

*Candidly, the best I've read on the subject
of leadership.*

Bill Williams, Former President of Pyxis, Inc.



The Golden Flame

THE HEART AND SOUL OF REMARKABLE LEADERSHIP

Dr. Keith Merron

THE PROBLEM WITH LEADERSHIP

...driven to seek the elusive dream of material
success because they have lost their inner

spirit and can only look outward for identity
and meaning.

- Jean Houston

As you walk into Delancey Street Restaurant, all seems normal – just another appealing restaurant, one of hundreds that populate San Francisco. Noted for its attractive location overlooking the bay and for its tasty Mediterranean cuisine, you would likely file it away as one of the many places to get a wonderful meal in the Bay Area – unless you knew its history.

The restaurant is part of the Delancey Street Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people who have faced difficult times to get their life back together. Every staff member of the restaurant lives next door at a residence home for former drug addicts, drug dealers, gang members, murders, and assorted multiple felons. The profits from the restaurant, as well as from a moving company, a limousine service, and several other businesses that operate under the Delancey Street umbrella, go toward paying for the home.

This breakthrough concept, developed by founder Mimi Silbert, supports residents in learning a trade, reviving their self-esteem, and in getting their lives on a path toward success. The only requirements for getting into the program are that one has to have faced a significant challenge in their life – drug abuse, alcohol addiction, prison, etc. – and made a deep and abiding commitment to getting their life back on track.

When I visited the restaurant to meet with Mimi, I didn't know what to expect. I had heard from many enthusiastic patrons about Delancey Street but had never actually been there. I arrived in late afternoon only to learn that Mimi had been called away to attend to a family crisis. The staff was preparing for the dinner crowd and was wonderfully gracious toward me. Mimi's assistant, Dawn, apologized that I hadn't received her last-minute message that Mimi would not be available.

Seizing the moment, I took the opportunity to chat with Dawn about Delancey Street and learn about how it operates. She was engaging, bright-eyed, and cheerful. After hearing how all staff members are part of the residential home, I asked her with some hesitation, "Um, are you a resident here as well?"

She smiled. "Of course. We all are. Everyone you see here is."

In fact, Delancey Street has no actual "staff." Even Mimi lives in the community like everyone else and doesn't take a salary. Delancey Street operates on a role model concept in which all residents are "staff" to each other. "Each one teach one" is the main idea, where everyone is simultaneously a learner and a teacher, a giver and receiver. I mentioned to Dawn how impressed I was with how she carried herself. She thanked me matter-of-factly, a quality that characterized the entire conversation.

I asked another awkward question: "Why does everyone seem so friendly and gracious?" Dawn smiled again and said, "Oh, that's easy. We all want to be like Mimi."

Mimi was more than just the boss or the paymaster at Delancey Street, as I soon discovered. She modeled the kind of person that Dawn and everyone else wanted to become – honest, open, and caring, simultaneously strong and vulnerable, and infused with a generous spirit. Mimi Silbert was the keeper of Delancey Street's golden flame, exemplifying the kind of leadership that this book is about. You'll learn more about Mimi in later chapters.

Chapter 8

The Power of Self-Compassion

It is ironic but very true that we are often
the last ones in the world to be able to see

and acknowledge our own gifts.

- e.e. cummings

15,000 Miracles

I believe that this exploration of self-compassion warrants a return to Mimi Silbert, the founder, president, and CEO of Delancey Street Foundation, who I introduced earlier in the book. Among all the leaders I met, she's the one I would nominate as the poster child for knowing, accepting, and believing in oneself. Defying all conventional limitations, Mimi seems to have integrated an extraordinary vision and lofty ideals with a down-to-earth respect for reality while charting a new path in her industry. She's a frame-breaker, someone who has "boldly gone where no one has gone before." She embodies all of the qualities of remarkable leadership discussed so far, with an especially solid sense of self. Her story needs to be shouted from the rooftops.

Without any map to guide her but with moxie, a powerful belief in herself, and an abiding appreciation for the family environment she grew up in, Mimi started Delancey Street as a way of putting troubled souls back into society so that they are not only able to survive and function but to thrive in body and spirit. Among the people who have become residents of her organization are felons, addicts, drug dealers, and gang leaders. She operates with a deep belief that all of them can change if given the right kind of conditions and a lot of love. Her residential home and the foundation's multiple businesses (staffed solely by the residents) are based on two suppositions which Mimi seems to know instinctively: first, if you just give people a handout, it might temporarily help them but won't produce a fundamental change; and second, if you provide a healthy family-like environment (which most of them never had), that structure and nurturing will help cause a shift in thinking. The result of her efforts: a sociological and business miracle.

