



“PURITY VERSUS POPULARITY”: POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES  
AND TENSIONS AMONG THE DIFFERING EMPHASES OF  
SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

On the first occasion I spoke in public about my commitment to the principles of servant-leadership, I told the story of a manager who, on hearing me discuss being a servant-leader, saw it as an opportunity to develop his career. The latest thinking, any new idea being discussed by senior management, could be used as a fashionable shibboleth to help advance that career. With this potential misuse of servant-leadership in mind, I made my way toward the conclusion of my lecture:

There is an understandable temptation to see the concept of servant-leadership as something so important that one has to do all one can to retain the purity of the message. . . . At the same time, if one engages in . . . spreading the message, then, inevitably, new adherents may use areas of servant-leadership for their own ends. It's a matter of purity versus popularity.

And it is to this issue of “purity versus popularity” that I wish to return, although I must stress that when I mentioned originally that *new adherents may use areas of servant-leadership for their own ends* I could have worded that more elegantly, as I certainly did not mean it in a blunt pejorative sense—I meant that people may interpret servant-leadership in different ways, in ways not entirely consistent with Greenleaf's thinking.



To illustrate the growing popularity of servant-leadership, I first need to take a step back in time.

#### FROM IGNORANCE TO GROWING ACCEPTANCE

During the 1970s and early '80s I worked in heavy industry, and if I had stood up at a management conference and proclaimed the virtues of being a servant-leader I believe I would have been howled down in disbelief; even charitable colleagues would have considered me naïve about the ways of the world. Servant-leadership principles would have been considered out of step with the demands for no-nonsense management in the troubled climate of those times—this was a time when everyone needed to know who was boss! After some consideration, I have developed the following set of boss-leadership characteristics to describe the managerialism of those times.

#### Ten Characteristics of the Boss-Leader

(with acknowledgement and apologies to Larry Spears)<sup>1</sup>

*Ignoring.* Leaders are valued for their communication and decision-making skills, and these can be substantially weakened if one starts listening intently to others. The boss-leader directs the will of the group rather than wasting time listening to the irrelevancies spoken by employees. Listening and reflecting prevents the boss-leader from achieving results.

*Contempt.* People need to be motivated and told to leave their so-called “special and unique spirits” at home. Most workers have little intention of doing a decent day’s work, and these people should be found out and sacked.

*Hurting.* Boss-leaders are able to sort out any weaklings—people who have “broken spirits,” whatever that may be—or they will damage the performance of the business.



*Oblivious.* Boss-leaders must focus on goals and be oblivious to all people distractions. The boss-leader must never take his or her eye off the ball, as this will damage the performance of the organisation.

*Coercion.* The boss-leader relies heavily on coercion, making full use of positional authority, when making decisions within an organisation. The boss-leader does not waste time trying to convince others, but ensures that others do as they are told. Trying to build consensus within groups is a complete waste of time.

*Operations.* Boss-leaders get on with the job. They look at a problem and think only of the day-to-day realities and cultivate their efficient day-to-day focused approach.

*Myopia.* Trying to understand the lessons from the past and the likely consequence of a decision for the future is a waste of time. Boss-leaders live in the here and now—the realities of the present. Myopia remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies and deserves careful attention.

*Wantonness.* The boss-leader knows it is essential to “look after number one” in this world. Boss-leaders are committed to serving their own needs first and foremost, because no one else will. They also use control to ensure they succeed.

*People are merely another resource.* Boss-leaders are committed to utilising each and every individual within the business and doing everything possible to maximise the contribution of the employee resource (i.e. raw material).

*Replacing communities.* The boss-leader believes that much has been won as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions and seeks to identify means for building even larger institutions through more mergers and acquisitions.



That was the 1970s; in the 2000s the reaction is quite different: people in various organisations want to hear more about servant-leadership; the principles appear to resonate with their experience of work and leadership and, suddenly (that is, *suddenly*, in much the same way as a film star is suddenly discovered after treading the boards for twenty years), the concept of servant-leadership is being considered seriously. Many more people are willing to have the term *servant-leader* used to describe them, even if in some cases they do not understand fully the implications of such a descriptor.

