



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP DECISION-MAKING RUBRIC

*A Greenleaf-Inspired Assessment Tool for Employee-Based  
Issues*

— HENRY J. DAVIS

**M**aking decisions that directly affect others is often a stressful endeavor for those in leadership positions. This tension may derive from variables such as personal relationships with employees or concerns on how one may be perceived after an action is executed in the workplace, causing the leader in question to make reactionary decisions against their better judgment (Rosanas, 2013). Compounding the scope of a leader's decision-making activity are additional conditions ranging from potential lack of experience with a particular situation to being overwhelmed with several vague options instead of a set of well thought out possibilities to choose from (Grunig & Kuhn, 2013). The imprecise nature of decision-making lends itself out to further frustrations as one's inability to fully comprehend the intricacies associated with an issue can create greater hesitation and anxiety (Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997).

Decision-making may be divided into two distinct groups of thought: heuristic and rational. Heuristic decision-making



relies on a naturalistic approach in that the leader's assumptions carry the weight of the decision-making process instead of quantitative calculations or structured steps for analyzing a situation. As pointed out by Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011), "Heuristics can be more accurate than more complex strategies even though they process less information," allowing the decision-maker to be flexible in the face of a mutable organizational environment (p. 474). In turn, heuristic decision-making activities can be stored in an adaptive toolbox or a mental database of previously successful actions to use in comparable scenarios by the individual (Broder, 2003; Kurz-Milcke & Gigerenzer, 2007).

Contrary to the heuristic approach is rational decision-making. While various perspectives exist, the inherent purpose of rational decision-making is to systematically replicate logical actions that adhere to a specific set of steps or instructions (Eisenfuhr, Weber, & Langer, 2010). For the intent of this paper, rationality takes its understanding from March (1994) who writes:

Rationality is defined as a particular and very familiar class of procedures for making choices. In this procedural meaning of "rational," a rational procedure may or may not lead to good outcomes. The possibility of a link between rationality of a process and the intelligence of its outcomes is treated as a result to be demonstrated rather than an axiom. (p. 2)

In other words, rationality is not a guaranteed or flawless approach to achieving a desired end result. Rational decision-



making only ensures that one can clarify how they came to the eventual decision.

Despite whether a leader chooses a heuristic, rational, or an alternative paradigm to form decisions, the favored decision-making approach for leaders will inevitably affect organizational functions (Dean & Sharfman, 1996). From a servant-leadership standpoint, the decision-making process takes on a weightier significance as servant-leadership dedicates itself to specific attitudes on how employees should be treated. The notion of acting as a resource for others and serving the common good in a selfless fashion directly alter the landscape of decision-making for the servant-leader who views these ideals as their authentic calling. Yet, with these understandings in place, there is no formalized approach to analyzing whether an impending action is compliant with tenets associated with servant-leadership.

#### PURPOSE OF PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to create a decision-making rubric for servant-leaders that adapts Robert K. Greenleaf's philosophy on the treatment of employees and co-workers as shared in his essays, "The Servant as Leader" and "The Institution as Servant." This paper aims to provide a structured approach to analyzing potential actions against that (1) formalizes Greenleaf's ideas on leadership's responsibility towards employee growth and organizational stewardship for use in making decisions affecting employees, and (2) offers servant-leaders a consistent and measurable process to review



and determine whether a decision-making action fulfills Greenleaf's criteria for treating an employee.

## GREENLEAF, THE SERVANT AS LEADER, & EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

While Greenleaf (1977) has authored numerous works on the topic of servant-leadership, his two essays entitled "The Servant as Leader" and "The Institution as Servant" may be considered the most influential of his writings. In "The Servant as Leader," Greenleaf (1977) fleshes out the modern notion of the servant-leader as an individual who's first and most pivotal role is one of service to others. This inclination to see oneself as a "servant first" acknowledges the belief that leaders must invest time and resources on employees so they may successfully fulfill their professional responsibilities, which is an integral part of "mak[ing] sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 13).

