



THE INTERIOR DICTATES THE EXTERIOR

In Individuals and Organizations

— KEVIN PARKER

The inconvenient truth about servant-leadership is that it begins with us and then compels one to build meaningful relationships with organizational members. Leading well doesn't just determine what a leader does, but how they do so (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013). When practicing servant-leadership, one is required to access the interior of a person and meet and serve them there. No loitering around the exterior of their lives, their emotions, their fears, or their challenges; rather, it is an inside job, which takes effort, intentionality and consistency. Leadership begins in one's heart and character (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). The labor is challenging, but the harvest is rich. Just as servant-leadership reaches to the interior of a person, creating change in them, when practiced correctly, servant-leadership leaks from the interior of an organization, to the exterior. But perhaps the most fundamental and challenging piece to the philosophy of servant-leadership is that serving others begins deep within our own hearts, our interior. Because servant-leadership begins on the inside of an individual, it does not seep in from the outside



(Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). No easy checklist exists where you can mark off items to reach clearly defined success apart from Greenleaf's definition. This is a philosophy grounded in one's relational capacity to connect with others in classical Greenleaf fashion by developing people and furthering their self-efficacy, which helps others become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, which eventually compels them to serve others as well (Greenleaf, 1977). The sobering reality is that we are constantly casting shadow or light into another individual's life (Palmer, 2000). The purpose of this piece is to highlight that the exterior of an individual as well as an organization is best changed from the interior, which requires the servant-leader to earn the right to be heard from other organizational members. The interior is always leaking through to the exterior. This philosophy is abstract, and yet it is fundamentally practical in nature. While one can easily get lost in the depth of this philosophy, the practicality of the application of servant-leadership is based around a couple of fundamental concepts. One, is that it is important to understand exercising leadership is not tied to a position; therefore, anyone can practice servant-leadership. Applying the practice of servant-leadership entails earning the right to lead, know the individuals and people you want to serve, invest in a few to reach the masses, while anchored in the undeniable tenant the interior impacts the exterior.

Some have dismissed servant-leadership as another mediocre leadership theory, rather than a deep and profound philosophy to meaningfully engage life, people, and



organizations. Anderson (2008) highlights, “As great as the idea of servant-leadership was, Greenleaf was not interested primarily in making people better leaders, or in fact, making the organizations they lead more effective or profitable” (p. 4). At initial glance, his philosophy may appear too abstract to implement in today’s workplace. Some have suggested servant-leaders are passive and as a result marginalize the on-going demands of the organizational structure (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004). While the temptation to lead more effectively may pull one to simple tools offering quick solutions, Greenleaf contrasts that notion by introducing the hard work of creating meaningful relationships with organizational members which develops them as individuals, not just useful employees. Servant-leadership is a time consuming, hard, and expensive proposition that demands much of the leader. Greenleaf’s idea is definitively different in that his ideas were counter-cultural by putting others first, over self (Anderson, 2008). This is largely why critics may say this approach is unrealistic in a fast-paced environment. Servant-leadership is most concerned about the growth of the individual, believing that individual’s growth impacts the organization. The fundamental notion is that if the individual grows, they will in turn grow their organization. Greenleaf (1998) inculcates, “But if one is a servant, either leader or follower, one is always searching, listening, expecting that a better wheel for these times is in the making” (p. 23). In a restricted cultural framework, people may dismiss servant-leadership as a quaint theory in the classroom, but one that is



often unrealistic to apply in organizational contextual settings.

While attending a reunion with the Aspen Institute a couple of years ago, the dinner speaker was an editor of Time magazine, who said our leadership effectiveness at any level will fundamentally come down to the way your followers ask, and ultimately answer, two questions. The first question is: Where are we going? The second, slightly more compelling question is: Do you care about me? The Millennial population is seemingly particularly interested in these two questions, which are regularly at the forefront of my mind, serving as a guidepost along the foggy path of my organizational life. These questions also serve as a built-in personal accountability.

This servant-leadership philosophy is a fountain which waters people. Striving to continually implement servant-leadership in one's personal as well as professional, life, tends to foster meaningful growth. Deeper ways of serving not previously considered tend to surface the more one serves. There is a significant self-discovery component embedded in servant-leadership. The problem and the beauty of servant-leadership is that practicing this philosophy requires considerable effort, both personally and professionally.