Without doubt, servant-leadership and its central tenets make far more sense to a wide range of leaders in the twenty-first century, and the following quotation illustrates this point perfectly. The quotation is taken from an online journal aimed at the expanding entrepreneurial market and is written in typical upbeat language and under the significant heading of “Why the best leaders are servants”:<sup>2</sup> “Servant leaders . . . put their people and their organizations before themselves. Some of the most successful entrepreneurial companies—including Southwest Airlines and Starbucks—are servant-led, buoyed by the contributions of trusted, respected employees.” The writer explores the reasons for this growing interest and comments: “Servant leadership is enjoying renewed currency now—which makes sense, given the tight labour markets and widespread mistrust of chief executives. It is also the natural model for the growing number of companies that compete for human capital.”

The article concludes with a powerful case study and this penetrating and insightful comment that will be used time and again: “Servant leadership isn’t about being a great boss; it’s about accepting that bossing and leading aren’t synonymous.”

The three reasons given—tight labour markets, mistrust of chief executives, and competition for human capital—may well be true, but there are other, more fundamental reasons for the growing interest in servant-leadership, not least the burgeoning leadership literature that explicitly or implic-





itly promotes the concept. Consider these words taken from the work of Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner:

Leaders who see their role as serving others leave the most lasting legacies. If we're going to be authentic in our leadership, we have to be willing to serve, and we have to be willing to suffer. When leaders accept that they are servants first, then they clearly know where they stand. And it's not at the head of the line.<sup>3</sup>

Or James MacGregor Burns, whose work continues to be highly valued:

It is the power of a person to become a leader, armed with principles and rising above self-interest narrowly conceived, that invests that person with power and may ultimately transform both leaders and followers into persons who jointly adhere to modal values and end-values. A person, whether leader or follower, girded with moral purpose is a tiny principality of power.<sup>4</sup>

Many other books and writers could be quoted, including Gary Hamel's new book *The Future of Management* with its iconoclastic first chapter "The End of Management?",<sup>5</sup> but I wish to return to the main line of my argument: the potential opportunities and tensions that can exist between the popularity of servant-leadership and the purity of its message.

#### DIFFERENT EMPHASES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

If people spend time discovering and then understanding the servant-leadership literature, in most cases they will be impressed by what they read, but they will also be struck by the different emphases that appear in many of the journal articles and books. These different emphases can be classified under six headings, although inevitably an element of overlap exists. The titles of the six classifications have been chosen sensitively, with politeness and without criticism, and with an eye on a healthy dose of humour. Some alternative titles have also been included in parentheses and I trust colleagues will appreciate the quirky humour contained in these



optional terms. (My fear is that this humour may not travel well across the North Sea, let alone the Atlantic, and if I offend anyone then I apologise in advance.) The humour makes a serious point—if these different emphases are not appreciated, then there may be a tendency to make sweeping statements about servant-leadership that are not universally true.

### *1. The Poets (or romanticists and visionaries)*

One has only to read a small number of Robert Greenleaf's writings to experience the sense of vision, even romance, in his thinking and the inspirational role played by literature, including poetry. Greenleaf was a visionary; he understood what life could and should be like, and that vision, that idealism, encouraged him to share his thinking with others.

Other leadership writers, committed to the principles of servant-leadership, have used poetry expertly to explain their motivation and expand their ideas. Take the example of Max DePree,<sup>6</sup> who laments the fact that "talent may go unnoticed and unused" by quoting Thomas Gray's<sup>7</sup> well-known verse:

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

Advocates of servant-leadership have also turned to the poetry of Jim Autry<sup>8</sup> to elaborate a fundamental servant-leadership and business point, and many a time I have experienced an audience gripped by the powerful message contained in his lines of verse.

The tradition of utilising poetry has been maintained in the editions of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*.<sup>9</sup> Volume 2, for example, contained a Meg Wheatley poem, "Greenleaf on Robert Frost," and a chapter called "A Poetics of Servant-Leadership," and concluded with a section



entitled *A Place for Poetry*. Many other examples can be found within other editions.

