

Faithful leadership

A conversation between Crawford Loritts¹ and Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker

When Crawford Wheeler Loritts Jr. was growing up in a blue collar section of Newark, New Jersey, he had no way of knowing that one day he would speak to thousands of people in stadium events and millions on radio. He had no idea he would have a chance to counsel and pray with National Football League Super Bowl champions, United States senators, and men and women of influence around the globe. As a black man growing up in the shadow of the civil rights movement, he never dreamed he would be a published author of five books, the pastor of a large church, and a mentor to other leaders.

I had the privilege of spending some time with Crawford in late 2007 to explore some of his thoughts on what it takes to be a great leader. With great passion and enthusiasm, he shared his views on what it takes to lead others and how he believes that God both calls and equips people to lead. Following is a small portion of these interactions with a man who has spent his life intentionally building leaders and who knows what it takes to lead.

Rob Parker (RP): At Kiwanis, we have been talking about how important it is for leaders to be able to communicate a clear and compelling vision. Would you agree with that, and what are your thoughts on the importance of vision?

Crawford Loritts (CL): Vision is everything. There's no such thing as leadership apart from assignment. Leadership is not a position. Leadership is a verb. If there's no movement, there's no leadership. If there's no task, there's no leadership. If there's no assignment, there's no leadership. By its very nature, leadership is not a corner office with a big desk and nameplate. That is not leadership. Leadership is always about going somewhere. This is where vision comes in. The vision, that's the target. It is what you see. It's what gets you up in the morning. It is what makes you pound the table and weep. And if a leader doesn't feel that, if it's not worth

a sacrifice, then it's not worth trying to communicate. You have got to be absorbed with the vision. There's so much that's nonverbal about leadership. A leader communicates passion with body language and presence, and with their eyes and with all their nonverbal communication ... that's what helps make vision compelling.

RP: We also place a lot of emphasis at Kiwanis on leading by serving others. Can you share your thoughts on servant leadership?

CL: Well, basically leadership, in a sense, is all about serving. So when you say "servant leadership," it's the demeanor, it's what the leader looks like, the humility of the leader, their identity ... not a strategy. Some servant leadership language we use is to affect the bottom-line. And so it's more of a strategy, a quid pro quo: If I treat you a certain way

then I'm going to reap some dividends. But genuine servant leadership comes out of authentic humility that says as a leader my role is to invest in you, and I don't have to sacrifice my commitment to making you a better person for the objective and the goal. They both can be accomplished.

RP: When you think of servant leaders you have known, who are some of those people, and what were they like?

CL: Some of those people are more well-known than others. In the Christian circles in which I've operated, probably Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, is the epitome of a servant leader. He had the uncanny ability to sort of tap into the gifts, talents, abilities, purposes of the people around him, and to leverage that and to give them a platform, and there was a certain joy and delight he had in doing that. He was the kind of guy whom you always felt better for being in his presence. You felt privileged to do something that he asked you to do because it wasn't self-serving; it was a noble thing he wanted to get accomplished. And he didn't lead with himself, he led with a cause. He was pretty incredible. Another one would be Joe Stowell, former president of Moody Bible College. Joe had that same thing about him. You genuinely sensed that when you were in his presence he really cared about you and he wanted to use what he has to make you a better person. These guys were surrounded by loyal people, because people love to be around others who genuinely care for them.

RP: Do you believe people are born leaders, or is leadership something that can be learned?

CL: I think we all need to be concerned about developing our ability to

lead in relationship to the responsibilities we have. However, I do think there are unique positions that require more than just skill. It requires a sense of innate ability that either you have it or you don't. Let me give you an illustration. You can teach kids with average hand-eye coordination to be a fairly decent baseball player. But there comes a time where no amount of time in a batting cage is going to help a kid bat any better. There are certain things you cannot coach and cannot teach, like when to swing. And I think that's true at certain levels of proficiencies and skills. There are some people, no matter how many seminars you send them to, no matter how much training you give them, how many books they read, there is a certain innate sixth sense a leader has to have that makes all that stuff natural; that you can't teach. Some of it is natural and some of it is learned.

RP: What leadership qualities are attractive to others?

