



THE LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY OF MARY PARKER  
FOLLETT (1868-1933)

— JUDY I. CALDWELL AND CAROLYN CRIPPEN

Who ever has struck fire out of me, aroused me to  
action which I should not otherwise have taken, he has  
been my leader.

— Mary Parker Follett

The current study used qualitative historical analysis methodology to investigate systematically whether there was evidence of servant leadership competencies in Mary Parker Follett’s work and life. Although Follett conducted her work approximately 100 years ago, many of her ideas, such as win-win, power-over versus power-with, and conflict resolution, would be considered leading edge today. In fact, Warren Bennis (2003) argued that, “Just about everything written today about leadership and organizations comes from Mary Parker Follett’s writings and lectures” (p. 178) and Peter Drucker (2003) referred to her as the “prophet of management” (p. 9). Despite the importance of her work to the study of leadership, management theory, business and education, no one



has yet formally investigated her leadership philosophy. This was the purpose of the present study. To this end, a biographical profile of Follett was created using primary and secondary sources. This profile was then examined for evidence of the seven pillars and 21 core competencies of servant leadership as outlined by Sipe and Frick (2009).

#### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MARY PARKER FOLLETT'S LIFE

Follett was born in 1868 in Quincy, Massachusetts to a middle class family (Tonn, 2003). As her parents had the resources, she was able to attend elite schools that many of her peers were not. At the age of 24 years, she enrolled in Radcliffe College: the women's branch of Harvard University. At Radcliffe, she received instruction from notable Harvard scholars, including William James and Albert Bushnell Hart. Her areas of study were economics, law, government, and philosophy. In 1898 she graduated from Radcliffe with the highest distinction. Her undergraduate paper, entitled *The Speaker of the House of Representatives*, earned her considerable acclaim and established her as a scholar (P. Graham, 2003).

From 1900 to 1908, Follett devoted her energies to social work in Roxbury, a poor neighbourhood of Boston. Realizing that people in the community needed a place to socialize, she introduced the idea of leaving schools open in the evening to serve as social gathering places. Eventually, the community centres began to include programs in vocational counselling



and placement. The project became national and Follett was viewed as a leader in the movement.

It was this work in the community that helped form her views on politics (P. Graham, 2003). In 1918, she published her second book, entitled *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government* (republished in 1998), which critically examined government, democracy, and the role of the community.

In 1924, Follett published her third book, *Creative Experience* (republished in 2013), which focused on group process and interaction. Follett believed that by working in groups, the inherent talents of every individual are tapped; that group dynamics release the full potential of the individual. According to Follett, the purpose of working in groups is to uncover the collective thought, and so the outcome of group processes is something ‘new’ that would not have otherwise been created.

During the 1920’s, some of Follett’s greatest followers were in the world of business. She was often asked to give lectures to businessmen and to serve as a business consultant. These lectures became some of her best-known works. In 1942, Metcalf and Urwick published a collection of her speeches posthumously in a book entitled *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* (republished in 2013).

In 1926, Follett’s long time companion, Isobel Briggs, died. Follett was devastated and moved to London for both work and companionship. In December 1933, while visiting Boston, she



became ill and died there in hospital. She was 65 (P. Graham, 2003).

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf (1904 -1990) coined the term servant leadership in his 1970 seminal essay entitled *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf (1970/1991) defined servant leadership as:

A 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, 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? (p. 15)

Although Greenleaf first introduced the philosophy of servant leadership, it was Larry Spears that continued Greenleaf's legacy by editing and coediting numerous books on servant leadership, and writing countless articles, essays, and reviews on the topic (Spears & Lawrence, 2004). Spears (1998, 2004) identified in Greenleaf's writings ten characteristics of servant leadership: a) listening, b) empathy, c) awareness, d) healing, e) persuasion, f) conceptualization, g) foresight, h) stewardship, i) commitment to the growth of others, and j) building community.



More recently, Sipe and Frick (2009) introduced seven pillars (and 21 core competencies) of servant leadership. They define a servant leader as “a *person of character who puts people first*. He or she is a *skilled communicator*, a *compassionate collaborator* who has *foresight*, is a *systems thinker*, and *leads with moral authority*” (p. 4). The seven italicized characteristics in the definition above refer to the seven pillars of servant leadership and they are, with their corresponding core competencies, presented below (from Sipe & Frick, 2009).

*Pillar I. A Person of Character – A Servant-Leader makes insightful, ethical, and principled decisions.*

1. Maintains Integrity
2. Demonstrates Humility
3. Serves a Higher Purpose (p. 15)

*Pillar II. Puts People First – A Servant-Leader helps others meet their highest priority development needs.*

1. Display a Servant’s Heart
2. Is Mentor-Minded
3. Shows Care & Concern (p. 34).

*Pillar III. Skilled Communicator – A Servant-Leader listens earnestly and speaks effectively.*

1. Demonstrates Empathy
2. Invites Feedback
3. Communicates Persuasively (p. 45).

*Pillar IV. Compassionate Collaborator – A Servant-Leader*



strengthens relationships, supports diversity, and creates a culture of collaboration.

