

SERVANT LEADERSHIP: THE COMPLEXITY OF A SIMPLE IDEA

Sarah L. Bodner

Leadership – how is it that such a simple word can bring about such idealistic notions that such a magnitude of individuals strive to achieve whatever it is they perceive it to be? The intense interest we as a society have in the concept of leadership has given birth to such a preponderance of research, seminars, and best selling books that we are awash in the flood of ideas surrounding leadership. With so much information, it is often difficult for an individual to get their bearings, and so they cling to any concept they can grasp hold of.

Servant Leadership is one of the many concepts of leadership swirling about in the sea of ideas. It is however, one concept that is not likely to be picked by someone who is grasping in desperation for a leadership method to hold on to. Reason being is that Servant Leadership is anything but simple and concrete. There are no 14 steps or 7 habits – it is more a way of life than a suit of leadership armor to be put on when ‘leading the troops’. This is what is so very wonderful and yet so very frustrating about Servant Leadership.

Robert K Greenleaf is considered by some to be the grandfather of the modern empowerment movement (Minton 1995). Greenleaf was born in 1904 and passed away in 1990 – he left behind the legacy of Servant Leadership. There were two major events that are repeatedly cited as the foundation for the shaping of his life and the ideas. The first was a professor who encouraged Greenleaf to join a large institution and influence it, the thinking behind this was that the big institutions were what would make or break the future. The second major event was Greenleaf’s reading of a novel by Herman Hesse entitled A Journey to the East.

The first major event landed Greenleaf smack dab in the middle of one of America’s largest organizations – AT&T. His career with this giant spanned from 1926 – 1964. He retired from AT&T as Director of Management Research. During this period in his life, he became greatly interested in the field of management research, development, and education. Greenleaf was an educated and well-respected man in this field. He held joint appointments as a visiting lecturer at MIT’s Sloan school of Management and the Harvard Business School. He also taught at Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia, as well as consulting for Ohio University and MIT.

In the 1960's, the second event occurred which led Greenleaf to embrace the idea of Servant Leadership. During this time, he read the novel by Herman Hess - A Journey to the East. The novel portrays a group of men on a mythic journey. The group is accompanied by a servant by the name of Leo - who helps sustain the men by performing menial tasks and by uplifting them with his spirit and song. Leo eventually disappears and the men find that they cannot continue without him and so disband. Later the narrator finds Leo once again after many years of wandering and is flabbergasted to find that the man he knew as servant is a great and noble leader.

In his early 60s, when many begin to enjoy a life of leisure, Greenleaf embarked on his second career. He founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was later renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. He credited his second career to an article that he read while in his 40s, which encouraged him to prepare for a useful old age (Ganoë 1996). In 1970, at the age of 66, Greenleaf published his first essay on Servant Leadership – The Servant Leader. This was the first in a long string of essays and books around the concept of Servant Leadership. Since that time, over 400,000 copies of his various essays and books have been sold worldwide (Spears 1994). Greenleaf considered his 15 years from age 60 to 75 as his most productive and rewarding. It was during these 15 years that he coined the term Servant Leadership and wrote his essays which have led to the expansive acceptance of Servant Leadership as a viable leadership method.

Basis of Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership is a difficult concept to define, its central definition has been taken from the writings of Greenleaf in The Servant as Leader:

“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?”

The premise appears to be simple – yet it is highly confusing to most individuals who are used to being given a formula to follow. There is no formula for servant Leadership; it is a journey for the leader and for his or her followers. The journey is not easy, but it is filled with learning and growth. One of the more simple foundations of Servant leadership is that it is based on love and caring for all fellow beings and the desire to help them, not to accumulate power or prestige – Servant Leaders are focused on helping others and society. In order to be a Servant Leader, the leader needs to start with pure motives. Granted, it is rare to find an individual with absolutely pure motives, so semi-pure motives are a good start.

