



## GARDENING TIPS FOR SERVANT-LEADERS

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*Editor's note: This article is the first in a two-part series. In this installment, Dr. Thorsten Grahn discusses the use of metaphors and analogies by leadership of organizations and delineates why gardening is a particularly appropriate metaphor for the field of servant-leadership. Look for the second installment in the 2010 International Journal of Servant-Leadership.*

Metaphors and analogies are powerful concepts for developing new insights into such complex domains as “organizational leadership.” Metaphors always produce a kind of one-sided perspective, and imply a particular way of thinking and of seeing. They transfer meaning from a well-understood source domain like “gardening” to a rather complex target domain like “organizational leadership.” Different metaphors of organization have different focuses. While the organization-as-machine metaphor focuses on the functioning of each part, the focus of the organization-as-garden metaphor is the healthy growth of the individual plant/person. In organization theory, it is the servant-leader who focuses on the growth of the individual, and who continuously asks himself the Greenleaf test question: “Do those being served grow as persons?” (Greenleaf, 1980, p. 43). Based on the organization-as-garden-metaphor, ten gardening tips provide insights from gardening for the practice of servant-leadership, which can be applied in private as well as in organizational communication to get the message of servant-leadership across, and to illustrate the beauty and the power of servant-leadership.

More than 20 years after Greenleaf's groundbreaking work, Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) note that “academic research on servant leader-



ship is still in its infancy” (p. 7). However, the concept of a servant-leader is not a modern concept, as “it was Christianity’s founder Jesus Christ who first taught the concept of servant leadership” (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 58). Jesus Christ submitted his own life under the will of God (Luke 22:42), and he sacrificed his life freely out of service to others (John 10:30). He came to serve (Matthew 20:28), although he was God’s son, and thus more powerful than any other leader in the world. He was an extremely powerful leader, who healed the sick (Mark 7:31-37), drove out demons (Mark 5:1-20), was recognized as Teacher and Lord (John 13:13), and had power over the wind and the sea, and even over death (Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 9:18-26). In John 13:1-17 Jesus gives a very practical example of what it means to serve others. He washes the feet of his followers, which used to be the responsibility of the house-servant.

The Bible uses analogies from gardening in connection with the leadership of the servant-leader Jesus Christ. The Prophet Isaiah announced Jesus as God’s servant, who will not break a bruised reed (Isaiah 42:3), and in the famous Bible passage John 15:1-8, Jesus himself compares his father’s leadership with a gardener’s leadership, which inspired our analogy *Lasting Growth Requires Regular Pruning*.

#### THE USE OF ANALOGIES AND METAPHORS IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The word *analogy* stems from the Greek word *analogia*, meaning *proportion*. An analogy is to say that a part—or an aspect—of “A” resembles “B,” for example, to say that “gardening” resembles “leading an organization.” The word *metaphor* comes from the Greek word *metapherein*, which means *to transfer*. A metaphor is to say that “A” is “B,” where “B” enhances the meaning associated with “A”; for instance, an “organization” is a “garden.” While analogy and metaphor are similar, they are distinct in that an analogy is aspectual, whereas a metaphor is holistic. Analogies between gardening and organizational leadership focus on the specific aspects of leadership in the garden metaphor for organization. In organiza-



tion theory, researchers study metaphors for organization mainly for three reasons:

1. To gain new understanding about the complex system called “organization” (e.g., Morgan, 2006),
2. To explore those parts or aspects of the metaphor where the metaphor does not seem to work, in order to develop new creative solutions for organizational challenges (e.g., Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002), and
3. To learn about the paradigm of those applying the metaphor, because different metaphors reflect different world views of an organization (e.g., Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2007; Oberlechner & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2002).

Analogies and metaphors are powerful concepts in organization theory. A study of the organization-as-garden metaphor, with garden as the source domain and organization as the target domain, reveals new insights into the complex domain of organizational leadership.