1. Expresses Appreciation
2. Builds Teams & Communities
3. Negotiates Conflict (p. 77).

*Pillar V. Foresight* – A Servant-Leader imagines possibilities, anticipates the future, and proceeds with clarity of purpose.

1. Visionary
2. Displays Creativity
3. Takes Courageous, Decisive Action (p. 104).

*Pillar VI. Systems Thinker* – A Servant-Leader thinks and acts strategically, leads change effectively, and balances the whole with the sum of its parts.

1. Comfortable with Complexity
2. Demonstrates Adaptability
3. Considers the “Greater Good” (p. 130).

*Pillar VII. Moral Authority* – A Servant-Leader is worthy of respect, manages change effectively, and establishes quality standards for performance.

1. Accepts and Delegates Responsibility
2. Shares Power and Control
3. Creates a Culture of Accountability (p. 155).

Recently, numerous researchers have been investigating servant leadership characteristics to see if they are evident in the work and lives of prominent individuals. For example, Crippen and Nagel (2013) used the case study method to



investigate whether there was evidence of servant leadership in sport. The research participants were two elite NHL hockey players: Henrik and Daniel Sedin of the Vancouver Canucks. The researchers collected their data using face-to-face interviews. The participants' responses were then compared to Sipe and Frick's (2009) seven pillars of servant leadership. Based on their analysis, Crippen and Nagel (2013) concluded that the Sedin brothers did indeed demonstrate the seven pillars of servant leadership.

Negron (2012), using the case-study method, examined whether servant leadership characteristics were applicable in a for-profit setting, i.e., in a proprietary institution of higher education. Negron (2012) conducted the study as an interpretive biography. To this end, he carried out in-depth interviews with the research subject and 13 of his colleagues, peers and employees. He also examined secondary sources, including the research subject's curriculum vitae, records, and articles. In examining the themes that emerged from the data, Negron (2012) concluded that servant leadership can be effective in a proprietary institution of higher education, but that more evidence was required to determine whether "servant leadership can address needs in for-profit organization related to competitiveness and firm decision-making" (p. iv).

Crippen (2004) used qualitative methods to conduct historical analyses of biographical profiles of three pioneer women in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Using various primary and secondary sources, profiles of the lives of the women were created. These profiles were then compared to the 10



characteristics of servant leadership identified by Spears (1998). Crippen (2004) found evidence of servant leadership characteristics in the lives of all three women, that the call to leadership came early in their lives, and that they, “served their communities first, and it was through their service they became recognized as leaders” (p. xi).

It is interesting that despite the importance of Follett’s ideas for contemporary thought on leadership, and her clear contributions to leadership study, no one has yet investigated the type of leader that she was. The current study thus fills an important gap in the literature on leadership theory. First, it adds to a growing number of recent publications involving Mary Parker Follett which are beginning to give a voice to an important female scholar who was all but forgotten in leadership circles only a couple of decades ago. Second, it adds to the growing field of servant leadership by investigating the servant leadership characteristics of an important scholar who did her work a century ago. In doing so, it contributes to those studies that have analyzed servant leadership competencies in individuals in various leadership roles, such as those discussed above (i.e., Crippen, 2004; Crippen & Nagel, 2013; Negron, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

### *Qualitative Historical Analysis*

As an individual’s behaviours are shaped throughout life by cultural, historical and personal forces, an examination of Follett’s servant leadership characteristics required an in-depth





analysis of her life experiences. Thus, following Crippen (2004), the current study used the qualitative historical analysis method to build a biographical sketch of Mary Parker Follett, in the aim of answering the following research question: Is there evidence of servant leadership characteristics in the work and life of Mary Parker Follett?

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), “The goal of qualitative research is to discover patterns which emerge after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic” (p. 21). If the researcher is searching for patterns in the aim of understanding a given person, situation or phenomenon, and the following assumptions are made: multiple realities exist and they are socio-psychologically constructed, events are mutually and simultaneously shaped, and the goal of the research is discovery, qualitative methods should be employed (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Other researchers have conducted similar analyses of servant leadership characteristics in prominent leaders, but have instead used the case study method (for example, see Crippen & Nagel, 2013; Haitt, 2010; Negron, 2012; Omoh, 2007). A case study is a qualitative research strategy “in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event activity, process, or one or more individuals” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). According to Yin (2009) case studies are used to:

. . . contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organization, social, political and related phenomena. . .  
the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the



desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. (p. 4)

Unlike previous studies that have used the case study method to investigate servant leadership characteristics in prominent leaders, the current study used a historical analysis to investigate whether there are servant leadership competencies evident in Follett's work and life. Yin (2009) discussed the difference between these two types of methodology. Specifically, the historical method is used "when no relevant persons are alive to report, even retrospectively, what occurred and when an investigator must rely on primary documents, secondary documents, and cultural and physical artifacts as the main source of evidence" (p. 11). Case studies, on the other hand, can use a variety of evidence, including "documents, artifacts, interviews and observations – beyond what might be available in a conventional historical study" (p. 11).