While it may appear that Servant Leadership is a “feel good” journey where everyone wanders around aimlessly and nothing concrete is achieved, rest assured that is not the case. Servant Leadership is not about lack of direction, but about implementation. There is a strong emphasis involving the visionary role and the implementation role of the Servant Leader (Blanchard 1995). It is very common for the Servant Leader to develop a vision – the difference is that they do not take on the sole guiding role for that vision.

What the servant does best is to bring out the leader in every individual – he or she is the enabler (Smolenyak 1992). By enabling those who follow the servant, the vision is more likely to be achieved. The idea behind this is simple – the larger the number of ants working to lift a tree, the more likely they are to succeed. Many people feel very threatened by this portion of Servant Leadership. It is easy to meet the needs of your followers and to present a “feel good” environment, but when it comes to giving away authority to achieve the vision – most individuals are threatened. However, there is no need to mourn the loss of power, because power is something that you can give away and still receive more of, shared power is power multiplied (Brody 1992).

This new concept speaks to a large number of people who have the ability to lead people to guide themselves to what they were always capable of doing. It takes much of the fear out of leadership, because the leader does not have to know what to do in every feasible situation – they simply have to be able to serve those who follow them in their quest for the answers. They are able to turn to the collective wisdom of the group to glean knowledge (Lee 1993). Servant Leaders are introspective and believe that answers can be found within, they readily acknowledge personal strengths and weaknesses. Their great sense of humility is what leads them to seek the support and advice of others (Sarkus 1996). By having the courage to compile the collective wisdom of their followers, Servant Leaders are more productive and are better able to lead their followers toward achievement of the vision.

This aspect of Servant Leadership fits in quite well with corporate America’s shift away from a sole focus on financial capital and a larger focus on human capital as a source of organizational success (McCollum 1997). Indeed, empowerment is a part of Servant Leadership that has been readily accepted and utilized by the business community. Empowerment leads to a culture that shows care and concern by providing valuable tools learning experiences to help employees openly and effectively influence the organizations and the work habits of others. (Sarkus 1996). Leaders are no longer focused only on the bottom line of increasing profits and productivity; they want to make a positive difference in the lives of other people. They hope to mentor and bring out the best in those who will someday take their place (Tice 1994). Common knowledge tells us that this focus will not only have a positive influence on the organizational culture, but on the bottom line as well.

Taking this a step further, Servant Leaders focus not only on their followers’ needs as a whole, but on the individual follower. It is often said that the key to the many is the one - this is due to the fact that the deepest hunger of the human soul is to be recognized, valued, appreciated, and understood (Covey 1994). To serve the needs of their followers,

the Servant Leader cannot afford to overlook the individual. The Servant Leader takes the individual very seriously; valuing people entails a new business ethic – the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work (Kiechel 1992). The individual and their work are reciprocal, to value one but not the other is to devalue both, which is harmful to all involved. The Servant Leader takes people and their work very, very seriously as well as listening and taking his or her lead from his or her followers. By doing this, and in addition to doing this, the Servant Leader is able to heal both their followers and themselves from experiences of the past. The servant's strength lies in their willingness to accept, rather than inflict, pain (Sarkus 1996).

While Servant Leadership is a process that cannot be defined or articulated by steps, there are several key elements, defined by Spears (1994), which lay the foundation for a Servant Leader:

1. Listening receptively to what others have to say
2. Acceptance of others and having empathy for them
3. Foresight and intuition
4. Awareness and perception
5. Having highly developed powers of persuasion
6. An ability to exert a healing influence upon individual and institutions
7. An ability to conceptualize and to communicate concepts
8. Building community in the workplace
9. Practicing the art of contemplation
10. Recognizing that Servant Leadership begins with the desire to change oneself.