The straightforward nature of the servant-leader's obligation to support and develop employees is summed up in a series of questions Greenleaf (1977) proposes akin to a litmus test:

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? (pp. 13-14)

These questions serve as an internal starting point for the servant-leader scrutinizing over whether they are embracing a genuine servant-leadership attitude. From a decision-making



perspective, Greenleaf (1977) himself recognizes that deciding upon a noteworthy action affecting employees requires additional considerations and reflection before its subsequent implementation. The technique of withdrawing from the issue to gain an outside view is preferable since it affords the leader a non-pressurized space to explore their unique role as servant within the scenario (Greenleaf, 1977). Even with the advantages of withdrawing, Greenleaf (1977) does caution the servant-leader that taking too much time on one problem may eventually cause a backlog of new issues needing immediate attention. Knowing that one will never have a complete picture leading to a perfect solution, the leader must use intuition to “bridge the gap” between missing sets of information (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 23).

Responsible decision-making on behalf of others is not just an expectation placed on the servant-leader. The entire institution in which the leader is part of must jointly act as a steward for its employees and society as a whole. Greenleaf’s (1977) “The Institution as Servant” identifies trustees as the primary group who can steer an institution to excellence by setting attainable goals and expectations to be assessed on a continual basis. Before any meaningful change can occur, trust must be built between the institution and all the constituencies it serves. Trust is a time consuming endeavor where the trustee must do their due diligence, becoming an active learner interested in each facet of the organization. While adopting this proactive stance, the trustee must never forget that the institution is charged with “caring for all of the persons touched by it—



caring for those persons in proportion to their involvement in, and their dependence on, the institution” (p. 87). Therefore, employees who have wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to the mission of the institution and the most vulnerable amongst them must be prioritized when decisions are made.

Servant-based institutions must be cohesive and have well-defined goals that support the institutional mission just as any other public or private institution. With that being said, the servant-based institutions are held accountable for their actions in achieving these goals just as:

Large businesses must make their peace with the idea that these institutions exist by the consent of clients, employees, and society at large—all of whom must be well served, and whose judgment on whether they are being well served is becoming more and more discriminating. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 74)

To ensure that the servant-based institution is living up to its mission, trustees along with managerial leadership must constantly examine whether the goals set forth in their mission are reasonable and most importantly, realistic from an operational perspective (Greenleaf, 1977). Once goals are adjusted based on achievability, the institution can move towards a level of distinction as the clarity of purpose is tangible and less hypothetical. Reaching past individual institutions, Greenleaf’s (1977) most optimistic vision was to create a collective “made up of predominantly serving institutions that shape its character by encouraging serving individuals and providing scope and shelter for large creative



acts of service—by individuals and groups” (p. 88). For Greenleaf, nurturing employees to serve others through inspired works in an encouraging, non-obtrusive manner is paramount to the servant-leadership role.

#### VIEWPOINTS ON SERVANT-LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING MODELS

The vision of servant-leadership as described by Greenleaf offers would-be servant-leaders a philosophical foundation with behaviors to contemplate for the workplace. As in any theoretical approach, the conjectural aspects undergirding the message leave it vulnerable to scrutiny and doubts which may hinder its implementation. Servant-leadership is not immune to such scrutiny as its effectiveness has been discussed at length in various research studies. According to Andersen (2009), servant-leadership is an ambiguous method that lacks a formal definition, not possessing a definitive instrument for quantifying servant-leadership qualities. An inconsistent understanding of servant-leadership also makes it problematic from an organizational context where structured guidelines and transparency are crucial for success. Thus, prospective servant-leaders may easily find themselves at a disadvantage when attempting to infuse servant-leadership within their organization minus a standardized set of rules and regulations to follow (Prosser, 2010).