The Romanticists readily move beyond poetry. They believe that the widespread application of servant-leadership can result in a better tomorrow for one and all—as if servant-leadership is one of the key levers in bringing about a utopian employment ideal; aspects of a “kingdom of heaven on earth.” Surely, it is this commendable idealism that generates articles with titles that include phrases such as: *Servant-Leadership and Unconditional Forgiveness*; *Servant-Leadership, Forgiveness, and Unlimited Liability*; *Happiness, Success, Quality of Life, and Love*; and much more. The International Journal of Servant-Leadership’s manuscript reviewers’ guidance document speaks admirably of “educating the whole person” in order to “heal the heart of humanity.”

Some may consider the Romanticists to be dreamers, but they have a passion that is laudable, and they have a message that more people, outside of an overt servant-leadership persuasion, are beginning to reflect in their writings as they describe the need for new patterns to emerge within the employment relationship.

## 2. *The Managerialists (or partially-reconstructed Taylorites)*

Anyone who has read James Autry’s *The Servant Leader*<sup>10</sup> and its references to performance management, negative appraisal, firing people, handling conflict, leadership when things go wrong, and much else will know that this book deals with the realities of servant-leadership in practice—or the harsh realities of organisational life, as he calls it. Autry is prepared to explain the application of servant-leadership within the context of business and shows the theory is not to be adopted at the expense of sound managerial practice. Rather, sound managerial practice is applied systematically through the principles of servant-leadership.

This concept is inherent in Max E. Douglas’s<sup>11</sup> discussion of servant-leadership among supervisors:



Supervisors who model servant-leadership will face all the challenges of any other manager – personal and organizational conflict, budget crises, sexual harassment, hirings and firings, reorganizations and complex ethical dilemmas. The difference is the approach servant-leaders use in making decisions and managing resources.

Stephen Covey<sup>12</sup> emphasises that being a servant-leader sometimes calls for tough action:

Later in life, I served as a vice president under a benevolent dictator. The servant leader who replaced him was actually tougher. That experience taught me that servant leadership is not soft or touchy-feely. It's a much tougher style because when you set up performance agreements and become a source of help, people have to be tough on themselves. They just can't sit around and blame others.

A similar point is made by Sandra J. Reinke,<sup>13</sup> who emphasises that the concept of "stewardship ensures that the servant-leader does not accept mediocre performance, but keeps everyone focused on achieving organizational objectives within the constraints of shared organizational values."

Ann McGee-Cooper and Gary Looper also deal with the reality of business life in *Lessons on Layoffs: Managing in Good Times to Prepare for Bad Times*.<sup>14</sup> First, they provide advice on how a servant-leader should handle layoffs, when there really is no other alternative, and provide examples of how the servant-leader can utilise human resource policy and practices to make the organisation healthier, thereby obviating the need for redundancies. Second, they envisage engagement with HR management can also involve practices to "weed out non-performers within the six-month probationary period."

This notion of performance is also to be found in the work of Irving and Longbotham,<sup>15</sup> who undertook a study "designed to examine the effect of servant-leadership on team effectiveness." They conclude:

Because servant leadership has been identified in this study as a significant predictor of team effectiveness, those who use team structures in



organizations are advised to better understand both servant leadership in general and the six essential servant leadership themes in particular if they desire to increase their effectiveness . . . We trust that these findings will encourage increased exploration into the positive effects of servant leadership on team effectiveness, as well as a robust application of servant leadership in contemporary organizational settings.

Their term *robust application* is intriguing, but far more important is their link between servant-leadership and organisational performance.

Barbuto and Wheeler<sup>16</sup> present “an integrated construct of servant-leadership” that identifies five servant-leadership factors that are related, amongst other components, to organisational effectiveness. Their concluding paragraph makes the following point:

The excitement surrounding servant leadership may be justified, as it appears strong relationships with positive outcomes such as employers’ extra effort, employees’ satisfaction, and perceptions of organizational effectiveness were found. Organizations may look for opportunities to recruit individuals who possess servant leadership characteristics.