Developing organizational members is at the forefront of most superior minds and agendas, but Greenleaf's approach is most challenging in nature. It is a call to action but one we must define the logistics of, which is beautiful. His piercing question of ultimately creating other servant-leaders (Greenleaf, 1977) is the pinnacle of organizational health and individual development. The most piercing question is what are



we doing for the people who work with and for us?

In my early days at Dutch Bros., the franchise of coffee stands I own in Spokane, Washington, I thought I was doing a lot for my employees, but the reality is that I was from a different generation and what I thought I was giving, my employees interpreted as no more than status quo in their eyes. I am identified by scholars as Generation X while almost all my employees are identified as Millennials, and Generation Z; there is a different mindset and approach to our behaviors. If you would have asked me what I was doing for my employees in the early days, I would have said, I am nice, I am encouraging, I let them play any assortment of music they want during their shift, and I give them a fun job, a paycheck, and free drinks. If you would have interviewed them, they would have very likely agreed I was nice, but if pointedly asked what I did for them, I believe they would have replied, very little. I was already familiar with many leadership theories, save for the one that would be most important: servant-leadership. Once I discovered this philosophy, my personal and professional lives experienced dramatic shifts. Practicing servant-leadership has changed my life and I cannot authentically imagine trying to lead an organization without employing Greenleaf's challenge, to help those I serve grow as people. I have become convinced that if we grow the person, they will naturally grow as an employee. Servant-leadership makes for a rich organizational life. It also makes for a transformational life. Through servant-leadership, it is possible to reach the interior of both people and organizations, impacting the exterior. There



are numerous examples where I have seen this play out in an organization. The following are particularly meaningful to me.

A FUNDAMENTAL MISTAKE THAT CHANGED ME: EARNING THE RIGHT TO LEAD

Fourteen years ago, my wife, Kerry, and I pioneered the local Spokane coffee industry by bringing Dutch Bros. Coffee to the state of Washington. At the time, I thought I was relatively advanced in my leadership training and I approached my small staff of eight people feeling adequately armed in both theories and the practice of leadership. Little did I realize how an authentic self-assessment would highlight that I was not relationally close to my staff and not serving them well. It became apparent my staff was not endeared to me and I uncomfortably discovered why. As Sipe and Frick (2015) write, “You would say we wrote this book because we needed it for ourselves. Because when it comes to leadership, and especially servant-leadership, information, insight, and motivation are not enough” (p. xv). I thought I was exercising leadership well, but the reality was the opposite. Like Sipe and Frick, insight and motivation were not enough. What it took for me to be a better servant-leader started with a busy morning and a fundamental mistake coupled with the self-awareness to learn from the situation.

Greenleaf (1977), brilliantly unfolds the idea of self-awareness when he says, “The opening of awareness stocks both the conscience and the unconscious minds with a richness of resources of future needs” (p. 41). During a busy morning



rush, I was working the espresso machine alongside a young 18-year-old woman who was a diva in every sense of the word. As a result of my carefully crafted assumptions about her, I didn't give her much attention beyond the normal interactions with an employee. During the rush, she turned to me and said, "Why do you care more about the customers more than us?" Internally, I immediately interpreted her comments as her story manifesting her own insecurity. I also filtered her comments through the belief that no one should be asking a boss, let alone the owner of a business, a question like this one. My main thought quickly turned to the idea that I should fire her. After stewing on her question for a couple of weeks, I arrived at the uncomfortable proposition that Nicole's question was uncomfortable because she was right. "Only congruent, persistent, and meaningful action combined with regular practice, feedback, and accountability, completes are Level Three education" (Sipe & Frick, 2015, p. vx). My mindset began to change. I was beginning to learn that authority does not automatically come with a position but only through sustained meaningful movement.

While serving for five years as an area director on the Young Life staff in Littleton, Colorado I was instilled with founder Jim Rayburn's philosophy about sharing our faith. Rayburn said, "We must earn the right to be heard." That statement, which he disseminated about 70 years ago, is still alive and well in Young Life today, and has a transcendent quality which reaches into American based organizations. In cognitive similarity, when leading, we need to earn the right to



lead which is ultimately gained by serving our crew, employees and organizations.

A servant-leader is always building relational capital or withdrawing relational capital depending on their approach with the other organizational members (Covey, 2013). Covey suggests we need to build up an emotional bank account when serving people; hence, we need to be making deposits in other people's accounts.

