FOREWORD

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I can still see their faces as I walk up to the podium. Written all over them is the question, “What could she possibly have to say about running a business? A former professional ballet dancer and philosophy major . . . how is she even employed?” Yes, it is an unusual combination. Yet when I describe my background, I push back on the stereotypes. I argue that my past as a performing artist and my background in ethics and political philosophy inform my work as a CEO numerous times every day. In fact, it is *because* of these experiences that I believe values-based leadership is critical to the development of high-functioning teams in the 21st century.

For many the notion of being a professional ballet dancer is glamorous. One imagines performing on stages around the world and not having to deal with the day-to-day challenges of a “regular” job. The reality is, being a professional dancer is extremely difficult, highly stressful work, where one is compelled to perform at a very high level at all times, even through injury and illness, because “the show must go on.” For me, dancing with the American Ballet Theatre in the 1980s was both a great honor and an emotional journey. At that time the dancers were treated not as respected, highly trained professionals, but as cogs in a much larger mechanism, a ballet production. We were told to be silent and obedient. Dancers were often punished—by not getting opportunities to perform certain roles—for speaking out, for asking questions, and for trying to demonstrate some personal efficacy or wanting to have some control over their professional lives. Repeatedly, we were told to “shut up and do as you are told.”

This daily marginalization was corrosive to the spirit. It created an inordinate level of low morale among the artistic talent, the company’s greatest asset, and compelled many of its gifted employees to look for other professional

opportunities or, even worse, leave the field altogether. Consider the fact that one must train like an Olympic athlete, seven days per week for years on end, to become a professional dancer, and you can see how this loss of expertise would be a considerable drain on the productivity of the institution.

While I recognized something was wrong with this treatment and that my colleagues and I would perform better and longer if we were treated with dignity and support, I was not able at that time to articulate my misgivings. It seemed this was the way ballet companies were supposed to function, and there were no options to change that.

After dancing professionally for seven years, I succumbed to a foot injury. As a result, I left my burgeoning ballet career to attend a university. Pursuing a college degree was a revelation for me. When I arrived, my self-esteem was so low I could barely speak in public, which is notable since as a child I was quite outspoken. My experience as a dancer had crushed my self-confidence and silenced my “voice.” Luckily, I ended up at a university with a supportive culture and found a subject to study, Ethics and Political Philosophy, that proved not only revelatory but also restorative.

My major was extraordinary, but it was one book, *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls, that proved foundational in the development of my management style. In short, Rawls was seeking to answer the question, “What constitutes a just society?” and his answer was rooted in justice as fairness. I modified this question to be, “What constitutes a just workplace?” and, similarly, I have come to believe that fairness is required for a just workplace. This is the kind of workplace that O’Malley and Baker passionately and convincingly portray in their wonderful book, *Organizations for People*. I knew what a workplace lacking in justice or fairness looked like (and how unproductive that can be). What I wanted to understand were the characteristics of a workplace managed with a sense of fairness and dignity. From this question I framed the notion of leadership around a simple premise: *While an employer cannot treat everyone equally, a true leader should treat every employee as a moral equal.*

Throughout my years working in the nonprofit sector, I have sought to operationalize this foundational value. Whether it was increasing the flexibility in work hours for young parents or those with aging or ill family members, eliminating numerical scoring methodologies in the annual review process, holding authentic discussions of employee goals and accomplishments, or introducing new professional development opportunities for artists and staff, I tried to support “the whole person” rather than see employees as means to an organizational end.

Now, as president and CEO of The Music Center, one of the largest performing arts centers in the country, which is home to thousands of employees, I am seeking to further institutionalize the notion of treating every staff member as a moral equal. I believe this approach not only creates a more productive workplace, but also makes sound business sense. By treating every patron, employee, and constituent in this fashion, the Music Center team is positioning both our organization and the performing arts more generally for relevancy in the 21st century.

The first steps we took to reframe our organization included transforming our work to be both top-down and bottom-up and rooting every interaction in the idea of service: service to one another, service to our mission, and service to the public. We believe we must work from a moral center, guided by our commitment to compassion and social justice. Each day we seek to make the Music Center a welcoming place for all in Los Angeles County, regardless of background, and as Music Center employees we seek to treat one another with the same respect and care that we extend to those who visit us as tourists, audiences, or creators.

Through these efforts the Music Center has evolved into a much more inclusive and diverse organization, one that is truly representative of the people of Los Angeles County. Not surprisingly, our programmatic offerings have also been transformed and have become increasingly successful, both financially and in terms of social relevancy.

An example is our highly popular *Sleepless: The Music Center After Hours* program. With an eye to increasing the diversity of our audiences, we created a low-cost program that runs from 11:30 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. We transform our theaters from palaces of high art to comfortable and deeply creative spaces with participatory programs, DJs, live bands, dance, visual art, craft projects, performance art, and more in a setting of beanbag chairs, cocktails, and general conviviality. This program draws in audiences of all races and ages, and it typically sells out in hours, with people waiting in long lines, hoping to be let in.

Our *Sleepless* program would never have been developed in an atmosphere that did not value diversity, relish inclusion, and deeply respect those from all walks of life. This type of work can happen only when these values are embraced across the organization.

Because I believe values-based management is the best way to develop and support an organization, I was thrilled when I learned that Bill Baker and Michael O'Malley were writing *Organizations for People*. Their efforts to

raise awareness of the importance of this leadership approach and to provide successful examples across industries is very welcome in our world. My hope is that this approach, which highlights the power of working from a moral center and the importance of human dignity, will be adopted broadly and embraced deeply. To quote Desmond Tutu, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.” And only together can we achieve greatness in the workplace and in our community.