

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SERVANT-LEADER

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Servant Leadership is a non-traditional approach to leadership in which the leader is portrayed as a servant to others. Developed in the 1970s by former AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf, Servant Leadership deviates from typical top-down leadership models, which place the leader at the top directing the actions of the followers below (Blanchard, 1998:25). Instead, Servant Leadership places the leader among the followers, emphasizing empowerment of the followers through teamwork, relationship building, and shared authority (Jones-Burbridge, 2012:46). Through empowerment, the followers achieve great results for their organization and grow to be thoughtful servant-leaders themselves.

Since its inception, interest in Greenleaf's vision of "servant as leader" has grown, and Servant Leadership has developed into a popular and powerful philosophy for organizational leadership, one which leadership experts and scholars continue to explore. In his essay *Servant-Leadership and The Greenleaf Legacy*, then Executive Director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, Larry Spears, distilled from Greenleaf's philosophy ten key characteristics of servant-leaders (1995:4). This paper explores these key leadership traits, drawing upon the works of other authors and experts to paint a fuller picture of Greenleaf's "servant as leader".

Characteristic #1: Listening

Bestselling author on Servant Leadership, James C. Hunter, wrote: "Healthy organizations consist of healthy relationships" (2004:56), and Servant Leadership is relationship based. Key to relationship building is the servant-leader's ability to listen to his people. We were given two ears and only one mouth for a reason (Hunter, 2004:114), and while traditional leaders focus on being heard, the servant-leader recognizes the importance of hearing others. The servant-leader listens to learn and gain understanding, to "identify and clarify the will of a group" (Spears, 1995:5). Hunter wrote that listening is "working to understand where people are

coming from and then going to a new place together” (2004:116). People are drawn to good listeners (Hunter, 2004:117), and by being a good listener, the servant-leader is able to attract followers who become loyal team members.

Characteristic #2: Empathy

In his famous book *Leadership is an Art*, Max DePree wrote: “The needs of the team are best met when we meet the needs of individual persons” (1989:35). The servant-leader meets the fundamental need to be heard, but also the need to be understood. He listens to his followers with empathy, seeing things as his followers see them and feeling things as his followers feel them (Hunter, 2004:115).

While people are capable of evil, the servant-leader is willing to assume that people overall have good intentions. In his essay *Servant-Leadership Revisited*, famed author Ken Bainbridge wrote of Seattle-based department store Nordstrom, owing its success in part to a liberal, hassle-free return policy that focuses on pleasing the 90 percent of consumers who are honest people wanting good service, rather than the 10 percent who will rip a company off (1998:26). However, the servant-leader is not a wimp. He addresses misbehavior directly so that harsh policies and restrictions meant to address the few don’t oppress the many.

Characteristic #3: Healing

People are fatigued by economic instability, downsizing, and reorganizing. They are skeptical of management, battered by top-down, dictatorial leadership and fearful of more change and more uncertainty. The servant-leader is able to mend broken spirits and tend to wounded emotions.

One way the servant-leader works to heal is through conflict management. Leading author on Servant Leadership, James A. Autry, says the servant-leader doesn’t mediate conflict

by making people like each other, but by leading people to “care about one another in the context of what they do together, because in that context they are mutually interdependent whether they personally like each other or not” (2001:172). The servant-leader aims to connect his followers around the mission and purpose of the team even when deeper personal connections are not achievable.

Characteristic #4: Stewardship

The servant-leader is an effective steward, placing high importance on the responsibility entrusted in him to safeguard his organizations and its assets (Spears, 1995:8). An organization’s greatest asset is its people, and their greatest need is great leadership. Hunter equates a team to a complex machine, needing a great technician to service it (Hunter, 2004:198). Autry says to be a servant-leader, one must be his follower’s principle resource, writing: “The most important thing you can be as a leader is useful” (Autry, 2001:20).

Critics of Servant Leadership say this emphasis on satisfying the people is too much like slavery, with the leader doing whatever the people want him to do. However, the servant-leader isn’t a slave doing what his people want. He is a servant identifying and meeting his people’s needs (Hunter, 1998:65). He remains accountable for the productivity of the team and the accomplishment of team goals, and will not sacrifice effectiveness to fulfill his follower’s desires.