Research on servant-leadership and its application across various fields has increased in recent times (Parris & Peachey, 2013). However, subsequent studies have rarely addressed



formalizing servant-leadership into a methodical approach. As noted by van Dierendonck (2011), “most of what has been written about servant leadership (including both academic and nonacademic writings) has been prescriptive, mainly focusing on how it should ideally be” (p. 1229). The apprehension of instilling servant-leadership within an organization due to unfamiliarity or abstractness may be quelled with the introduction of a decision-making instrument to normalize and shape responses based on servant-leadership’s core beliefs on employee engagement.

Academic literature on decision-making has yielded numerous studies examining variables such as behaviors contributing to ethical decision-making (O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) or how intuition affects the decision-making process (Dane & Pratt, 2007). Though developing scales to measure behavioral traits influencing decision-making is vital for comprehending how decisions are inspired, there is little in regards to a clear-cut structure for filtering potential responses through so as to gauge their compatibility to the desired theoretical approach. Even so, decision-making models are successful in mapping out the process a leader goes through before acting yet lacks depth for considering and cultivating actions against reflective prompts.

In Behling and Schriesheim’s (1976) bounded rationality model of decision-making, for instance, it suggests that the leader must define their aim, set a level of attainment they hope to reach in carrying out the aim, devise a reasonable action via heuristic thinking aligning with the specified level, and





evaluate and decide whether or not the action can achieve the desired end. If it does accomplish the intended aim, the leader reviews any difficulties that arose in achieving the desired level of attainment, adjusting the original level to make it more manageable (Behling & Schriesheim, 1976). Whereas this approach to bounded rationality presents leaders with a progression plan for decision-making, it does not provide a fully formed assessment tool to weigh and adjust actions with using detailed instructions that reinforce the core values linked to one's leadership approach. Moreover, if the decision does not achieve its intended outcome, it may be reviewed again using the tool to diagnosis where the action hypothetically went off course.

Correlations have been made between strategic decision-making processes and effective decision-making activities (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Elbanna & Child, 2007). The strength of decision-making models is that they set the foundation for viewing decisions in a logical manner. To create a model for budding servant-leaders, there must also be a consistent measure that organizes concepts into a readily useable structure that aligns decisions to servant-leadership outcomes. This may be accomplished through the creation of a specialized rubric.

#### CREATING A RUBRICS-BASED APPROACH FOR THE DECIDING SERVANT-LEADER

Rubrics are most commonly used in academia to score the effectiveness of student assignments. Two major components linked to the formation of a rubric are dimensions and scale



levels, with dimensions identifying each skillset needed to successfully complete a given task and the scale levels classifying the degree of achievement attained by the assignment reviewed (Stevens & Levi, 2013). The straightforward and methodological nature of a rubric provides the user with a consistent set of standards to review a task against, allowing for greater reflection and detailed feedback on the item.

The effectiveness of a rubric is in its ability to assess and improve items in a descriptive, methodical fashion. In a review of studies conducted on rubric use in educational programs, it was found that rubrics were extremely helpful in appraising student aptitudes for the subject matter, allowing the instructor to determine problem areas where adjustments could be made in order to maximize performance results (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Jonsson and Svingby (2007) contribute improved instruction and learning via rubric use as “rubrics make expectations and criteria explicit, which also facilitates feedback and self-assessment” (p. 141). Moreover, in analyzing several studies on formative assessment rubrics, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) uncovered promising parallels between rubric use and performance, stating that:

The use of rubrics may mediate improved performance through (a) providing transparency to the assessment, which in turn may (b) reduce student anxiety. The use of rubrics may also (c) aid the feedback process, (d) improve student self-efficacy, and (e) support student self-regulation; all of which may indirectly facilitate improved student performance. (p. 140)



Though rubrics have not traditionally been used for decision-making actions in leadership, their potential to determine the extent of particular elements or behaviors in an artifact is significant for assessing known motives that, through further analysis, can lead to uncovering hidden problems found in an action. By populating a rubric with servant-leadership aptitudes and considerations, the rubric's scale works concurrently with these dimensions, immediately flagging contrary ideas to servant-leadership during the initial assessment phase.