In the current study, with the primary investigator's own background and beliefs directing the analysis, an interpretation of Follett's leadership philosophy was uncovered from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources used were Follett's major writings, including: *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government*, *Creative Experience*, and *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, edited by Metcalf and Urwick and published posthumously, and the secondary source used was the comprehensive biography of Mary Follett, written by



Joan Tonn (2003) and entitled *Follett P. Follett: Creating Democracy, Transforming Management*.

The biographical analysis consisted of a two-step process. First, the biographical sketch of Follett's work and life was examined for:

- a) The most significant personal, social and political events that shaped her leadership philosophy.
- b) Comments, behaviour, and/or events that indicated either directly or indirectly servant leadership characteristics. The information gathered was then compared to the seven pillars and 21 competencies of servant leadership put forward by Sipe and Frick (2009).

Second, Follett's writings were divided into key themes, and these themes were examined for evidence of Sipe and Frick's (2009) seven pillars and 21 competencies of servant leadership. Finally, conclusions relating to Follett's leadership philosophy were presented.

The reason for using Sipe and Frick's framework in this analysis, as opposed to Spears' (1998, 2004) ten characteristics, was two-fold. First, in 2004, Frick authored Greenleaf's comprehensive biography and was therefore given access to all of Greenleaf's writings and other related documents (Crippen & Nagel, 2013). Second, following Crippen and Nagel (2013), it was decided that Sipe and Frick's framework was not only more recent than Spears' framework, but was also "deeper and broader in scope" (p. 5).

It is important to note that for ethical considerations it was



essential that the authors avoid reporting only results that were consistent with the hypothesis under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Thus, results that were both consistent and inconsistent with evidence of servant leadership competencies in Mary Parker Follett's work were sought and reported.

## FINDINGS

### *Themes in Follett's Writings*

As Follett's ideas held amazingly constant over time, it was easy to see major themes in her writing throughout her entire career. Some of the themes that emerged included: group process, power-with versus power-over, conflict resolution/constructive conflict, control/authority, the role of the individual in the community, circular response, and the law of the situation. The themes that emerged were examined for evidence of servant leadership as defined by the seven pillars and 21 competencies of servant leadership put forward by Sipe and Frick (2009). The findings, divided by pillar, are presented below.

#### *Pillar I. A Person of Character.*

All that I am, all that life has made me, every past experience that I have had – woven into the tissue of my life – I must give to the new experience. (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. 136)

In Follett's writings it is evident that she placed a great deal of importance on character and integrity in business. For example, she stated:

I see no reason why business men should have lower



ideals than artists or professional men. . . I think that we may feel that business men can make as large a contribution to professional ideals as the so-called learned professions. I think, indeed, that the business man has opportunities to lead the world in an enlarged conception of the expressions ‘professional honour,’ ‘professional integrity.’ That phrase which we hear so often, ‘business integrity,’ is already being extended to mean far more than a square deal in a trade. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 143)

Follett (1942/2013b) also spoke of loyalty to one’s work. She argued that in business, “. . . the ideal is loyalty to the work rather than to the company” that the businessman “may change his firm; but he remains permanently bound to the standards of his profession” (p. 136). She argued that loyalty was about “sticking to professional standards instead of merely giving the public what it wants” (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 137). She also addressed corporate responsibility, arguing that businesses have a responsibility “for maintenance of standards, for the education of the public, and for the development of professional standards” (p. 136).

Also falling under *Pillar I*, Follett (1942/2013b) spoke of leaders serving a higher purpose. For example, she argued that business, through management style, could contribute to overall culture, “. . . you need not. . . give your daytime hours to a low thing called business, and in the evening pursue culture. Through your business itself, if you manage it with style, you are making a contribution to the culture of the world” (p. 140) and further, that “. . . leaders of the highest type do not



conceive their task merely as that of *fulfilling* purpose, but also that of finding ever larger purposes to fulfill, more fundamental values to be reached” (p. 288).

Moreover, her views on influencing others clearly demonstrated an ethical approach, with her arguing that power should be shared (power-with) rather than coercive (power-over), “Coercive power is the curse of the universe; coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul” (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. xiii). Follett’s views on power will be further elaborated upon in the section discussing *Pillar VII - Moral Authority*.

Follett was also clearly serving a higher purpose in her work in the community, such as in her contribution to the community centres movement and her work with vocational counselling and placement. A specific example is seen in her arguments for safety in the workplace:

. . . in our attempts at social legislation we have been appealing chiefly to the altruism of people: women and children ought not to be overworked, it is cruel not to have machinery safe-guarded, etc. But our growing sense of unity is fast bringing us to a realization that all these things are for the good of ourselves too, for the entire community. (as cited in Tonn, 2003, p. 276)

*Pillar II. Puts People First.*

The person who influences me most is not he who does great deeds but he who makes me feel I can do great deeds. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 230)



