

# Lonely at the top

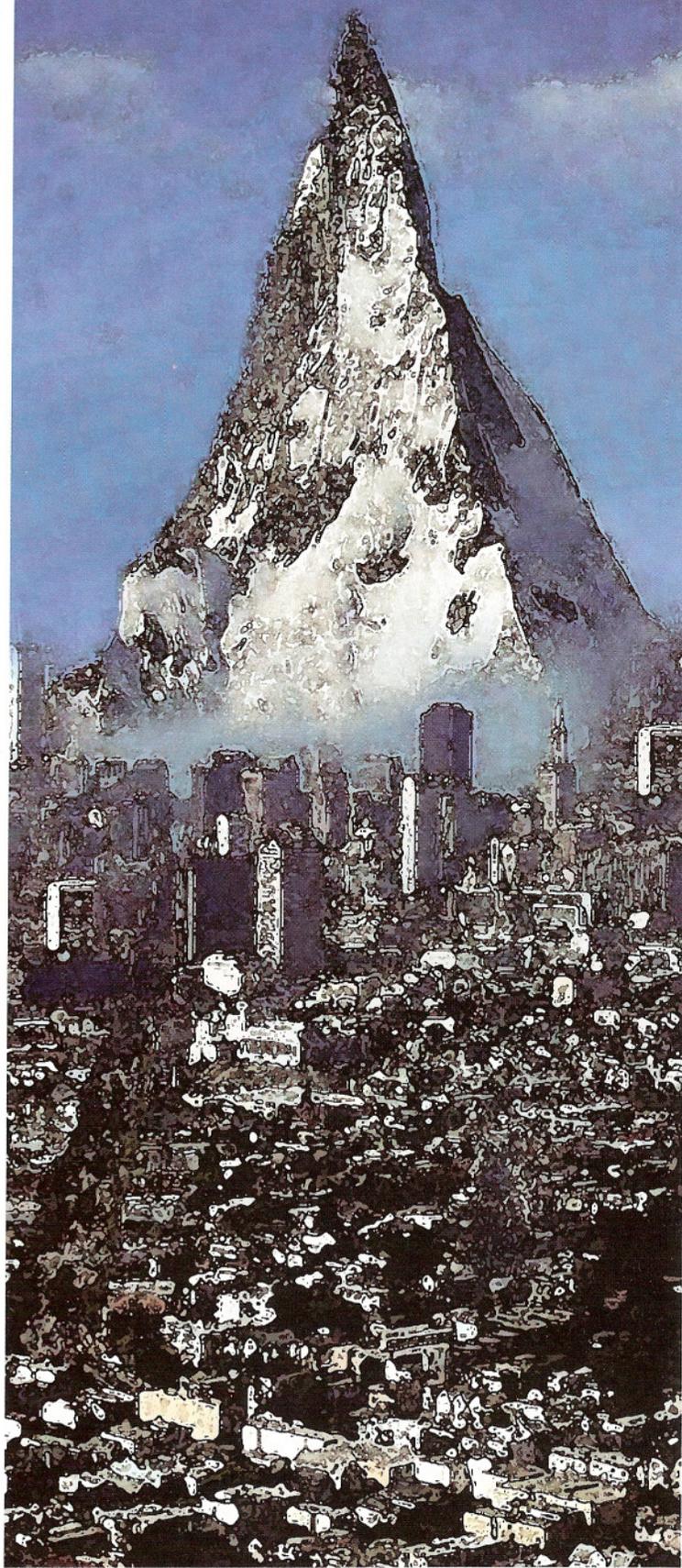
Mennonite consultant helps leaders heal and find purpose

by Todd Svano

**W**alking into a memorable leadership conference this year, consultant John Stahl-Wert met the impatient and hostile eyes of men and women who were bearing crushing responsibilities.

"Their faces said, 'We don't need one more jerk with five keys to effective leadership oversimplifying our lives,'" said Stahl-Wert, co-author of *The Serving Leader*.

But when he put aside the marker board and began to address



the stresses, challenges and pain that come with leadership, ears began to open.

"Nonprofit and business leaders are lonely, constantly in over their heads and afraid of getting axed for their inability to handle it all," he told his audience.

When he began to identify the ways leaders tend to cover or hide their pain, one could have heard a pin drop.

