



HOLISTIC SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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This article was made possible by our dear friend and mentor, Curtis E. (Bill) Bottum, who was an avid follower and friend of Robert K. Greenleaf. As President and CEO of Townsend and Bottum, a worldwide leader in power plant construction, Bill advanced servant-leadership as the company's guiding philosophy and established the first council of equals there. He also served on the Greenleaf Center's board of trustees for over twenty years. We each spent a lot of time with Bill, both separately and together, discussing servant-leadership and the first-among-equals governance model. This article is, in part, an extension of those discussions and that experience. As such, it is dedicated to Bill's wonderful and enduring spirit.

INTRODUCTION

Robert K. Greenleaf first published his seminal essays, *The Servant as Leader* and *The Institution as Servant*, in the early 1970s. In them, he promoted his hopeful vision of a better society, one more just and more loving with greater opportunities for all. He claimed that achieving this was possible by improving the performance of both our leaders and our institutions. Over the subsequent decades, an increasing number of people around the world have been studying these essays and other Greenleaf writings, and striving to live out the ideals and principles of what is now called “servant-



leadership.” This writing provides a practical framework and multidimensional map for those so engaged. As such, it is meant to:

- (1) Identify and integrate the *generic* aspects of servant-leadership, those common to most enterprises (including business and private enterprise, not-for-profits, health care, education, and government);
- (2) Provide insight into how those aspects or dimensions not only differ from one another, but also relate to one another, ultimately comprising an integrated whole;
- (3) Support practitioners in their work and journey from intention through practical application; and
- (4) Encourage the continuing evolution and growth of the servant-leadership movement in an ever-changing and ever-challenging world.

In developing and writing this monograph, we have tried to remain true to the core teachings of Greenleaf while including related insights from our own experience. In addition, we have reframed and expanded concepts and language to update and better place this work within the context of today’s realities and emerging worldviews.

THE POTENTIAL AND PARADOX OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf had remarkable wisdom and insight about things that really matter. Decades ago, when most conventional leaders focused primarily on furthering the goals of a privileged few, Greenleaf challenged them to also consider the needs of others and the less privileged. He claimed that a good, just, and desirable society ultimately depends upon leaders who *care*; that is, leaders who extend consideration to all those affected by the enterprise. These *stakeholders* include employees, local communities, other “tribes” and peoples, living systems, and future generations. Greenleaf thereby presaged the most significant issue that confronts our increasingly interdependent world, recently framed as follows:

In a world of six billion humans and countless other beings, how can we create circumstances wherein each can flourish, without limiting the life



expression of others? In short, how can we create a world that truly works for all?¹

This is the underlying dilemma and challenge in Greenleaf's work for our leaders, our institutions, and us.

Greenleaf spent over half a century working in the fields of management research, development, and education, trying to improve the performance of both for-profit and non-profit institutions. As a lifelong student of and participant in how things get done in organizations, he distilled his observations in a series of essays and books centered on the themes of *car-ing* and *The Servant as Leader*. Throughout these writings, he discussed the need for a better approach to leadership—one that puts serving others first. Greenleaf urged those in formal leadership positions to ask themselves two questions: "Whom do you serve?" and "For what purpose?" He also urged leaders to take a more holistic approach to work, to promote a sense of community, and to share power in decision-making. Through his writings and work, Greenleaf sought to stimulate thought and action for building a better society.

It is worth noting that the words *servant* and *leader* are usually thought of as being opposites. And when two opposites are brought together in a creative and meaningful way, a paradox emerges. At first glance, the paradox seems contradictory or opposed to common sense, but there is also an underlying sense that it could be true. The overall effect is to wake us up to new possibilities, ones that transcend previous ways of thinking and believing. So, who is this paradoxical "servant-leader"? Anyone dedicated to serving others who then chooses to formally lead in some way. According to Greenleaf:

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to



become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?²

Many positional leaders have concluded that being a servant-leader is the right thing to do, and subsequently decide to embrace it. This has been an important way through which servant-leadership has grown and been advanced over the years. But Greenleaf titled his essay *The Servant as Leader*, not *The Leader as Servant*. He thereby called upon people who are “natural servants” to actively participate in leading organizations and institutions on behalf of the common good. He specifically asked those who have a vocation for service to consciously seek and fill positions as leaders dedicated to creating a more caring society.

At its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—a way of being—that has great potential for creating positive, non-violent change throughout our society and the world.