There is a great deal of evidence in Follett’s writings demonstrating the competencies described by Sipe and Frick (2009) under *Pillar II*. For example, she clearly saw the need to put people first, “What we care about is the *productive* life, and the first test of the productive power of the collective life is its nourishment of the individual” (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. xiii). Follett (1942/2013b) acknowledged the importance of treating employees fairly, and argued that such fair treatment was an essential part of a successful organization, “Business management includes: (1) on the technical side, as it is usually called, a knowledge of production and distribution, and (2) on the personnel side, a knowledge of how to deal fairly and fruitfully with one’s fellows” (pp. 122-123). Follett was a humanist writing at a time when the prevailing view of business and organization was increasingly mechanistic in nature. Counter to Frederick Taylor and the dehumanizing goals of Scientific Management, Follett (1942/2013b) argued “that we can never wholly separate the human and the mechanical problem. . . the study of human relations in business and the study of the technique of operating are bound up together” (p. 124). She further stated that people are central to any organization, and that we should:

. . . un-departmentalize our thinking in regard to every problem that comes to us. . . I do not think we have psychological and ethical and economic problems. We have human problems with psychological, ethical, and economic aspects, and as many more as you like. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 184)



Under Taylor's Scientific Management theory, employee empowerment was not a priority, which caused issue for Follett. She argued that institutions of the time were founded on a philosophy that "did not mean the development of individuals but the crushing of individuals – all but a few" (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 170). Instead, Follett (1942/2013b) was concerned about the education and empowerment of employees:

. . . it is one of the leader's chief duties to draw out from each his fullest possibilities. The foreman should feel responsible for the education and training of those under him, the heads of departments should feel the same, and so all along up the line to the chief executive. (p. 267)

She further argued that:

The best type of leader to-day does not want men who are subservient to him, those who render him a passive obedience. He is trying to develop men exactly the opposite of this, men themselves with mastery, and such men will give his own leadership worth and power. (p. 267)

Evidence of her view of leader as servant can also be found in her writings:

The test of a foreman now is not how good he is at bossing, but how little bossing he has to do because of the training of his men and the organization of their work. The job of a foreman thus conceived, we have. . . a leader not ordering his men, but serving his man. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 274)





Follett not only wrote about leader as servant but also demonstrated it in the way she ran the community centres. Specifically, she realized that for the long-term success of the centres, self-governance was essential and so the best individuals for the task would be those that could teach young people about self-management. These leaders would be able to teach young people:

. . . how to win self-government, to train them in the ways of self-direction. . . He is not the best manager who imposes the most progressive ideas on his district – he is the best manager who guides the people of his district to express and develop the best in themselves. (Follett, as cited in Tonn, 2003, pp. 240-241)

Once management was in place in any of her projects, she stepped away and allowed the program to run itself, “Each project, no matter how dear to her heart, was eventually turned over to a capable colleague. If a crisis arose, Follett could be counted on to help. . . but Follett most often restricted her involvement to offering praise and encouragement” (Tonn, 2003, p. 228).

Follett was also an inspiring mentor, “Follett honed her formidable entrepreneurial, political, managerial, and fundraising skills and became an inspiring mentor to a new generation of Boston civic leaders” (Tonn, 2003, p. 5). Tonn (2003) also stated that, “many who listened to Follett found themselves coaxed to a larger vision of their role in society – and then inspired by her passion to a program of action” (p. 2). It is evident here that Follett exemplified many of the core



competencies of *Pillar II*: she clearly demonstrated a servant heart, was mentor minded, and showed care and concern.

Follett, however, made comments on service that may at first seem contrary to Greenleaf's (1970/1991) philosophy of servant leadership and thus inconsistent with the current hypothesis under investigation. In *The New State*, Follett (1918/1998) stated:

. . . I do not believe that man should 'serve his fellow-men'; if we started on that task what awful prigs we should become. Moreover, as we see that the only efficient people are the servers, much of the connotation of humility has gone out of the word service! Moreover, if service is such a very desirable thing, then every one must have an equal opportunity for service. (pp. 84-85)

Greenleaf (1970/1991) argued that the best test of servant leadership was to ask the question:

. . . 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? (p. 15)

Follett surely believed in service in this regard, as witnessed throughout her biography and in her writings. She believed in empowering others so that they could become their best possible self and, in turn, become servants who empower others. It is evident that what Follett meant by the above comment was that leaders should not simply relinquish



whom they are in order to serve others. Instead, every individual, both leader and follower, should bring what they have to offer to the situation; that subordination does not mean, “subordination of the individual to ‘others’. . . it means the subordination of the individual to the whole of which he himself is a part” (p. 82).

*Pillar III. Skilled Communicator.*

Discussion is to be the sharpest, most effective political tool of the future. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 212)

Greenleaf (1970/1991) argued that, “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*” (p. 18). There is evidence in Follett’s biography that she was a true listener. Tonn (2003) shared a comment from a colleague of Follett’s who stated that Follett ‘would talk to anyone who cared to talk to her and she would really listen. She was continuously testing her ideas against the facts brought to light as the results of these countless conversations” (p. 2).