Once that process has begun, it then becomes possible to practice Servant Leadership at the institutional level

Greenleaf's philosophy of servant Leadership is to a great extent spiritual, yet it is finding a home in the secular world of the corporation. It seems to have tapped into a growing need to find comfort and meaning in the stressed-out, insecure workplace of the '90s (Lee 1993). To avoid any misunderstanding, let us first define spirituality by its dictionary definition. 1) the animating or life giving principle within a human being, 2) the part of a human being associated with the mind or feelings as distinguished from the physical body, 3) the real sense of significance of something (Lee 1993). It is with this definition of spirituality that the concept of Servant Leadership coexists.

There seems to be quite a revolution occurring in our society in regards to spirituality. The sheer volume of self help, spiritual self-awakening books and seminars available are a living testament to society's desire to discover what else is out there – they are beginning their search within themselves. This desire seems to be twofold. The first is that they've begun to think that there must be a bigger purpose than the BMW and the prestigious job. The second is the acceptance of the whole person in the workplace. Individuals no longer must check their feelings, health, sexuality, spirituality, and family problems at the door of the workplace (Lee 1993). Some organizations have evolved from treating employees as machines to recognizing that they are individuals and treating them accordingly. This leads to the search on the part of the employee for more. They desire not just a paycheck, but meaning from their work.

There also seems to be an immense change in the leader as individual. Changes in an individual come from within, from inner consciousness or spirit. The essence of leadership stems from the leader's soul rather than from his or her behavior (Lee 1993). The leader must be a seeker first – she must “seek to seek” rather than “seek to find” (McCullum 1996). The spiritual journey is as much a part of being a Servant Leader as is the focus on serving the needs of followers. Part of their spiritual journey is helping others as they proceed on their own journey. In doing so the Servant Leader honors some unspoken requests of their followers as defined by Lee (1993):

- * Hear and understand me
- * Even if you disagree with me, please don't make me wrong
- * Acknowledge the greatness within me
- * Remember to look for my loving intentions
- * Tell me the truth with compassion

How Servant Leadership Works

When broken down into its most simple dimensions, Servant Leadership is nothing more than an upside down pyramid. Greenleaf's basic idea was that the leader exists to serve his followers; they grant him their allegiance in response to his servant nature (Lee 1993). The pyramid represents the traditional hierarchy of organizations - The leader at the top and the followers at the bottom. Servant Leadership attempts to absolutely flip the pyramid over and invert it so the people are responsible and their leader is responsive (Blanchard 1995). With the pyramid inverted, the leader, now on the bottom, serves and supports high-level management, who in turn serves and supports middle management, who in turn serves and supports the men and women who are in the trenches everyday – doing the job that everyone works together to accomplish (Staley 1999). This may seem a bit radical to some and downright ludicrous to others – that is the difference between a Servant Leader and any other type of leader. A Servant Leader is willing to put themselves last and to try new ideas – whatever it takes to best serve those whom they lead.

Once willing to make the pyramid inversion, what happens next? There is no concrete answer to this question. As any practitioner of Servant Leadership will tell you, it is a process that is different for everyone who takes on the journey. To be sure, there is no need to make a big announcement and to have everyone scrambling to the Xerox machine with new organizational charts. The process starts slow and takes over in its own unique way. It cannot be choreographed or manipulated – Servant Leadership is a process to be followed. The end result may be difficult to foresee, but it will always be a positive one.

To begin the process of Servant Leadership there needs to be a common goal and purpose and free information flow – because it is going to be chaotic for a while, it is important to be expecting this in the beginning (Covey 1994). The shared vision and purpose are essential to Servant Leadership. The servant aspect of leadership begins only when the vision, direction, and goals are clear (Blanchard 1995). Once the vision is carved out there is a period of self-introspection. This is an important starting point, because once

you take the time to consciously consider your own life experience, to think about your values, and to reflect on how those values influence your daily activities – you start on the path of Servant Leadership (Melrose 1997). This is an ongoing process that is done at the beginning and then again throughout the process of Servant Leadership. Granted this does not make the process an easy one, nothing is easy when it depends on self-discovery as an integral part of the process.