Arguably, the work of James D. Showkeir<sup>17</sup> illustrates the managerialist approach in clearer terms than anyone else. He recognises that most organisations are managed on the basis of coercive power and that to attempt to introduce persuasive power would be “in practice . . . for many, a bit like trying to grab a handful of smoke.” He argues that there is a need, first, to redistribute organisational power before, second, attempting to implement Greenleaf’s “best test” of servant-leadership—that is the only way, in his view, to “satisfy all of the requirements of the test and build the capacity of the business for attaining greater marketplace results.” In order for servant-leadership to be positioned alongside successful business practice, a *sine qua non* in his writing, it needs “a solid business argument that reconciles the attainment of unequivocal business results (profit, market share, and so on) with the need and longing for individual meaning and purpose at work.” He believes that much of the misunderstanding over ser-



vant-leadership is because of a lack of “connection between servant-leadership and attaining business results.”

### 3. *The Egalitarians (or redistributive socialists)*

The one and only time I heard George SanFacon speak I was impressed and puzzled in equal measure by what he had to say. Later, as I read his papers, it was clear to see that this was an exposition of a different dimension of servant-leadership. This extract from the work of Don Frick<sup>18</sup> captures the essence of George SanFacon’s approach:

Today, no one person alone can hire, fire, promote, or evaluate an employee. It is done by group process and consensus. By the time of George’s retirement in the spring of 2004, the commitment to a consensus structure was embedded in the minds of many partners.

The University of Michigan’s Housing Facilities Department, led by SanFacon, removed their traditional management hierarchy and introduced shared governance with managers in collaborative teams—they removed the traditional boss-subordinate relationships and managers reported to a Council. The success of this Facilities Council encouraged mid-level managers to put in place a similar framework.

As Malinoski, Murray, and SanFacon<sup>19</sup> describe:

Facilities Council decision making is collective and done strictly by consensus . . . The Council’s consensus process consists of hearing and understanding what each individual has to say, and reaching a decision that is acceptable to all and consistent with the mission statement . . . Departmental staff and others may appeal decisions made by the Council or a Council member.

The authors continue by describing “consensus decision making,” “resources freely shared across units,” “time for participants to adjust to the equalization of their roles,” and “power and authority distributed more equally among the members.”



SanFacon developed his thinking further in his book *Awake At Work*,<sup>20</sup> and the series of quotes joined in the next two paragraphs illustrates the egalitarian nature of his approach:

Some are now embracing a more balanced and holistic framework, known as moral symmetry or the “triple bottom line.” This approach emphasizes not only *economic prosperity*, but also *social equity* and *environmental protection*—profits, people, and planet. It is the emerging paradigm for business and organisations in the 21st century, shifting our free enterprise system from *shareholder* capitalism to *stakeholder* capitalism—from a world that works for a few to a world that works for all.

Everyone affected by a decision has a moral claim on the decision maker: each stakeholder deserves nothing less than serious consideration when being affected by an organization in decision-making or implementation. . . . Organizations—both for-profits and not-for-profits—are deserving of our commitment and support to the extent that they extend such consideration to each of their stakeholders . . . With consensus decision-making and open access to decision-making bodies, every person in the system has influence and power. No one person has unilateral power over another, and there is protection against the arbitrary use of power.

Norman Bowie’s *A Kantian Theory of Leadership*<sup>21</sup> resonates with SanFacon:

Kant’s moral philosophy . . . is basically egalitarian. It is Kant who provides the intellectual justification for the respect for persons principle. Kant points out that each person thinks of himself or herself as a rational creature who is entitled to dignity and respect . . . Kant argues that in a community or organization we are bound by rules but by rules that we ourselves would accept as rational legislators . . . Given these egalitarian commitments, how can Kant provide a theory of leadership when “leadership” has connotations of elitism and hierarchy?

As Bowie develops his argument he comments:

Perhaps a Kantian would endorse a theory of leadership that specifically eschews the notion that the leader is somehow superior to his or her fol-



lowers. Servant leadership is one such theory . . . it can be plausibly argued [that] Greenleaf's account of servant leadership is not servile in Kant's sense . . . there are many passages in Greenleaf that would fit with a Kantian theory of leadership.

