



MY JOURNEY INTO THE SERVANT-LEADERSHIP MOVEMENT

— JOSEPH ROCKY WALLACE

I was raised in a home that modeled servant-leadership through and through, as my parents were active Christians, and Dad was a United Methodist pastor. But as I grew, navigating the various stages of high school, college, early career, graduate school, marriage, children...the term *servant-leadership* was not commonly used in my life circle. I was an educator, later a school administrator, had coached baseball and basketball in the school system to begin my career, always active in the church, attended leadership conference after leadership conference as part of my work...But servant-leading in how one lives life and serves in organizations did not come up much. It was assumed that discerning and ethical leaders just simply lived and led this way.

But that all changed in the fall of 2003, when I began my doctoral journey at Regent University. I remember the very first morning of residency. Oh my, when the director of the program spoke (Dr. Jacques King), I knew I was in the right place. And subsequently, over the next three years, the reading and lectures were rich, and the assigned research, papers and projects were meaningful and inspiring. And the underlying theme, in course after course, was servant-leadership. We were immersed in what it meant to first lead self, and then serve others—both on the individual and corporate level.



Oh, how I had needed this infusion of what matters most in the never-ending fray of philosophies and resources on how to lead. The long and short of it was I was exhausted and should not have been at that relatively young age of my life. Did “running” a school, and helping others navigate through the daily processes and protocol have to be so grueling? How had the essentials—teaching and learning—gotten so complicated?

And so, in year four at Regent, I chose to write a book that told the story of servant-leadership through the eyes of a veteran school principal, as he mentors young school administrators while they deal with the day to day realities of leading (serving) people and growing organizations. Little did I know that this one exercise to fulfill my doctoral requirements would change my career—and life.

After earning my degree in Strategic Leadership in May of 2007, I did not think much about how to follow up in further developing the manuscript, until one day a colleague of mine encouraged me to send it to Rowman & Littlefield Education, as she had heard of this publisher and knew they specialized in helpful tools for school practitioners. And a few months later, *Principal to Principal: Conversations in Servant Leadership and School Transformation* (Wallace, 2008) was born.

At the time, I was teaching for Morehead State University, and began using the book in my graduate education leadership classes. Students loved it! It was real world, what they were living every day. Like me just a few years earlier, most of them only vaguely understood the term servant-leadership and could relate to so many of the stories in the book. Now they had a clear definition for what they had felt called to do when they chose education as their career. And now they had a model to grow into as they were training to be school administrators.



I realized I needed to write a follow up book for aspiring high school principals, as the first was based in an elementary school. A short time later, *Servant Leadership and High School Change* (Wallace, 2009b) was published by Rowman & Littlefield. In this story, as in the first book, the mentor (John) provides wise counsel. In this installment, he coaches a young, careless, and self-centered principal. Literally, to this day, my students call for his termination when reading the early chapters!

And books three and four were soon to follow. My editor at Rowman & Littlefield, Dr. Tom Koerner, realized the value of these stories that paralleled what life down in the trenches is really like for school leaders, and was helpful every step of the way. The third book centers around how to re-invent a school with servant-leadership as the driver—*Breaking Away from the Corporate Model* (Wallace, 2009a), as a fire on the weekend before opening day forces the traditional model to be discarded, and a new beginning to birth from the ashes.

The fourth and final story of the “principal to principal” series explores how John (the servant-leader mentor in all four books) deals with life on a personal level when battling cancer, but still mentoring—*Servant Leadership: Leaving a Legacy* (Wallace, 2012). John’s unwavering commitment to the wisdom and goodness that had defined his life models for all who know him that servant-leadership is indeed a lifestyle, rock solid when the storms of life toss us to and fro.

Over the years, I have been asked often by my students if I was indeed the leading character, John, who shares such insights in coaching his young mentees to grow into servant-leaders who thus transform school communities. My answer always is: “No, John is who I want to be when I grow up.” And I mean that with all sincerity. I so wish I had been introduced to Robert Greenleaf’s work



and other literature on servant-leadership way back there when I was serving as a school principal. With great staff around me, we did a lot well—even being named a Kentucky and U.S. Blue Ribbon School in 1996-97 (Catlettsburg Elementary).

