



ENLIGHTENED LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING, TROUBLED WORLD

—GEORGE PATRICK MURPHY

One of the more positive responses flowing from the global economic, ethical, political, and spiritual crises that have challenged social architecture over the past thirty years has been the gradual emergence of a new leadership paradigm. The servant-leadership movement has gone mainstream. It now represents a powerful alternative guiding leadership philosophy embraced by an increasing number of leaders from within the for-profit, nonprofit, governmental, and professional arenas. I believe that the fundamental benefits inherent in the theory and practice of servant-leadership represent an exciting opportunity for leaders to develop and enhance their leadership efficacy as they seek to enable the people and organizations they serve to survive and flourish, even in the face of challenging, rapidly changing times. The concepts inherent in the philosophy and theory of servant-leadership are easy enough to grasp on an intellectual basis. However, personally integrating its key tenets and successfully leading the institutional, organizational, and cultural shifts required to adopt them requires extensive interior assessment, time, effort, creativity, and foresight on the part of enlightened individuals who fully embrace the spirit of selfless contribution to a good beyond their own self-interest. The journey to becoming an authentic servant-leader promises to be a richly transformative and rewarding endeavor for those possessing the insight, courage, and stamina to chart new courses of action for themselves and those whom they have the privilege of leading.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS A GUIDING PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLE

The founding father of the servant-leadership movement, Robert K. Greenleaf, provided the scholarly foundation for understanding this rapidly advancing contemporary leadership theory. A visionary, Greenleaf (2002) captured the



essence of the underpinning philosophy of the servant-leader when he wrote more than thirty years ago:

The servant leader is servant first. . . . 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 . . . is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (6, emphasis original)

Ramsey (2006, 113) further captured the spirit of servant-leadership when she quoted Laub (1999), who explained:

Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led, and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual.

Ramsey elaborated further, writing,

The broadening view of servant-leadership embeds holistic leadership practices not only in the corporate boardroom, but in social and political interactions that rely upon, even demand, the need for people who are dedicated to making the world a better place for all to live. (113)

Since the 1980s, the philosophy of servant-leadership has gained widespread and growing acceptance. It has merited advocacy from mainstream leadership studies leaders, noted scholars, popular writers, and distinguished practitioners. Warren Bennis, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley, Parker Palmer, Larry Spears, and Max De Pree, to name a few, have all endorsed and promoted the philosophy of servant-leadership. All cite the visionary acumen of Robert Greenleaf and reflect the power of incorporating the tenets of this leadership theory into modern-day leadership practice within for-profit, not-for-profit, institutional, governmental, and organizational contexts. Clearly, the philosophy and practice have caught on and are gaining momentum. Not only does servant-leadership have wings, but also its proponents and organizational “converts” are



rapidly emerging as front-runners in their respective fields. Within the world of business, an increasing number of enterprises have “adopted servant-leadership as part of their corporate philosophy or as a foundation for their mission statement” (Spears and Lawrence 2004, 17).

The servant-leadership movement did not burst on the scene as a quick fix, leadership theory “flavor of the month.” By definition and design, its personal and organizational inculcation involves fundamental change in the hearts, minds, and souls of its adherents. Making such deep and profound change is time-intensive hard work, not for the faint of heart. Changing beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and management practices is a transformative process; for that reason, effecting such change requires a new vision coupled with energetic championing and inspiration. In short, it requires the inspired leadership of self and others.

Highly successful enterprises such as the Toro Company, Synovus Financial, Zeno Group, the Vanguard Group, Costco, the Men’s Wearhouse, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, TDIndustries, and ServiceMaster have (or until recently, had) visionary, principle-driven leaders and like-minded leadership team members who are (or were) staunch advocates of advancing the philosophy and practice of servant-leadership (although not all of them use the term) as their guiding operating platform for culture building and operating their thriving businesses. Likewise, a growing number of successful, best-in-class, smaller, less-visible enterprises have leaders who practice the tenets of servant-leadership in their business organizations.

The traits exhibited by these leaders match those in Larry Spears’s (2004) summation, gleaned from Greenleaf’s works, of the ten key characteristics of servant-leaders. Spears cites listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people, stewardship, and building community as common traits exhibited by efficacious servant leaders (Spears and Lawrence 2004, 13–18). Based on my studies of servant-leadership and my own experience as a business and not-for-profit leader, I would add forgiving, restoring, and focusing relentlessly on customer and clientele needs to Spears’s list of characteristics required to be an authentic and effective servant-leader. From my perspective, the value of having such a list is that it can be invaluable in supporting a leader’s attempts to build a holistic self and organization.

From my perspective, servant-leadership, with its inherent empowering, inclusive, collaborative, and liberating elements, is an approach whose time has arrived. It appears to me to be the prevailing leadership theory that best responds to the complex and rapidly changing business environments



in which we must navigate today. The fact that the aforementioned leading servant-leadership-oriented companies are emerging as business segment “winners” confirms my personal choice to adopt the servant-leadership model as the guiding leadership philosophy and culture-building cornerstone for the organizations for which I serve as a leader and mentor.

Servant-leadership not only “feels right”—that is, is consistent and compatible with my values, ethics, guiding principles, and leadership style—it also substantiates my belief that if companies do not adopt it, they will be vulnerable to competitive intrusions from progressive organizations that have done so. Additionally, they will have foregone a potentially significant opportunity to establish a significant competitive advantage and to establish healthy, thriving organizational cultures of integrity. But before a company can be run on servant-leadership principles, its leaders must passionately embrace the relevant thinking and serve as pioneers in championing service-first practices.

