



## NAIKAN THERAPY: AN APPROACH FOR DEVELOPING CORPORATE EXECUTIVE SERVANT-LEADERS

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### INTRODUCTION

Greenleaf provided the following description in defining the identity of the servant-leader (2002, p. 23): “The servant leader is servant first. . . . Becoming a servant leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.” But what if an individual does not inherently desire to serve? Can s/he ever develop into the servant-leader that Greenleaf dreamed about? What practical contributions does Naikan therapy provide for leadership development? These and other concerns will be addressed in this article.

### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSFORMATION

It appears that adherents to Greenleaf’s servant-leadership characteristics are often predisposed to his concepts: That is, these people were already servant-leaders in belief and attitude, but didn’t have a name for their value system. Once they read Greenleaf’s works, they felt a congruence with his ideology, and have become “converts” to servant-leadership.

In reality, these were not true converts. These individuals were already servant-leaders but didn’t realize it. At a servant-leadership conference in San Diego, one of the participants, an organizational psychologist,



asked this pertinent question: “How can you change a leader in an organization who is tyrannical, self-serving, and manipulative into a servant-leader?” This question speaks to the core of the issue. If people cannot be transformed from self-serving to other-serving, if scholars and practitioners do not have a clear transformational approach to personal mastery and change, then there will always exist a chasm between opponents and advocates. Without a clear answer to this question, proponents of Greenleaf’s ideology will be relegated to “preaching to the choir” status. Is there a simple, yet effective method for modifying the behaviors and attitudes of egoistic leaders?

As one peruses much of the extant servant-leadership literature, it appears that the authors are: (1) touting the value of servant-leadership, (2) defining or identifying individuals or organizations that hold Greenleaf’s tenets, or (3) explaining how a company (e.g., Southwest Airlines or Herman Miller) has successfully incorporated servant-leadership into its company’s culture. But very little is written on a transformative approach to servant-leadership within corporate leadership.

There has been outstanding work done in the organizational studies field by luminaries such as Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley, Danah Zohar, Stephen Covey, Peter Block, and the like. But much of this work is done from an organizational dynamic, a macro rather than a micro approach to transformation.

This is where Naikan therapy can provide a transformative approach on an individual level. Naikan proffers a means of altering the external behaviors of a self-serving corporate executive, through intrinsically modifying that leader’s *attitude of gratitude*. Before looking at the methodology of this therapy, a background of Naikan will be presented.

#### BACKGROUND OF NAIKAN

Mr. Ishin Yoshimoto, a successful business owner in Japan, explored an introspective approach to personal enlightenment. Yoshimoto borrowed some of the emphases of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, most notably the “desire



to repay others with a joyful heart” (Reynolds, 1980, p. 50). This is the characteristic element of Naikan therapy.

Naikan detached itself from its foundational moorings to Buddhism, evolving into a more scientific methodology. Today, there is no perceivable connection to a religious system, except when discussing Naikan’s historical perspective. Utilized primarily in Japan, Naikan has transformed the lives of inmates, people with neuroses, individuals with character disorders, business people, and families, from the 1950s until the present time (Reynolds, 1980; Dieser, 2002). As clients undergo *introspection* (which is the translation for the term *naikan*), they are brought to a place of recognition of the good that others have for them. It is through this emotional reframing of the past that the client embraces the love that others have shown him or her, motivating the client to serve others through this new awareness (Reynolds, 1989b). The client develops a servant’s heart.

This is not a Pollyanna approach that dismisses the hurtful and sometimes abusive treatment we have received from significant caretakers, colleagues, authority figures, or friends. It does not negate or excuse evil that is perpetrated against innocent victims. However, even in the most maladaptive relationships, the perpetrator typically will do something that benefits the recipient, and the recipient does something that hurts or inconveniences the perpetrator. Naikan recognizes that in any relationship, there lies potential for beneficial and unhealthy interactions, and provides a more balanced perspective of reality.