A responsible steward protects his organization by demanding excellence on its behalf. “The leader should never settle for mediocrity or second best – people have a need to be pushed to be the best they can be” (Hunter, 1998:66). The servant-leader pushes his followers to reach high expectations and holds followers accountable for their performance, but is not cruel in addressing shortcomings or correcting mistakes (1998:102). Discipline derives from the word

“disciple” – meaning “to teach” – and the servant-leader uses errors and missed marks as teaching opportunities, maintaining the follower’s dignity while redirecting actions (1998:121).

Characteristic #5: Awareness

As Autry wrote: “Leadership, like life, is largely a matter of paying attention” (2001:21), and Hunter describes attention as “a legitimate human need” that leaders must not neglect (1998:107). The servant-leader pays attention. He is a faithful observer, always seeking awareness of himself, his people, and his surroundings. Awareness fosters an integrated understanding of people and situations. Through self-awareness, the servant-leader gains the knowledge of who he is, what he stands for, and where he is trying to go (Kouzes and Posner, 1993:186). As a vigilant observer of others, the servant-leader discovers what his followers need, so he can then work toward clearing barriers to meeting those needs. Hunter describes leadership simply as identifying and meeting needs (1998:90). He says: “Too many managers spend their careers getting in the way instead of getting the obstacles out of the way” (1998:63).

Awareness for the servant-leader is what Spears quotes from Greenleaf: “a disturber and an awakener” (1995:5). When it comes to hard truths, the servant-leader isn’t an ostrich with his head in the sand. He encourages openness from his followers even with the bad news and is able to view unpopular information as “friendly facts” that, when valid and reliable, help empower him as a problem solver (Kouzes and Posner, 1993:192).

Characteristic #6: Foresight

Through awareness, the servant-leader is able to develop foresight. In his book *Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be*, religious leader and author Leroy Eims identified a leader as “one who sees more than others see, who sees farther than others see, and who sees before others do” (Maxwell, 1998:36). The servant-leader is able to apply the knowledge he gains through

awareness and experience to anticipate outcomes, both by learning from the past and understanding the present (Spears, 1995:5). The ability to see what's coming before it arrives allows the servant-leader to prepare for outcomes or work to prevent them.

Characteristic #7: Persuasion

Author and leadership expert John C. Maxwell put it simply: "Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less" (1998:13). While all leaders must be able to persuade "up" to their own managers or boards, the servant-leader also works to persuade "down". He does not seek to lead through controlling his followers. While a traditional manager would rely on his position to influence his followers, the servant-leader relies on his powers of *persuasion* to produce results and prompt action, seeking to "convince rather than coerce" (1995:5).

The convincing may not even be an action, but may result from one's character. Hunter says true authority is "the skill...of getting others willingly to do your will because of your personal influence" (2004:53). Unlike power, which can be bought and sold, he views authority as something inherent in the character of its holder (2004:54). The way in which these words are used illustrates the point: a person having power "over" someone versus a person having authority "with" someone (2004:63).

Hunter defines leadership as "the skills of influencing people to enthusiastically work towards goals identified as being for the common good, with character that inspires confidence" (2004:32). Hunter defines character as moral and ethical maturity, commitment to doing the right thing (2004:144). The "character that inspires confidence" is exhibited as credibility gained by walking the talk, doing what one says he will do (Kouzes and Posner, 1993:47).

Characteristic #8: Conceptualization

DePree says the first responsibility of any leader is to "define reality" (1989:11). The

servant-leader conceptualizes, is forward-thinking and able to dream the big dreams (Spears, 1995:7). Traditional managers are often short-sighted, focused on the day to day management of the team and the tasks. While the servant-leader must do this too, he balances his focus on how the work is done with a focus on what to do and how to be (Autry, 2001:38). In this way, they intertwine the most important aspects of an organization – its people and its future (DePree, 1989:133).

The servant-leader establishes and champions the vision for his organization and followers. Autry identifies three components to vision, the first being *purpose*. He describes purpose as the “overarching reason for being,” as well as “the beacon that illuminates the potential for finding meaning in every single job” (2001:26). It answers the question: “why are we here?” Autry’s second component of vision is *mission*. This answers the question: “what do we do?” For business, this is not simply to make a profit, but to provide some product or service that has enough perceived value that consumers will pay for it (2001:29). Mission can include both organizational and personal goals, and can change over time (2001:31). Autry’s third component of vision is *values*. While the group values are derived from the people, Autry says that a primary responsibility of the servant-leader is to guide the development of those shared values into a framework for behavior that will benefit both the people and the organization (2001:31). When someone’s actions are inconsistent with the shared values, the servant-leader must intervene, both to address the action and to show the other followers that the leader is committed to those values (Kouzes and Posner, 1993:55).