To create the Servant-leadership (SL) Decision-Making Rubric, select steps from multiple rubric building approaches were adapted and incorporated into a cohesive set of guidelines aimed at constructing an assessment rubric for balancing leadership decisions with Greenleaf's criteria for treating an employee. The procedural steps that guided the formation of the SL Decision-Making Rubric was (a) considering what aspects should be highlighted from Greenleaf's texts on the treatment of employees and what these expectations mean for leaders making decisions (Stevens & Levi, 2013), (b) establishing the benchmarks making up these expectations that will instill transparency and direction in the rubric (McGoldrick & Peterson, 2013), (c) Recording these benchmarks as dimensions to populate the rubric (Arter & McTighe, 2001; Stronge, Xu, Leeper, & Tonneson, 2013), and (d) outlining the dimensions through descriptive text and confirming what constitutes applicable decision making actions and those actions that require additional reflection (Quinlan, 2011).



In tandem with the aforementioned steps listed, a form of open coding was used to abstract recurring themes found within the Greenleaf’s writings, eventually generating 5 distinct benchmarks in the final analysis stage (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). The concluding dimensions were shaped through an employee-centric servant-leadership paradigm and labelled: 1) Trust-Building, 2) Growth, 3) Institutional Purpose, 4) Examination of Issue, and 5) Communal Well-Being. A three column scale was applied to show the levels of attainment in regards to each dimension, starting with the following: (3) Implementation Ready, (2) Withdrawal Required, and (1) Reformulation Stage.

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP (SL) DECISION-MAKING RUBRIC

	Implementation Ready	Withdrawal Required	Reformulation Stage
	3	2	1
<b>Trust-Building</b>	The action illustrates an enhanced understanding of the employee in the organization from an operational, financial, and personal development perspective and is perceived to build employee trust.	The action shows a limited understanding of the employee in the organization from an operational, financial, and/or personal development perspective, containing an equal number of pros and cons that can shift employee trust to either side.	The action does not visibly take into account the employee in the organization from an operational, financial, and personal development perspective and is perceived to decrease trust with the affected employee.



<p><b>Growth</b></p>	<p>The action is perceived to increase opportunities for the employee to grow within the institution. This growth includes: Self-Sufficiency Creative input Career development and trajectory Overall support in the workplace.</p>	<p>The action indeterminately affects growth levels currently experiences by the employee. Growth might occur in 1 of the following: Self-Sufficiency Creative input Career development and trajectory Overall support in the workplace.</p>	<p>The action is perceived to limit opportunities for the employee to grow within the institution. Other affected areas include: Self-Sufficiency Creative input Career development and trajectory Overall support in the workplace.</p>
<p><b>Institutional purpose</b></p>	<p>The action directly relates to and fulfills the institutional purpose set forth by trustees, embodying the core value of people first associated with serving institutions.</p>	<p>The action somewhat relates to the institutional purpose set forth by trustees and is implicit as to whether the core value of people first associated with serving institutions will be observed.</p>	<p>The action regarding the employee(s) does not relate to and fulfill the institutional purpose set forth by trustees, lacking an understanding of and proper application of the core value of people first associated with serving institutions.</p>



<b>Examination of Issue</b>	<p>The action reviewed contains: A multi-faceted (Leader and employee) perspective with well thought out and convincing points representative of both sides. Contextual (historical and contemporary) information directly related to the issue.</p>	<p>The action reviewed contains: A singular (Leader or employee) perspective with distinct points for one side without serious consideration of the other side involved. Limited contextual (historical and contemporary) information related to the issue.</p>	<p>The action reviewed contains: A fragmented viewpoint (Leader and/or employee) that is limited in scope and breadth with weak points made for one or both sides involved. No contextual (historical and contemporary) information related to the issue.</p>
<b>Communal Well-Being</b>	<p>The action contains explicit components for enhancing individual as well as the overall well-being of the community of employees with a strong focus on promoting: Equity Inclusion and acceptance of all peoples.</p>	<p>The action contains an element that may enhance individual as well as the general well-being of the community of employees yet the act does not provide a clear vision promoting: Equity Inclusion and acceptance of all peoples.</p>	<p>The action does not take the individual as well as the overall well-being of the community of employees into account and presents no focus on promoting: Equity Inclusion and acceptance of all peoples.</p>