To obtain this balance, Naikan asks the client to reflect on the contributions that a significant individual (e.g., Mom, Dad, coach, professor) made in their development (Sato, 2001). Three reflective questions are asked of each specific individual:

1. What did the client receive from this individual with respect to objects, services, or kindness rendered?
2. What has the client reciprocally returned to that individual?
3. What troubles, heartaches, disappointments, or trauma did the client inflict on that individual?



The client will reflect on his or her life in three-year increments from the earliest recollection in preschool, usually beginning with the client's mother. If there are any habitual issues (anger control, thievery, lying, etc.) that surface, special assignments may be given by the therapist to address the client's behavior and motivations (Reynolds, 1980).

Imagine, for a moment, that a parent in your life was neglectful. Mom or Dad did not treat you with the respect that you desired, nor was s/he empathetic or emotionally present for you. Western therapy would acknowledge this travesty and advance techniques that would allow you to confront the anger and cope successfully in your road to healing. Eastern therapies (Naikan, in particular) would recognize that you were the recipient of these injustices, as well, but would also point out that this parent changed your diaper, fed you, put a roof over your head, provided you with clothing, chauffeured you around, and the like. Yes, you were harmed, but you were also the beneficiary of your parent's benevolence. As the student reflects on the sacrifices that the parent made relative to his or her life, s/he oftentimes will begin to feel gratitude rather than dissociation. This does not excuse the parent's wrongdoing, but provides a more accurate picture of reality. Translate this scenario to a boss, an ex-spouse, a neighbor or a child, and the utility of Naikan as a transformational approach begins to be seen.

These are the rudimentary aspects of Naikan. Before proceeding further, a couple of notes will be presented regarding terminology, a comparison between Naikan therapy and servant-leadership will be made, and a case study epitomizing both approaches will be examined.

#### TERMINOLOGY

It might be interesting to note, at this point, that the therapist is usually called a guide or *educator* (*sensei*, in Japanese); and rather than *client*, the reflective individual is designated the *student*. This might seem like an incidental point, but in working with leaders in corporations, there is less stigmatization to saying that one is going to "learn about oneself" as





opposed to “I need to see a therapist.” In fact, the student’s desire to find herself is seen in a positive light, as self-reflection is touted by many organizational experts as being critical for growth and skill development (Ben-nis, 2003; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005). When working with corporate leadership, this slight change in perspective (from *client* to *student*) may prove to be instrumental in terms of overall success rate and participation. These terms will be used interchangeably in this article.

It should also be noted that when speaking of the therapy itself, the noun *Naikan* or *Naikan therapy* (capital “N”) will be used. When speaking of the process of introspective reflection, the verb *naikan* (lowercase “n”) will be employed. This purposeful distinction will occur throughout this paper as well.

The next section will elaborate on the specific process as it appears in traditional settings, followed by an executive case study.

#### NAIKAN METHODOLOGY

*Traditional approaches.* The word *naikan* is translated *introspection*; the student reflects on the benevolent things others have done for him or her (Itai & McRae, 1994). Naikan therapy is oftentimes a seven-day residential process in which sensory stimulation is often removed or limited and the student is isolated (at least for the first few days). The student sits in his or her room alone (which may have only a bed, a toilet, a window, and a small table for toiletries), initially contemplating what a significant person has done (starting with the mother). Students are “instructed to sit in their room from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. for about 1 week, during which time they devote themselves exclusively to self-observation” (Sato, 2001, p. 113). The *sensei* (or “instructor”) checks in on the student every couple of hours to advise or direct the student. This guided self-reflection is known as *shuchu-naikan*, in which one thinks through one’s existence as it relates to others.

This *naikan* experience can sometimes provoke feelings of resentment and hostility toward the person upon whom the student is reflecting. These



feelings are considered normal, but are not themselves the focus of the sensei. Rather, the guide helps the student to appreciate the positive contributions made by the significant person in his life and to focus on those attributes (Reynolds, 1980). For example, if the student begins to rail against her mother, the sensei would remind the student that “Naikan is reflection *on the self* in regard to the mother” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 274), *not* on the mother exclusively. Since the guide visits the naikansha (*student*) every couple of hours, there is time for the student and educator to dialogue and informally mark progress.