Follett was also effective in clearly sharing her ideas. In terms of her communication skills in action, Tonn (2003) wrote, “her plainness faded as soon as she spoke. The warmth of her voice, the elegant gestures of her hands, her stylish wit, and her attentive listening were irresistible” (p. 2). Tonn (2003) further stated that Follett “could illuminate for any audience the most complex concepts with homely, unforgettable metaphors drawn from the minutiae of daily life” (p. 2), and:

Even as a young woman, Follett had been able to captivate an audience. Not only was she bright and



articulate, but she also found ways to make both her message and her presentation compelling. She challenged her listeners to see the larger significance of day-to-day issues – placing them in philosophical, political, economic, and social context – and, at the same time, she was remarkably adept at illustrating difficult concepts or principles in anecdotes that her audience could easily grasp and appreciate. (p. 243)

Follett was also said to be very persuasive in her writing. For instance, a colleague argued that Follett:

. . . reasons with such strength and clearness, and fortifies her position with so many illustrative facts, that a large part of her readers will accept her statements as the whole of the case and her conclusions as the end of the whole matter. (as cited in Tonn, 2003, p. 86)

The importance she put on communication can also be seen in her writings. Follett (1918/1998) referred to the idea of discussion as ‘truth-seeking.’ She stated that in true discussion, you can see how others’ ideas can enrich your own, “In a discussion you can be flexible, you can try experiments, you can grow as the group grows . . .” (p. 210).

Follett (1918/1998) suggested that one of the advantages of genuine discussion “is that it tends to make us think and to seek accurate information in order to be able to think and to think clearly” and that it also helps us to “overcome misunderstanding and conquer prejudice” (pp. 210-211). According to Follett, true discussion:



... will always and should always bring out difference, but at the same time it teaches us what to do with difference. The formative process which takes place in discussion is that unceasing reciprocal adjustment which brings out and gives form to truth. (p. 212)

*Pillar IV. Compassionate Collaborator.*

The potentialities of the individual remain potentialities until they are released by group life. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 6)

Follett (1918/1998) saw the individual as a social being. She argued that through group life the individual finds identity, meaning, and purpose. She disagreed with many of her colleagues at the time that believed “individuals are more rational, more innovative, and more productive working alone than when joined with others in a group” (Tonn, 2003, p. 274). Follett instead argued that people tend to bring their best when working in a group, anticipating the psychological concept of social facilitation (Tonn, 2003).

Follett’s passion for unity and the building of communities was evident in her work with the community centres. It was through these centres that she felt communities could be built and the political landscape could be changed:

Political progress must be by local communities. Our municipal life will be just as strong as the strength of its parts. We shall never know how to be one of a nation until we are one of a neighborhood. And what better training for world organization can each man receive than



for neighbors to live together not as detached individuals but as a true community. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 202)

According to Greenleaf (1977/2002), in order to build communities what was needed was “enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his or her own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group” (p. 53). It is clear from Follett’s life’s work that she did her part in this regard.

In terms of negotiating conflict, many of the current views on conflict resolution can be traced to Follett. Follett did not shy away from conflict and, in fact, believed that it could lead “to invention” and “to the emergence of new values” (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 36). She discussed three ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise and integration. In the case of domination, no one wins; there is “non-freedom for both sides, the defeated bound to the victor, the victor bound to the false situation thus created—both bound” (Follett, 1924/2013a, pp. 301-302).

In the case of compromise, both sides give up some aspect of their desire, leading to the conflict not being fully resolved and thus resurfacing at some later point in time:

If we only get compromise, the conflict will come up again and again in some other form, for in compromise we give up part of our desire, and because we shall not be content to rest there, sometime we shall try to get the whole of our desire. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 35)

The most desirable way of dealing with conflict, according



to Follett, is integration, which involves the weaving into the solution the desires and interests of all parties involved. Here, a solution is found at the expense of no one. Follett (1942/2013b) stated that in order to achieve integration, all pertinent information needs to be brought into the open; the desires of both sides need to be fully uncovered. That is, full opportunity “needs to be given in any conflict, in any coming together of different desire, for the whole field of desire to be viewed” (p. 39). However, she acknowledged the complexity in achieving integration in conflict situations. Specifically, she stated that the main obstacle to integration is that it “requires a high order of intelligence, keen perception and discrimination, more than all, a brilliant inventiveness . . .” (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 45).

Follett (1942/2013b) further argued that we should not feel limited by an either-or approach:

Our outlook is narrowed, our activity is restricted, our chances of business success largely diminished when our thinking is constrained within the limits of what has been called an either-or situation. We should never allow ourselves to be bullied by an ‘either-or.’ There is often the possibility of something better than either of two given alternatives. (p. 49)

Instead, we need to be directed by the situation:

My solution is to depersonalize the giving of orders, to unite all concerned in a study of the situation, to discover the law of the situation and obey that. Until we do this I do not think we shall have the most successful business administration. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 58)



Moreover:

One person should not give orders to another person, but both should agree to take their orders from the situation. If orders are simply part of the situation, the question of someone giving and someone receiving does not come up. Both accept the orders given by the situation. (p. 59)

This, she stated, is “. . . the best preparation for integration in the matter of orders or in anything else . . . a joint study of the situation” (p. 61). To Follett, integrative unity was key:

I think on every board, in every committee, the same effort should be made, namely, to substitute conferring for fighting, to recognize that there are two kinds of difference, the difference which disrupts and the differences which may, if properly handled, more firmly unite, and to realize that if unity is the aim of conference, it is not because unity in the sense of peace is our primary object—you can get peace at any moment if your sledge hammer is big enough—but because we are seeking an integrative unity as the foundation of business development. (Follett, 1942/2013b, pp. 76-77)

Follett’s view on the sharing of power will be continued below in the in the section covering *Pillar VII – Moral Authority*.