SELF-EXAMINATION, REFLECTION, AND DETERMINATION: THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD BECOMING A “LEADER FOR OTHERS”

A prerequisite to becoming an authentic and enlightened leader seeking to “serve first” is a cultivated, deep self-awareness. Business leaders of purpose, conviction, courage, and compassion are at peace with themselves and with those they serve. Self-examined leaders know who they are and which principles cannot be abandoned. Such leaders have engaged in internal wrestling regarding personal meaning, ethics, and purpose. These leaders appreciate their positive attributes. Conversely, honest, thorough, and sometimes painful self-assessment unveils these leaders’ shortcomings. Once they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they can nurture the former and mitigate the latter. Not until leaders have engaged in such self-analysis and conducted a deep and comprehensive moral assessment are they able to be of optimal service to those led.

I believe that individuals’ first step in becoming authentic and trustworthy servant-leaders is to achieve personal clarity regarding doing the right things for the right reasons. Leaders must conduct constant self-assessment regarding their innermost thoughts, biases, and feelings while endeavoring to become the best leaders possible.

After an intense level of moral, soul-searching assessment, a self-examined individual (and leader) may hypothetically query in advance



some of our projected responses to even the most challenging dilemmas and circumstances. These self-assessments and reflections may help us respond with personal integrity to situations and circumstances that later confront us. Some of these theoretical questions might be: What extremes would we go to ensure our very survival? What would we be willing to risk to preserve our integrity in regard to that which we intimately and passionately value (for example self-dignity, preservation of life, freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness)? To what degree would we be willing to endure pain, transgressions, suffering, oppression, and loss of self-respect with regard to the aforementioned noble values? What external forces and environments would cause us to abandon our previously held values and principles? How deep would our personal moral resolve be to remain fair, honest, respectful, responsible, loving, and compassionate if we found ourselves in the horrid conditions and circumstances so eloquently articulated by Wiesenthal (1976), Wiesel (2006), Frankl (2006), and other survivors of the atrocities of the Holocaust? When do we have a personally defined moral responsibility to stand up and resist the recognized oppression perpetrated against individuals, communities, and races? Do we choose to forgive our transgressors *as* we forgive those who trespass against us? Do we lead and choose to follow processes enabling unconditional restorative justice (as did Mandela), unconditional restorative justice (as practiced by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission), retributive justice (seen in the Nuremberg Trials of Germany), or retaliatory justice (as propagated by the Mafia and gangs)? What is our premeditated stance against wrongdoers who have violated our rights, either individually or as a community? Do we seek first that which is good in ourselves and others, or do we look for the bad? Do we seek to contribute to the well-being and benefit of others, or are we driven by our self-interest? In times of severe adversity and loss, do we retain our faith and trust in a higher power, or do we sever our spiritual relationships and lose our trust and faith in others?

We cannot help but wonder how we would respond if we were placed in such circumstances. Hypothetical self-assessment and reflection, spurred by education and exposure, help us test the clarity, depth, and intensity of our professed value and ethical systems. This type of self-analysis, though potentially painful, may give us intense and provocative insight into who we *really* are, thereby informing our self-knowledge. The juxtapositions give us insight into our true heart and, as Rabbi Moishe put it when speaking to Wiesel (2006, 5), into the “God within me.” The self-prediction of our responses, following



a self-review of our professed principles, values, and ethics, can also help us clarify our personal perspectives on the topics of forgiveness, restoration, and justice. Although ideally we will never have to experience atrocities and horrific scenes such as those experienced by victims of the Holocaust, or the evils of apartheid that gripped South Africa, or the oppression so prevalent in the Arab Spring, insights gained through such interior assessment can help an individual define and shape who he or she is, as a person and as a leader. As we challenge ourselves to formulate responses to our personal inquiries and seek to answer questions such as those listed previously, and to project corresponding responses, we move a step closer to understanding our own meaning and purpose in life. Do we view ourselves as good and worthy of the love of God and others, or as unworthy, perhaps even as bad persons in need of forgiveness, restoration, and perhaps redemption to become whole again? As we assess where we are on life's mysterious path, do we project the qualities of a decent or an indecent person? As Frankl (2006) wrote, "There are two races of men in this world, but only these two—the 'race' of the decent man and the 'race' of the indecent man. They are found everywhere; they penetrate into all groups of society" (86).

Throughout our lives, we have wonderful opportunities to learn and to experience personal growth flowing from our current and past encounters with the good and evil forces that confront us or are initiated from within. Our struggles, suffering, exposure to atrocities, and bouts with darkness all provide opportunities for self-discovery, healing, beneficial change, hope, and rebirth (Ferch 2011, 6, 7, 195, 199). Conversely, engagements and personal encounters with truth, love, justice, forgiveness, compassion, beauty, and joy also penetrate our human existence and serve to enlighten us and give us reason and purpose to live a full and rich life of meaning steeped in authentic service to others (Ferch 2011, 206, 208). I believe that in the final reckoning, who we are, assuming we desire to become whole, contributing, spiritual, and "others first" people, is greatly influenced by how we choose to deal with the darkness of evil and the light of goodness as they are, inevitably, cast upon us. Do we succumb to the harsh and sometimes repugnant forces that have shackled us and held us captive within the depths of our inner prison, or do we seek to escape and pursue new beginnings and vistas as we toil to regain our wholeness and well-being as we vigorously set out on a long climb toward the transcendental?

A study of servant-leadership provides a wonderful backdrop that enables us to gain informed perspective and to learn from the individuals and organizations, communities and nations that have experienced the harshest



depths of evil, as well as the freedoms and discoveries emanating from the heights of goodness. As we learn and apply our knowledge, we open ourselves to new expansive and examined possibilities in the formulation of our individual choices and responses to the forces of good and evil. Although our behaviors and actions may be influenced by circumstances beyond our control, I believe our choice of responses and attitudes remains within our control. This is the gift of free will and freedom of choice bestowed upon us by our creator. Perhaps, as Wiesel postulated, God tolerates evil because it paves a potential path to an even greater level of goodness.