KNOW THE PEOPLE WHOM YOU WANT TO SERVE

One of my favorite stories about knowing who you are serving was told to me by the former Columbine High School principal, Frank DeAngelis. The Columbine shooting happened April 20, 1999, and that following fall, as students returned to the school for the first time since the shooting, I accompanied them, as a Young Life leader in the school. I clearly remember the all too familiar sight of TV cameras and trucks lined up along the entrance to Columbine. I, along with the 2,000 students, walked into the refurbished school for the first time since that fateful day, while television cameras watched our every step. In the moments following the grand entrance carried on live television across the world, DeAngelis walked back to his office where his secretary told him he had an important call on line one. Frank said, "Thank you, but can you tell them I'll call back later?" His secretary insisted he needed to take the call. DeAngelis said he didn't want to take the call since the students literally just re-entered the school and he wanted to be available to the staff and students. His secretary



said for the third time, “Frank, go in your office, sit down and push line one.” The directness in her voice indicated the call was an important one, so DeAngelis walked into his office, sat down and begrudgingly pushed line one, before saying in a rather solemn voice, “This is Frank.” The voice on the other end said, “This is Air Force One, and the president would like to speak with you, please confirm your identity by providing your social security number.” DeAngelis said, “What?” The kind woman on the other end said, “Sir, I need your social security number please.” Fumbling through the numbers DeAngelis heard, “Please hold for the president of the United States.” Then he heard President Bill Clinton saying, “Frankie D, I am on Air Force One flying over the Swiss Alps and just watched all of you walk back into Columbine. Please know that I am watching, as America is. We are very proud of you.” DeAngelis and the president spoke for a few more minutes, and after hanging up, what struck DeAngelis the most was the president’s emotional engagement by knowing his nickname, “Frankie D,” which is the nickname all the students and staff called him. I remember Frank DeAngelis telling me that if you don’t know your people, you have very little leadership capacity. He said, “The president knew my nickname. How in the world did he know that? He knew it because he is connected to people.”

This story has always spoken to me of the value of knowing the people we want to serve. Relationships build trust which is the foundation for our authority, gained by way of serving others. In this sense, the president earned the right to



lead DeAngelis because he displayed an emotional connection to him and the situation.

DEVELOP A FEW TO REACH THE REST

Greenleaf (1998) writes, “How to achieve community under the shelter of bigness may be the essence of this challenge because so much of caring depends upon knowing and interacting with persons of intimacy of propinquity” (p. 22). The number one complaint I hear about servant-leadership is the abstractness and scope of the endeavor. It is unrealistic to consider personally developing every individual in your organization, but you can invest in a few who in turn invest in others. One of the more salient lessons I have learned is the importance of presence and proximity. Servant-leaders stay geographically and emotionally close to those they serve and as a result, they capture the emotions and realities of their organizational members which builds exceptional intuition with their employees (Greenleaf, 1977). We have more than 200 employees and building community is not always easy despite regular all-company meetings, movie nights, classes, etc. I learned the value of building community by also reaching individuals in the company. Greenleaf (1998) asserts, “They may need to help to do some things they do not know how to do, but not without how to be human and caring” (p. 158). Each Monday, I drive across the city of Spokane and try to individually visit each stand. While there, I may linger for two minutes, or 20 minutes, all depending on what is unfolding at that location. If the



employees are really slammed with customers, I may look for a chore to do for them, such as taking out the trash, sweeping the floor, or something else simple like that. It is amazing how employees notice this and chat about it. Even a few customers have seen me taking out the trash and asked one of our employees if I was their boss. Great as helping with a few chores is, something occurred to me about three years ago. Although I was serving in this capacity, I was overlooking the opportunity to build a relationship with my employees while I was there. So, I learned a deeper way to serve; the deeper way was to also have conversations as employees have time. Before, I would obviously say hello and talk for a few minutes, but it was mostly small talk. Then, I learned the deeper value of taking time to check in with an employee and just enjoying casual one on one conversation is where the magic lies. Thompson (2015) states, “Whether viewed as an opportunity for spiritual growth or as a spiritual discipline, work and life in the workplace take on the kind of transcendent meaning . . .” (p. 67).