MOTIVES, MEANS AND ENDS—THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP

So, how does one proceed from intention to practice as a servant-leader? Greenleaf left a clue in the name he first used for the fledgling, non-profit organization which he founded in 1964: The Center for Applied Ethics. Evidently, in some way or at some level, he viewed ethics, or moral reasoning, as a compass or pathway for effective leadership and a better world. According to ethicists, sound moral reasoning requires a holistic approach; that is, an appraisal of three distinct dimensions: motives, means, and ends.³ *Motives* are about intentions—“why” we do something. *Means* are about methods—“how” we do it. And *ends* are about outcomes—“what” we are trying to accomplish. Ethics demands that each of these be judged as right, good, and desirable by both those involved and those affected. Separately appraising each of these dimensions of servant-leadership—motives, means, and ends—can help clarify both its philosophy and practice. It can also lead to insights about how these dimensions relate to



one another, as well as the specific work that servant-leaders are called to do and live out in each domain.

MOTIVES AND INTENTIONS

As we grow into personhood, we become increasingly concerned about others. This is how human development generally proceeds. Each higher stage of this development does not mean that we stop caring for ourselves, but that we include more and more others for whom we also evidence a genuine consideration and concern.⁴ We thereby become increasingly committed to enlarging the lives of others. Whether we are following or leading, our intention is to serve—to extend what we want for ourselves and our loved ones to all. This intention is the taproot of servant-leadership, and the seedbed from which the impulse arises to make a positive difference in the world. It is from this interior place that real change happens, first in ourselves and then in the social systems in which we participate.

In this dimension, servant-leaders are called upon to *care*. Of course, we each land on a different place along this spectrum of caring, which ranges from *self* to *all*. Nevertheless, we are called to serve all—ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors, our tribe, our people, other peoples, future generations, other life forms, living systems, and even creation itself. At the most basic level, our development is about growing into this expanded embrace. Somewhere along the journey, even though we have been enjoying comfort and material gain under the established order, we become willing to change that order to further a world that works for all. This makes deep, non-violent change truly possible. One pioneering teacher put it this way:

[These] individuals. . .tend to develop a sense of planetary citizenship, reverence for life in all its forms, deep ecological sensitivity, spirituality of a universal and all-encompassing type, aversion to violence, and reluctance to view aggression as an acceptable form of conflict resolution.



Such radical inner transformation and rise to a new level of consciousness might be humanity's only real chance for survival.⁵

MEANS AND METHODS

While motives and intentions relate to the source of our energy for taking action, means and methods relate to how that energy expresses itself in the world. We can divide these expressions into two major categories: (1) ways of being, and (2) institutional systems. The former relates to the leader as an individual; the latter relates to the organizational frameworks and infrastructure used by the leader.

- *Servant-Leader Ways of Being, Capacities and Roles.* There are ways of being and capacities that are central to how servant-leaders develop and engage in the world. These include, but are not limited to, awareness, presence, availability, reflection, empathy, listening and receptivity, acceptance of others, intuition, generosity, foresight, and transparency. With these and other qualities available as reliable resources, servant-leaders are able to fulfill key roles as stewards, role models, healers, change agents, and community-builders—in creating better enterprises and a better world.
- *Institutional Systems and Governance.* Conventional thinking assumes that we just need to get the right people into the right positions for things to get better. But that is only partly true; while we *do* need good, competent people serving as leaders, we *also* need effective institutional and organizational systems. That is because systems are powerful containers for the human experience; they shape the life that is poured into them. But only formal leaders are officially sanctioned to change the system. To paraphrase one management guru, “Workers work *in* systems, leaders work *on* systems.”⁶ Greenleaf identified the system of *organization*, what he referred to as “people and structure,” as fundamental to better leadership and a better society.⁷ Structure relates to how power, rights,



and responsibilities are distributed, which encompasses the executive functions. It is, therefore, the *metasystem* for the enterprise, through which all other systems are controlled and mediated. Here, Greenleaf advocated partnership rather than domination, admonishing leaders to be “first among equals” on teams of equals (another Greenleaf paradox), rather than “lone chiefs” or bosses atop hierarchical pyramids.⁸

In addition to working on themselves, effective servant-leaders work on their institutional and organizational systems. In this dimension, the two-fold process of transformation—self and system—is the calling of servant-leadership.

