then he became president of Starbucks North America. He retired in 2003.

In his broom-sweeper reference, Behar means that the employees skilled in a certain area know best. To illustrate, he told the story of a persistent area manager in California who kept suggesting a new drink to him. Though Behar was eventually swayed, others in the company were not. The manager's idea eventually stuck. It's the Frappuccino, the frozen coffee drink that Starbucks trademarked. It's been a \$2 billion-plus boon.

To make his third point — caring about people — Behar told about a 3 a.m. phone call he received one day from the east coast. It was one of his managers in Washington, reporting the shooting death of three Starbucks employees. They were opening the store. It turned out to be a bungled robbery.

Soon after, Starbucks' current CEO, Howard Schultz, flew to D.C. He spent a week meeting with family members. "He went from home to home," Behar said. "He took responsibility and asked for forgiveness. ... If it's about the people, it's about the people."

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