Once the process has begun, there are three factors that the leader needs to be sure that they are attending to. They may be considered steps, but they would be more appropriately viewed as sequential aspects of the process. According to Covey they are (1994):

1. Building relationships of trust
2. Setting up win-win performance agreements
3. Becoming a servant and source of help

Trust is an essential factor of Servant Leadership and its success. The followers need to be able to trust the Servant Leader, so the burden of proving themselves trustworthy is upon the Servant Leader. This entails putting people and ethical considerations intentionally ahead of short-term institutional or personal self-interest (Shegart paper). By doing this the followers will be able to see in concrete terms where they fall in the Servant Leader's list of priorities – at the top. This is the first step toward a relationship of trust. To continue building that trust the Servant Leader should continue to serve his followers as his or her first priority.

Leadership is in essence an influencing process in which the leader helps their people accomplish goals. Part of helping them accomplish those goals, is to establish a clear picture of perfection – of the operation running smoothly (Blanchard 1995). This picture gives direction both to the followers and to the Servant Leader. That direction helps to establish win-win agreements where the followers and leader work together in the direction of perfection. By establishing the direction and the performance agreements and becoming a source of help, the people become tougher on themselves, because they can no longer sit around and blame others – they become responsible for themselves and their actions (Covey 1994). This essentially eliminates, or at least greatly reduces, the need for role of disciplinarian. The Servant Leader helps their followers to discover the best in themselves, to contribute to the end that makes their work exceptional (Smolenyak 1992). The workers achieve greatness, because they want to and are helped to, rather than intimidated or threatened into great achievement.

This may sound reminiscent of another leadership method, that of the participative manager. This is a method in which the leader respects the skills and abilities of employees and sees himself or herself as coach, mentor, and facilitator, rather than as taskmaster. Servant Leadership takes this a bit further by advocating more openness and participation and a less directing management style (Lee 1993). The two methods are similar and compliment one another. A leader who has been using the concept of participative management is off to a good start toward Servant Leadership.

The question often arises; who can be a Servant Leader? The answer is simple – anyone who has the inner ability to give of themselves. It is often thought of that only people in positions of power and authority can be leaders - this is a false belief. There are two general types of power; there is 1) position power and 2) personal power. Position power is where most people consider leaders to reside. They have at their command the ability to use authority, reward, and discipline to effect change. However, a person with little or no position power can be an effective leader. An individual with personal power has at their disposition information, expertise, and sound relationships to gain commitment toward change (Sarkus 1996). The latter forms of power that are used by Servant Leader uses. Granted they may have position power, but it is the personal power that makes them a Servant Leader.

The final outcome, the great victory of Servant Leadership is a workplace where managers and workers alike share a deep sense of purpose and meaning (Lee 1993). While this is may be the ultimate benefit, there are many other lessons taught by Servant Leadership. Below are a few lessons learned by Melrose (1997) while on his journey through Servant Leadership:

- Everyone has the potential to be a strong contributor in an organization
- Individuals work best within a nurturing, valuing environment because that environment allows them to trust, risk, create, and measure up to the expectations of others, and thus become more valuable people
- The primary driving forces behind continuous improvement are positive self esteem and trust (not tools, techniques, or skills)
- Effective, long lasting personal growth and learning are accomplished interactively on the job
- Even though individuals may feel helpless at times and unable to exert enough influence to actually change and organization, they can, in fact, make a difference.

Servant Leadership is a simple concept, yet it may be difficult to implement. It is often difficult to see the immediate results that are desired. It is advisable to be patient, because it will usually take at least a full year for people to believe that the leadership is really sincere, and to test that sincerity within the framework. When it comes to establishing trust – paper and words are meaningless, it is actions that count (Frick 1994). Once the trust is established the move toward managing solely by values may take as long as three years (McCullum 1997). This long-term change is due to the fact that managing by values is diametrically opposed to traditional methods – it takes time to change old habits. Over the long run there is no stopping point in which a person can say “I am a Servant Leader – I have achieved all I can in my leadership abilities.” There is no end; it is a constant process of discovery and growth. Greenleaf once denounced the idea of a timeline by saying, “...if one is servant, either leader or follower, one is always searching.” (Scott 1998).

