



## WHAT CAN HUNTER-GATHERERS TEACH US ABOUT SERVANT-LEADERSHIP?

—RICHARD LEIDER AND LARRY C. SPEARS

If the doors to perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man  
as it is, infinite.

—William Blake

For most humans living today, it is hard to imagine life without mobile phones and tablets. Every day we all face endless choice points. As our technologies accelerate the speed and frequency of choices coming at us, the faster we feel compelled to respond to each choice. We can be overwhelmed by the emails, tweets, phone calls, text messages, voice mails, all piled on top of the basic life we live each day.

However, on the scale of human history, the Internet and mobile devices are recent inventions. Until just 10,000 years ago, we lived in small groups, hunting and gathering. While that life might seem to be ancient, it is also the life for which our bodies and brains are adapted. We have something to learn from people who still live as we did for most of our evolutionary history.

### THE ORIGINAL SERVANT-LEADERS

The early origins of the Hadzabe hunter-gatherer tribe qualify them as one of the oldest peoples on Earth, and perhaps as the original servant-leaders. They have been living in the Lake Eyasi basin in northern Tanzania for thousands of years.

What can the Hadzabe teach us about servant-leadership? We are not suggesting that we romanticize the lives of hunter-gatherers or shape our lives like them. We couldn't do that even if we tried. We are suggesting, however, that we can learn from them. For they have thrived—and they still survive by living their lives with a servant-leader mindset. The Hadzabe provide a living glimpse of the evolution of servant-leadership.



## SHARING CULTURE

Interestingly, the Hadzabe “sharing culture” with its leaderless structure is at odds with the power required to maintain control of their land rights in the face of increasing external pressures. With their strong cultural ethos, which requires sharing for the common good, they find it difficult to find leaders among them who will lead publicly.

Perhaps this is the conundrum of leadership today. Progress requires power, and also sharing for the common good. How do we blend the two? Servant first, leader second may be the answer. The Hadzabe are a living example of that blend.

Robert Greenleaf, the father of servant-leadership, defined servant-leadership in this way: “The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

The Hadzabe embody the notion that “the servant-leader is servant first.” In fact, they consider it bad for anyone to try to control others or to have more power or higher status than others. Although camps may be named after a well-known and respected elder, that individual has no more authority than anyone else in that camp.

## ANCIENT WISDOM

The hunter-gatherer exists in all of us. For 90 percent of human history we were almost exclusively hunter-gatherers. Living in our technology-dependent world does not mean that we have totally severed our hunter-gatherer roots and lost the wisdom learned from all those millennia of survival. One does not erase the souls of one’s ancestors. Even if we no longer actively use those skills for daily survival, the untapped wisdom remains within us. Could it be that we could reclaim the things we have forgotten and need to relearn today?

Hadzabe wisdom is grounded in a worldview that requires “sharing” as the essential path to surviving. The Hadzabe don’t recognize any leaders or any one person as having more power or influence than others. And even though they have clearly defined gender roles, men and women in their society participate equally in decision-making. Their traditional “immediate return” economy



supports this equality, because all people from an early age have the skills and knowledge to get what they need each day. To be a Hadza means that if someone asks for something, they have no option but to share. It is considered bad to hoard or accumulate more than what one needs. Everyone shares. Everyone serves. Everyone leads. Everyone is a servant-leader.

#### EVOLUTION OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

While our focus in this essay is on servant-leadership and the hunter-gatherer Hadzabe tribe of Tanzania, other significant concepts and people serve as important links in the evolution of servant-first, leader-second. Chief among these influences are *ubuntu* and *harambee*.

#### *Ubuntu and South Africa*

Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, your salvation is my salvation.

—African saying on *ubuntu*

The South African word *ubuntu* means that a person is a person through his or her interaction with others. *Ubuntu* expresses mutuality, compassion, and a desire to build communities that are just and caring. *Ubuntu* is an idea that goes deep in African culture. It conveys the importance of interdependence. Respect for differences among people is an important part of *ubuntu*.