It is unfair to place Jill W. Graham<sup>22</sup> in this category, on the basis of the overall tenor of her article, but there is a part of her writing that is somewhat egalitarian in approach:

The assumptions underlying servant-leadership in organizations include recognition of (1) the inherent fallibility of humankind, both individually and corporately. . . ; (2) the tendency of high level positions to encourage narcissism in their occupants, leading to an excess of hubris; and (3) the tendency of habituated subordination in low level positions to lead to docility and loss of critical thinking capacity i.e. an excess of humility. The dangerous consequences of these conditions are common where systems are characterized by unilateral/hierarchical power, but can be ameliorated by practicing power with its service ethic.

#### 4. *The Peripherals (or zealots and agnostics)*

The word *peripheral* is used in a general sense to describe diverse people and organisations with one main characteristic in common: they describe an allegiance to the principles of servant-leadership without any reference to the work of Greenleaf. Apart from this common factor, they include a disparate range of views and reputations, and for that reason they shall remain nameless.

The first group consists of the overtly Christian writers, speakers, and websites, who base their views on well known teaching such as Matthew 20:27 (KJV): "And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." On the basis of verses such as this, they have constructed a series of principles around the idea of servant-leadership. There are institutes established to "provide opportunities for the spiritual formation and leadership development of people who are called to be servant leaders" and train-





ing organisations that introduce their clients to “a unique style of leadership that is modelled on the approach of Him who said he came to serve, not be served” and universities that introduce their students to “the nature, styles, and skills of Servant Leadership, utilising historic and contemporary models and emphasising moral roots of responsible leadership.” There are some Christian organisations that appear to equate servant leadership’s apotheosis with work to alleviate the needs of the least privileged in society: “asylum seekers, the homeless and drug addicts.” These bodies usually have admirable aims and undertake credible work—that is why the word *zealots* is used charitably—and occasionally they may make passing reference to a Greenleaf website, but they promote servant-leadership from a standpoint that is peripheral to Greenleaf’s writings.

The second group, the agnostics, contains writers who advocate servant-leadership, but who reveal in their writings that they have clearly not yet grasped the servant-leadership principles from a Greenleaf perspective, or from any other robust perspective, it appears. An article in one professional journal examines the leadership practices of two U.S. presidents and concludes that they were servant-leaders because “they believed the role of leaders is to support and serve those around them.” So far so good, but then the article builds to its peroration by encouraging the reader to emulate these prime examples of service by engaging in *disclosure*—“reveal your true self to those around you”; *awareness*—“monitor the mood of the work environment”; *toughness*—“acknowledge their perceptions, but stand firm in your direction and decisions;” and “*courage*—standing up against overwhelming pressure for what you believe is right and just.” Commendable points no doubt (and that is the reason for the extensive quotes), and consistent with what can be found in many leadership texts, but the whole thrust of the article is at best tenuous in relation to key servant-leadership principles.

Within this group of agnostics are books—and here I have three books in mind—that may have servant-leadership in the title, or in a prominent position, but that contain little reference to servant-leadership in



recognisable form, or worse still, contain sentiments that run counter to the notions of Greenleaf and other advocates. It is for this reason that they are called agnostics—they do not really know what they believe in, but they do think that there is some greater influence out there somewhere . . . probably.

### 5. *The Discreet (or silent disciples)*

By *discreet* I mean wary, circumspect, and/or prudent.

Deservedly, TDIIndustries and Southwest Airlines are among the most frequently mentioned exemplar servant-leadership organisations. The TDI website's *Culture, Mission, and Values* page announces, "TDIIndustries strives to model the management style defined by Robert Greenleaf as 'Servant Leadership'. We firmly believe our shift to this culture during the 70s has made us one of the most unique companies in the country—it is to this practice that we attribute our many years of success." Its servant-leadership page goes even further and tells its customers that the company "uses Robert Greenleaf's essay, *The Servant as Leader*, as a blueprint for our behaviour."

The Southwest Airlines website is quite different. There is a distinct absence of any overt reference to servant-leadership, or none that could be found in a ten-minute visit. The site proudly declares that its mission statement includes these words: "We are committed to provide our Employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines. Above all, Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer." One can detect the servant-leadership influence throughout the site (in much the same way as a commitment to distributed leadership can be detected on other websites), but there is no overt declaration of adherence to the Greenleaf principles.

