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Is it Un-Christlike to Work a Room?

An author considers the premise of her own book and asks: When is it OK to be proactive with the space you take up as a leader, and when is it unethical?

By MaryKate Morse

I wrote the book “Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space, and Influence” about the premise that servant leadership is more physical than mental. I argue that paying attention to how you use your body as a leader in social space is a key spiritual and professional discipline.

Jesus gave his body for our sakes, and in the same way we manage our physical bodies for the sake of others. Some leaders naturally take up a lot of social space. Of those, some are clueless. Though they are given lots of influence in a group, some fill it with their personalities and agendas. There is not room for others. Jesus took up space to lead and serve.

Others don't naturally take up a lot of social space, and they have less influence. I am one of those persons. So, in order to be a servant leader, I will purposefully manage my physical presence in social groups by paying attention to such things as how I enter a room, how I talk, how I introduce myself to others, how I contribute, where I sit, etc. When I have more influence, I can empower others. If I have little influence, I cannot do much.

Some have questioned this intentionality and view it as manipulative. So I've been thinking more deeply about the difference between manipulation and intentionality as it relates to servant

leadership, and I'd appreciate your thoughts. Is it un-servantlike to "work a room" or "insert your thoughts into a discussion?" Should you wait to be noticed or asked? Is it OK to position yourself in a group by taking up space with influential leaders in order to get leadership roles or even get the privilege of shaping your role and contribution? Is that un-Christlike? I've observed gifted, passionate persons who yearn for influence but don't take up space because they believe it is not servantlike.

When is it OK to be competitive and proactive for God's mission with the space you take up as a leader, and when is it unethical?

I'll start the discussion with two checks, and I'm looking forward to your wisdom. Having influence is a leadership responsibility. It needs to be cultivated as you would cultivate a garden so that the produce is healthy and plentiful. In order to take up space appropriately, I have to check my soul and check my emotions to know whether I am pursuing my own gain or Christ's.

It is manipulation if the gain is personal. It is responsible intention when the gain is Christ's. If I am feeling insecure, angry, self-absorbed, proud or reactive emotionally, my physical actions in social space will probably be self-serving and self-protecting. A spiritual discipline would be to wait and discern until I am clear about why I am feeling these emotions before I take up space in a room. Taking up space out of love is different than taking up space out of need.

In contrast, if I am open spiritually -- hospitable and hopeful-- then I am more likely to be centered in Christ and I feel present with him in the room. It is his presence in me and a sense of the Holy Spirit with me that frees me to respond intentionally as a servant leader. I am ready to engage others and I see others.

With checks like these, I think it's a spiritual responsibility to be thoughtful about taking up physical space in order to be a servant leader, and it is not manipulative. What do you think?