Earlier this summer, when I stopped by one of the stands, an employee named Sarah shared vulnerably about what it was like to grow up while living in a trailer. She explained that part of her paycheck goes to helping out her mom who struggles with alcohol. She is only 21 years old and my level of respect for her has gone through the roof. As a result of this conversation, and taking time to develop a relationship with her individually, rather than just seeing her as blending into the overall group of employees, I see her differently, because I see



her humanness. It is these kinds of conversations that allow us to approach our organizational members as people rather than just employees. One would argue that I see her more accurately and completely now. Perhaps I am realizing what humanness really means. Nicole's one-time offensive question has altered the way I approach employees for the last fourteen years. Servant-leadership ultimately appeals for one to see individuals who have passions, pain, dreams and challenges, as opposed to seeing people as employees performing a transactional function in our lives.

When I stopped in last month at our stand by Gonzaga University, an employee told me that another employee named Kaylee really changed a customer's life earlier that morning. A customer started tearing up while in line as a result of the weight of the stress she experiences as a single parent. Her tire had literally gone flat while in line at our coffee shop. On this particular day, this customer who is named Amelia, was trying to get her little girl to her first day of third grade. Our staff were their usual outgoing selves and were verbally trying to make Amelia feel better the best they knew how. They were making statements like, "It's only a flat tire, those are pretty easy to fix." The reality is that for a single mom, fixing a flat tire is not always easy when finances are in short supply. Kaylee, who has worked for us for two years and is a very quiet, unassuming young woman, walked over to the window and handed the customer the keys to her own car. Amelia initially refused the keys although she was really touched by the gesture. Kaylee insisted she use it for the day saying, "You



have more important things to do today than I do.” Amelia humbly accepted the unexpected offer of the keys and used Kaylee’s car for the day. I still get teary when I tell this story. I wouldn’t know these stories first-hand and be blessed by hearing them had I not taken the time to get to know the employees by stopping by and building authority with them. A servant-leader is always building authority with employees by investing in them and being present. Having been focused on trying to serve my staff the last few years, I unintentionally discovered a most unexpected lesson. Serving people has become the most satisfying part of my role in Dutch Bros.

In the melody of cognitive similarity, the janitor working inside Columbine High School on the day of the shooting on April 20, 1999, personified servant-leadership. I remember walking down the stairs at 11:17 a.m. that particular day, heading into the cafeteria, and catching the janitor out of the corner of my eye. Within a couple of minutes, two mentally unbalanced shooters would descend on the school with the intent to take the lives of students identified on their pre-determined hit list. The gunmen would begin their carnivorous hunt in the cafeteria, where approximate 500 students were innocently having lunch and unbeknownst to all, were sitting ducks. I clearly remember hearing gunshots outside the windows of the cafeteria and the next thing I recall was the janitor, along with Dave Sanders a beloved teacher and softball coach at the school, was running around the periphery of the cafeteria yelling, “Get down, get down, get down!” While students quickly sought shelter under cafeteria tables, the janitor and Dave Sanders



literally rose to the occasion by running in front of the windows while corralling the student body. I've always cherished the visual picture of the janitor pushing his broom one minute, and risking his life just moments later, in an attempt to save the lives of the students he served every day by cleaning up after them. This time, his role wasn't picking up trash or sterilizing surfaces, but it was his willingness to risk his life for others. Dave Sanders and the janitor selflessly served when it would have been easier to hide. Sadly, Dave would lose his life within the next couple of hours saving the lives of students, many of whom he probably didn't even know by name, yet, he gave his life so they might have theirs.

We all serve differently, but we all need to serve. Most of the time, serving comes in the form of small little ways that prove to be meaningful to others. Once in a lifetime, we may have the opportunity to serve like the janitor in *Columbine*. Greenleaf's (1977) *Best Test* helps discover why one serves. It states, "The best test is this: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (pp. 13-14).

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN DUTCH BROS. COFFEE

Nicole was right, and her uncomfortable probing question provided a much-needed assessment of the reality of the situation with my employees. Today, Dutch Bros. Spokane is definitively different as a result of her piercing and direct question. Ultimately, it was her question that drove me to the



field of servant-leadership. I began to realize that I knew a lot, but understood little.