Characteristics of A Servant Leader

For many practitioners of Servant Leadership, the essence of the idea is written in their hearts (Lawrence 1998). This is a wonderful way of describing Servant Leadership, but many people need a more concrete description. Several people have attempted to develop lists of characteristics of a Servant Leader; it is interesting to note that while each is different, they all have the same theme. The idea is that Servant Leadership is about making the goals clear and then rolling up one's sleeves and doing whatever it takes to help people win by accomplishing the goals – the followers do not work for the leader, the leader works for the followers (Blanchard 1995). According to Greenleaf's philosophy, the Servant Leader embodies these characteristics (Lee 1993):

- They are servant first
- They articulate goals
- They inspire trust
- They know how to listen
- They are masters of positive feedback
- They rely on foresight
- They emphasize personal development

Many others have taken from this list of Greenleaf's and tried to discern what specific characteristics are necessary to achieve the ideal of Servant Leadership. Spears (1998) listed 10 characteristics he considered to be essential to being a Servant Leader. They are: 1) listening 2) empathy 3) healing 4) awareness 5) persuasion 6) conceptualization 7) foresight 8) stewardship 9) commitment to the growth of people and 10) building community.

One of the other many attempts to list characteristics of a Servant Leader was by Lee (1993). He listed 12 characteristics: 1) integrity 2) vulnerability 3) discernment 4) awareness of the human spirit 5) courage in relationships 6) sense of humor 7) intellectual energy and curiosity 8) respect for the future, regard for the present, understanding of the past 9) predictability 10) breadth 11) comfort with ambiguity and 12) presence.

One of the more behaviorally oriented lists of characteristics came from Tice (1994). He only lists 5 characteristics that are a bit more specific than the above lists. They include: 1) are learned optimism 2) occasionally go down in the trenches and get their hands dirty 3) are results and process oriented 4) do not have all the answers but ask great questions and listen carefully to the responses 5) have a powerful sense of the interconnectedness of all living things and so refuse to enter into adversarial relationships with others or themselves.

The last set of characteristics associated with servant Leadership comes from Spears (1994). He lists 10 key elements of servant Leadership: 1) listening receptively to what others have to say 2) acceptance of others and having empathy for them 3) foresight and intuition 4) awareness and perception 5) having highly developed powers of persuasion 6) an ability to conceptualize and to communicate concepts 7) an ability to exert a healing

influence upon individuals and institutions 8) building community in the workplace 9) practicing the art of contemplation 10) recognizing that Servant Leadership begins with the desire to change oneself.

After reading these characteristics, one might assume that only one is missing – Walks on water. It may seem as if the Servant Leader must be perfect. Individuals may be dissuaded from attempting to be a Servant Leader, because they feel they have to be “perfect” - and we all know that we are far from perfect. However, perfection is not a prerequisite for Servant Leadership. The only thing necessary to begin on the journey of Servant Leadership is an honest desire to make things better and an open mind and heart. Servant Leadership is a long process – what you don’t have when you start, you will pick up somewhere along the line.