ENDS AND OUTCOMES

A world that works for all is the ultimate goal of the servant-leadership movement. But there is a long way to go. While current social and economic systems have brought unparalleled wealth to some people, they have also brought marginalization and misery to many. At the global level, the benefits of economic growth have become increasingly concentrated: the richest 20% of people in the world consume 86% of everything produced, while the poorest 20% are pressed into absolute poverty, barely surviving in urban slums or depressed rural areas.⁹ At the local level, our organizations and enterprises are dominated by lone-chief (boss/subordinate) structures, and by jobs that are smaller than the people occupying them. Such conditions fuel resentment, division, and conflict. To make matters worse, our consumer-based culture and lifestyles are resulting in the overexploitation and destruction of nature and living systems. All of this is compounded by the negative, unintended consequences of technology (including nuclear proliferation and global warming), which potentially threaten all life on the planet. The fact is: our contemporary world is socially, politically, and ecologically unsustainable. As recently noted:

We cannot remain as we are, nor can we go back to conditions that are



behind us. We can only move forward, but not on the same path we have been following. We need to find a new direction.¹⁰

Servant-leadership is part of this new direction, which entails striking a better balance between self-interest and the common good. In this dimension, servant-leaders are called to lead their enterprises in:

1. transitioning to goods and services that promote a workable and meaningful world;
2. embracing a *Triple Bottom Line*—sustaining people, profits and the planet; and
3. adopting the practice of *moral symmetry*—balancing the legitimate needs of all those affected by the enterprise.

A CHART OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The following chart, “The Dimensions of Servant-Leadership,” provides an overview of these domains and their relationship to one another.



| The Dimensions of Servant-Leadership | | |
|---|--|--|
| Dimensions | Basic Concepts and Goals | The Calling of Servant-Leaders |
| <i>The “Why?”</i> Motives and Intentions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve.”¹¹ • Personal aspirations for leadership come from a basic desire to enlarge the lives of others, rather than a desire and drive for more power, recognition, or material gain. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and grow the personal capacity (depth and range) to <i>care</i>. • Develop an expanded embrace that extends to everyone affected by the enterprise. |
| <i>The “How?”</i> Means and Methods | I. The Servant-Leader—Ways of Being, Capacities and Roles | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A better world can be built by better people. • There are ways of being, capacities, and roles that embody servant-leadership, both representing its expression and furthering its realization in the world. These can be learned and deepened through practice. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase personal capacities for awareness, presence, availability, reflection, empathy, listening and receptivity, acceptance of others, intuition, generosity, foresight, simplicity, and transparency. • Fulfill organizational roles of steward, role model, healer, change agent, and community builder. |
| <i>The “What?”</i> Ends and Outcomes | II. The System—Organization and Governance | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional and organizational systems are people-building and life-giving, rather than people-using and spirit-killing. • Power is shared. Leaders are “first among equals” on teams of equals, rather than “lone chiefs” atop hierarchical pyramids.¹² | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to a shared governance model that incorporates the <i>first among equals</i> concept. • Use participatory approaches to workplace issues and practice. • Implement new-paradigm approaches, such as “open book” management, gainsharing, employee stock ownership programs (ESOPs), and self-directed teams (SDTs). |
| <i>The “What?”</i> Ends and Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those affected by the servant-leader and the enterprise have the experience of being served in a way that builds a society “that is more just and loving. . .with greater opportunities for all.” • Systems and institutions are socially, politically, and environmentally sustainable. • The world works for all. Every person has the opportunity to discover and live out who he or she is and can be. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to goods and services that promote a workable and meaningful world. • Embrace a <i>Triple Bottom Line</i> for the enterprise—promoting social equity, delivering profits, and sustaining the planet. • Practice <i>moral symmetry</i>—balancing the legitimate needs of all those affected by the enterprise. |



REALITY—A SEAMLESS WHOLE

While the boundary lines we impose on reality can be helpful in understanding it, there is, nevertheless, an underlying oneness at work. Therefore, even though we divide servant-leadership into separate dimensions—motives, means and ends—it actually works as a seamless whole. These parts, therefore, need to be reassembled into the single reality that actually exists. We can do this by simply recognizing that shortfalls in any specific aspect or domain will ultimately limit progress and outcomes in other parts, as well as in the whole. The point is: the various aspects and dimensions of servant-leadership function most effectively as an integrated whole.