"Many leaders spend more and more time protecting themselves and not giving of themselves," Stahl-Wert said. "To mitigate this

sense of isolation, they often become emotionally hardened and insulate themselves against feeling the human impact of their decisions.

"Good leaders make good decisions that nonetheless hurt people. And they tend to build systems of self-justification so that they can live with those decisions."

### Leaders seek meaningful work

Last year Stahl-Wert, an ordained Mennonite minister who is president of the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation, teamed with Ken Jennings, a hypervelocity management consultant to Fortune 500 companies, to develop transformative tools for reclaiming the hearts of North American leaders in the business and nonprofit worlds.

Their book, *The Serving Leader* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003), is hitting a nerve with leaders trying to combine productivity and purpose in their work, while reconciling their public and private lives.

"One businessman approached me with tears streaming down his face and said, 'I'm just terrified that I'm going to get to the end of my life and say, what a waste!'" said Stahl-Wert in an interview.

"I hear people asking, 'Can you help me understand how to live and lead at a deeper level? Yes, I want to avoid contributing to the next corporate scandal. But more importantly I want to find meaning in what I do.'"

In their lean yet well-written and empathetic novelette, Stahl-Wert and Jennings provide a portrait of a driven business leader, Mike, who is forced into a season of reflection while attending to his father in the late stages of cancer.

Mike faces the necessity kicking and screaming, and fumes about a lengthy four-hour train ride home. But the downtime finally enables him to face unresolved feelings about his father, himself a reputable business leader, yet one who "gave me so little of himself."

### Paradox 1: The best leaders are self-giving

Along the way, we find that Mike has learned his father's self-distancing behavior well, a fact that cost him his marriage. At one point he confesses, "I don't think I've ever been good at being close to anyone."

Leaders work against themselves, said Stahl-Wert, when they hold themselves aloof from their charges, shielding their weaknesses and failing to share what they know.

"Leadership is a human challenge before it's a technical challenge. Great leaders must first become great human beings. Conventional wisdom says, 'Don't let down your guard.' The serving leader risks self-giving."

Upon Mike's arrival, his father, Bob, deflects attention from his illness, eager to introduce his son to a network of leaders he coordinates throughout the city of Philadelphia.

One by one in successive chapters, Mike meets male and female leaders in their workplaces who are deeply engaged in their employees' lives and who succeed by serving from "the bottom of the pyramid" to unleash others' strengths. (These characters are based on actual people, we are told in the Acknowledgments.)

**One businessman told him, "I'm just terrified that I'm going to get to the end of my life and say, what a waste!"**

In this way the authors provide, in living color, portrayals of "The Level 5 Leader" that has aroused such interest among business and nonprofit executives since Jim Collins' bestseller *Good to Great* (HarperBusiness: New York, NY, 2001).

Collins and a 20-member research team studied 11 elite American companies that outperformed the general stock

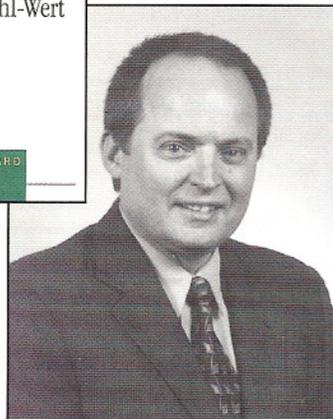
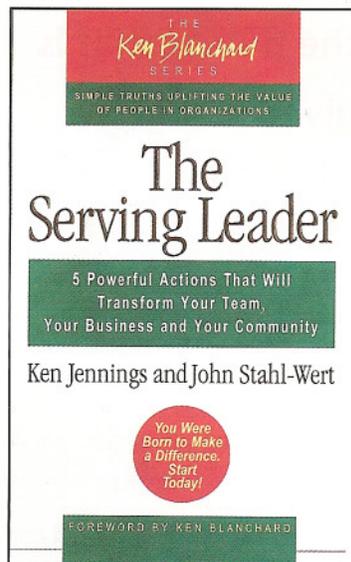
market by seven times over a 15-year period and were stunned to discover that all were led by CEOs who were "highly ambitious" but humble, "modest, understated and self-effacing."