#### *Harambee and East Africa*

Like *ubuntu*, *harambee* is deeply grounded in African beliefs about the importance of helping one another and building community. Many East Africans view *harambee* as a way of life, much as we view servant-leadership as a way of life, a way of being. It is the embracing of *harambee* that has helped to hasten development in Kenya in recent decades. *Harambee* self-help projects have inspired the building of hundreds of schools, health centers, nursery centers, and bridges as well as hundreds of miles of rural roads.



Nelson Mandela and the Xhosa tribe are examples of *ubuntu* in practice in South Africa. Mandela's living testament as a powerful African servant-leader has resulted in a growing interest in *ubuntu* and servant-leadership. In a similar vein, Bishop Desmond Tutu is well known for his emphasis on being a servant first, a leader second. We view these and other African leaders as exemplary servant-leaders. Whether we call it *ubuntu*, *harambee*, or *servant-leadership* matters less than the fact that those who embrace these beliefs have much to teach us about life and leadership today.

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond writes that after thirty-three years of working with hunter-gatherers, "They impressed me as being on the average more *intelligent*, more *alert*, more *expressive*, and more *interested* in things and people around them than the average European or American is."

Who among us would not like to be more intelligent, more alert, more expressive, and more curious? Let's consider that sentence, one word at a time.

#### "Intelligent"

Why are they smarter? Diamond writes that part of it is the combined result of their lifestyle and the process of natural selection, which would promote genes for intelligence by weeding out those not quite savvy enough to make sense of what was going on in the world around them.

First, they are "walking encyclopedias" of natural history. Observations by close observers of the Hadzabe, such as David (Daudi) Peterson of Dorobo Safaris in Tanzania, show that they know the names and have detailed knowledge of hundreds of plants, birds, and animals and their characteristics, distribution, and potential uses. In his seminal book, *Hadzabe: By the Light of a Million Fires*, Peterson details this wisdom and intelligence. Your observational skills mean living or dying. You live in the now, since today's survival is the primary focus of your day.

Second, they live a sustainable lifestyle. Because they know with certainty that each day will provide them with food from their natural environment, they don't need to store food for tomorrow. They share whatever they have today with everyone. But to ensure that they have enough for tomorrow, they live a seminomadic life that allows the land to recover in



their wake. When they return, they find the land healthy and plentiful once again. They serve each other and they serve the land around them. Each person is significant to the survival of all.

Robert Greenleaf writes, “[T]his takes a special view of the self.” “The sustaining feeling of personal significance is important. It comes from the inside. I am *not* a piece of dust on the way to becoming another piece of dust. I am an instrument of creation, unlike any that has ever been or ever will be. So is each of you. No matter how badly you may be shaken, no matter how serious the failure or how ignominious the fall from grace, by accepting and learning you can be restored with greater strength. Don’t lose this basic view of who you are.”

### *“Alert”*

The Hadzabe wake up every day alert to the reality that time is precious and limited; they live close to life and death. They live in the present moment. Richard notes in his many visits with the Hadzabe that they appear to experience more joy in a day than some of us do in a lifetime. Living in the present brings forth an infectious presence that is passed on to the children, who become equally alert. They are fulfilling time, not filling time.

### *“Expressive”*

The Hadzabe are the “original affluent society.” They are satisfied with few possessions in the material sense. They spend time gathering what is needed today. Such a worldview leaves time for creative expression and for community. To be a Hadzabe is to serve the tribe and the survival of the community through sharing. Servant-leadership is in their DNA.

Greenleaf once gave a talk about expressiveness before the faculty and students of Barnard College. Years later, his talk was turned into an essay titled “Education and Maturity,” in which he wrote the following:

A friend of mine in Madison, Wisconsin, tells a story about Frank Lloyd Wright many years ago while at his studio, Taliesin, was at nearby Spring Green. Mr. Wright had been invited by a women’s club in Madison to come and talk on the subject, “What is art?” He accepted and appeared at the appointed hour and was introduced to speak on this subject.



In his prime, he was a large impressive man with good stage presence and a fine voice. He acknowledged the introduction and produced from his pocket a little book. He then proceeded to read one of Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tales, the one about the little mermaid. He read it beautifully and it took about fifteen minutes. When he finished he closed the book, looked intently at his audience, and said, "That, my friends, is art," and sat down.

