



## A JOURNEY IN SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

—LARRY C. SPEARS

As always, I start by commending our contributing authors in this journal. In this tenth volume of the journal, I want to celebrate ten years of excellence and deep devotion to the principles of servant-leadership as a way of life. The articles in this issue are truly engaging and offer a compelling vision of servant-leadership. They represent the diverse thinking of people from around the world, and a powerful landscape of human insight that deeply inspires me. For a journal to accomplish a decade of integral work in any field is a true honor. For a journal to accomplish such work in the context of servant-leadership is to me an important confirmation of the wisdom, freedom, health, autonomy, and service that are the foundation of a more whole and healthy world.

### REFLECTIONS ON MY TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR JOURNEY IN SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

This year (2015) marks my twenty-fifth year of professional and personal focus on servant-leadership. In 1990, I was appointed CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, where I served until 2007. In 2008, I established the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership, where I continue to focus part of my energies. In 2010, I was honored to be appointed Servant-Leadership Scholar for Gonzaga University's School for Professional Studies, where I joyfully devote myself to designing and teaching courses in servant-leadership, and to working with Shann Ferch on this *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.

My work over the past quarter-century has allowed me to wear many hats—among them, those of author, chief executive, teacher, editor, consultant, and speaker. I have learned much in these roles, and I have done my best to be of service to others and to the servant-leadership movement.

As I take a moment to reflect on my experiences since 1990, I find myself thinking that it has been my work as editor and teacher that has given me the deepest sense of personal satisfaction and service in servant-leadership.



As editor, I have had the privilege to co-create many books with numerous writers-and-editors. Those books include

- *Conversations on Servant-Leadership: Insights on Human Courage in Life and Work* (Shann Ferch, Larry Spears, Mary McFarland, and Michael Carey, editors; 2015, SUNY Press)
- *Fortuitous Encounters* (Paul Davis and Larry Spears, editors; 2013, Paulist Press)
- *The Spirit of Servant Leadership* (Shann Ferch and Larry Spears, editors; 2011, Paulist Press)
- *Within Your Reach* (by Bill Bottum; edited by George SanFacon, Dorothy Lenz, and Larry Spears; 2010, Lulu Publishing)
- *The Human Treatment of Human Beings* (by John Donnelly; edited by Paul Davis and Larry Spears; 2009, Scanlon Leadership Foundation)
- *Scanlon EPIC Leadership* (Paul Davis and Larry Spears, editors; 2008, Scanlon Leadership Foundation)
- *Practicing Servant-Leadership: Succeeding Through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness* (Larry Spears and Michele Lawrence, editors; 2004, Jossey-Bass)
- *The Servant-Leader Within* (by Robert K. Greenleaf; edited by Larry Spears, Hamilton Beazley, and Julie Beggs; 2003, Paulist Press)
- *Servant Leadership* (by Robert K. Greenleaf; edited by Larry Spears; 2002 Silver Anniversary edition, Paulist Press)
- *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership in the 21st Century* (Larry Spears and Michele Lawrence, editors; 2002, John Wiley & Sons)
- *The Power of Servant Leadership* (by Robert K. Greenleaf; edited by Larry Spears; 1998, Berrett-Koehler)
- *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (Larry Spears, editor; 1998, John Wiley & Sons)
- *Seeker and Servant* (by Robert K. Greenleaf; edited by Anne Fraker and Larry Spears; 1996, Jossey-Bass)
- *On Becoming a Servant Leader* (by Robert K. Greenleaf; edited by Don Frick and Larry Spears; 1996, Jossey-Bass)
- *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's Theory of Servant-Leadership Influenced Today's Top Management Thinkers* (Larry Spears, editor; 1995, John Wiley & Sons)



Having been appointed as Servant-Leadership Scholar at Gonzaga University, I also have the honor of serving as a faculty member. Since 2008 I have had the privilege of teaching some fifty courses—many of these are sections of MA-ORGL 530 (Servant-Leadership), wonderfully designed by John Horsman. Last year, John Horsman and I codesigned a new course for the MA-ORGL program, titled Listen, Discern, and Decide, which I am also now teaching. In addition, with the support of Shann Ferch and others in the Doctoral Program in Leadership Studies (DPLS), I have designed and taught a half-dozen DPLS courses on servant-leadership. All of this has allowed me the true honor of getting to know hundreds of Gonzaga students since 2008. I have learned so much, from so many.

The roles of editor and teacher involve a deep collaboration with others—both serving and leading. At this twenty-five-year mark, I feel humbled and energized by the opportunities that I have been given, and I offer my thanks and appreciation to everyone.

#### THE CHOICE IS OURS

During the past twenty-five years, one of the comments I have heard on occasion is, “Servant-leadership is a great idea, but it could never succeed in MY workplace.” This is sometimes said of what the speaker describes as a cutthroat business environment. My own response is to say that servant-leadership can work anywhere. It only requires that the understanding, desire, and personal commitment be present in the hearts and intentions of those individuals who seek to practice it. And I add that there are plenty of corporate examples of servant-led institutions that are also doing very well in comparison to their closest competitors. Large companies such as Starbucks, the Men’s Wearhouse, Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, and others are examples of successful businesses that practice servant-leadership.

I also have heard it said that servant-leadership could never work in the military or in paramilitary organizations such as police and fire departments where hierarchical structure is paramount. I disagree. In fact, I believe it is remarkably easy to find servant-leaders in many places in the military and in police and fire departments. Service to others, and the leadership that comes out of that desire to serve others, is at the heart of what attracts many to these institutions. There are numerous examples of servant-leaders in these kinds of organizations—organizations where chain of command is also important, and where life-and-death decisions are made.



It is helpful to understand that servant-leadership starts within each of us, and that it is primarily a personal philosophy and commitment that we can choose to practice in any environment. If we understand Greenleaf's best test as the fundamental understanding of servant-leadership, then it becomes clear that the choice to seek to practice servant-leadership is ours to make, and no one else's. Our personal embracing of servant-leadership does not require the approval of our supervisor or our organization's chief executive. It does not require organizational buy-in. We do not need anyone's personal permission to do our best to act as a servant-leader. The choice is ours.

Another helpful insight may be to state the obvious: there are no perfect servant-leaders, and no perfect servant-led institutions. Institutions are led by people, and people are imperfect. Even the best-intentioned servant-leaders in training (and we are all of us, always, servant-leaders in training) will at some point in time do or say something that we ourselves regret. At those times, the best thing to do is to apologize sincerely and to seek to learn from it. In other instances, someone else may become angry with us for a decision we are convinced was the right one and made with the greater good in mind. When that happens, and if we are aware of it, the opportunity is there to try to promote healing by reaching out to one another. Of course, the effective use of foresight, listening, and other servant-leader characteristics can often help us to avoid this sort of thing in the first place.

Servant-leadership isn't pie-in-the-sky kind of work. It requires commitment and dedication. Yet for those who feel called to it, it makes all the difference in the world. The choice is ours.

"The servant-leader is servant first. . . . The best test of servant-leadership is, are those within the organization 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?" (Robert Greenleaf)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry C. Spears is president and CEO of the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership ([www.spearscenter.org](http://www.spearscenter.org)) and serves as Servant-Leadership Scholar at Gonzaga University. He is the editor and contributing author for a dozen books on servant-leadership, including the critically acclaimed *Insights on Leadership* and *Fortuitous Encounters*. Larry serves as senior advisory editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.