Mimi began Delancey Street in 1971 with a thousand dollars and a desire to help others in distress, and the social system she created has reformed troubled souls with amazing consistency. Nearly four decades after its inception, Delancey Street, named after the section of New York where immigrants assembled more than a century ago, is now considered one of the nation's leading self-help residential education centers for the underclass in need. It has turned around the lives of over 15,000 people.

Mimi's Vision and Purpose

After missing her on my initial visit to Delancey, I ultimately had the pleasure of spending three hours with Mimi at her restaurant, and was deeply moved by her enthusiasm for her work and her appreciation for the gift of life. I was especially impressed by her humanity and lack of pretense. During our time together, three things became clear: she is powerfully determined to make a difference; she cares deeply about the people who work for her; and her work is, in the deepest sense I can imagine, a labor of love.

Mimi's model for working with society's outliers is, by its very nature, a frame-breaking model. Our country and many others in the Western world operate within a dysfunctional paradigm about "criminals" or those who are "troubled" that, in most respects, is designed to keep them that way. We shame them. We treat them with scorn and judgment. We do little to change the conditions that helped to create them. The sociopolitical system for dealing with these people can be broken down into two fundamental and opposing (but similarly ineffectual) views or frames. The conservative view emphasizes punishment and self-responsibility over compassion and acknowledgment of systemic problems; the liberal view stresses compassion and systemic problems over justice and personal responsibility.

At one extreme, the most tough-minded conservatives say that society owes nothing to the underprivileged except "opportunity" – which simply means they have a right to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Such a view ignores all the ways that one's own assumptions of what is possible are themselves the products of upbringing and life experience, or that the system itself may be rigged against them. The liberal view, in contrast, claims that people are impoverished due to the social system in which they grew up; therefore, they are not to blame and we should help them. We do this in the form of welfare and similar means that tend to foster dependency and can prolong destructive behaviors.

Both of these perspectives have some grain of truth in Mimi's view. It is what she calls mutual restitution. The convicts owe society to become the new best version of themselves – to give back and to give to others as opposed to take from others. And society owes them the open doors – to need to underclass and take full advantage of their true talents and new skills.

Both perspectives however, ignore some very important truths that Mimi has built into her vision. Yes, she acknowledges, the environment has a lot to do with how people turn out, and her organization responds to that by creating an atmosphere that leads to healthy, vibrant, responsible citizens. At the same time, she holds each person fully responsible for everything that happens in his or her life. Thus, everyone involved in the Delancey Street Foundation takes total responsibility for his or her choices. Importantly, this isn't done in isolation but in community. A primary ingredient to community – to this community in particular – is a whole lot of tough love. This includes a powerful belief in a person's capacity to grow and a commitment to joyful interdependence: We are all in this together and so we must help each other out, just like a healthy family does. In fact, Mimi lives in the Delancey Street apartment complex just like all of the residents. No special treatment for her or anyone else – including her children, who've been raised there and have had all of their needs met by the community that Mimi created. She views Delancey Street as a big extended family, and she is fully a part of it.

Many have thought that Mimi is standing in harm's way by living amidst the violent criminals and unpredictable outcasts who have entered the facility's doors. She sees it differently. She sees it as welcoming them into her communal family and home. She extends them her trust and in so doing earns their trust; as a result she always feels safe – only once or twice in nearly 30 years did she feel physically at risk.

Mimi's sense of purpose is clear: She wants nothing less than to break the frames that limit one's opportunities. Her foundation doesn't take money from the government nor does it solicit financial contributions – only donations of clothing and supplies that they can use – and she doesn't draw a salary. All of the businesses they have started, and all of the living quarters they have built – including an award-winning architectural masterpiece on some of the most expensive land in the world – were put together by Mimi and her residents with little expertise or resources. As Mimi put it, "We've done things we didn't know we could do because we didn't know we couldn't do them."