It is important to understand that the sensei is not a moral judge (Reynolds, 1995). These guides are not there to empathize with the student’s plight or to provide *unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1965) or affirmation during this time. They do not function as therapists, at least not in a strict Rogerian sense. The guide is tasked with refocusing the student’s attention on the task at hand: that is, to reflect on what others have done for the student, what the student has done in reciprocity for the significant individual(s), and what troubles, heartaches and disturbance the student has caused the other individual(s). This sounds like a simple process, but it often takes the naikansha many days to comprehend the depth of this introspective technique.

Once the student has exhausted her reflection on her mother, she is encouraged to examine the contributions made by her father on her upbringing. This process continues with other significant individuals in the person’s life, such as siblings, extended family members, teachers, coaches, and so on. Once the naikansha recognizes the benevolence of individuals in her life, the list becomes endless: Mail carriers, butchers, bosses, clergy, government officials, and innumerable (even faceless or nameless) individuals are worthy of appreciation. Whether these individuals are paid directly or indirectly by the naikansha for their service is of no consequence; the fact is that any service rendered is valued. When these actions are esteemed, the student’s attitude begins to change.

As a result of this naikan experience, students recognize that they



belong to a greater social context, one that provides service to other group members, and experience an appreciation for services received from others. Within the *naikansha* is the awareness that she belongs to a community of people dependent on one another, whether that community is comprised of familial, occupational, avocational, educational, spiritual, or other purpose-driven bonds. Gratefulness emerges out of the realization that the individual is not alone, but is part of a vast and complex network of interpersonal connections with others (Walsh, 1995). The student evolves from a “taker” into a “giver.”

What is the psychological dynamic that explains this change in the student’s attitude? According to Naikan therapy, many problems derive from an inordinate preoccupation with self-centeredness and self-absorption (Reynolds, 1989a). Itai and McRae (1994) propose that individuals avoid recognizing their debt to others because

they are afraid of the results of confronting it [their debt]. Facing debt through Naikan enables individuals to have a healthy existential guilt and gives them relief. Then they start to appreciate what others have done for them and try to repay them. Because the individual’s attention moves to other people and a constructive life style, psychological suffering resulting from excessive self-absorption dissipates. (p. 376)

When the student becomes other-centered, he finds a greater purpose for his existence: a larger contribution to society. Sato (2001, p. 114) described the phenomenon in this way:

Thinking about what others have done for them makes patients aware of what others think and feel about them. When patients realize how much they owe to other people, they feel thankful and want to fulfill their obligations to others. In other words, they realize and accept the communal relationships between themselves and others. This, in turn, leads patients to want to fulfill their obligations to others by becoming constructive members of their group. By becoming a constructive member of the group, a person eventually develops a sense of relatedness.



At this point, it is appropriate to interject the servant-leadership concepts of *building community*, *healing*, *empathy*, *listening*, and *awareness* into the Naikan experience. These five concepts will be briefly discussed in the following sections.

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND NAIKAN THERAPY

Naikan therapy and servant-leadership developed independently of one another, yet the concepts are remarkably interconnected. The distinction between the two concepts is that Naikan therapy strives to embrace a service approach, with no clear directive to leadership. Servant-leadership, in comparison, functions within the juxtaposition between servanthood and leadership. Serving and leading must occur in a syncretistic manner, while Naikan can operate outside of a leading capacity. It is the author's opinion that Naikan can be utilized as an effective process for converting an egocentric leader into someone who focuses on the welfare of others. How does this community building occur? The answer to this question will be examined next.

*Building community.* The naikansha examines his connection to others, and in repaying his debt to society, regains a reconnection to those around him. The servant-leader, likewise, understands the import of reconnecting with humanity, and of treating institutions as entities made up of numerous people, not just automatons. There is a desire to serve people within a particular organization, so that they can "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (Spears, 2005, p. 29). As the leader becomes transformed into a grateful servant, this attitude may become pervasive in the organization.