In this paper, I will look back on the worst confrontation with a dark force I experienced in my thirty-five years in business as a manager and leader. The setting is a large business organization. After providing the personal and organizational systems' contextual background, I will recount how I viewed the challenges through the lens of the value system and ethics I subscribed to at that time in my life. I will then examine how, in the face of conflict inherent in the examined problem, I sought to maintain my personal integrity and to preserve the dignity of the people I was privileged to lead in an environment fraught with uncertainty, mistrust, anger, and fear, by describing my responses and corresponding actions. I then evaluate my life-giving responses (and lapses), reflecting the light of the new learning and insights gained thus far through study of servant-leadership. I share my self-critique while addressing the self-posed questions: Did I do enough? What more could I have done with the benefit of my recent discoveries and subsequent life learning? I will also examine recent examples of processes used in asking for and receiving forgiveness based on what I have studied in the doctoral program in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. Finally, I will summarize my thoughts and offer a recommendation, hopeful that I contribute to a sense of hope and optimism that, in me, stems from a belief in the overarching strength of the force of goodness to overpower evil.

PERSONAL CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEM UNDERSTANDING

As I commenced and advanced in my business career, an exercise I did in a graduate school class at the University of Southern California more than thirty-four years ago proved invaluable. We were asked to define our life goals: personal, professional, and spiritual. After identifying our guiding life



principles and core values, we were asked to write a fictional obituary and to note, in a sentence or two, how we wanted to be remembered after we were gone. My remembrance statement was: “He lived his life and conducted his business with integrity.” The aspirational values I selected were fairness, honesty, respect for others, responsibility for my actions, and always showing compassion and love for others. A strong work ethic, creativity, competitiveness, collaboration, and contribution were listed as my operative values. Some of my selected guiding life and professional principles were to treat everyone respectfully, be inclusive, be humble, and lead by example. On the spiritual front, I selected the three overarching goals of loving God with the entirety of my mind, body, and spirit; loving my neighbor as myself; and when harm to others is unavoidable, mitigating it to the extent possible.

As I discovered later, living and behaving in accordance with these values and principles severely tested my resolve and resilience as I dealt with the organizational business problem described in the following paragraphs. These ideals also proved to be the troth from which I would drink in order to maintain my equilibrium during the chaotic and difficult times ahead.

At the time I made my decision to pursue a business career, I had two lingering concerns. First, I was worried that I might not be able to maintain my values and live within the constructs of my principles, given the highly charged and often cutthroat world of big business; second, I wondered whether my recently developed and coveted people-first leadership style would be compatible with the realities of the proverbial mandate to “make the numbers at all costs” so pervasive in corporate cultures.

I had decided that working for a leading Fortune 100 Company would be the career path that would best allow me to play to my strengths. Successfully doing so would provide my wife and me with the optimum opportunity to raise our eventual family in agreeable environments while providing the lifestyle and professional achievements we desired. Also playing heavily into my early career decision was my aspiration to enjoy and excel at a job I could become passionate about. I also set out to prove to myself and to others that “good guys” could not only survive, but also flourish in the highly competitive and politicized world of big business. (At the time, I defined a “good guy” as a person notable for the way in which he or she accepted responsibility, exhibited good character, treated others with respect and compassion, and conducted business with integrity. In my mind, good guys also seemed to have a lot of fun and to enjoy full and active lives.)



The company I chose was the quality and innovative leader within its industry. Additionally, it represented what I believed to be a perfect personal fit in terms of my long-term career aspirations, while holding highly desirable enterprise values and having created a very positive, ethical culture. It also had an excellent reputation for having the best people and leadership in the sector. In addition, its growth prospects for the division for which I was recruited were excellent.

The enterprise clearly met the criteria I had identified while seeking the “the best possible company for me.” It would enable me to pursue my passion for business and to realize my dream of a long career of contribution and distinction, while fulfilling my need to make enough money to meet my long-term financial objectives.

BUSINESS PROBLEM CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

After early career success I advanced quickly, and the company seemed to take a special interest in me as a person while rewarding me with a series of rapid promotions and the continuing designation of being a “high-potential” associate. The company (particularly our commercial division) and I prospered and flourished for my first eighteen years of employment.

A benefit of being designated a “high-potential performer” at the company’s world headquarters was that the senior leadership served as volunteer mentors. In my case, both the CEO and the worldwide leader of my division acted as my mentors and role models. Both of these gentlemen were great teachers and promoters of personal growth and development—true servant-leaders. Looking back now, with the benefit of studying and understanding the philosophical underpinnings, key tenets, and characteristics of true servant “others first” leadership, and using Larry Spears’s (2004) ten characteristics of an authentic servant-leader as an evaluative standard, I would rate these executives as business servant-leaders of integrity. They consistently “talked the talk and walked the walk” exemplified in true servant-leadership (Spears and Lawrence 2004, 17). In addition, they were extremely competent, competitive, hardworking, and ethical businessmen who were quick to smile. I was honored to call them friends.

The CEO was forced to retire by the board of directors after serving more than twenty years; during the last ten of those years, he also served as chairman of the board of directors. The salient reasons cited by the board, when announcing the decision to force retirement, centered on the CEO’s



documented deficiencies in not leading a reversal of the two-year cascading financial performance trend, his inability to “right-size” the company via the failed execution of multiple “restructuring” efforts, and his failure to deliver the targeted return-on-investment ratios associated with a multibillion-dollar capital expenditure program designed to expand the capacity of one of the corporation’s highly profitable but underperforming divisions. The board members had decided it was time to bring in a proven, restructuring type of CEO. They recruited and chose a highly publicized, ruthlessly successful restructuring specialist CEO to “save” the company. Wall Street responded immediately and favorably. Our stock price quickly began to rise. Clearly, the board had made the right decision from the perspective of shareholders.