THE JOURNEY

The challenge for us as servant-leaders is to actually live out the underlying ideals and better realize them in the world. The question is: How do we, as servant-leaders, hold our organizations and ourselves accountable for what we are trying to live out?

One way is to make periodic assessments, taking inventory of both our systems and ourselves. Through honest reflection and feedback (most importantly, to and from those being affected), we can learn where things stand on a range of possibilities for each characteristic and dimension. We can then redirect our efforts to achieve better outcomes. Another way is to consider the work of this moment—that is, whatever is at hand and needs to be addressed—as an opportunity to live out and express the ideals. As one sage put it: “Everything we face is an opportunity to walk the path.”¹³ In this case, we simply do what servant-leadership calls us to do with what is in front of us right now, in this moment. Either way, we can move along the path incrementally by simply taking the next, small step. In addition, we can do this repeatedly, whether we are working to improve our listening skills (self) or transitioning to a first-among-equals form of governance (system). In our experience, servant-leadership is almost always “a thousand-mile journey taken one small step at a time.”



SUMMARY

Effective servant-leaders consciously engage each of the dimensions of servant-leadership: (1) motives and intentions, (2) means and methods, and (3) outcomes and results, and seek to understand them as a gestalt. This is a holistic approach to the work. These leaders thereby create spaces where individuals and communities can heal, grow, and thrive through mutual caring and trust. Organizational life is thus gradually transformed from a treadmill and struggle of opposing forces to a journey and celebration in co-creativity. Through this process, both natural servants and positional leaders become servant-leaders, the journey becomes the destination, and the world becomes a better place for all.

High moral values and excellence must dominate the twenty-first century if progress is to have positive meaning. Through ideas like those of Robert Greenleaf's servant-leadership, such a way of life is now well within our reach.¹⁴

—Bill Bottum

George SanFacon served as Director of the Housing Facilities Department at the University of Michigan from 1983 to 2004, where he pioneered implementing a council-of-equals governance model. He has facilitated seminars and workshops on *service management*, *self-directed teams*, *energy conservation*, *organization development*, and *servant-leadership*. His other writings include *A Conscious Person's Guide to the Workplace* (available Spring/Summer 2008). George has an unusually wide range of workplace and organizational experience. He has worked as a grocery clerk, factory assembler, painter, maintenance mechanic, custodian, security guard, high school teacher, short-order cook, facilities engineer, energy conservation consultant, trainer, facilitator, operations manager, management consultant, and executive coach. He is now devoting his time to per-



sonal study and writing, connecting with nature, and working as the part-time caretaker for a small retreat center in the Irish Hills area of Michigan.

Larry C. Spears is an author and editor of a dozen books on servant-leadership, including the critically acclaimed work, *Insights on Leadership*. From 1990 to 2007, he served as President & CEO of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. He is now the President & CEO of The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership. Spears had previously been Managing Director of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, a cooperative association of 12 colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area. He also served as a staff member with the Great Lakes Colleges Association's Philadelphia Center and with the Quaker magazine, *Friends Journal*, in Philadelphia, PA. Spears is also a writer and an editor who has published hundreds of articles, essays, newsletters, books and other publications on servant-leadership. Dozens of newspapers and journals have interviewed him, including *Fortune*, *the Indianapolis Business Journal*, *the Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Washington Post*, and *Advancing Philanthropy*. A 2004 television broadcast interview of Spears by Stone Philips on NBC's *Dateline* was seen by ten million viewers.

NOTES

1. Sharif Abdullah, *Creating a World That Works for All*, Berrett-Koehler, 1999, 19-20.
2. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 1973, 7.
3. John E. Foley, "Ethics and Civility in Collective Decision Making," April 1995, 2.
4. Based upon the work of Ken Wilber in *A Brief History of Everything*.
5. Stanislav Grof, *The Ultimate Journey*, 317.
6. William Glasser, *The Control Theory Manager*.
7. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Institution as Servant*, 1972, 9.
8. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Institution as Servant*, 1972, 12.
9. Ernest Laszlo, *You Can Change the World*, 2003, 4.
10. Ernest Laszlo, *You Can Change the World*, 2003, 7.
11. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 1973, 7.
12. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Institution as Servant*, 1972, 12.
13. Don Alverto Taxo, *Friendship with Elements*, 56.



14. From "Within Our Reach: Servant-Leadership for the Twenty-first Century," by Bill Bottum with Dorothy Lenz, in *Insights on Leadership*, John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

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