But as I think back, oh how rich it would have been to immerse ourselves as a school into the servant-leadership domain more purposefully. As we plugged along, having much positive influence in so many ways in that little community, still, there was an even simpler, more effective road we could have traveled. “We didn’t know what we didn’t know.”

THE PEBBLE IN THE POND

With these books creating an underlying theme in our principal licensure program at Morehead State University, when we later developed our doctoral model there in education leadership, the chair of the department, Dr. David Barnett, decided that the very first course would be on servant-leadership. (I was asked to help develop and teach it; and, working with the initial Ed.D. cohorts at Morehead State was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career).

And since that time, I have helped develop Asbury University’s graduate program for aspiring school leaders, and currently am doing the same at Campbellsville University. All these schools are in Kentucky and have used the “principal to principal” books extensively. And I have been blessed beyond measure to be asked to present and train on servant-leadership in schools and other education agencies here in Kentucky, as well as presentations at national conferences. And I have written or co-written several other books that have servant-leadership as a prominent theme.

So, I am not exaggerating when I say that my experience in doctoral study at Regent University changed my life. But it wasn’t simply the study of servant-leadership. It was how much the



professors and guest lecturers believed in the core values of servant-leadership as a lifestyle. One of those lecturers was Larry Spears. I have come to cherish Larry as a friend and mentor, and I admire his work greatly.

Another direct result of my immersion in servant-leadership at Regent was bringing Ken Blanchard to Kentucky for a one-day conference. We utilized his resources in our doctoral program, and my colleagues were reading his literature at the education coop center in Kentucky I was working with at the time (Kentucky Education Development Cooperative). So, we decided to invite Dr. Blanchard in as one of our featured professional development offerings. His visit to Lexington was attended by hundreds of Kentucky educators. (In fact, the idea of my approach to telling the stories in my books came from Dr. Blanchard's style of rich storytelling he utilizes in so many of his books).

And I could go on and on giving examples here of how the study of the literature on servant-leadership impacted my life and career and has led to the lifestyle having positive influence on hundreds of others. But, really, all I have been doing these last several years is educating students and colleagues about the rich collection of research and inspired writing and pointing them to the timeless principles that Robert Greenleaf reminded us of 50 years ago.

Larry Spears, presently the President and CEO of the Spears Center for Servant-Leadership in Indianapolis, mined these out from Greenleaf's body of work in the early 1990's, and oh my, what a treasure trove he gave us. Larry writes, edits, lectures, consults, and promotes the work of Greenleaf and others in the servant-leadership domain, and has had tremendous influence worldwide in advancing the cause—most recently with his teaching classes on servant-leadership at Gonzaga University. Gonzaga is among a handful of schools that offers concentrations and degrees in the study of



servant-leadership, although the circle continues to grow.

Spears (2010) narrowed in on 10 foundational nuggets from Greenleaf's work, and they have been universally accepted as an executive summary of servant-leadership's key characteristics:

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing
4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualization
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship
9. Commitment to the Growth of People
10. Building Community

One can only imagine the transformation in a classroom if a teacher helps create a daily culture based on these principles. And one can only imagine the transformation for an entire school community if a principal embraces these as the rock bed non-negotiables. And similarly, such positive influence will happen in other organizations (and has been—across the spectrum). But there is a catch—a critical pre-requisite. For the needed change to happen, it must begin inside with self-leadership. The literature is becoming increasingly abundant in asking the question: “How can one truly lead others, if she cannot first lead herself?”

A focus on authentic community, emphasis on trusting relationships, celebration of student and staff achievements in all areas (not simply assessment scores), impeccable ethics, helpful coaching and accountability...Who wouldn't want their child to attend a school with such a healthy culture? But, for such a culture to



exist, the principal and classroom teachers must model—not simply preach—such commitment to holistic wellness.

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

A varied mix of organizations are proving servant-leadership is transformative. The consulting group Spiritual Leadership Inc. has utilized the principles of servant-leadership over the last 20 years to facilitate coaching sessions for pastors and church leadership teams around the world. Commonly known as SLI, this team is home-based in Lexington, Kentucky, and began at ground zero with one simple realization: If the church is unhealthy, then its leaders are most likely in need of help themselves. If we can help the leader to unpack and take a look at the various wounds, bias, lack of spiritual depth he once had, then there is hope for the organization.