Characteristic #9: Commitment to the Growth of Others

Hunter wrote: “All life is – all business is – is a series of relationships. Without people, there is no business” (2004:55). Robert Greenleaf says that the best leaders view their followers

as whole people and are committed to their personal and professional growth. He asks: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 1995:19). The servant-leader takes the time to understand his followers’ strengths and weaknesses and to identify their potential (Jones-Burbridge, 2012:46).

He also seeks to learn what motivates his people. Motivation is “any communication that influences choice” (Hunter, 1998:114), and studies show that money is not a primary motivator (Hunter, 2004:189). Hunter questioned what drives volunteerism, essentially why someone would work for no pay. He determined that the primary motivators were excellent leadership, being brought into the organization’s mission, public acknowledgment of one’s good work, a team atmosphere committed to excellence, and openness in the team community to share and be heard (2004:196).

The servant-leader empowers his followers to share their ideas for improving processes and participate in decision-making that impacts their work (Spears, 1995:7). This contrasts sharply with the organizational power pyramid of typical management models, which place the leader at the top dictating to the followers below. Servant Leadership inverts the pyramid, placing the followers at the top, where they can influence how the work is accomplished. Famed educator and business writer Stephen R. Covey views the empowerment of people as key to an organization’s success, writing that it is only organizations that “align their structures, systems, and management style to support the empowerment of their people that will survive and thrive as market leaders” (1998:xii).

Critics of Servant Leadership say that the approach is too passive, too much like “the inmates running the asylum”. Servant Leadership is not leaderless“ness” and is not a lack of

direction. While the implementation side of Servant Leadership does invert the organizational power pyramid, the visionary side remains leader-centered (Blanchard, 1998:22). The servant-leader is still relied upon to define the mission, establish and embody the values, and set the performance standards for the team. The servant-leader also remains accountable for the effectiveness and productivity of the team (Hunter, 2004:51).

Characteristic #10: Community Building

The servant-leader establishes the vision, but cannot accomplish it alone. A football coach doesn't win a single game by passing the ball or running it into the end zone. It's the players that accomplish the coach's goal to win, a goal that is shared by every member of the team (Blanchard, 1998:28). The servant-leader works to build a community among his followers around the vision, mission, and shared values. "Leadership is not about being boss; it's about being present for people and building a community at work" (Autry, 2001:20).

The servant-leader believes in strengthening interpersonal connections between team members, as well as between him and the team. Community building is "the business of creating a healthy environment in which people can live and work free of unnecessary barriers and distraction" (Hunter, 2004:207). The result is followers safe to be themselves and "free to put all their energy into the things that make themselves and their organizations great" (2004:208). The servant-leader's investment in strong community can pay dividends to an organization, both in high work ethic and productivity, but also in employee loyalty (Maxwell, 1998:107).

Conclusion

Over 50 years old now, Servant Leadership remains a prominent and powerful philosophy of organizational leadership. Greenleaf described it not as a concept or principle, but "an inner standard of living that requires a spiritual understanding of identity, mission, vision and

environment” (Jones-Burbridge, 2012:45). Through awareness, the servant-leader establishes his own motivations and direction. Awareness, coupled with listening and empathy, allow him to establish his followers’ motivations and needs. The servant-leader works to heal his followers by meeting their needs and helps them to grow through empowerment and inclusion, and in doing establishes his own legacy by identifying and developing the next generation of servant-leaders (DePree, 1989:14). He faithfully stewards his organization’s human resources through persuasion, not coercion, valuing his followers as whole people. Through foresight, he is able to anticipate outcomes. He also conceptualizes a vision for his organization, around which he builds community with his followers through shared commitment.

Autry wrote: “True power comes from the people. It comes from gaining the trust and support of the people who then give you the power” (2001:21). Servant Leadership acknowledges that not only the source of an organization’s true power, but indeed the source of its true success, is the people. While the leader is first the captain setting the course, he then becomes a servant, helping the crew sail safely and successfully to its destination.

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