Twenty years after Morgan (2006) first published his classic book *Images of Organization* about the use of metaphors in organizational management, he observes an enormously increased interest in the role that metaphors play in understanding and managing organizations. Moreover, he notes that “metaphor is central to the way we ‘read,’ understand, and shape organizational life” (p. 8). No single metaphor can capture the total nature of organizational life. Different metaphors provide different insights in the target domain, and can constitute and capture the nature of organizational life in different ways, each generating powerful, distinctive, but essentially partial kinds of insight. Morgan (2006) presents some of the well-explored metaphors like organization as machine, as organism, as brain, as culture, as political system, as psychic prison, as flux and transformation, and as instrument of domination. Metaphors are helpful not only in understanding organizational life; they are also applied to influence the people in the organization. The leadership’s choice and usage of metaphors in the organization often reflect a certain paradigm and worldview. By studying the metaphors that the leaders of an organization use, people can get an idea of the



inherent worldview and paradigm of the organizational leadership, because “metaphors are indicative of a leader’s thinking and form a foundation for his or her actions. Leadership metaphors create leadership reality by defining such important aspects as the leader’s role and the context in which leadership takes place” (Oberlechner & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2002, p. 161). Oberlechner and Mayer-Schoenberger explore specifically the relationship between leadership and the use of metaphors. They compare four common metaphors: war, machine, play, and “spiritual experience” based on a number of what they call leadership dimensions—for example, metaphor focus, role of leader, role of group, and change dynamics. Many of these metaphors revolve around defined themes that play a central part in various conceptualizations of leadership. To be aware of some of these frequent “metaphorical themes helps one to better understand some of the common conceptualizations of leadership” (p. 162).

The way in which leaders use metaphors to influence the organization and the public can be seen in the example of Jack Welch, the longstanding CEO of General Electric and one of the world’s most successful transformational leaders. In a 2007 article, Amernic, Craig, and Tourish evaluated Jack Welch’s annual letters to the stockholders in his years as CEO from 1981-2000 in terms of the leadership metaphors he used. In the discussion of their findings, the authors contend that “the metaphorical constructs employed in Welch’s letters, and the overall tone of certainty they often employ about issues that are objectively *uncertain*, seem intended to produce conformity with a centrally ordained corporate direction” (p. 1863).

The present study focuses on the organization-as-garden metaphor and reveals several similarities between gardening and organizational leadership, with the same intent as Morgan’s: “To show how we can use the creative insights generated by metaphor to create new ways of understanding organization” (2006, p. 367).

#### THE GARDEN METAPHOR

The organization-as-garden metaphor has gained more attention in the



last years. In an interview in 1999 published on the web by Fast Company, Peter Senge remarks:

The most universal challenge that we face is the transition from seeing our human institutions as machines to seeing them as embodiments of nature. . . . Perhaps treating companies like machines keeps them from changing, or makes changing them much more difficult. We keep bringing in mechanics—when what we need are gardeners.

In an international context, it is worth noting that the use of the metaphors is culturally sensitive. Grisham (2006) discusses the use of metaphors in a cross-cultural leadership situation. He points out that while some metaphors work cross-culturally, others do not. When using a garden metaphor in a Japanese context, one must be aware that a Japanese garden has a specific meaning. With its specific elements, which one does not find in Western gardens, the Japanese garden can serve as a metaphor for Japan: “Japanese society is fluid and changes without altering its essential character. The garden is a reminder of the centrality of nature in Japanese society, religion (Shinto), and art” (p. 491).

The Britannica online dictionary defines “garden” as “Plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers, vegetables, or trees are cultivated” and “gardening” as “Laying out and tending of a garden” (EncyclopediaBritannicaOnline, 2008). This definition covers a wide range of garden types, like a small garden in the back yard of a private home, a rose garden, a large recreational public garden, and even the biblical garden Eden.