If the autocratic, self-serving manager becomes transformed into a servant-leader, the organization will acknowledge this change. When such a dramatic transformation takes place, those associated with the naikansha will take notice, and morale will inevitably increase. The team members may be guardedly skeptical at first, but as the naikansha consistently exhibits a servant attitude, the community will certainly become freer and more



autonomous, as Greenleaf envisioned. This leads to healing on an organizational level, but personal healing—which will be discussed next—can also occur.

*Healing.* In Naikan, the student is the one who undergoes a type of self-healing, under the watchful eye of the guide. As a result of this process, the naikansha is made aware of significant people whom he has injured or neglected, and is encouraged to “make amends” or to rectify the oversight in a practical way. In this way, healing can occur interpersonally.

The servant-leader is also concerned with healing those who belong to his or her community—driven not by guilt, but by an altruistic motivation to help others grow. Through Naikan, leaders can become servant-leaders as they undergo personal healing, and then begin a quest to facilitate healing for those who have been offended. This concept is aptly described by Ferch (2005) in his article entitled “Servant-Leadership, Forgiveness, and Social Justice” (p. 97):

One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one’s own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response, to seek a meaningful change. Socially, both forgiveness and the disciplined process of reconciliation draw us into a crucible from which we can emerge more refined, more willing to see the heart of another, and more able to create just and lasting relationships. Such relationships . . . form what is best in people, in families, and in the workplace.

The servant-leader is concerned not only with healing relationships within that community, but within himself as well. This “search for wholeness” (Spears, 2005, p. 33) is a signature piece common to servant-leaders and naikansha alike.

But “wholeness” is not synonymous with “feeling good about oneself” or “alleviating personal guilt.” For the naikansha, “wholeness” might mean accepting the reality of life as it truly is, not as they would like it to be. Their lives are not thwarted by defense mechanisms, displaced emotions, or interpersonal disconnections. There is a clarity never before experienced,



and this is the wholeness that both servant-leadership and Naikan would ascribe to:

It [Naikan] spotlights the cradle of reality in which we live our lives. The gratitude that wells up conquers our feelings of isolation and victimization. More importantly we begin to get our first clear views of the way things really are. The disease of narcissistic self-deceit gradually give [*sic*] way to clear vision. (Reynolds, 1995, p. 66)

When narcissism dissipates, the leader can then begin to see the world through a divergent lens. He may discover a new idealism that drives him to succeed beyond profit and loss columns, connecting a depth and richness to work as others grow and flourish as whole people, not just employees. This self-discovery ultimately evolves into the manifestation of the Buddhist saying, “All happiness in the world comes from serving others; all sorrow in the world comes from acting selfishly” (Takamine, 2006, p. 581). And this new-found joy may develop into empathy.

*Empathy.* Spears and Lawrence (2002) describe *empathy* as an ability to understand and appreciate others. Naikan therapy proposes that naikan-sha will have a transformational appreciation of altruistic people in their lives, which raises their level of gratitude toward others. As we feel appreciative of the sacrifice that others have demonstrated (clothing us, delivering mail to us, taking the time to train and educate us), we begin to feel a natural compassion toward others who are experiencing some void in their life that the naikansha can fulfill. This “pay it forward” approach (Miller, 2000) allows the naikansha to gratefully serve another person, to facilitate that person’s growth to become “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 24). This beneficence is triggered by an emotional embrace of another’s need.

Empathy implies that there is a deep emotional, humanistic, and perhaps spiritual connection with another human being, that there is a meaningful connection with another. It should not be understood merely as a



cognitive construct. Max DePree, former chair of the Herman Miller Company and noted author, explains that “the servanthood of leadership needs to be felt, understood, believed, and practiced” (cited in Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 10). Being a servant-leader means having your heart engaged with another because someone engaged you at some point in your life, and that you are compelled to serve others with your talents, abilities, resources, and leadership. As Spears and Lawrence so aptly point out, “The most successful servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners” (2002, p. 5).