Resources

- Anonymous. 1996. Positive Leadership Needed, says CRE. Equal Opportunities Review. July/Aug (68): 5-6.
- Blanchard, K. 1995. Servant Leadership. Executive Excellence. Oct 12(10): 12.
- Berry, L & Parasuraman, A & Zeithaml, V & Adsit, D. 1994. Improving Service Quality in America: Lessons learned; Executive Commentary. Academy of Management Executive. May 8(2): 32-35.
- Braham, J. 1989. Difficult Employees. Industry Week. Jun 19 238(12): 30-35.
- Brody, D. 1992. First Among Equals. Foundation News. Sept/Oct 33(5): 50-51.
- Clemmer, J. 1998. Liberating Performance. Executive Excellence. Sept 15(9): 17.
- Covey, S. 1994. Serving the One. Executive Excellence. Sep 11(9): 3-4.
- Covey, S. 1994. New Wine, Old Bottles. Executive Excellence. Dec 11(12): 3-4.
- Cowan, J. 1996. Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K Greenleaf's Theory of Servant Leadership Influenced Today's Top Management Thinkers. Journal of Management Consulting. May 9(1): 67.
- Dering, N. 1998. Leadership in Quality Organizations. Journal for Quality & Participation. Jan/Feb 21(1): 32-35.
- Frick, D. 1994. Evolution in Ann Arbor: A Case Study of the University of Michigan Housing Facilities Department. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/annarbor>.
- Ganoe, F. 1996. Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K Greenleaf's Theory of Servant Leadership Influenced Today's Top Management thinkers. Journal of Systems Management. May/June 47(3): 63.
- Gebhart, J. 1995. Focus: Timeless Themes. Sloan Management Review. Spring 36(3): 101.
- Jahner, B. Building Strong Inclusive Community Through Servant Leadership. Microfiche paper.
- Kenny, T. 1995. Simple Steps for Leadership. Personnel Management. Apr 6 1(7): 48.
- Kezar, A. Toward Pluralistic Leadership Cultures: Beyond Policy Making, Being transformed by stories. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper. Microfiche paper.

- Kiechel, W. 1992. The Servant as Leader. Fortune. May 125(9): 121-122
- Lawrence, M. 1998. Insights on Leadership: service, stewardship, Spirit, and servant Leadership. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/insights>
- Lee, C & Zmke, R. 1993. The Search for Spirit in the Workplace. Training. Jun 30(6): 21-28.
- McCollum, J. 1997. Managing by Values. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/managing>
- McCollum, J. 1996. On Becoming a Servant Leader. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/becoming>.
- McCollum, J. 1996. Seeker and Servant. Reflections on religious Leadership. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/seekerand> servant.
- McCollum, J. 1994. Stewardship: Putting service ahead of Self-Interest. The Robert K Greenleaf center for servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/block>
- Melrose, K. 1997. How servant Leadership Leads to Business success. <http://babyboomers.com/news>
- Minton-Eversole, T. 1995. Books – Reflections on Leadership edited by Larry C. Spears. Training & Development. Dec 49(12): 56.
- Myers, G. 1988. How to Nurture Creativity. Public Relations Journal. Nov 44(11): 45-46.
- Neuhart, D. 1988. Positive is A+ in Agency Management. Mid-America Insurance. Mar 97(3): 28-29.
- Sarkus, D. 1996. Servant Leadership in Safety: Advancing the Cause and Practice. Jun 41(6): 26-32.
- Scott, D. 1998. The Search for Meaning in Hampton House. The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/hampton>
- Shugart, S. Servant Leadership: Robert K Greenleaf's Legacy and the Community College. Microfiche paper.
- Smolenyak, M & Majumdar, A. What is Leadership? Journal for Quality & Participation. Jul/Aug 15(4): 28-32.

Spears, L. 1998. Servant Leadership. Executive excellence. Jul 15(7): 11.

Spears, L. 1994. Servant Leadership: Quest for Caring Leadership. Robert K Greenleaf Center for servant Leadership. <http://greenleaf.org/carelead.html>

Stackpole, K. 1998. The Book List. Association Management. Jan 50(1): 83-85.

Staley, M. Servant Leadership in Fire Service: It's Never Lonely at the Top When you're Leading from the Bottom. <http://mikestaley.com/servant>

Tice, L. 1996. Traits of Limitless Leaders. Association Management. Jan 48(1): L16.

Tice, L. 1994. Limitless Leadership. Executive excellence. Dec 11(12): 17-18.