

Supererogation—The Basic Principle of Service by Leaders

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Is that a word you use frequently? Not me!

Until this week, I'd never heard the word. A friend of mine, whose intellect I admire, commented on the article entitled "Neurotically Productive" that I wrote two weeks ago (an interesting article—if you missed it and want a copy, please contact me and I'll deliver one to you). My friend wanted more information about a quote I had included so that he could add it to his special list of notes about "supererogation."

I thought he was pulling my leg! This guy is not only bright, he's funny. So, trying to be funny with him, I wrote back "Hey, are you sure you spelled that word right? I guess if you make up a word, whatever spelling you choose is appropriate, right?"

Before I sent my e-mail response back to my friend, I figured I'd better check this out with the dictionary. I was amazed—the word was there! "Supererogation" means "the act of doing more than what is required or expected."

I took Latin for three years in school, and I remember the word "rogare" (pronounced "row-gar-ay") as meaning "to ask." Other words that come from that root word are "interrogate," which also means "to ask," and "abrogate," which means "to cancel, annul, or abolish."

"Doing more than what is required or expected" is a basic principle of service that I deal with as I work with leaders! How could I not ever have heard this word which seems to capture the concept so completely? I'm stunned that some author has not made a big deal of the word "supererogate!" Well, I am—with this article!

Why is "supererogate" such a seldom used word? More importantly, why is the concept it represents so rarely seen?

The basis is probably in our human selfishness. If people see no potential reward, it's unlikely they will go beyond what is minimally acceptable.

Yet most leaders can appreciate the value of exceptional customer service. Customers delighted beyond their expectations become raving fans who advertise your services and products to other prospects!

A greater stretch for many leaders is the idea that those under their authority are "internal customers." Small entrepreneurial companies seem to grasp this concept easier than individuals in larger, complex organizations.

Maybe that's because smaller companies feel more intimate. Maybe each person feels more freedom to capitalize on his or her unique perspective and talents. Or maybe it's because every person has rather close contact with the paying customers.

I spent the first thirty years of my career with Procter & Gamble and with the Weyerhaeuser Company. Both are large, complex organizations. And middle managers have neither close contact with the customers nor a good sense of the overall "bottom line" results of the organization. Further, many middle managers move in and out of roles every couple of years—not like in smaller, more entrepreneurial companies, where there is a greater sense of continuity in who fills what roles.

Middle-managers in large organizations may have a more difficult time understanding their roles as leaders. They don't set overall strategy, and they don't personally market the organization to potential customers. They may have to seek different ways to be inspired and inspiring. Still, they have great opportunity to create an environment where those under their authority can excel.

At least now I have a new tool to help this happen—a single, somewhat unusual word that at least epitomizes the concept. Supererogation!