In the organization-as-garden metaphor, the role of an organizational leader is commonly compared to the role of the gardener, such that insights for the leadership of an organization are drawn from insights from gardening. In many aspects, the task of the gardener in a garden is similar to the task of a leader in an organization. Both will study the environment, define a specific purpose, prepare a conducive place for growth, get the right plants/people in to be able to fulfill the purpose, and tend to the individual plants/people to help them grow and bear fruit. However, additional



insights can be gained from considering the role of a single plant—or even parts of a plant—in the garden, and applying those insights to the role of a leader in an organization. Every Christian leader can also be considered just a plant (e.g., a “tree” as in Psalms 1) or a part of a plant (e.g., a vine branch in John 15) in God’s worldwide garden.

Naturally, the central theme of a garden is the growth of its plants. The gardener’s main concern is when each plant grows, how fast it grows, in which soil it grows, how much water and how much sun it needs, what it grows, what stimulates its growth, what hinders its growth, how the growth of neighboring plants affect each other, and so on.

In 1970 Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) published the essay *The Servant as Leader*, in which he introduced a kind of leadership, called servant-leadership, that revolves around the question of the growth of the followers: “Do those being served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1980, p. 43).

As in the garden, in servant-leadership too, the central theme is the growth of the individual parts. This particular focus on the growth of the individual—and not primarily on the growth of the organization—is a unique characteristic of servant-leadership. In general, servant-leaders share the following characteristics:

1. The servant-leader is a voluntary servant of a higher purpose beyond his or her own or others’ interests;
2. The servant-leader is committed to serve others needs before his or her own, and to help others grow as individuals;
3. The servant-leader consistently develops others into servant-leaders; and
4. The servant-leader is committed to grow as leader and as servant toward the biblical servant-leader Jesus Christ (or another servant-leader model).

The Bible passage John 15:1-8 is one of most prominent connections between gardening and biblical servant-leadership. In this paragraph, Jesus



applies the garden metaphor to Christian leadership, with his father as gardener. Most of the following gardening analogies relate directly to the servant-leaders' focus on personal growth and on the growth of those being served.

#### GARDENING TIPS

##### *Grass Does Not Grow Faster if You Pull It*

An African proverb goes, "Grass does not grow faster if you pull it." Trying to make grass grow by pulling its blades kills the grass. First, the blade extends a little bit, especially if it is fresh grass, but if it is pulled a little harder, it tears off. It does not grow; instead, it dies.

The same happens whenever the leadership of an organization tries to put pressure on people to make them grow. It finally kills the people. It kills their motivation, their health, and sometimes even their lives. Sustainable personal growth needs personal commitment and inner motivation. The leadership can create a healthy environment to support the individual's growth process only by providing encouragement, vision, and training; leadership cannot force people to grow. Intrinsic motivation is necessary to ensure continuous healthy growth according to the individuals' strengths, skills, and gifts. According to Wlodkowski (1999), promoting learning among adults is most likely to take place through culturally responsive teaching based on intrinsic motivation.

Kouzes and Posner explain that "for the servant leader, the main reason for leading is to help other people win" (2004, p. 104). Helping people to win means helping them to grow. That is not possible through pulling or pushing, but only through encouraging their hearts, enabling them to act, and praying for them, as Jesus did. In Isaiah 42:3, it says of the coming Christ, "A bruised reed he will not break." Instead, Jesus Christ, the ultimate servant-leader, came to heal the human brokenness. Trying to heal hurt and broken people, and bringing them back to healthy growth, is an outcome of the servant-leader's commitment to the growth of the followers.



### *The Right Placement Turns Weeds Into Roses*

According to Bühl, Deiser, Gugenham, and Kessler (1991), every plant that grows in a place where it is not wanted could be called a weed. In a vegetable patch, roses are weeds. However, in most other parts of a garden, roses are considered beautiful flowers.