## EXPLAINING THE SERVANT-LEADERSHIP DECISION-MAKING RUBRIC

In conjuncture with the expressed messages contained in Greenleaf's (1977) "The Servant as Leader" and "The Institution as Servant," each dimension was described in terms of implementation ready, withdrawal required, and reformulation stage as cited on the scale. To clarify the scale for the user, implementation ready is the level of achievement where a significant percentage of the stated description would be considered accomplished by the action reviewed. For withdrawal required, the action is seen as containing elements of the servant-leadership dimension yet requires further alignment to reach the implementation stage. To improve upon the potential action, the leader must take a step back to ponder its implications akin to Greenleaf's (1977) withdrawing approach. The reformulation stage is when an act does not have visible signs of the servant-leadership dimension, making it necessary to reformulate the original action with those missing aspects.

Dimensions were tabulated to correspond with the rubric scale. In servant-leadership, trust-building happens when leaders concern themselves with how the organization interacts with its employees, actively seeking to acknowledge, support, and develop these individuals, clearing the path towards enhanced understanding and mutual trust between both factions (Greenleaf, 1977). The rubric explains trust-building through a potential action's perceived ability to understand the employee affected by the act, be it from an operational, financial or from



a personal development perspective in the organization and whether the act develops trust. Under the implementation ready scale, an action that takes into careful consideration an employee's well-being, how their position in the company would be affected by the action from multiple perspectives (operational, financial, and personal development), and the action's apparent advantages for promoting greater trust between both parties involved would constitute trust-building. This level of trust-building would vary from the withdrawal required scale as the perceived action would be viewed from a singular perspective (operational, financial, or personal development) along with ambiguity on exactly how the act will build trust, leaving it vulnerable to affecting trust in a negative manner. If an action does not contain elements leading to trust-building between leadership and employees, the user must amend the action in the reformulation stage by learning more about the affected employees utilizing the multiple perspective lens from the implementation ready scale.

The growth of an employee is a considerable facet of servant-leadership. Greenleaf (1977) pointed out that a genuine servant-leader constantly monitors the development of employees, making certain that they are empowered in their professional lives as well as capable of empowering those they serve. Part of this development comes in the form of increased opportunities for employees to expand their knowledge base and hone those skills they have acquired through the organization. Such growth would include encouraging self-sufficiency amongst employees, creative input on operational





functions that affect their position, promoting career development and trajectory in the organization, and providing overall support in the workplace when necessary. Actions that purposely include these growth factors would be implementation ready on the criteria scale whereas an action with an indeterminate growth upside would fall on the withdrawal required scale. Likewise, an action that limits opportunities for growth and ignore growth factors would need reformulation.

Institutions that recognize people as their greatest resource, honoring and utilizing employees in a meaningful manner while positioning themselves as agents for positive change in the surrounding community serve as models of distinction in organizational life. As written by Greenleaf (1977), “An institution starts on a course toward people-building with leadership that has a firmly established context of ‘people first’” (p. 40). The institutional purpose, no matter what it entails, starts from the concept of *people first* as serving institutions are created to benefit internal stakeholders in addition to contributing towards loftier goals such as the common good. Trustees charged with refining and upholding institutional purpose must define what their institution stands for and how it connects to and enriches people’s lives. Thus, an action that directly relates to and fulfills the institution’s purpose while embodying the core value of *people first* would be categorized as implementation ready. Actions implicit to the core value of *people first* that may inadvertently label employee needs as low priority would be consistent with the



withdrawal required scale. Those acts void of or lacking an understanding of others would need to be overhauled at the reformulation stage.