For weeks following the tenured CEO’s “retirement,” a sense of anger, loss, denial, and uncertainty about the future seemed to preoccupy the minds of all 33,000 global employees. These feelings and emotions were particularly manifested among the more than 1,600 dedicated loyalists (including me) who were located at the worldwide headquarters.

On a sunny day in late April, following weeks of hearing nothing from our new CEO (although we had all been visited and challenged by his outside consulting group, who were “assisting” with his “reorganization work and evaluation of personnel”), the entire executive headquarters staff was summoned to the cafeteria for a mandatory thirty-minute meeting with our new leader. At the appointed hour, the new chairman-CEO entered from the back of the room, surrounded by what looked like a contingency of Secret Service agents and four sharply dressed senior executive types. He walked swiftly and confidently to a podium. Turning to face the crowd and without taking off his sunglasses, he boomed, red-faced, “You cowards should be ashamed of yourselves . . . how could you continue to work for such a weak, ineffective group of corporate leaders who ran this once fine company into the ground? If you had any guts or smarts, you would have left this dismal place a long time ago . . . I have just fired the whole worthless lot of them. Effective immediately, these fine gentlemen” (motioning to the four executive types) “will be running the show.” We learned later that the sole exception to the firing barrage was the worldwide leader of my division, the most profitable and fastest-growing business unit in the company’s portfolio of holdings.

In the days that followed, all remaining senior executives were asked to present their plans, budgets, and projected headcounts. In my case, I was leading (while serving as the North American, Commercial Division, Vice President of Sales and Channel Development) the National Sales



and Customer Service Group, which was responsible for close to a billion dollars of profitable revenue. This team was widely recognized as the best in the commercial industry. I had been recently “interrogated,” without notice, by a group of four sales and marketing “experts” from the new CEO’s “hired gun” consultancy. I was grilled and tested from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. that dismal day. At the conclusion of the interviews, I was told to “cease all hiring and await further direction.”

After two weeks, I was revisited by the consultant experts. They informed me that I had been selected to stay in my role, that my already aggressive financial forecasts and plans had been slightly modified upward, and that my already sparse operating budget was being reduced dramatically. I was also warned that I was expected by the CEO to make the numbers at an accelerated pace and with a 20 percent reduction in head count. I was told, confidentially, that the company was being “right-sized” from 33,000 people to a number below 20,000. Also confided was that the headquarters staff would be reduced from 1,600 to 485, and that I had been selected to implement the yet-to-be-developed “downsizing” plan for the entire USA Commercial Division Sales and Marketing U.S.A. Group—affecting hundreds of dedicated associates. I was devastated on hearing the “good news” and receiving their “congratulations.” How could I ever implement a plan that was sure to decimate and slowly lead to the demise of the company, division, and team that I cherished and had been an integral part of building? How could I carry out my assigned task while maintaining my personal integrity, while upholding my aforementioned values and living into my core principles? That challenge, and the surrounding challenge of having to create a process of retention and termination that passed “legal muster,” was a daunting proposition. The degree of difficulty in terms of meeting our new leader’s expectations was exponentially multiplied by the directive to execute my plan within three weeks—or “suffer the consequences.” In the days and weeks that followed, I struggled, agonized, and lost a lot of sleep worrying about the job elimination and termination plan for which I was now accountable.

VALUE- AND PRINCIPLE-DRIVEN RESPONSE TO THE DOWNSIZING PROBLEM

How could I maintain my valued integrity while leading the design and execution of the massive division downsizing initiative? This was a huge moral and ethical dilemma. From my perspective, the mandated downsizing was



arbitrary, cold-blooded, and unjustified. It did not reflect the reality that our division had for years exceeded our plan expectations and had grown at a pace that more than justified the capital outlays the corporation had bestowed on us. I decided that, given my leadership role and my values, I had a moral and ethical responsibility to aggressively challenge and confront the new corporate leadership team and the hired-gun consultants with a logical, data-supported presentation that justified our division's being granted an exemption, or at least a significant reduction in the size and scope of the reduction numbers. The consultants quietly listened to my exemption request. At the conclusion of my presentation, they stated that they had already taken these factors into consideration when setting the reductions and that the figures were not negotiable. The 20 percent headcount reduction would remain in effect. They went on to remind me how lucky I was. Other divisions that performed less well were facing up to a 40 percent personnel reduction mandate. I was once again devastated. I was also told by the CEO that if I did not feel up to the task, he would bring in someone who would deliver the intended results. I picked up my materials and slowly, almost blindly, walked down the long hallway back to my office. The initial battle to "save" my beloved division had been waged. I had lost a fight I had no chance of winning.

After a night of reflection (clouded by moments of anger, spite, and self-pity, along with thoughts of resignation), I decided that it would be irresponsible of me to abandon my team and the great people who had been so dedicated to the company and supportive of me personally over the years. I owed it to them, and to myself, to do all that I could to preserve the goodness of our division's legacy. This became my driving professional purpose. That night, I concluded that the right thing to do was to remain in my role. Staying with the company was the first, most essential choice I had to make as I prepared to once again face the "Slasher CEO" force of evil. I committed to myself that, once again, I would seek to prove that the "good guys" could rise above it all and emerge victorious in the long term. I decided to use my gained knowledge of how things were really done at the headquarters and in the marketplace to do everything in my power to preserve the nucleus of what had made us so special as an organization. "Survive and thrive" became my inner, and soon my external, message. I would rally my team with a vision of hope and a tangible strategy that showed that a "good life after the war" was our destiny.

The first plank on the plan was to retain our corporate "top performer" status. The rest flowed from there. I reasoned that great results, achieved



in spite of the siege, would be our salvation. Meeting the inflated business performance targets would greatly enhance our collective chances of survival. Doing so would also allow us to emerge in a future position of strength, regardless of the corporate environment we found ourselves in. I was reminded of the old adage, “What does not kill you makes you stronger.” The words took on new meaning that night and in the ensuing months. With these thoughts swirling and flowing, I noticed that creative thoughts began to surface (although slowly at first), and I began to see fresh new possibilities once again. My attitude and mood also began to improve as my newly defined purpose became clearer and served as a guide for my ensuing actions.