Also relevant to *Pillar IV* is the fact that Follett (1924/2013a) was a great supporter of diversity and considered it life’s “most essential feature” (p. 301). In fact, she argued that “. . . fear of difference is dread of life itself” (p. 301).





Follett believed that diversity in times of conflict was the root of great ideas, “Our ‘opponents’ are our co-creators, for they have something to give which we have not. The basis of all cooperative activity is integrated diversity” (p. 174), and that we should “seek a richly diversified experience where every difference strengthens and reinforces the other” (p. 302). It is through diversity that Follett (1918/1998) believed unity would be attained: “Unity, not uniformity, must be our aim. We attain unity only through variety. Differences must be integrated, not annihilated, nor absorbed” (p. 39) and so, “Instead of shutting out what is different, we should welcome it because it is different and through its difference will make a richer content of life” (p. 40).

*Pillar V. Foresight.*

The lamp of experience is both to illumine our way and to guide us further into new paths. (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. 230)

According to Greenleaf (1977/2002):

Leaders know some things and foresee some things that those they are presuming to lead do not know or foresee as clearly. This is partly what gives leaders their ‘lead,’ what puts them out ahead and qualifies them to show the way. (p. 35)

Follett was clearly a leader in this regard; she had clear views on what needed to be done to change government and she shared many of these ideas in *The New State*. Specifically, Follett imagined a unified government that was concerned



about every individual and not just the majority. She did not believe that unity could be attained until the government moved beyond a focus on votes:

Democracy is not brute numbers; it is a genuine union of true individuals. The question before the American people to-day is – How is that genuine union to be attained, how is the true individual to be discovered? The party has always ignored him; it wants merely a crowd, a preponderance of votes. (Follett, 1918/1998, pp. 5-6)

Also, in *The New State*, Follett voiced her opinion on how the political landscape could be changed through group association, i.e., through the community centre movement:

Our proposal is that people should organize themselves into neighborhood groups to express their daily life, to bring to the surface the needs, desires and aspirations of that life, that these needs should become the substance of politics, and that these neighborhood groups should become the recognized political unit. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 192)

Representation is not the main fact of political life; the main concern of politics is modes of association. We do not want the rule of the many or the few; we must find that method of political procedure by which majority and minority ideas may be so closely interwoven that we are truly ruled by the will of the whole. We shall have democracy only when we learn to produce this will through group organization – when young men are no



longer lectured to on democracy, but when they are made into the stuff of democracy. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 147)

Like Greenleaf (1970/1991, 1977/2002), Follett (1942/2013b) was also aware of the importance of vision in leadership. She stated that the,

. . . most successful leader of all is one who sees another picture not yet actualized. He sees the things which belong in his present picture but which are not yet there. Indeed, the kind of insight which is also foresight is essential to leadership. (pp. 279-280)

She further argued that we should look to a leader to “open up new paths, new opportunities for the development of individuals, of groups, of the whole plant” and that great leaders “see not only larger situations, but situations of greater value to all concerned” (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 265).

Also relevant to *Pillar V* is the fact that Follett knew how to take clear and decisive action when problems arose. According to Tonn (2003), “when a problem presented itself, she was eager to develop an action plan and was resolute about getting things accomplished” (p. 3). This decisive action can be seen in her service work in the community.

Follett was clearly visionary. This is most evident in the fact that many of her ideas, which were leading edge at the time, are still relevant today, including her ideas of power-with versus power-over (discussed below in the in the section covering *Pillar VII – Moral Authority*) and conflict resolution (which was discussed above under *Pillar IV – Compassionate Collaborator*).



There is also no question that Follett was a courageous woman, moving against traditional female roles by writing and speaking about politics and other social matters at a time in history when women were not even permitted to vote. What is even more incredible is that the ideas that she shared were very highly regarded in circles, such as business, that were dominated by men.

*Pillar VI. Systems Thinker.*

To live gloriously is to change undauntedly. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 99)

Follett was clearly comfortable with complexity. In forming her ideas, Follett drew from various systems of thought that were gaining popularity at the time, including behaviourism, Gestalt psychology and Psychoanalysis. This ability likely grew from her academic years with such powerful mentors as A. B. Hart. However, according to Tonn (2003) she “did not ally herself with a single school but freely borrowed from the various systems those ideas that seemed most relevant to her concern with the constructive uses of conflict” (p. 364).

