

**A Spirit of Worldwide Servant Leadership:  
Actively-Caring Challenges from Our President**

“To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent...we  
will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

--President Barack H. Obama

On Tuesday, January 20<sup>th</sup> 2009, an estimated two billion people worldwide (about a third of all human beings on Earth) witnessed a most provocative and inspirational inaugural address. Over 1.5 million people filled the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to see the oratory in person, while others saw it on jumbo screens in Times Square and in smaller group settings, while the majority across the globe experienced this engaging presentation on their own television or radio. Plus, countless individuals read this uplifting address in the print media and on the internet. Question: Will this historical event make a difference or will it only be a memorable but fleeting moment with limited behavioral impact?

After watching the inaugural on T.V., I obtained a copy of President Obama’s address from the internet and read it several times. I sincerely hope you will do the same. Not only is the prose elegant and inspiring, the multifaceted message is critically important and instructive. But unless we translate this solemn speech into personally relevant behaviors, the thought-provoking words of our new charismatic President will not affect much change. By pointing out aspects of President Obama’s inaugural address here, I hope to stimulate meaningful interpersonal conversations capable of influencing pertinent behavior and culture change relevant for the achievement of an actively-caring, injury-free workplace.

**Servant Leadership**

As expressed by many authors of books on leadership, the servant leader actively cares for the welfare of others with courage, compassion, humility, and flexibility. Indeed, President Obama urges us all to “embody the spirit of service... (reflected in) the kindness to take in a

stranger when the levees broke, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their (sic) job, ... the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child.”

The opening quotation from our president also reflects a caring, servant-leadership paradigm. While many might associate the closed-fist metaphor with *foreign* terrorists—those “around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West”—I suggest we look long and hard in our own backyard. What about those CEOs who gave themselves huge financial bonuses while firing hundreds of dedicated employees? And how do you feel about those down-sizing companies who seek financial support from our government, while at the same time spending lavish amounts of money on extravagant parties, junkets, and pricey entertainment for select members of their “loyal” employees?

It seems we have a special brand of terrorism in our country—citizens who think only of themselves with “greed and irresponsibility.” While some of these “terrorists” may be completely incorrigible, I believe some are merely “unconsciously incompetent” and that with directive and corrective conversation, their behavior can be properly aligned toward a common good. For those who are “consciously incompetent,” instruction alone will likely fall on deaf ears. But some of these societal delinquents can be influenced by social consequences. Through interpersonal conversation and media exposure, people can be made to feel ashamed or guilty for their apparent greed and selfishness, with the objective to change their related behaviors.

Simply put, it should be un-American to choose personal pleasure and “narrow interests” at the expense of others. We need to make this perspective explicit in our communications and in our example-setting behaviors. In Obama's words, “our success depends (on) hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism.” Holding these

truths to be self-evident, we need to accept and begin “a new era of responsibility” whereby we contribute selflessly to the welfare of others. “We can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world’s resources without regard to effect.” (Recall my *ISHN* contribution on sustainability and safety last January, 2009).

### **Interdependence and Synergy**

Defining a new era of responsibility for the welfare of others, President Obama advocates service and interdependence over self-interest and independence. He reminds us how scores of Americans before us “struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.”

How reassuring and rewarding it is to hear our new President promote the kind of cultural transition needed for world-class safety. Indeed, the notion that mature and socially responsible organizations have transitioned from an independent to an interdependent culture originated in the safety domain, initially among leaders at DuPont. And decades ago, W. Edwards Deming explicated the synergistic benefits derived from developing interdependency from diverse knowledge, skills, and abilities.

In Obama’s words, “our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.” Although it may be more challenging to achieve interdependence from a heterogeneous than a homogenous culture, the synergistic whole is always greater than the sum of its parts when the interdependent parts are dissimilar and diversified.

### **Relevance to Industrial Safety and Health**

I hope the injury-prevention relevance of my interpretation of President Obama’s inaugural address is obvious. Servant leadership and service to others was indeed the primary

theme of Barack Obama's keynote, and these are essential for achieving and sustaining an injury-free workplace. (My September and October ISHN columns in 2008 entertained strategies for enhancing interdependence and actively caring throughout a work culture.)

A recent industrial mishap illustrates an instructive connection between these concepts and occupational safety. Specifically, after a Fortune 500 company experienced a horrific on-the-job fatality, senior managers ensured a thorough "accident investigation" and convened to assess the potential legal liability of their company. They defined certain at-risk behaviors the employee had been performing at the time of the incident, and were relieved to find their company had rules disallowing each of these. They felt off the hook for legal liability.

But, what about moral liability? What if the culture does not support those particular safety rules? How often are the behaviors that contributed to this fatality practiced by other workers? Do interpersonal conversations and example-setting behaviors discourage these at-risk actions? Is a behavior-based feedback and corrective coaching process in place to hold people accountable for practicing the safe alternatives to the behaviors that contributed to the fatality? Do the workers feel guilty or embarrassed when they see coworkers perform at-risk behavior but don't speak up with corrective feedback?

### **In Conclusion**

The new era of service, personal responsibility, and interdependence promoted by President Obama sets the stage for the kind of organizational culture needed to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. It reflects our moral responsibility to try and consistently set the safe example, while realizing we might sometimes work at-risk and thus need mutual interpersonal support for change from others. In an interdependent and actively-caring culture,

everyone accepts the servant-leadership responsibility by looking out for the welfare of others with commitment, competence, courage, and compassion.

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