Over the following days, I calculated, after conducting a little research on the CEO and his self-appointed position as the dean of the Restructuring CEO Academy, that once the restructuring had taken place, he and his “merry men” would grab their spoils and move on to the next unsuspecting enterprise whose board had decided that what was needed was a quick restructuring “fix.” It seemed to me that this was how the guy got his “high.” He was good at it, and he was personally banking tens of millions of dollars in short order. I reasoned that if we could band together and protect each other, we would outlive the CEO and survive to rise again in glory. I made a commitment to myself: I would design a plan and execution strategy that would not only deliver the numbers but would do so in a way that reflected my (our) values and be carried out within the context of my centered principles. This commitment set the stage for my team’s work in executing the mandated downsizing with as much compassion and empathy as possible under the circumstances. We would treat those being affected with respect, trying to minimize the negative impact on each individual and his or her family. We would also do everything in our collective power to ensure that each individual came out of the downsizing process in the most advantageous position possible.

The first step in orchestrating the restructuring plan was to define a new organizational structure that ideally would support the deliverance of the short-term earnings objectives while ensuring the viability of our newly minted longer-term strategic plan. Once this task was complete, we could legally begin the selection and rehiring process that provided the human resources (within the allowable headcount allocation numbers) needed to deliver the forecasts.

My team did masterful work in helping me shape and finalize a winning, legally approved plan in less than two weeks. Concurrent with this



work I and my very capable personal assistant undertook a clandestine effort that began the distasteful outplacement process in the first move toward what we knew would be an immediate downsizing of our organization.

I knew we would have to orchestrate outplacement encounters at four regional and twenty-six district office locations. Working independently, and with the help of the district and regional administrative assistants, we booked the hotels and made the other logistical arrangements to facilitate individual outplacement service engagements with the yet-to-be-contracted professional firms who specialized in such work. I reminded myself at the time that we were firmly committed to orchestrating what would become known as the “Black Friday” event with as much fairness and compassion as possible. We would seek to preserve the dignity and self-respect of the affected individuals, in spite of the speed with which we were required to act given “the Rifleman’s” arbitrary three-week deadline for completing the “right-sizing” effort.

With the help of a skillful and empathetic corporate human resources manager, we made arrangements to hire the best corporate outplacement firms across the country. Direction was given to prepare “exit packages” that included full benefits and salary continuance for up to six months for every associate who would be affected. Since we had not yet completed the selection and hiring process to staff the new organization’s structure and did not know who would be retained or who would be downsized, exit packages had to be generated for everyone in the division in anticipation of the potential that the individualized packages might be needed to facilitate the anticipated termination encounters on “Black Friday.” This was a herculean task for our HR department, but they, agreeing that we should display the highest level of compassion possible, did yeoman’s work to support this effort.

I also insisted that no “mass firing” tactics be deployed. Every affected individual would be engaged by a company supervisor and a professional outsource service-provider skilled at helping people process the trauma of being “let go.” These folks were also skilled at developing individual, need-based job searches. We signed up for the platinum-level outplacement services for every eventual victim of the “right-sizing” process. This strategy would ensure that each individual received as much assistance as possible as we helped folks find a new employment home. To increase the care and respect offered when leading the termination sessions, I reminded all involved with carrying out the “right-sizing” activities that it could easily have been us on the receiving end of the termination engagement table.



During this planning phase, I also had a divine inspiration that could potentially serve to reduce our 20 percent reduction number to 10 percent. We could “transfer” our existing dedicated food-service sales and marketing personnel to an outside independent sales and marketing firm that specialized in providing services to the food-service industry. I next quietly negotiated a deal with the president of this national firm that would provide for the immediate hiring of the displaced associates—en masse. The salary and benefit package offered would replicate the one they currently enjoyed. The scope and nature of the work would remain largely unchanged. Retained company management would provide the specifications dictating the ongoing priorities and performance expectations for this group. The net effect on the displaced employees was that they would be terminated and then immediately rehired by the outsourcing firm at the same pay level, with approximately the same core benefits, that they were receiving at the time of the “right-sizing.” Their work responsibilities would remain essentially the same. All that materially changed was the name on their paycheck. These folks would also be told that the door would possibly be reopened for them to rejoin our company’s team as future opportunities arose.

This was my creative response to the big challenge as I sought to minimize the often traumatizing and emotionally demoralizing impacts of being “fired.” By successfully executing this plan, we were eventually able to achieve 50 percent of our headcount reduction objective while minimizing some of potential harm done to the folks involved. Another positive aspect of this approach was that our valued customers in the food-service sector would not be negatively affected by the inevitable diminishing of the service and representation levels that would result from the downsizing. We pulled this “salvation” strategy off with only minor problems, much to the delight of all involved. The “good guys” had registered their first minor victory, and nobody on the corporate leadership team knew that there had even been a skirmish. Confidence within the team was building.

There were some potential personal risks inherent in this plan, given the CEO’s explicit direction to refrain from hiring outside consultants accompanied by the threat of firing, on the spot, any manager who violated this directive, and the almost maniacal pleasure “the Rifleman” seemed to take in pulling the “firing” trigger. I could have been terminated for insubordination. From my viewpoint, the CEO operated without conscience, compassion, or regard for anything that transcended his huge ego and overt need for financial gain, power, public notoriety, and Wall Street adulation. He got



immediate action through the use of intimidation, coercion, and unilateral decision-making. “The Rifleman,” as his lieutenants called him, spread terror, stress, and anxiety wherever he ventured; his leadership style was all “command and control.” I decided to proceed with my plan in spite of the risk of being fired. I did so knowing that the potential benefits of the outsourcing decision overshadowed the risks. I also correctly assumed that the risk of being “caught” would be minimized as long as we met the headcount and earnings numbers. I reasoned with myself that the CEO’s radar would not reach the executional detail level of this plan. Fortunately, this was a good read on the situation. My plan went undetected by “the Rifleman” and his posse.