SLI has zeroed in on the concept of “generative leadership,” coaching leaders they work with that once we learn to serve, then one plus one doesn’t simply equal two. Status quo is no longer the norm or the goal, and thus, the growth in the organization can be explosive (SLI, 2009). I have consulted with and been mentored by SLI for several years, and I believe strongly in its work.

Another organization that is successfully using the principles of servant-leadership to help individuals and organizations grow and prosper in healthy ways is the Rutherford Learning Group, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Mike Rutherford, CEO of the education consulting company, realized a few years back that there was something missing in the typical professional development being provided to school leaders across the board. I have been blessed to be a small part of Mike’s commitment to investing in the lives of his education colleagues by introducing them to Greenleaf’s work and others in the servant-leadership arena.

Mike calls his servant-leader trainings and conferences the



Artisan Leader series (“Heart of a Servant, Mind of a Scholar, Inspiration of an Artist”), and participants come away invigorated with new energy to go back to their home districts with fresh tools for how to grow servant-leader schools (Rutherford, 2016).

Regent University’s annual servant-leadership round table is yet another example of how the word spreads, and the movement grows. I have attended and presented at this one day gathering for several years now, and the diversity of work being done around the world in the area of servant-leadership is more than impressive, it is astounding. Dr. Kathleen Patterson directs this project, and invites in authors, consultants, educators, pastors, other leaders and planters of non-profits, social workers, thought leaders, corporate CEO’s, and others. The movement and its focus on ethical, unselfish leadership is spreading, and producing more effective organizations across the globe. People are thirsting for such leadership.

FOLLOWERSHIP

This movement to first serve is lifting up leaders throughout the organization, moving away from the traditional bureaucratic model that too often stifles and holds down those in the trenches who often are the most genuine and selfless leaders. In school work, sometimes the secretary or custodian is a gentle and discerning soul who listens to teachers and students with more effectiveness than the principal. Sometimes, it’s the first year teacher who is doing the most genuine and selfless work—modeling for older, experienced teachers who may be burned out or have lost their passion in the classroom.

And a key ingredient in the DNA of anyone who is having positive influence on others is the ability to follow well. John Maxwell calls this discernment and humility “leading up” (Maxwell, 2005). In fact, this characteristic of healthy dynamics with the designated leadership not only builds trust and helps get the work



done so much more efficiently, but it builds momentum for the organization.

When everyone is supporting those up the line with a sense of “modeling leadership for the leadership,” so to speak, wow, special things will happen in the macro culture. Notice in the examples below, it’s not about me. It’s about the culture and success of everyone...a generative model.

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE FOLLOWERSHIP

- I have not walked in his shoes. So, I’ll not pretend I have. He needs me to believe in him.
- I can help her best by listening with empathy and focus as she processes her decisions with me.
- I can best help the team by fulfilling the role I have been assigned with dedication and belief in the work.
- My superiors need me to share helpful and appropriate critique—not mindless agreement with everything they do.
- Followership means sometimes I’m the one who stays to help the “boss,” after a late meeting—so the others on the team can go on home.
- Followership means sometimes I will need to decrease, so others may increase.
- My giftedness is vital to the organization. My superiors will often decide how to utilize my skills best, and I need to be OK with that.
- If ever I see my boss or more than one headed for a train wreck due to a poor decision—financial, ethical, personnel, or other—I need to be prepared for the fallout with support...Doing all I can to prevent the mistake, but also to help in ethical ways with the clean up if it happens.



- My most important role in my career may be when I'm a “#2.”
- My least effective role could be when a “#1,” if without a team who lives by the principles of followership.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAMS

And, as a result of the individual understanding the importance of faithful followership, the harmony and effectiveness of teams can grow into a rhythm that produces an immediate and long-term culture of fulfilling, meaningful work. Once the egos are set aside, and the turf issues are removed, collaborative minds who aren't threatened by insecurities and distrust can solve almost any problem, diving deep to unlock transformative solutions.