Sometimes what differentiates a poor achiever from a high achiever is only the person's placement in the organization. According to Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2004), it is one of the five key principles of servant-leadership to arrange each person in a team or in a business such that everyone contributes what he or she is best at. The right placement is especially important in working with high potentials in an organization. Goffee and Jones (2007) contend that "leaders have to create an environment in which what we call 'clever people' can thrive" (p. 72). Clever people can cause more problems than average people can if they are in the wrong work place, but they can also become a greater asset for an organization if they are put in a place where they are not considered weeds and where they can thrive and prosper. First, the leadership needs to get to know both the potential of each of the people (plants) and the possible work places (soil) to develop the most fruitful combinations.

### *Growing Up Successfully Requires Growing Down Regularly*

The banyan tree's branches send down aerial roots that, when they reach the ground, take root in the ground. As they thicken, the roots support the branches which then grow and send down more roots that enable the tree to spread in amazing ways. (GeorgiaSouthernUniversity, 2007)

Therefore, banyan trees have been called "trees that walk." A strong tree needs a strong root. What makes the banyan tree unique is that it is continually growing new roots that are not extensions of already existing roots. The banyan grows not only new branches and leaves and fruits, but also new roots. The new roots do not make the old ones obsolete, but they complement them; together, they strengthen the tree and make it grow into



new areas. Growing deeper to grow bigger and expand the area of influence is a growth process for all members of an organization. Growing deeper includes engaging in ongoing learning, working on personal issues—which might be hidden from the public, but which affect the public—and remaining in touch with one’s foundation of life.

A leader who wants to help others grow must grow as well, because modeling is at the core of any leadership effort (e.g., Covey, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2004). As the banyan tree grows step by step by building increasingly firm foundations, leaders must commit themselves to ongoing deepening processes. As Covey notes, “The path to greatness is a process of sequential growth from the inside out” (2004, p. 28). It is a process that requires going back to the roots regularly. Based on the Bible passage in I Peter 2:1-2, Buzzell (1998) contends that “leaders are not qualified merely because they practice good deeds (although they must do that). They are qualified by possessing a passion and a craving for high spiritual qualities and exhibiting a consistent pattern of growth in those qualities” (p. 1455). To model the way and to grow consistently, based on a firm ethical foundation, is a sound basis for effective leadership. Christ-centered servant-leaders trust in the Lord and grow deep roots in God. Such leaders are like trees. Jeremiah 17:7-8 elaborates:

But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

### *There Is No Miraculous Growth Without Miracles*

A gardener can cultivate the garden in a perfect way, but without a sufficient supply of water and sunshine, the plants or even the whole garden might die. Human nurturing is necessary, but not sufficient for growth. All plants need a regular water supply and sunshine; the amount and the intensity needed varies from plant to plant. Greenhouses are only man-made



inventions to reduce the dependency on nature and God. Even though technology is moving fast, it will never be able to replace fully the natural sunshine, wind, and weather.

In an organizational setup, it happens sometimes that the leadership does everything possible to help the people and the organization to grow, but due to unforeseeable developments, the organization fails to flourish. In the final analysis, even the best leadership still is man-made, and therefore has its limitations. The leader Paul, who sees himself as a gardener in the Christian community, has understood that in the final analysis all Christian growth is only God's grace, when he writes in I Corinthians 3:5-9:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

### *Efficient Growth Requires Sufficient Space*

Bamboo is a kind of grass. It varies in height from one foot (30 cm) plants to giant timber bamboos that can grow to over 100 feet (30 m). Bamboo grows in many different climates, from jungles to high on mountainsides. Bamboos can be classified by the types of roots they have. Some, called runners, spread exuberantly, and others expand slowly from the original planting. Generally, the tropical bamboos tend to expand slowly and the temperate bamboos tend to be runners (Wolfram Franke, 2003).