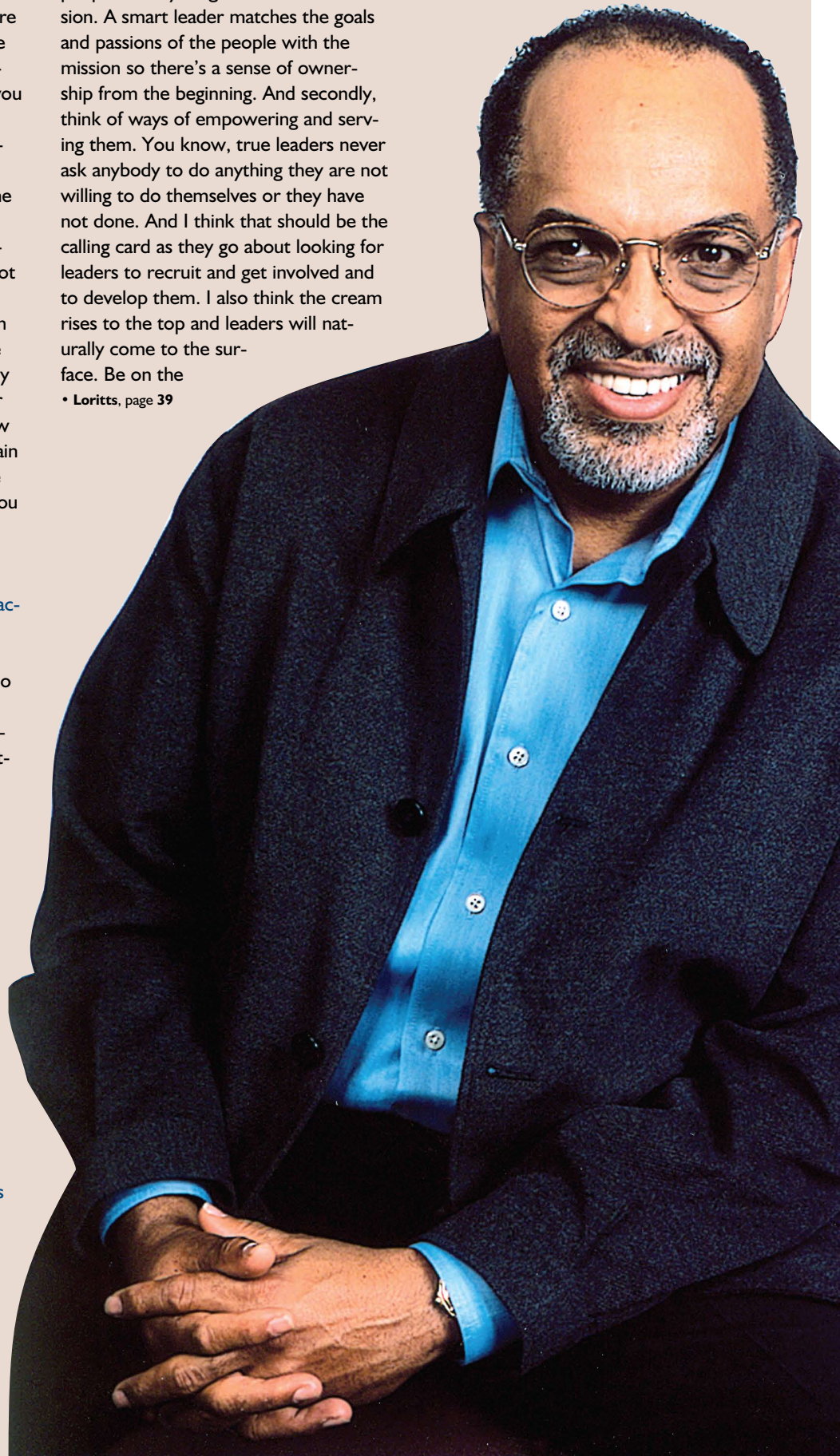
CL: People are drawn by character; they're drawn by transparency and also by trust. They are drawn to people whose purposes are bigger than themselves. Great leaders lead by this greater sense of purpose, and they're constantly learning, they're constantly growing; they're constantly developing. People also are attracted to leaders who listen well and who really care about the people they are leading. I also think a leader has to be the composite picture of the destination. As the leader, you have to be the picture of that reality so people can decide if they want to go there with you. It's not just what you say; it's all about who you are. That is what makes you believable. That makes people trust you.

RP: We have about 600,000 members in the Kiwanis family, and it's all volunteer-led, so we need about 50,000 leaders every year in our system. What kind of things would you tell people who have been given the responsibility to lead and what kinds of things would you either caution them about or encourage them with?