We ended up making both the headcount reduction and the financial growth objectives. I executed the downsizing successfully without compromising my core values. After a year of survival and good earnings performance, I was offered a promotion to become the division vice president of the Asia Pacific region and relocate to the company’s Hong Kong regional headquarters. My group’s North American “top performer” status was maintained and strengthened. I therefore jumped at the opportunity to take on an exciting new business challenge and at the chance to escape the prison-type atmosphere that had engulfed the worldwide headquarters. It had gotten so bad that the CEO had actually received death threats and hired a full-time bodyguard to be next to him at all times while at the office.

Eventually, the company was sold to a leading strategic buyer for more than \$9 billion. “The Dean of Restructuring” earned more than \$125 million in buy-out incentives and accelerated option grants. Our division was cited as being the “diamond” that drove the strategic buyer’s acquisition desires. Our new owners valued what we had done in the marketplace and recognized that it was our great people who had enabled our sustained success. They paid billions for this goodwill.

My family and I had moved to Hong Kong (the company’s Asia Pacific headquarters) months earlier. I was asked to remain with the “new” company and to serve as the Asia region vice president with accountability for the commercial business division and for creating the integration plans and future strategies that would ensure a bright future for the region and its customers and people. My beloved Commercial Group had found a new nurturing home within the new enterprise. Our “survive and thrive” vision had been realized without compromising integrity. Nonetheless, I felt an unhealthy amount of anger as a result of the callous actions and cold-hearted



tactics of the Rifleman and his henchmen while executing the downsizing plan and during the sale of the company.

FORGIVENESS APPLICATIONS

Before studying servant-leadership, I thought little about the benefits of a forgiveness process as a key component of one's personal or leadership philosophy or practice. The bitterness I felt toward the CEO and his ruthless tactics seemed just and reasonable. I found myself telling "despicable Rifleman" stories whenever the opportunity presented itself. Doing so only kept those wounds open and was unhealthy for me. I could feel the anger and anxiety return each time I publicly responded to the question: What was it like working for the notorious hatchet CEO? I often told my story with a sense of vengeance motivated by a strong need to seek revenge and retaliation.

Recently, after studying and learning about Nelson Mandela's brand of personal unconditional forgiveness, including his process designed to mend old wounds, as well as the application of restorative justice practiced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under Tutu's leadership in South Africa, I became intrigued by the often untapped power of asking and granting forgiveness and its healing properties and restorative benefits. For the past two years I have consciously chosen to regularly seek opportunities to practice forgiveness and to avail myself of the well-being associated with freeing myself from retaliatory revenge-seeking and then moving on to a more serene state of being.

My new insights have taught me that forgiveness and its supportive processes offer a great potential for unleashing personal healing and growth and for making me a better person and servant-type leader who possesses "the confidence and footing . . . to cross the chasm of personal growth to arrive at a life devoted to helping fulfill the highest priority needs of those being served" (Ferch 2011, 46). I learned that incorporating an authentic forgiveness process into our personal and communal lives holds the potential for liberation and rebirth. It holds the promise of lessening the burden of carrying the destructive feelings of fear, hatred, anger, revenge, embarrassment, guilt, isolation, despair, self-pity, and depression. It opens the door to conflict resolution. It opens the door to the restoration of fellowship, peace, and harmony. It has become apparent to me that if I am to avail myself of the power and corresponding benefits promised by the acts of seeking and



giving forgiveness, I must have a personal process for sensitizing myself to the need to invoke the power of forgiveness. My created process includes the following actions:

- Recognizing that my actions, comments, and behaviors may cause more harm, injustice, and damage to an individual than I may believe or intend.
- Recognizing that the act of seeking legitimate forgiveness often takes courage, time, and energy and is hard work—there are no quick fixes.
- Recognizing that if I feel that I have in some way caused harm to another, I should immediately and humbly admit and acknowledge my wrongdoing or offense and apologize for the *specific* act and request forgiveness. I should let the harmed consider my request, and if that person shares feelings, patiently listen and not become defensive or combative. The harmed person may need to know that I fully understand the depth and breadth of the pain I have caused before she or he grants forgiveness. I should avoid trying to justify my actions or omissions that I deem to be in need of forgiveness.
- Recognizing that the harmed may or may not find it in his or her heart to immediately forgive, and that it may take time to do so as the person engages in a personal healing process. If it's appropriate, I should acknowledge this to the harmed person and be patient.
- Offering to make amends, restitution, or reparations in an effort to make the offended person whole again. If forgiveness is granted I should express my appreciation and welcome the prospects of a mended relationship and the potential for a new and fresh beginning.
- Understanding that once forgiveness has been granted, I need to begin the conscious effort to free myself of the burden of worry, fear, and anxiety for my harmful acts. To continue to carry the burden of guilt and remorse is an impediment to my own healing and growth. This does not mean that I should forget my transgression, however. Remembering serves as a powerful reminder that I desire to never repeat the wrong action or offense.
- Recognizing, if I am the one who has been harmed, that until I forgive in my heart and mind, I may carry the unhealthy burden of anger, hate, contempt, revenge-seeking, and anxiety and therefore reminding myself daily to pray for the strength to forgive. A good reminder is the sage teacher who, when asked how often we should forgive one who has harmed us, replied, "Seventy times seven."