For one company it makes sense to make a bold declaration, and for another it does not; and this principle, of being selective or discreet, can be



found in many other companies. They may adhere to the principles of servant-leadership, but, for whatever reason, they prefer not to wear the tag or label in a way that identifies them with what others may consider to be another management concept or fad.

What is true for organisations can be even truer of individuals. As I discussed in my book on servant-leadership,<sup>23</sup> there are individuals working as leaders in organisations where the declared style is antithetical and inimical to the principles of servant-leadership. These brave souls battle on, attempting to remain true to their belief in Greenleaf, but in a way that does not alienate their superiors or allow their colleagues and direct reports to seek to gain an unfair advantage. Certain organisations and individuals remain loyal to the principles of servant-leadership, yet discreet.

#### 6. *The Syncretists and Systematisers (or harmonisers and architects)*

So there is a strand in servant-leadership that encourages us to take a more holistic view of who we are as individuals, which helps to stop this compartmentalization that considers work as one part of our life and the rest of our life as something completely different. He [Greenleaf] really felt people would grow best, in both a personal and spiritual sense, by being encouraged to integrate more fully both their personal and their work lives.

—Larry Spears<sup>24</sup>

The servant-leadership concept is a principle, a natural law, and getting our social value systems and personal habits aligned with this ennobling principle is one of the great challenges of our lives.

—Stephen Covey<sup>25</sup>

Is Servant Leadership a Spiritual Concept? Well, of course it is! You will find it in the sacred writings of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. But you will also find versions of it in secular humanism and in systems that are theistic and non-theistic. You could say that Greenleaf took a religious concept, distilled the spirituality beyond doctrine, and applied it in fresh ways.

—Don Frick<sup>26</sup>



The word *syncretist* is used in the sense of it being someone who attempts to reconcile, or fuse and blend, different dimensions of thought and belief, including at times even a selection of whatever seems best in each, into his or her life. The decision to become a syncretist can be viewed as a logical conclusion of attempting to act consistently in every aspect of one's life.

In many servant-leadership journal articles, the links made with philosophy, ethics, philanthropy, virtues, mysticism, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and much else can be seen clearly. Individual writers and practitioners demonstrate their readiness to describe servant-leadership in terms of its connection with other ideas and practices partly in an attempt to legitimise it, partly to encourage further adherents, and partly to syncretise a kaleidoscope of belief and practice.

This tendency is reflected in the writing of Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, and Kakabadse's *Spirituality and Leadership Praxis*.<sup>27</sup> The authors show that whilst "spirituality, historically, has been rooted in religion . . . its current use in business and in the workplace is most often not associated with any specific religious tradition." They add, "Increased attention to personal meaning and transformative leadership has shown striking benefits of integrating personal development and awareness at work," and they quote various sources to illustrate "the dramatic increase in interest in incorporating spirituality into management theory, management development and management practice." To demonstrate the connection to servant-leadership, they comment (in a difficult sentence): "The spiritual leadership movement encompasses the leadership servant and stewardship and empowerment models rest on servant leadership philosophy of Quaker theology, portrayed in Greenleaf's work."

A second and final example of syncretism is to be found in the work of Thomas Whetstone.<sup>28</sup> He sets out to identify a link between servant-leadership and what he calls personalism: "Personalism has many forms, each generally viewing persons and personal relationships as the starting point of theory and practice. However, there is no dogma or unified doctrine that



delineates a personalist ideology much beyond this starting point.” Thankfully and helpfully, Whetstone explains personalism through terms such as “centrality of the person,” “human dignity,” and “participation and solidarity.” Whetstone’s assertion that “servant leadership is a more appropriate paradigm for implementing personalism with the business community” is significant from the perspective of the servant-leadership syncretist, as is a concluding point that “genuine servant leadership is consistent with the five themes of the philosophy of personalism.”