In our garden, we had one of the temperate running bamboos. It was a beautiful plant, and we had already made several attempts to limit the growth of the bamboo and to keep it in a defined area. However, all attempts were to no avail; the bamboo cut through or grew under or over any set barrier and developed roots in other parts of our garden. The bam-



boo hindered the growth of other plants in the garden. The bamboo needed more space to grow. As we did not have more space, and the bamboo did not stay within its allocated growth area, we finally had to pull it out to protect the rest of the garden.

People need space to grow, to try out new things, to develop new skills, to change themselves and the organization. The organization must provide sufficient space for growth within the organization, or must transfer the individual to another area, or even another organization. Otherwise, both the individual and the organization will suffer. Servant-leaders provide the necessary growth environment for the individuals in the organization.

### *Lasting Growth Requires Regular Pruning*

Trees are pruned to develop a strong branching pattern. The pruning of fruit trees not only shapes the future growth of the tree, but also increases the quality of the fruit. The goal of the pruning is to create a clear crown, which allows the air to go through the crown, preventing diseases and allowing the sunlight through. The sunlight is important for the flavor of the fruit. In general, a strong pruning fosters growth more than a cautious one. Often the inexperienced gardener makes the mistake of pruning too cautiously and only on the outer part of the crown. Pruning is important so that the tree will not invest too much of its resources into branches that bear no fruit (Wolfram Franke, 2003).

Pruning, the focusing and prioritizing of the work of individuals on what they are best at and what is most needed for their individual growth processes, should become a regular process in any organization, just as the gardener has to do it repeatedly. Pruning in an organization involves evaluating ongoing projects and ministries and cutting those areas that will not bear lasting fruit, and focusing the available resources on the fruit-bearing branches. Pruning is a very difficult leadership task, because it hurts people, as it involves cutting projects that seem to bear no lasting fruit. Few leaders are willing to take on the role of the gardener, especially if there is no pressing need. In difficult times, sometimes external consultants are invited



to do the necessary pruning—often late in the process, so that instead of being pruned, the tree has to be cut down. It takes courage to prune. In the garden, as in many organizations, the pruning serves first the growth of the individual plant, and only secondly the growth of the garden.

Servant-leaders are not afraid of pruning. They know it will hurt the plant, but will also ensure improved growth and fruit-bearing. When servant-leaders prune, their motivation is the same as God’s motivation for pruning as Jesus describes it in John 15:2: “Every branch that does bear fruit he (God) prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful.”

*The One Who Outshines Others Takes Them the Light to Grow*

All plants need sunlight to grow. However, some plants need more sunlight than others do. Moreover, some plants take more of the sunlight at the expense of other plants, leaving them in the dark. The gardener has to make sure that the plants are placed in the right spots and that they get the sunlight they need.

In our garden, we have a cherry laurel sitting close to a rosebush. The roses need both regular fresh air and sunlight to flourish. However, the cherry laurel grows faster and thicker than the rosebush. We needed to prune the cherry laurel so that it does not grow into the rosebush. Instead of the cherry laurel outshining the rosebush, now both can flourish.

The leadership of an organization must be proactive in recognizing the staff members’ individual needs for growth and must create the space and environment necessary so that everyone can blossom. As Yukl puts it, “Effective leaders help people develop their skills and empower people to become change agents and leaders themselves” (2006, p. 475).

*There’s No Way That There’s No Change*

In the garden, continuous growth and death happen at the same time day by day. Often they are invisible at first, but they happen. Most of the changes are necessary to keep the plants growing. The different seasons are



necessary so that the plants can rest, gain new strength, multiply, flourish, and bear fruit at the right time. Sometimes, hurricanes, floods, or extreme heat have a drastic impact upon the plants in the garden.

The same is true for people, and thus also for the organizations they are working for. Organizational leadership needs to address such change situations and be prepared for the unexpected by continuously evaluating developments inside and outside of the organization. Change happens continuously, whether the leadership likes it or not. Moreover, without change, growth is impossible. As Buzzell (1998) explains: “The scriptures focus more on process than on product, because all believers are in a process of becoming the people God meant us to be. Without change, growth is impossible” (p. 1168).