- Recognizing that I hold what could be an abusive power over those who have harmed me. By not forgiving, I may continue to inhibit their healing and potentially cause them lasting harm. By forgiving, I open the door to restoring and rebuilding a loving and cherished relationship full of new possibilities for mutual growth after healing.
- Being empathetic and sympathetic with my transgressors. I do not know, and cannot know, all that the other person has experienced in life, nor do I know his or her genetic makeup or family history and dynamics. All of these factors may have contributed to the commission of the offensive actions.
- Remembering that only God is perfect. As mortals, we will all find ourselves in a position of needing to seek forgiveness for our actions or evil thoughts and intentions. How would we hope to be received by another as we approached asking for forgiveness for the same or a similar offense? As they say in twelve-step programs, “Progress, not perfection, is the goal.”

I have learned that forgiveness requires a deliberate and sincere effort if the benefits described above are to be enjoyed. I have also discovered that being deliberate in incorporating forgiveness into my leadership repertoire has enabled me to be a more effective facilitator and resource in promoting a spirit of openness, reconciliation, and harmony within the organizations I serve.

Personal Forgiveness-Asking Example: Application of “The Process”

I recently had a chance to ask forgiveness in a business setting where I serve as chairman of the board. The CEO of this enterprise and I were spending three days together in one-on-one, all-day strategy and plan development sessions. We really enjoy each other’s company and have a lot of mutual respect for each other, but this was the first time we’d had the opportunity to work together in a creative session. At the end of the first day together, we were both emotionally and physically drained. We had a very spirited discussion that turned into a somewhat heated exchange. In my closing “argument” I needlessly “shattered” his position on a proposed business direction. It was a topic in an area in which I have a lot of knowledge and practical experience. He had very little experience with the subject being discussed, but he had recently spent a lot of time and energy developing what he’d thought was a great plan.



At the end of my tirade he conceded that he would have to go back to the drawing board. I had “won”; he had “lost.” I could tell that he felt deflated and defeated as a result. He immediately became silent and removed. A short time later, I drove him back to his hotel; he sat dejected and said very little during the ride. He simply said, “Thanks for the day and the ride” after we had arrived at his hotel. As I drove home, I reflected on our earlier exchange. I concluded that I had been insensitive and needlessly aggressive in our debate. I had wounded him with my passionate “attack” on his position. I had not given him the respect he had earned and deserved. I felt very uncomfortable with the thought that I might have damaged our emerging business and mentoring relationship. I also recognized that I might have negatively influenced our chances of having open and free-flowing exchanges over the next two days. My actions had jeopardized the potential quality of the outcomes we were anticipating would flow from our three days together.

I decided to apply my new forgiveness-asking process. Upon returning home, I drafted a personal email in which I thoughtfully identified what I believed to be the things I had done that might have caused him harm and that might have damaged our relationship going forward—particularly my overly aggressive attack on his position and my lack of sensitivity to his feelings. I closed by asking his forgiveness for my actions and asked that he try to not worry too much about the matter that night, adding that I had some additional reconciling thoughts that we could talk about the next day. I also told him that since it was late and we both were tired, he need not respond to my email; we could talk when we were together the next day.

When I picked him up early the next morning, the bounce had returned to his step. He greeted me with his usual warm smile and firm handshake. He told me how much he appreciated receiving my email and that he was really looking forward to the day ahead. The new process had delivered the hopeful benefits of restoration and produced a fresh start.

More recently, I have had two other forgiveness process applications in other work-related situations, including one in which I was able to accept a public apology and immediately grant a public “absolution” by downplaying the impact of the offending incident and commenting that we could all learn from the situation and move on in a positive manner. So far, the process indeed works for me!

I have decided that I will apply the process principles to rid myself of the burden of carrying the aforementioned feelings of anger, revenge, and ill



will that I have harbored against “the Rifleman” for many years. That work has just begun, but I already feel a sense of release and freedom as a result of acknowledging the need to grant forgiveness (in my heart), in an attempt to heal this very old, yet lingering wound. I look forward to experiencing the process as it once again “works its magic,” and to the emotional healing that will surely follow. I also acknowledge that this may be a complex process application of my forgiveness model and may include seeking the counsel of a trusted mentor as I seek resolution. I find that knowing I have the opportunity to free myself of needlessly carrying the unhealthy burden of anger and ill will, directed at an individual who has long since been removed from my life, is a liberating and exciting prospect.

ADVANTAGES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS A GUIDING PHILOSOPHY

As mentioned earlier in this article, there is an ever-expanding body of scholarly research and relevant case studies that validate the positive, often dramatic performance outcomes being enjoyed by organizations that have embraced the spirit and practice of servant-leadership in their mission, future vision, and organizational culture. Enlightened leaders, who have the gift of foresight and possess strong conceptualization skills, have increasingly recognized that successfully incorporating the tenets of servant-leadership into their personal leadership philosophy and their organization’s social hierarchy may foster cultures of integrity and achievement while building sustainable competitive advantage.

The servant-leadership movement is not without its skeptics and detractors. Often heard are the doubting voices of those who have not thoroughly studied, understood, or otherwise experienced the multiple benefits accruing to leaders and organizations that have adopted servant-leadership as an overarching way of life and as a guiding philosophy. I had an experience recently, during a live-time discussion, that confirmed some of the prevailing perceptions as articulated by a group of successful senior scholars and professionals. The fields of law, business, healthcare, education, and not-for-profits were represented at the gathering. The setting was the inaugural executive advisory board meeting of the fledgling Center for Transformative Ethical Leadership, convened in 2013.

As a founding director and lead author of the proposed vision, mission, and promise documents for the Center, I had expressed my belief that



servant-leadership, as an accepted and rapidly growing theory and practice in organizations around the globe, could be “a wonderful framework, philosophy, and cornerstone platform to be incorporated into our eventual curriculum, symposium, seminar, and distance-learning offerings.” I further spoke of the self-assessment and interior discovery work that a true servant must process, which enables that servant-leader to help others to grow, to become healthier, more discerning, collaborative, and self-governing . . . thereby inspiring them to be more likely to make greater contributions to “the cause” and produce positive outcomes sought by the people they serve.