The embarrassing reality is that I was mostly concerned about myself during those early years of business ownership. As I began to be more concerned about the people in my organization, though, change came, and ten years ago we started a servant-leadership institute in Dutch Bros. Spokane, which has evolved today with an official curriculum. We are laser focused on the development of the individual through various approaches. Each Wednesday my wife, Kerry, and I meet with the regional team who oversee the managers. We talk through issues, how they are doing personally as well as professionally. Each meeting begins with a personal check in of their highs and lows during the last week. When dealing with conflict in our company, the state of the person is always at the forefront of the discussion. The culture of Dutch Bros is something we hold very dear. I firmly believe that if we don't have culture, we don't have a team. We may have a group of people, but not a team unless they are bound by a culture that values them, grows them, and empowers them to follow their dreams. Our culture and a deep part of our company is best defined by investing in developing people, and our employees know this. Much effort goes into the personal development of our crew. Apart from the servant-leadership based curriculum, we also offer voluntary enrollment classes for our employees in courses such as financial freedom and home buying fundamentals. These classes have nothing to do with Dutch Bros., but have everything to do with developing the



individual. Note that I didn't say developing employees, but I intentionally emphasized the idea developing individuals. I was not a good boss in the early days of Dutch Bros., mainly because I made it more about me rather than the employees. My employees today would provide a much different response than those of 12 years ago. For most of us, the 'society' we have a sphere of influence over is our organization that we work for. I am convinced it is absolutely imperative we seek to serve that society to which we belong.

My contemporary understanding of servant-leadership is evolving; therefore, I am continually growing, and encouraged by the fact that I understand the philosophy more today than I did last year, or even last month. I am excited about the lessons that will unfold in this coming year. One of the things I have learned already is that servant-leadership begins internally.

CONTINUING TO WORK ON MY INTERIOR . . . AND, THEREFORE, MY EXTERIOR

In studying and implementing servant-leadership is the unavoidable reality that it all begins internally. Servant-leadership is an education where no one ever graduates. Hopefully as we progress and walk the path Jesus demonstrated, and personified by Leo in *Journey to the East* (Hesse, 2011), a seminal and foundational piece of work about servant-leadership about an individual named Leo who faithfully serves the people along a long journey. The end result is that we think more critically, we love more deeply, we see people more completely, and we understand serving at a deeper level.



After I moved from Littleton, Colorado to the Northwest, I returned to visit Littleton five years later. I called Frank DeAngelis, the former Columbine principal and arranged a time to meet him at the school. It was most enjoyable to see him and walk around the halls of the school one more time as we both reflected about the tragedy, how we have grown, and what our lives looked like in the years following the tragedy. I had just been elected to the state legislature and the conversation we had couldn't have been more apropos. One of the things Frank said that he had learned is that one size doesn't fit all.

The temptation as we dive further into leadership studies is to pick up a hammer and assume everything is a nail, but it is not always as it may appear. One of my favorite aspects of servant-leadership is that although this philosophy is about serving, the way we serve each individual is different. Human beings are complex and come to us with a wide spectrum of needs, some of which they cannot articulate. Building relationships with organizational members is critical because it is through close relational contacts that we begin to determine what their needs may be. Although there is no one size fits all, there is an approach which meets the unique tapestry of needs and that is servant-leadership. Ultimately, servant-leaders compel us to see things in people that they do not see in themselves. The health of others is largely determined by the health of our own souls.



References

- Anderson, J. (2008). The writings of Robert K. Greenleaf: An interpretive analysis and the future of servant leadership. *Servant Leadership Roundtable*. Retrieved from https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/sl_proceedings/2008/anderson.pdf
- Blanchard, K., & Broadwell, R. (Eds.). (2018) *Servant leadership in action: How you can achieve great relationships and results*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Covey, S. R. (2013). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A Journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1998). *The power of servant-leadership*. L. C. Spears (Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2013). *Primal leadership: Unleashing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Hesse, H. (2011). *Journey to the East*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books.
- Palmer, P. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening of the voice of vocation*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sipe, J. W., & Frick, D. M. (2009). *Seven pillars of servant leadership: Practicing the wisdom of leading by serving*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Smith, B. N., Montagno, R. V., & Kuzmenko, T. N. (2004). Transformational and servant leadership: Content and contextual comparisons. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 10(4), 80-92.
- Thompson, C. M. (2015). *The congruent life: Following the inward path to fulfilling work and inspired leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



Kevin Parker is an entrepreneur, former politician, formerly an advisor to a senior member of Congress, and a current professor of leadership studies. Perhaps most notably, he is a survivor of the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999. Kevin is a Rodel Fellow at the Aspen Institute and served as a facilitator at Harvard University. Currently, he owns Dutch Bros. Coffee in Spokane and employs over 230 individuals and nine locations.