On Mike's first workplace visit, he is greeted warmly by one such CEO, a factory boss named Dorothy, who introduces him to each of her workers by name, each time relating a story and praise about that person's recent contributions to the mission.

"By the time we reached her office," Mike reflects, "she had

worked meaningfully with nearly a dozen people....How many times have I followed an executive into a factory and watched as the workers glanced away or pretended to be too busy to notice? The difference here was stunning."

Dorothy calls it "people development...their success is my success." Mike is confronted by the power of authen-



John Stahl-Wert

tic, growing relationships that have transformed this factory from an anonymous assembly line into a vital and vivacious community.

### **Paradox 2: Powerful leaders give away power**

"The critical question for us as leaders," said Stahl-Wert, "is, 'What will we do with the power that is given to us?' In the old school, business leadership was modeled for us by Jack Welch of General Electric who fired 10 percent of his workforce each year on principle.

"So we were trained to think that nice guys finish last and that caring for your workers is bad for the bottom line. But that thinking is perverse. There is no research to support it."

Authoritarian bosses produce a cold environment of clock punchers who do no more than what is expected of them, Stahl-Wert explained. "Leaders who value their workers tap into their desire to do something really terrific. They come up with that great innovation that saves the company a million dollars.

"Leaders have the opportunity to facilitate transformation in the lives of those they serve and it has a radiating impact, even back to the leader."

Stahl-Wert admits that the term "serving leader" can seem like an oxymoron in the business world, connoting more softness than strength. Yet he says one only has to look at the model of Jesus' life to understand the paradox that love and service is not soft.

"The thing that caught me in Gibson's movie *The Passion* was when Jesus' mother asks at the cross, 'When are you going to stop this?' It hit me that she knew that he could do what he wanted to do, but chose not to. There is a sense here of his incredible power in the choice he is making. This gift of love is not soft."

Ironically, it's the fear of losing authority in business that keeps people from serving and giving power, said Stahl-Wert. "One of the book's principles is, 'To protect your value, you must give it all away.' The best leaders even plan for their succession from the onset."

Ironically when Jesus relinquished power, he gained influence, said Stahl-Wert. "People think of Jesus as a good guy who lost. But did he? When we look around we'd have to say he pretty much rocks and rolls globally."

### **Paradox 3: The soft stuff is the hard stuff**

Stahl-Wert and co-author Ken Jennings empathize with leaders who anguish over difficult decisions they are paid to make on behalf of their employees. "Business schools don't teach you how to respond to the struggling secre-

tary who reports that her cancer has returned," said Stahl-Wert as an example.

But they believe more creative and satisfying results are possible when leaders approach these decisions as fellow human beings.

"We tend to look at the facts not the feelings at stake in the issues we face. We can compartmentalize people as workers or 'units of cost' rather than as individuals, parents with families, spouses with mates, and members of the community," said Jennings.

By contrast, Jennings points to the example of executives from Entegris, a \$300 million-a-year semi-conductor packaging company and one of the most successful of over 25 Fortune 500 clients he has had in the last six years.

## **The critical question for leaders is "What will we do with the power that is given to us?"**

When an Entegris employee contracted a fatal disease, staff members not only called his wife to check up on his condition and see how they could help, but they hired his wife to help provide financially.

But they were no less humane when a number of employees self-reported embezzlement, allowing the perpetrators to save face and remove themselves from the company.

Company managers try to "catch people doing good" at Entegris, and they themselves admitted their mistake in requiring 70-hour weeks during one season. Though they were able to take advantage of a market opportunity, the human cost was too great.

The more a business invests in and accommodates its people, the more they will invest in the company, said Jennings.

"The whole person will come to work, be fully engaged, and will want to stay with the company if their manager works to remove obstacles to their peak performance, whether in the worker's personal or professional life."

As *The Serving Leader* concludes, the biggest barrier to growth in Mike's life is removed when his father reconciles with him, shares his pride in and love for his son, and passes on to him the baton of empowering leadership just before he dies.

The book shows that when an empowering leader risks the investment of genuine care in relationships with co-workers, customers, family, community and God, it pays multiplied returns, both economically and emotionally, in his or her own work and personal life. ♦

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**Hear John Stahl-Wert at MEDA's Business as a Calling convention, November 4-7, in Pittsburgh**