Finally, I noted that “a person who has done the self-assessment work may emerge with a vision of greater contribution and a commitment to meeting the needs of others, as opposed to primarily seeking to satisfy his or her own egocentric drive for increased power, control, popularity, prestige, and wealth.” Some of the board members’ responses to my presentation, as I remember them, follow:

- “People in organizations today are under tremendous pressure to survive and meet financial commitments. Servant-leadership seems to be too ‘touchy-feely’ and vague to give people what they need.”
- “As a state-funded, public institution, we have to be careful not to appear to be preaching specific religious practices.”
- “I am not too sure this servant-leadership stuff fits into what we are trying to accomplish with our mission and vision.”
- “We will be trying to reach a lot of lawyers—they won’t necessarily relate to servant-leadership.”
- “Shouldn’t we be focused more on transformative leadership theory?”
- “I think we should focus more on professional ethics.”

I did not have time to offer countering thoughts or provide more insights into the theory, art, and practice espoused by the servant-leadership movement. I have, however, been thinking about how to better position the philosophy, theory, and practice of servant-leadership. My background in general management has taught me that if people are to remain interested in a new proposition, they must first “see” the advantages of investing the exploratory time and effort if they are to really understand that there is something in it for them. They must be intrigued by the offering, learn about the potential



benefits, and relate to how it helps them meet existing needs. They want to know the advantages that will accrue to them if they “buy in.” Sometimes positioning the advantages first captures their imagination, opening the door for further engaged dialogue. In hindsight, that is what I should have done in my presentation to the executive advisory board. Therefore, I have chosen to list the top benefits I believe accrue to leaders and organizations steeped in the philosophy of servant-leadership:

- Vibrant and flourishing cultures. Such cultures attract, retain, and develop the most talented, ethical, and committed people—the number-one asset of any successful organization, institution, or enterprise.
- Sustainable competitive advantage and better organizational outcomes. The company is likely to see increased associate morale, esprit de corps, communication, productivity, collaboration, participation, creativity, responsibility, and accountability.
- A culture of contribution. Everyone in the organization is inspired to make a personal optimal positive contribution to meet the needs of the organization, its people, and its stakeholders, clientele, and patrons, creating delight for all.
- Personal and organizational health and well-being: The organization harnesses the power of individual and organizational healing, optimism, relationships, and achievements while facilitating improved mental, physical, and spiritual wellness.
- An “as one” spirit. Such a spirit inspires alignment and movement as a unified community in pursuit of a common vision, mission, and promise to achieve commonly held outcomes while being guided by collectively held values and principles.

Once the potential outcomes accruing from the practice of servant-leadership are understood and appreciated, leaders and associates are more likely to wonder how they might avail themselves and their organization of these benefits. After all, what leader or organizational stakeholder would not want to enjoy the personal and organizational benefits flowing from successfully creating a culture of service and contribution?

In summary, the practice of servant-leadership represents an opportunity for everyone associated with an organization to experience positive engagements and relationships, a high level of achievement, and self-fulfillment.



Servant-leadership affords the potential for a pervasive, deep, and enduring level of happiness through its adherents' contributory efforts to develop and assist others and to build and to participate in organizations that prosper and flourish.

A Center that is focused on research and education and that is contributed to by respected scholars and servant-leader-type practitioners could help the theory and practice of servant-leadership to grow significantly. Cultures of integrity, ethical behaviors, and prosperity would proliferate. The above benefits can and must be further developed, elaborated on, substantiated, and refined to support the creation of such a Center.

CONCLUSION

This article offered an overview of servant-leadership before moving into a description of some personal experiences that were positively influenced by my understanding of the philosophy as manifested in practice in a for-profit business setting. It ends with a recommendation flowing out of that philosophy and those experiences: that a center or institute dedicated to research and education on the topic of servant-leadership be created in an effort to allow many of us to experience the benefits of living more authentic and meaningful lives while concurrently helping us to strengthen and sustain healthier, more resilient, and more prosperous organizations.

REFERENCES

- Ferch, S. (2012). *Forgiveness and power in the age of atrocity: Servant-leadership as a way of life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Frankl, V. (2006). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Vintage Books. (Originally published 1946.)
- Greanleaf, R. (2002). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness* (25th anniv. ed.). New York: Paulist Press.
- Ramsey, M. (2006). Servant leadership and unconditional forgiveness: The lives of six South African perpetrators. *International Journal of Servant-Leadership* 2, 113–139.
- Spears, L. C., and Lawrence, M. (2004). *Practicing servant leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tutu, D. (1997). *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.



- Tutu, D. (2004). *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our time*. New York: Random House.
- Wiesenthal, S. (1976). *The Sunflower*. New York: Schocken.
- Wiesel, E. (2006). *Night* (rev. ed.). New York: Hill and Wang. (Originally published 1960.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Patrick Murphy began his business career working for the Commercial Division of Scott Paper Company, which was acquired by Kimberly-Clark Corporation in 1995. He eventually assumed the role of North American vice president and corporate officer. After George retired from Kimberly-Clark he served as president and CEO of Technical Concepts Worldwide. George next became an operating partner, executive advisor, and portfolio company board member for several private equity firms. He is currently on the board of directors of Wausau Paper Corporation and is chairman of the board of Altitude Medical. Active in nonprofits, he serves as vice chairman of the Spitzer Center for Ethical Leadership and is founder of the proposed Center for Transformative Ethical Leadership. George received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Southern California, where he graduated with honors. He is currently enrolled in the doctoral program for Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. He and his wife of thirty-nine years, Bonnie, have three daughters and six wonderful grandchildren.