The turn of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of the systematisers and this category includes the writings of Kathleen Patterson, Robert F. Russell and A. Gregory Stone, Sen Sendjaya and James C. Sarros, Paul T. P. Wong, and Bruce Winston, among others.<sup>29</sup> In most ways the systematisers are not a separate emphasis at all; rather, they are a group of academics who have attempted to bring together related (perhaps isolated) ideas concerning servant-leadership into a coherent model through their theoretical architecture, in much the same way that systematic theologians developed a comprehensive and integrated statement of belief for parts of the church. However, the fact that these academics engage in model making becomes a distinguishing feature in itself and justifies grouping them together. Systematisers commendably subscribe to a view that servant-leadership

requires rigorous quantitative and qualitative research. As the current literature on servant leadership is filled with anecdotal evidence, empirical research is critically needed to test and validate these various questions and to create further predictions and hypotheses in order to fully develop the concept and construct of servant leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Close cousins of the systematising architects are the quantity surveyors who delight in statistical analyses to determine the length, breadth, height, and depth of the impact of servant-leadership principles. Their commitment to correlation coefficients, significance tests, hierarchical regression analysis,



and much else is praiseworthy and provides valuable information, especially to those of a quantitative tendency.<sup>31</sup>

Syncretists and systematisers have at least one thing in common: they bring together different elements of belief and practice to establish a whole person or the identification of an all-embracing model, thereby uniting elements of, or elements connected with, servant-leadership.

#### CONCLUSION

In his keynote address to the 2005 International Servant-Leadership Conference, Peter Block turned to Larry Spears and delivered a humorous aside:

I always felt that once an idea gets popular it's not useful anymore because then everybody markets it; they change their old binder cover, and whatever was new in the idea is co-opted and lost. So when an idea becomes popular, I have to let go of it and move on to something else. But you've held on to the spirit of servant-leadership, you've kept it vague and indefinable, which I think is a great strategic advantage. People can come every year to figure out what the hell this is, and by not answering, they're forced to come the next year. So it's both a clever marketing strategy and a stance in support of the spirit of it rather than the substance of it.<sup>32</sup>

Peter Block's perceptive (and likely prepared) ad-lib raises three important questions germane to the line of argument developed in this paper. First: Is there a danger in popularising servant-leadership, in that the greater the number of adherents, the greater the likelihood of misunderstanding and misapplication? Second: Would maintaining a certain mystique around the definition and implementation of servant-leadership actually help to protect the "purity" and intrigue of Greenleaf's central message? Third: Is it more important to remain faithful to "*the spirit of it rather than the substance of it*," where a common use of terminology clouds a divergence of principle and practice?



These words from Greenleaf's biography might encourage a celebration of the growing interest being shown in servant-leadership: "Each institution adapts Greenleaf's ideas to not only fit their own culture but help transform it. Nothing could have made Robert Greenleaf happier than to see the ongoing evolution of his ideas since 1990."<sup>33</sup> Additionally, it can be argued that Greenleaf himself was not prescriptive in his writings, and perhaps adherents of servant-leadership should be guided by one of his maxims: "I will remind you in offering you these conversations that I am not presuming to tell you how you should think. Rather, I am offering what I think in the hope you will say what you think and then, out of the dialogue, all of us will be wiser."<sup>34</sup>

However, believing in an "evolution of his ideas" is not the same as acquiescing to their mutation into something quite alien, and being free to "say what you think" does carry with it a commitment to intellectual rigour and experiential honesty. That is why alongside any celebration of the growing popularity of servant-leadership should be a firm commitment to further research, writing, and promulgation of the principal tenets and applications of servant-leadership. As a greater understanding develops, the six approaches described in this paper should become complementary rather than occasionally competitive or contradictory, and in that way the richness of Greenleaf's writings will be better understood by one and all. For this reason, among others, Kent Keith's recent *The Case for Servant Leadership*<sup>35</sup> is a welcome and valuable addition to general understanding.

All writers and speakers need to emphasise that servant-leadership is not an add-on extra; rather, it is a fundamentally different way of doing things that strikes at the very heart of everything one believes in and practises in all aspects of one's life. Servant-leadership runs deep—it is not something superficial that can be taken up and then put down when someone becomes tired of it or when some other topic is in vogue. If someone is to become a servant-leader then that person needs to commit to the long haul; otherwise the individual has not understood that becoming a servant-leader changes one's whole approach to life. Being a servant-leader may be



a challenge, but being a half-hearted or easily distracted servant-leader is not an option.

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#### NOTES

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