Implicit in the above passage is the idea that storytelling is a powerful means of expressiveness, for understanding one another. We need to relearn the power and art of storytelling and its relevance for thriving and, ultimately, surviving. The Hadzabe are great storytellers. They make sense of the world through storytelling. With no alphabet or writing, the upside is that you develop a better memory, you do more storytelling. You become a keener listener, and you speak from the heart of experience.

### *"Curious"*

Curiosity is a constant in Hadzabe life. Hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly changes powerfully modify Hadzabe lives, as do the wind and waves on the earth's surface. The seasonal nature of resources requires and encourages curiosity. Survival itself forces constant scouting and curiosity.

In *Education and Maturity*, Greenleaf talks about what he called his long "wilderness" period in which he sought resources outside of himself. He writes:

I looked for an "answer" to the normal frustrations of life (frustration used in the sense of the blocking of motives to which one cannot make a constructive response). Good years went by. No answers came. It took a long time for me to discover that the only real answer to frustration is to concern myself with the drawing forth of what is uniquely me. Only as what is uniquely me emerges do I experience moments of true creativity; moments which, when deeply felt, temper the pain of long periods of frustration that are the common lot of most of us and give me the impulse and the courage to act constructively in the outside world.



Curiosity may seem ordinary, but it is an extraordinary thing. A curious mindset shifts the way we see, the way we choose, and ultimately, the way we live. That's something we can definitely learn from.

#### THE BEST TEST

Intelligence. Alertness. Expressiveness. Curiosity. These four traits of hunter-gatherer life resonate deeply with Robert Greenleaf's insights into what it takes to become a mature human being, and ultimately a servant-leader. The Hadzabe embody "the best test" in the way that they honor servant first, leader second.

Greenleaf concluded his talk at Barnard College and his essay on *Education and Maturity* by sharing the following story:

I had a dream—a big dream. I've only had four or five big dreams in which I came sharply awake realizing that something important had happened and remembering enough so that I could reconstruct it in detail.

It is a beautiful day and I am in a lovely woods on level ground in which there is a labyrinth of paths.

I am riding a bicycle through these paths. In my left hand I hold a map of these paths by which I am guiding my journey. I am riding rapidly and buoyantly as I follow my map. There is a delightful certainty about it.

Suddenly there is a gust of wind and my map blows out of my hand. As I come to a stop, I look back and see it flutter to the ground. It is picked up by an old man who stands there holding it for me. I walk back to get my map.

When I arrive at the old man he hands me, not my map, but a small round tray of earth in which are growing fresh grass seedlings.

#### WISDOM CAUGHT, NOT TAUGHT

All Hadzabe children are "seedlings." They are given attention and cared for from birth by all members of a bush camp. The Hadzabe never punish young children and rarely punish older children; rather, they let them learn



by experiencing. Because they give children much freedom and because they participate in all activities from an early age, their children are independent choice-makers much earlier than in most societies. They become mature—intelligent, alert, expressive, and curious—at a very early age.

The wisdom of both Robert Greenleaf and our hunter-gatherer ancestors teaches us much about servant-leadership today. The wisdom exists so deeply in our memories and psyches that it cannot always be taught. But it can be “caught.” We need to recall more of our ancestral intelligence, alertness, expressiveness, and curiosity, to survive and thrive. The Hadzabe, and Robert Greenleaf, continue to have much to teach us about servant-leadership, and about surviving and thriving in the 21st century.

#### SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The late Stephen Covey spoke of “sharpening the saw” as one of the seven habits of highly effective people. If we apply the idea of sharpening one’s saw to that of developing our intelligence, what are some things that you might do to develop your intelligence (intellectual, emotional, spiritual)?

For the Hadzabe, *alertness* has a lot to do with living in the present moment. Do you live in the present moment, or do you tend to spend considerable time either dwelling on the past or contemplating the future? What steps could you take to center yourself more often in the present moment?

Allowing time for creative *expressiveness* and building community is also key to the Hadzabe way of life. Do you allow time for building community and for your own creative expression? If you think that is also important for you, what might you do to make or increase time for your own self-expression and spending time with others?

*Curiosity* shifts the way we see, the way we choose, and ultimately, the way we live. Are you curious about your world and the larger world? What simple things might you do to make curiosity more of a focal point in your life?

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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