Consider how freeing and unchained it would be to work in the team environment described below:

- Diverse coverage of the larger group
- Regular meetings (establish protocol, time limits)
- Everyone has a voice
- No hidden agendas
- The focus is on the vision
- How to provide support for implementation of the vision
- Responsibilities: Who will do what before the next meeting?
- Team versus individual lobbying for a cause
- The leadership team represents the whole group—is not a “title” thing
- Invite guest presentations to the group meetings
- Relentless pursuit of organizational health
- Servant-leadership—why are we here for this organization? Who do we serve?



WOUNDED LEADERS

The servant-leadership model also has benefits in helping shape the moral fiber of society. In *The Road to Character*, David Brooks (2015) challenges the current generation to accept the responsibility to be about something larger than comfort and self-focus. He points to earlier core values of stewardship we've lost sight of and calls for an increased centering on relationship and virtues of goodness.

But, in reality, isn't this "goodness" factor so basic it should not have to be explained? Generally, aren't leaders in all walks of life modeling the ethical principles of serving as a routine staple of their role as an influencer and decision maker who impacts lives every day? Sadly, this is not the case in too many work environments. In *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, McIntosh and Rima (2007) cite examples of fallen leaders down through history that illustrate the inherent danger of having power and influence. From Biblical leaders to American presidents, their definitions of leaders who are compulsive, narcissistic, paranoid, codependent, and passive-aggressive remind the reader that careless and broken leadership is a cancer that exists all around us.

In *Leadership and Self-Deception*, The Arbinger Institute (2010) shares in a simple story of mentoring new employees how easy it is for leaders at all stages of life to not see the reality in the mirror. In the workplace, and at home, it is not uncommon for those who are given the most authority to abuse that authority without even realizing the hurt they are causing others around them.

SCENARIOS

Servant-leadership is not complicated. Simply put, it is caring for others with empathy, utilizing the emotional intelligence potential that is in all of us to grow beyond ourselves and into a level of authentic relationship that literally changes lives, and heals



organizations. Let's explore three examples of careless leadership, followed by three examples of servant-leadership.

- Mary begins her Monday morning at the office just like any other—overwhelmed, stressed over her mother's lingering illness, husband working two jobs, kids needing transportation for activities after school. Dan, her boss, comes by her desk and without as much as a “Good Monday morning,” gives her a list of new tasks. “Need them by end of day. Life's rough sometimes.” Mary begins her resignation letter over lunch, which she turns in later that week. In her exit interview, she simply said, “I just never felt good enough for this job. Never felt appreciated. I like the work but can't stand the culture around here.”
- Holly sobbed as she explained to her Mom and Dad that she had quit the gymnastics team. She had worked so hard, since she was five years old, and was one of the best gymnasts in the region. But as a sophomore in high school, she was tired of the relentless pressure to perform at the highest level. “If only Coach Patterson would let me know she cares for me as a person, I'd hang in there. But she never seems to understand our emotional needs. It's all about her goals, her dreams...the school being known for its gymnastics program. I feel used. I feel unappreciated. So, I'm done.”
- Harry had spent the last 25 years as a custodian at the warehouse over on the river—the loneliest and most dangerous part of town. But he had persevered, day after day, and night shift after night shift. When his wife Clara had died with cancer, the company had not remembered to do anything special except send a card. Only one of his supervisors came by the funeral home for visitation. When his kids had



graduated from high school, only a couple of fellow janitors congratulated him.

So, as Harry punched his time card for his last day, he was not surprised at all that the only gesture of appreciation was a note in his mailbox that said, “Good luck Harry. Enjoy sleeping in while we’re all still here working.” He would have been given a gold watch at the formal retirement dinner the company sponsored every year, but it was not for a couple of months later. By then, Harry had no interest in coming back to the place he had felt so worthless for all these years.

- Nell looked at her tireless office crew. She remembered beginning her career in learning the same tasks they now performed so well for her every day. As CEO, she was in and out all the time, often on a plane to another part of the country, or international. With Christmas approaching, end of year deadlines were looming, and she noticed several of her staff staying late every evening—way too late. So, she did the only thing she knew she could do for her support team who carried the organization, and made it possible for her to earn a salary that would send all of her kids to college and allow she and her husband to retire early.