Follett (1924/2013a) could also see the complexity in human relations. Her concept of the circular response is a powerful one:

I never react to you but to you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me. “I” can never influence “you” because you have already influenced me; that is, in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both become something



different. It begins even before we meet, in the anticipation of meeting. (pp. 62-63)

Further, Follett (1942/2013b), being influenced by the Gestalt school, saw the importance of balancing the whole with the sum of its parts, which she combined with her idea of the circular response:

I have been saying that the whole is determined not only by its constituents, but by their relation to one another. I now say that the whole is determined also by the relation of whole and parts. Nowhere do we see this principle more clearly at work than in business administration. Production policy, sales policy, financial policy, personnel policy, influence one another, but the general business policy which is being created by the interweaving of these policies is all the time, even while it is in the making, influencing production, sales financial, and personnel policies. Or put it the other way round – the various departmental policies are being influenced by general policy while they are making general policy. (p. 195)

In fact, Parker (1984) argued that Follett's ideas contributed to the founding of the systems theory of organization. Her ideas relating to the systems school of thought are summarized nicely in the following quote:

. . . she accepted the need for organisms to exercise self-control and hence advocated that executives should manage with their fellow workers, should be allowed to



self-adjust, and that organizations should allow collective, self-control. In addition, she saw the organizations as being pluralistic (rather than stressing authoritarian, hierarchical control) and stressed two-way feedback of information as well as both lateral and vertical coordination of controls. . . She recognized control as a continuous process rather than as a static function, and she emphasized her belief in focusing primarily on the operation of the whole system (e.g., the organization) rather than on its parts in isolation from one another. Furthermore, she stressed the interaction of individuals and groups with their environment. (pp. 743-744)

Follett's complexity of thinking can also be seen in her views on how true democracy should be achieved:

We do not want the rule of the many or the few; we must find that method of political procedure by which majority and minority ideas may be so closely interwoven that we are truly ruled by the whole. We shall have democracy only when we learn to produce this will through group organization. (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 147)

She argued that democracy is found through the group; that people need to move away from individualism and toward group process, what she called "the new principle of association" (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 3):

The group process contains the secret of collective life, it is the key to democracy, it is the master lesson for every individual to learn, it is our chief hope for the political,



the social, the internal life of our future. (p. 23)

*Pillar VII. Moral Authority.*

The best leader knows how to make his followers actually feel power themselves, not merely acknowledge his power. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 290)

As with the first six pillars, Follett demonstrated the core competencies listed under *Pillar VII*. Follett (1918/1998) believed that everyone has a responsibility to their community, their city, and their country; that everyone fails to benefit when someone is not doing their part:

. . . the taking of responsibility, each according to his capacity, each according to his function in the whole. . . this taking of responsibility is usually the most vital matter in the life of every human being, just as the allotting of responsibility is the most important part of business administration. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 64)

She further argued that through neighborhood organization, responsibility could be developed, that “men will learn that they are not to *influence* politics through their local groups, they are to *be* politics” (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 240) and, further, that by performing their humblest duties, they are “creating the soul of this great democracy” (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 242).

Also relevant to *Pillar VII*, Follett (1942/2013b) argued that we should be accountable for our own mistakes:

. . . the one who made the mistake should certainly be the one to rectify it, not as a matter of strategy, but because it is better for him too. It is better for all of us not only to



acknowledge our mistakes, but to do something about them. (p. 68)

In terms of sharing power, Follett was an early voice emphasizing the idea of power-with rather than power-over. She introduced these terms in *Creative Experience* when stating that, “genuine power is power-with, pseudo power, power-over” (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. 189). In fact, Follett argued that “The power of the strong is not to be used to conquer the weaker: this means for the conquerors activity which is not legitimately based, which will therefore have disastrous consequences later; and for the conquered, repression” (Follett, 1924/2013a, p. 189). Consistent with Follett’s views on power, Greenleaf (1977/2002) argued that the efficacy of coercive power only lasts as long as the coercion is strong and, further, that coercion will ultimately diminish an individual’s autonomy.

Instead of coercive power, Follett (1942/2013b) argued for the decentralization of authority; that “authority is inherent in the situation” (p. 150) and not attached to any official position. That is:

. . . authority should go with knowledge and experience; that that is where obedience is due, no matter whether it is up the line or down the line. Where knowledge and experience are located, there. . . you have the key man to the situation. (p. 148)

In other words “Authority belongs to the job and stays with the job” (p. 149). The idea of total authority was foreign to her.





Instead, she argued in favour of functional authority, where each person has the final authority for his or her own tasks. She further stated that:

This conception of authority and responsibility should do away. . . with the idea almost universally held that the president delegates authority and responsibility. . . I do not think that the president or general manager should have any more authority than goes with his function. (Follett, 1942/2013b, pp. 148-149)

As discussed above under *Pillar IV*, Follett (1924/2013a) argued in favour of a non-hierarchical authority; that true power comes not from authority but from integration:

The only possible way of getting rid of the greed and scramble of our present world is for all of us to realize that the power we are snatching at is not really power, not that which we are really seeking, that the way to gain genuine power, even that which we ourselves really want, is by an integrative process. (p. 188)

Further, that because integration is:

. . . the basic law of life, orders should be the composite conclusion of those who give and those who receive them; more than this, that they should be the integration of the people concerned and the situation; more even than this, that they should be the integrations involved in the evolving situation. If you accept my three fundamental statements on this subject; (1) that the order should be the law of the situation; (2) that the situation is always



evolving; (3) that orders should involve circular not linear behaviour – then we see that our old conception of orders has somewhat changed, and that there should therefore follow definite changes in business practice. (Follett, 1942/2013b, pp. 65-66)

Under *Pillar VII*, Sipe and Frick (2009) also stated the importance of managing change. Follett wrote extensively about change, specifically she believed that the true leader is the situation and that this situation is constantly evolving. This can be seen in the previous quote as well as in the following quote: “The best type of leader does not seek *his* ends, but the ends disclosed by an evolving process in which each has his special part” (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 288).