CL: First, I would say never use

people for anything other than the mission. A smart leader matches the goals and passions of the people with the mission so there's a sense of ownership from the beginning. And secondly, think of ways of empowering and serving them. You know, true leaders never ask anybody to do anything they are not willing to do themselves or they have not done. And I think that should be the calling card as they go about looking for leaders to recruit and get involved and to develop them. I also think the cream rises to the top and leaders will naturally come to the surface. Be on the

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lookout for people who naturally take initiative. Who leans toward responsibility, not away from it? Who shows up, who are the consistent ones? Look for those people who have a good track record, and sometimes it's not as hard as we make it. But you also have to be careful. There are people who want to do things, but just because you want to do something doesn't necessarily mean you can do it. I also like to create opportunities to test people, to see what they really bring to the table. You learn a lot about your leaders when they have to deal with a crisis.

RP: Do you see a difference between those who are gifted as managers and those who are gifted to be leaders?

CL: Managers are motivated by the orderly implementation of process. Typically speaking, when there is a problem, and there's a directional thing that needs to be solved, a manager will come up with another system to get it done, while leaders will lead by movement and direction. Leaders are not afraid to take strategic steps in an unknown direction because that's ultimately the solution. They're a little bit bored with repetitive processes. I really think from a gut level that is the difference between a leader and a manager. And sometimes we put highly skilled, proficient managers in positions of leadership and they end up tearing up the organization because what's really needed is not more processes, but actually more clarity of thinking and strategic direction.

RP: We have made the case here at Kiwanis that conversations are absolutely critical for leaders to be able to share a vision that people can buy into. Talk to our leaders about the importance of leadership communication.

CL: Rob, next to vision, communication is everything. I had a friend tell me: "Crawford, when you feel like you've talked about it so much that you don't want to hear it anymore, then you are getting close. That's probably when you are just beginning to communicate." I thought that because I said it a couple of times people must understand it. But the job of any leader is to figure out how people hear things, especially those folks who are closest to you. So you need to study the people who are closest to you and figure out how they hear things, how they understand things. Try to speak to them in their language. Then, double-check to make sure they understand. I want people who are progressive followers. You have to create an environment where people can ask you and challenge you and push you. We need to have a free-flowing ability to get questions answered and not have organizational structure that's cumbersome. Sometimes our structure hinders our ability to communicate.

RP: Do you believe our society is experiencing a leadership gap?

CL: I feel there are two things that have happened over the past 30 years that are hurting the emergence of leadership. One is the breakdown of the family. I think the home is the incubator for everything that takes place in the world and in society, and with the breakdown of the family, it has caused this whole uncertainty and insecurity, and men don't know how to be men, women don't know how to be women. There's something missing in our lives. This is just my observation. I think with the breakdown in the family has come this sort of a fear and insecurity and the inability to take risks, to take charge, because leadership is based upon certainty, courage comes out of confidence, and people who don't know who they are tend to either lead with power or posi-

tion or they shy away from responsibility. So I think that that is a big issue. In the Western world especially. Secondly, I think what has happened is that we have not celebrated leadership the way we ought to. We talk more about consensus and more about management, and so I think there is this collective group-think here where we're not encouraging people to take risks. With that said, I am still remarkably hopeful. I see some of these young guys and gals coming to the scene who are doing some pretty incredible things, and I just think we need to encourage them.

RP: I know we talked about pride being one of the challenges leaders face, but as you think back over the life you've lived, what are the things you're proud of?

CL: One is, I'm glad I didn't quit. You know, success is the next step after you feel like quitting. So, I'm glad I didn't quit. The privilege of speaking at different events and seeing people's lives changed is incredibly gratifying. The opportunities to serve on boards of organizations that I feel deeply about and help them translate vision to reality has been extremely rewarding. Then I look at my family, what God has done with our kids, and the impact they are having. ... Two sons who are gifted church leaders, two amazing daughters, and five beautiful grandchildren. The privilege of serving as a pastor and influencing lives ... the radio program, the books, speaking to millions of people through the years: It's just been gratifying. But no leadership assignment has been more important than my call to be a husband and father of character and integrity.

Crawford Loritts will be a featured speaker at the 2008 Kiwanis International Convention. See "Loritts to Speak at 2008 Convention," page 6.

Next issue: A conversation with Bobby Fong, president, Butler University.