Greenleaf's (1977) message to trustees was one of being proactive, of learning as much about the working parts of an organization that factor into the causation of organizational planning and decision-making. As conceptual talent, trustees and leaders are expected to "see the whole in the perspective of history—past and future—states and adjusts goals, analyzes and evaluates operating performance, and foresees contingencies a long way ahead" (p. 66). To use this information for forming a plan, leadership is called to thoroughly review the impending action from multiple perspectives that considers the responsibilities charged to the leader and the employee's role in executing the action, whether they are afforded input regarding their given role. If employees do not have a direct say in the matter, how is their role in the action essential to forwarding the *people first* ideology found in institutional purpose? Gathering contextual data relating to the issue that supports the use of employees or how the whole including the employees will benefit (transparent or not at the time of the action) is key to being implementation ready. Conversely, an action that is viewed from a single perspective (Although seemingly paradoxical, a servant-leader may be prone to only viewing an action from the employees perspective which would overshadow certain leadership responsibilities owed to the organization) with a limited contextual picture either from lack of institutional research or



limited effort on the leader's part calls for withdrawal. In this stage, the leader would rectify the issue by analyzing the action from the alternate side's perspective. Those actions that disregard the contextual aspects of a current issue with no discernable voice attached to it requires more depth as to how one can satisfy their obligations as leader while equally meeting the needs of their employees to move beyond the reformulation stage.

In a leadership approach that places people and their growth first, ensuring the communal well-being of one's employees takes on a renewed significance. The overarching theme in Greenleaf's (1977) essays is the idea of building community that transcends the organization, treating each other with fairness and dignity, accepting the positive aspects an employee brings to the organization along with "a tolerance of imperfection" that is part of the human experience (p. 21). Though an employee might fail at a task or make a questionable decision, showing compassion contributes to the overall development of the person and deepens their relationship with leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). Along with being inclusive of the whole being, Greenleaf (1977) illustrates the value of promoting equity within the organization. A telling example of producing an environment that takes all feedback into account is the idea of "primus inter pares— first among equals" as an equity-based model for organizational leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 61). Seeing how a single perspective presumably lacks the capacity to conceptualize every undertaking within an organization, having a group of diverse



peers to debate and collectively contribute towards a solution is a step towards inculcating a culture of equity. Therefore, an action that enhances the individual as well as the overall well-being of the community of employees with a focus on promoting equity and inclusion of all people including their opinions and feedback is implementation ready. An action that contains an element that may enhance individual as well as the general well-being of the community of employees yet does not provide a clear vision promoting equity or inclusion of other people including their ideas would require withdrawal. Lastly, an action that does not take into account the individual and the community of employees' well-being with no focus on equity and inclusion would need to be reformulated to accept those involved in the decision with fairness to meet the implementation ready standard.

## CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership offers a distinct perspective and set of values for leaders that acknowledge the worth of others with a focus on employee growth. Making decisions can be conducted using a multitude of approaches such as heuristic and rational decision-making. The perceived difficulty in identifying a decision-making approach for servant-leaders guided the formation of a decision-making rubric that applied aspects of Greenleaf's (1977) "The Servant as Leader" and "The Institution as Servant" to populate the rubric dimensions. The five dimensions extracted from the works include: Trust-Building, Growth, Institutional Purpose, Examination of Issue,



and Communal Well-Being. The descriptions offer servant-leaders a consistent and measurable process to review and determine whether a decision-making action fulfills Greenleaf's criteria for actions affecting employees.

Though uncommon for determining leadership actions, a decision-making rubric makes sense in that a rubric is a diagnostic tool with standards in place that "helps [an individual] see what to work on" (Walvoord, 2010, p. 18). In applying the rubric, it is understood that no one action may receive a perfect score and be implementation ready in all five dimensions. Just as leadership theory is not an exact science, using the rubric will not produce perfect solutions for every employee-based issue. If anything, it is a starting point, a checklist that offers considerations that remain essential for understanding Greenleaf's servant-leader style, realizing its practical application in the workplace for shaping thoughtful decisions.

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