## FOLLETT AND TRANSFORMATIONAL VERSUS SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Some may, in reading Follett’s work and biography, argue that instead of demonstrating servant leadership, she embodied transformational leadership. In fact, Follett did allude to the concept of transformational leadership long before James McGregor Burns (1978) formulated, and Bass (1985) expanded upon, the model. In both transformational and servant leadership the needs, values and empowerment of followers is essential. However, an important difference between transformational and servant leaders is what each considers to be the highest priority. In transformational leadership, the leader serves himself/herself and/or the organization first, “the primary allegiance of the transformational leader is clearly to



the organization (or to themselves) rather than to follower autonomy or to universal moral principles” (J. Graham, 1991, p. 110). In this case “individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation of the followers. . . help tap the creativity of followers for solving organizational problems and serving organizational purposes” (p. 111). In the case of servant leadership, the primary allegiance is to the employee, as “the leader humbly serves the led, rather than expecting to be served by them” (p. 111); the servant leader’s highest priority is seeing that the needs of others are being met. Follett’s transformational views can be seen in the following quote:

When you have made your employees feel that they are in some sense partners in the business, they do not improve the quality of their work, save waste in time and material, because of the Golden Rule, but because their interests are the same as yours. . . We find, however, that when there is some feeling in a plant, more or less developed, that the business is a working unit, we find then that the workman is more careful of material, that he saves time in lost motions, in talking over annoyances, that he helps the new hand by explaining things to him, that he helps the fellow working at his side by calling attention to the end of a roll on the machine, etc. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 82)

However, we are going to argue that there is evidence in Follett’s writing suggesting that her leadership philosophy moved beyond transformational leadership and into the realm of servant leadership. As discussed above, an important difference between transformational and servant leadership is



that with the former, the primary allegiance is to the company, with the empowerment of employees serving the needs of the organization. With servant leadership, the primary allegiance is to the employee; a servant leader's highest priority is seeing that the needs of followers are being met (J. Graham, 1991). The importance that Follett places on fulfilling the needs of the individual can be seen in the following quote:

Group activity, organized group activity, should aim: to incorporate and express the desires, the experience, the ideals of the individual members of the group: also to raise the ideals, broaden the experience, deepen the desires of the individual members of the group.

Obedience in relation to leadership can be discussed only in terms of these two aspects of the group process. From a study of this process we see that leadership rightly understood increases freedom as it heightens individuality. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 275)

Furthermore, it is not only individual growth that Follett viewed as central to leadership; she also considered human relations a higher priority than the needs of the organization:

They may be making useful products; in addition to that they may be helping the individuals in their employ to further development; but even beyond all these things, by helping in solving the problems of organization, they are helping to solve the problems of human relations, and that is certainly the greatest task man has been given on this planet. (Follett, 1942/2013b, p. 269)



She further stated, “. . . to me the chief function, the real service, of business [is] to give an opportunity for individual development through the better organization of human relationships” (Follett, 1942/2013b, pp. 140-141).

## SUMMARY

As discussed at length in the findings section of this paper, there is significant evidence of Sipe and Frick’s (2009) seven pillars and 21 core competencies of servant leadership in Follett’s work and life. Specifically, in examining both her biographical profile and the themes in her writing it is evident that Follett; 1) was a woman of character, 2) put people first, 3) was a skilled communicator, 4) was a compassionate collaborator, 5) had foresight, 6) was a systems thinker, and 7) demonstrated moral authority.

What is interesting is that Follett demonstrated these competencies at a time prior to the formulation of the model of servant leadership by Greenleaf (1970/1991). In fact, Greenleaf’s seminal essay outlining the philosophy of servant leadership was published almost four decades after Follett’s passing. This demonstrates that a woman living and working during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was able to embody the characteristics of a model of leadership that had not yet been formally recognized.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In 1977, Greenleaf was optimistic when he wrote that people were beginning to “relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002,



p. 23); or, in other words, that people were learning to interact in a more constructive manner, a manner described by Follett in 1924 when she wrote *Creative Experience*. Like many great leaders, Follett had a dream, “. . . and for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams” (Greenleaf, 1970/1991, p. 18). Follett dreamed of a unified government that was built from the ground up; a government that was not simply concerned about votes or the majority, but was sincerely concerned about the welfare of every individual. She believed that such a government could be obtained through group association; by the building of communities, and she worked tirelessly to do so through her hands-on work in the community and through her writings and speeches. Despite the importance of Follett’s work and the fact that many of her ideas on leadership are still pertinent today, she is not widely known in leadership circles. By formally investigating Follett’s leadership philosophy, it is hoped that attention will be drawn to her important contributions, giving her the recognition she so rightfully deserves.

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