Becoming a Resident

This intention to "figure it out ourselves" turns the whole system of welfare on its head, for the foundation's core belief is that for change to occur, it must occur from within, aided by a social environment that supports self-reliability and self-responsibility. All residents of the foundation must ask to come, although most come from parole or as an alternative to prison – often to a life sentence. Yet despite any violence in their pasts, the neighborhoods in the cities they now dwell as part of Delancey Street have consistently been safe. In order to be accepted, they go through an extensive interviewing process and must successfully meet three conditions:

1. They must want to break their habits of cheating, stealing, violence, and drugs
2. They must become a full-time resident, living, studying academic and vocational skills and working at a job and with each other until they are ready to leave.
3. They must live by Mimi's rules (see below).

Each resident lives in an apartment, often shared by others, on the waterfront in San Francisco or in any of the residences in other major cities (there are facilities in five other locations around the country). Each is required to get a high school degree and as part of that, take liberal arts classes. Each must train in and work at one of its businesses, including (among others) an award-winning restaurant, an award-winning moving company, a transportation and limo service, or a room for screening films and documentaries. The money earned by these businesses is pooled together and pays for the costs of living (housing, food, clothing – everything). In effect, every penny earned through its companies goes to support the education and rehabilitation of its residents. Because of this, Delancey Street has the highest rating among charitable organizations. Those who become residents must also abide by Mimi's rules, which are simple but inviolable.

Anyone who breaks them either gets thrown out or goes in front of a review board (made up of residents) that decides their fate. These are her inviolable rules:

- No drinking or drugs

- No physical violence
- No threat of physical violence

In addition, the follow rules exist to guide their lives together, which, if violated, are subject to the consequence of having to do extra work such as washing dishes:

- Each one teach one
- Care for each other – be both a giver and a receiver
- Take responsibility for your actions; recognize that everything you do impacts others. Own up to your mistakes and simply fix them
- Act “as if” you can become a decent, talented person of integrity (with the expectation that doing so, you will eventually become one)

Surprisingly, few people break the rules. With no drugs, alcohol, lying, stealing, or cheating, food seems the only excess. The peer support system is so powerful that residents “get it” instantly, and work hard to be worthy of staying in the organization.

It’s the Whole System that Makes the Difference

Mimi has created a self-sealing, frame-breaking social system designed to shift the mindset and conduct of troubled souls. It’s a brilliant work of art, and its many components defy conventional wisdom. It is clearly not welfare, for there are no handouts. It’s much more than workfare as well, even though work is part of it and people must help themselves in order to stay. Her system focuses on creating a powerful social container, much like a family, where people can become healthy and whole. By living together under house rules designed for social and emotional health, by working together in a way that teaches collaboration, service, and specific skills that translate well to the outside world, and by honoring each person’s innate ability to live well with one another if given the right conditions, thousands of people have graduated Delancey Street no longer the troubled souls they once were.

In short, Mimi and her system teach the basics of life. In her words, “To be classy on the outside, you have to be classy on the inside. We teach the importance of helping one another to take responsibility. We teach that you can’t change others, but you can change yourself.” Over 15,000 current and former residents can lay claim to the system’s power and potency – a true model of self-governance with a wide range of spectacular successes. And while she didn’t say it directly, she implied in all that she shared with me that self-compassion and self-esteem were at the root of her work to support others in raising themselves from their past. Be every definition, Mimi has taken the art of leadership to a new level, and she couldn’t have done it without a rock-solid sense of self and a belief that anything is possible.

The following are quotes within the chapters that are noted:

Chapter 3 – The Compass of Purpose

√ For Mimi Silbert, founder and CEO of The Delancey Street Foundation, it is dedicating her life to the belief that former criminals and addicts can have a full and healthy life if they live in a community where they are needed, treated with dignity, and supported to take responsibility for their own lives.

Chapter 4 – A Clear Map

Mimi Silbert of the Delancey Street Foundation, for example, didn't have a defined personal leadership map. Instead, she searches her heart for guidance, trusting her inner knowing of what to do, and this has yet to fail her.

Chapter 10 – The Evolution of Leadership

When people in Delancey Street say “I want to be just like Mimi,” it shows the power of her leadership to be a beacon of light for others, just as her family was a beacon for her.

Chapter 12 – The Secret Ingredient

Mimi Silbert of Delancey Street said it simply: “It just made sense to me and so I did it.”