#### *Artificial Flowers Are Beautiful, but Do Not Grow*

Often artificial flowers look extremely pretty. Even after a week in a flower vase, the leaves do not go limp, the flowers are still in full bloom, and they do not even require any water, sunshine, or nutrition to keep looking pretty. They will never die. There are many good reasons to prefer artificial flowers to natural flowers. Artificial flowers have only one disadvantage: they do not grow! They stay the same forever. They will never die, but only because they never lived.

Sometimes leaders wish their staff would behave like wonderful artificial flowers. However, soon they would discover that there is no more growth, no more flexible adaptation to changing environments, no more change at all. Organizations need living people who want to grow, not people who want to keep the status quo. The leadership must treat the people as living plants that need a lot to grow, but that in the long run will always outshine the artificial flowers in the organization.

#### *Take Time to Enjoy the Flowery Scent*

Gardeners enjoy the roses, which grow, more than they mourn the



seeds, which die in the process. Gardening is a wonderful job. To be in contact with growing and ever-changing plants, to watch the fruit develop, to nurture the plants with water and watch them recover from the heat, and to see the impact of the garden on other people, are glorious things. Moreover, “Every blossoming flower is a reminder of God’s faithfulness to us” (Buzzell, 1998, p. 1122). A Chinese proverb goes, “Life begins the day you start a garden!”

Leading often involves difficult, challenging, and suffering situations. For a leader to stay healthy and be able to empower others, the leader needs to take time to sit back, relax, and enjoy the growth and the beauty of the organization. Doing so infuses new power and joy, in addition to making the leadership grateful for the observable growth.

“No rose is without thorns,” goes a common proverb. Servant-leaders do not expect the perfect worker. They know to enjoy the blossom and have learnt to deal with the thorns. Servant-leaders know to enjoy their people and their work.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In a world that becomes increasingly more complex every day, there is a growing interest in analogies and metaphors, which help people to understand and illustrate complex realities by relating them to common and well-known images. Organizational leadership is one of the complex domains that can be understood in different ways by applying different kinds of metaphors. The metaphor in use in an organization tells something about the self-perception of the leadership in that organization. The organization-as-garden metaphor is both a very natural and a very positive metaphor. Its focus is on the growth of the individual. Thus, most of the gardening analogies talk about the growth aspect. Being focused on the growth of the individual is the outstanding characteristic of servant-leadership. Individual growth is what gardening and servant-leadership are all about.

Does the focus of the leadership concept determine the metaphors that are used, or do the metaphors determine the focus of the leadership? Both



happen. Those who form the language and the culture in an organization the most—usually the leadership—choose the metaphors based on their leadership focus. The people in an organization, who adopt the language of the leaders, also adopt their metaphors. These metaphors influence the followers’ way of thinking and acting.

The leaders’ understanding of leadership will be reflected in the metaphors they use, but there is no one-to-one relationship between the preferred leadership model and the metaphors used (e.g., Amernic et al., 2007). Servant-leaders should therefore be careful to use metaphors like the organization-as-garden metaphor rather than using war or machine metaphors, which communicate another type of leadership, which runs partly contrary to the servant-leadership paradigm.

Analogies from the garden have already been applied effectively in the Bible to communicate biblical truth (e.g., John 15). Obviously, the concept of a garden bears a significant meaning in the Bible. From garden Eden, to garden Gethsemane, to the eternal paradise, the gardens in the Bible always mark crucial times in God’s story with the world. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) noted, “In a garden the world got lost, in a garden the world got redeemed.” Moreover, the first job that God gave to the first man on earth, Adam, was to be a gardener: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). From the beginning to the end, the garden seems to play an important role in God’s design for this world. Learning from the garden seems to be a promising undertaking for all leaders—for their living as well as for their leading.

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