*Listening.* “Listening with reflection” could be the operative motto of Naikan. It means not just hearing words, but inherently feeling the intent of another. As a corporate servant-leader, one must sense the pulse of his or her organization, getting beyond the niceties and superficiality of most communication.

For the servant-leader, the skill of being able to go beyond the words and delve into the feelings of the other individual is a critical one. Spears’ summary of Greenleaf’s writings captured the essence of *listening* with these words:

[The servant-leader’s communication skills] need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. . . . He or she seeks to listen receptively to what is said (and not said!). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s own inner voice and seeking to understand what one’s body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader. (Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. 5)

In a global environment, listening with the heart as well as the ears is critical for culturally diverse communication. High-context cultures communicate implicitly: that is, there is a great deal of inference that must be correctly deciphered through the listening process (Wurtz, 2005). Body language and nonverbal signals are as important as the spoken words themselves (if not more so). Asian countries, including Japan, utilize high-context communication (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida,



Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Hofstede, 1980). In any case, organizational leadership scholars (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000) are well aware that listening is critical to social literacy, whether in high-context countries (such as Japan) or in low-context societies (e.g., the United States). The servant-leader must be adept in this communication area, and Naikan can help to improve one's listening skill.

*Awareness.* As an individual becomes a better listener, to those around him as well as to his own inner voice, that servant-leader will be able to gain a new awareness of her own personal values and perspectives. Awareness (and that includes self-awareness) allows one to see reality realistically. It allows the servant-leader the ability to stop making excuses for herself; it looks at life clearly and holistically. This characteristic allows a person to be real, to be truly present, and to accept herself and others as they are.

Awareness is also a bridge to Naikan. Reynolds (1990, p. 41) wrote this about Constructive Living, which is the Western adaptation of Naikan:

With a lot of purposeful, dedicated effort you can become *you*. But you are already you; you couldn't be anyone else. Constructive living can help you learn to accept the natural you—the you and your desires to succeed and your fears of failing; the you with your search for good health and your fears of illness and dying; the you with your wishes for perfection and your disappointment with limitations; the you who (sometimes) feels foolish, embarrassed, lacking in confidence, frightened, angry, worried, vulnerable, timid, but also (at times) caring, grateful, hopeful, giving, loving, accepting. Constructive living helps you to recognize yourself as you really are, accept the whole mixed bag of you, and get on about living. Don't you get tired of trying to become extraordinary, superior, wonderfully enlightened? Wouldn't it be a relief just to be you, nothing-special you, but putting-out-your-best you?

Both servant-leaders and naikansha are not after solace, as Greenleaf profoundly states, but are in pursuit of reality, truth, and thus, inner serenity (2002). These individuals are at peace with themselves and have nothing to





prove. And these people, one might suppose, are wonderful employers to work for.

Perhaps the best way to see the natural connections between servant-leadership and Naikan is to look at an executive who has been transformed through Naikan therapy. Such an executive is Mr. U., a Japanese executive for a commercial firm in Japan.

#### A CASE STUDY IN NAIKAN THERAPY: MR. U.

Mr. U., an executive with a publicly traded (Tokyo Stock Exchange) commercial firm, spent seven days at Mr. Yoshimoto's Naikan training center in Japan. It was during this intensive experience that Mr. U. became acutely aware of his self-centeredness and lack of service to others. By the end of his stay, this naikansha had this to say about his transformation:

After an intensive course of Naikan for one week, I became aware and cognizant of the fact that I used to live my life in a very selfish manner, and that I greatly benefited from the help of others. This new discovery made me feel grateful for the service that others have shown me, and filled me with the desire to help others from this moment onward. (Personal communication, August 2, 2007)

Mr. U. went through a personal change process which altered his mental model from a self-centered to an other-centered perspective. Naikan therapy provided Mr. U. with the mechanism for this modification. As is often the case with any effective therapy, change is the *sine qua non* of true actualization.

The new awareness that Mr. U. experienced resulted in a life-changing attitudinal transformation which led to a behavioral alteration. This awareness is the critical factor that has been missing from the servant-leadership discussion. Can a person who is a selfish, egocentric, autocratic leader experience a metamorphosis into servant-leadership? In Mr. U's situation, the response would be a resounding "Yes!"