“Girls, it’s Friday. Next week is Christmas. Go home at noon today. You have shopping to do for your families. And enjoy your bonus checks—we’re cutting them a week early and doubling the amount from last year. You have more than earned it. You’re the best. And, I’m hiring two more part-timers in January to help you carry the load. Can we afford it? We can’t afford not to.”

- Rick was the fair-haired boy in his church youth group. He had grown up as a Christian, and a hero in this small town where kids and adults almost worshiped the athletes who



made it good in life. Rick had been offered a scholarship to play basketball at the regional state university. But in the summer after high school, he signed on to work at a church camp, and fell in love with his job...mowing grass, building campfires, counseling kids and becoming immersed in actually having time to learn about the love of Christ. When fall term began, he talked to his head coach and abruptly resigned from the team. Rick was no longer in love with himself, all the adoration, the fame and glory. He was in love with loving others, and changed his major to missions.

- Ron worked in electronics at Walmart. He had landed this job after not being able to pay tuition for his sophomore year at the community college. His Mom had wanted to pay his way, but his Dad had said he could not dip into his nest egg. Ron found that his favorite task was taking the time to show his customers the best way to save money, while purchasing technology that they could enjoy and understand. His manager passed him over several times for a promotion because Ron's volume of sales was not quite up to par with his colleagues. But, his customer service comments from his clients were always the best in the store.

Months passed. Then one day, Ron's new supervisor called him into his office. "I'm making you the head of this department. You are what we want all our associates to be about. Thank you, Ron, for putting the customer first." Two years later, Ron became the head manager of the store.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In reviewing Greenleaf's principles of servant-leadership, as gleaned from his work by Larry Spears, I am inspired in knowing that they are being studied and embraced more and more by school



leaders, and leaders in all walks of life. The feedback I am given from my students who are training to be school administrators, and the feedback I receive when doing servant-leader professional development and presentations reminds me that in many ways this is indeed the missing piece—for any organization.

I can only speak for myself. But when in totally honest self-reflection, if I am careless in any interaction or conversation—be it with spouse or other family member, colleague, professional networking contact, student, church member, bank teller, store clerk, someone on the phone, or e-mail, or Facebook...I have failed that person. And I have only added to the confusion that so holds our present culture hostage.

Contrary to what many believe, servant-leadership is hard. It's so easy to talk about and write about. But it's a daily challenge to actually do. But, what a difference it makes—one person at a time, one day at a time... Yes, it is a lifestyle.

References

- Arbinger Institute (2010). *Leadership and self-deception: Getting out of the box*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Brooks, D. (2015). *The road to character*. Random House.
- Maxwell, J. C. (2005). *The 360 degree leader*. Thomas Nelson.
- McIntosh, G. L., & Rima, S. D. (2007). *Overcoming the dark side of leadership*. Baker Books.
- Rutherford, M. (2016). The artisan leader—An Ed conference series. Rutherford Learning Group. <https://rutherforddlg.com/>
- Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. *The Journal of Virtues & Leadership*, 1(1), 25-30. http://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/jvl/vol1_iss1/home.htm
- Spiritual Leadership Inc. (2009). <https://www.spiritual-leadership.org/>
- Wallace, R. (2008). *Principal to principal*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wallace, R. (2009a). *Breaking away from the corporate model*. Rowman & Littlefield.



Wallace, R. (2009b). *Servant leadership and high school change*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Wallace, R. (2012). *Servant leadership: Leaving a legacy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Rocky is an associate professor at Campbellsville University, helping develop CU's graduate education leadership program. He has also served in a similar capacity at Asbury University and Morehead State University, and he provides consulting and trainings on servant-leadership with schools and other agencies. Rocky is a former school principal of a U.S. Blue Ribbon School (Catlettsburg Elementary in Catlettsburg, KY), served in the Highly Skilled Educator program at the Kentucky Department of Education, and as Director of Instructional Support and Adult Education at KEDC (an education cooperative in Ashland, KY). Rocky's wife of 36 years is Denise, and the couple have two grown daughters (Lauren—husband Ely, and Bethany—husband Troy), and a toddler granddaughter (Corrie Brooke), and infant grandson (Cade).