Therapists and educators often argue that cognitive awareness has



merit in and of itself, but Greenleaf and Yoshimoto appear to require a change in lifestyle as validation of true and significant change. Wheelis (as cited in Yalom, 1980) writes that “Therapy can bring about a personality change only insofar as it leads a patient to adopt a new mode of behavior. A real change occurring in the absence of an action is a practical and theoretical impossibility” (p. 287). Naikan therapy provides the vehicle for that type of lasting change.

Mr. U. further described how this new awareness had practical implications for the workplace. When asked how his Naikan experience impacted his day-to-day actions, Mr. U. had this to say:

It [Naikan] has allowed me to judge my subordinates not merely with pure results, but also with their processes in achieving those results. And it motivated me to make sure that all employees’ efforts were being fairly evaluated by their supervisors. (Personal communication, August 2, 2007)

There are those critics of both servant-leadership and Naikan therapy who suggest that these perspectives do not take into account the harsh realities of the corporate world, such as layoffs. In their minds, empathy cannot realistically manifest itself in the workplace. But Mr. U. found just the opposite to be true in his experience. He said: “When the corporate downsizing of one of our foreign affiliate companies occurs, I attempt to provide the [laid off] employees with outpatient counseling even after they have been given their unemployment notice” (personal communication, August 2, 2007).

Mr. U. was working at General Electric’s Japanese affiliate group at that time. Faced with laying off a sizeable portion of his workforce, Mr. U. empathetically listened to his subordinates, went to great lengths to provide outplacement services for his employees, and made sure he communicated with his workers honestly and continually. Mr. U. did not have to show this amount of care for his downsized staff, but he felt compelled to serve his



people. This example of empathetic beneficence built trust and community in that organization, even during times of economic downturn in the market.

As Spears and Lawrence (2002) noted, being able to listen empathetically and reflectively is a critical competency for effective servant-leaders. And as Rosen et al. (2000) discovered, listening from the heart is requisite for global leadership as well. Mr. U. exemplifies this type of listening in his business environment:

Naikan has altered my beliefs in the way that I interact with others. If I open myself up to others without hesitation, then others will gradually open themselves up to share their feelings. I want to interact with others in an authentic manner, so that others will know the real me. (Personal communication, August 2, 2007)

Mr. U. expressed his desire to be open and honest in his interactions with his employees and colleagues, which is challenging for someone in a society which tends to mask feelings and attitudes. Yet Naikan has unwittingly developed this executive into a servant-leader. Listen to what Mr. U. said about his revolutionary experience through reflection:

When I saw myself through my mother's point of view, and saw how I was unconditionally loved, I felt that I was selfish and took advantage of others' help toward me. As a business executive, I cannot survive in the business world with just altruism. But I also realized that in a competitive environment, anyone at the top would feel gratitude toward others who have contributed to their success through the support of their business. (Personal communication, August 2, 2007)

Even if a leader has talent and has attained success because he worked harder than anyone else, a leader that is too selfish cannot survive in the business society or in the organization. Naikan taught me how to interact with others by deeply knowing myself. I recommend all leaders to do Naikan daily.



## CONCLUSION

Naikan therapy provides a means by which to convert a self-serving, egocentric executive into an altruistic servant-leader. Through the syncretism of these two seemingly disparate approaches, Naikan becomes a method of transforming an executive into a servant-leader. This juxtaposition of Eastern and Western thought comes at an apropos time, when the global economy warrants an investigation of perspectives in an ever flattening marketplace. And the world will be a better place for it.

There may be skeptics who question whether an Eastern therapy can benefit a Western mindset, and even those who are more receptive to the possibility of Naikan as an option might have reservations about the traditional seven-day inpatient format that is used in Japan. These concerns are meritorious. However, this is a discussion for another day. Suffice it to say that in a global economic powerhouse such as Japan, executives are becoming servant-leaders without realizing it, and this is a benefit for all concerned.

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