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The Beginnings of Servant-Leadership

Servant-leadership is one model that can help turn traditional notions of leadership and organizational structure upside-down. Robert K. Greenleaf came up with the term “servant-leadership” after reading The Journey to the East by Hermann Hesse. In this story, Leo, a cheerful, nurturing servant, supports a group of travelers on a long and difficult journey. His sustaining spirit helps keep the group’s purpose clear and morale high until, one day, Leo disappears. Soon after, the travelers disperse. Years later, the storyteller comes upon a spiritual order and discovers that Leo is actually the group’s highly respected titular head. Yet, by serving the travelers rather than trying to instruct them, he had helped ensure their survival and bolstered their sense of shared commitment. This story gave Greenleaf insight into a new way to perceive leadership.

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This appetite for high drama can fool us into believing that we can depend on one or two “super people” to solve our organizational crises. Even in impressive corporate turnarounds, we tend to look for the hero who single-handedly “saved the day.” We long for a “savior” to fix the messes that we all have had a part in creating. But this myth causes us to lose sight of all those in the background who provided valuable support to the single hero.
Seeing the leader as servant, however, puts the emphasis on very different qualities. Servant-leadership is not about a personal quest for power, prestige, or material rewards. Instead, from this perspective, leadership begins with a true motivation to serve others. Rather than controlling or wielding power, the servant-leader works to build a solid foundation of shared goals by (1) listening deeply to understand the needs and concerns of others; (2) working thoughtfully to help build a creative consensus; and (3) honoring the paradox of polarized parties and working to create “third right answers” that rise above the compromise of “we/they” negotiations. The focus of servant-leadership is on sharing information, building a common vision, self-management, high levels of interdependence, learning from mistakes, encouraging creative input from every team member, and questioning present assumptions and mental models.

How Servant-Leadership Serves Organizations

Servant-leadership is a powerful methodology for organizational learning because it offers new ways to capitalize on the knowledge and wisdom of all employees, not just those “at the top.” Through this different form of leadership, big-picture information and business strategies are shared broadly throughout the company. By understanding basic assumptions and background information on issues or decisions, everyone can add something of value to the discussion because everyone possesses the basic tools needed to make meaningful contributions. Such tools and information are traditionally reserved for upper management, but sharing them brings deeper meaning to each job and empowers each person to participate more in effective decision making and creative problem solving. Individuals thus grow from being mere hired hands into having fully engaged minds and hearts.

This approach constitutes true empowerment, which significantly increases job satisfaction and engages far more brain power from each employee. It also eliminates the “That’s not my job” syndrome, as each person, seeing the impact he or she has on the whole, becomes eager to do whatever it takes to achieve the collective vision. Servant-leadership therefore challenges some basic terms in our management vocabulary; expressions such as “subordinates,” “my people,” “staff” (versus “line”), “overhead” (referring to people), “direct reports,” “manpower,” all become less accurate or useful. Even phrases such as “driving decision-making down into the ranks” betray a deep misunderstanding of the concept of empowerment. Do we believe that those below are resistant to change or less intelligent than others? Why must we drive or push decisions down? Something vital is missing from this way of thinking—deep respect and mentoring, a desire to lift others to their fullest potential, and the humility to understand that the work of one person can rarely match that of an aligned team.

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FROM HERO-AS-LEADER TO SERVANT-AS-LEADER

Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammell

An organizational and spiritual awakening is currently taking place. On the cusp of the new millennium, more and more people are seeking deeper meaning in their work beyond just financial rewards and prestige. The desire to make a difference, to support a worthwhile vision, and to leave the planet better than we found it, all contribute to this new urge. Whom we choose to follow, how we lead, and how we come together to address the accelerating change are also shifting.

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The Power of Internal Motivation and Paradox

So what does it take to become a servant-leader? The most important quality is a deep, internal drive to contribute to a collective result or vision. Very often, a servant-leader purposely refuses to accept the perks of the position and takes a relatively low salary because another shared goal may have more value. For example, Southwest Airlines (SWA) chairman Herb Kelleher has long been referred to as the most underpaid CEO in the industry. Herb was the first to work without pay when SWA faced a serious financial threat. In asking the pilots' union to agree to freeze their wages for five years in exchange for stock options, he showed his commitment by freezing his own wages as well.

Big salaries and attractive perks are clearly not the main motivators for Southwest's leadership team; the company's top leaders are paid well below the industry average. Rather, they stay because they are making history together. Their vision is a noble one—to provide meaningful careers to their employees, and the freedom to fly to many Americans who otherwise could not afford the convenience of air travel. SWA's leaders love to take on major competitors and win. Beyond that, each finds fulfillment in developing talent all around him or her. Servant-leadership has become a core way of being within Southwest Airlines.

A second quality of servant-leaders is an awareness of paradox. Paradox involves two aspects: the understanding that there is usually another side to every story, and the fact that most situations contain an opposite and balancing truth (see “The Structure of Paradox: Managing Interdependent Opposites,” by Philip Ramsey, The Systems Thinker, Volume 8, Number 9). Here are some of the paradoxes that servant-leadership illuminates:

- We can lead more effectively by serving others.
- We can arrive at better answers by learning to ask deeper questions and by involving more people in the process.
- We can build strength and unity by valuing differences.
- We can improve quality by making mistakes, as long as we also create a safe environment in which we can learn from experience.
- Fewer words (such as a brief story or metaphor) can provide greater understanding than a long speech. A servant-leader knows to delve into what is not being said or what is being overlooked, especially when solutions come too quickly or with too easy a consensus.

A Time for Transformation

We are moving away from a time when a strong hierarchy worked for our organizations. In the past, we gauged results in a far more limited way than we do today—financial and other material gain, power, and prestige were viewed as true measures of success. Other, more complex measures, such as the impact of our businesses on society, families, and the environment, have not been part of our accounting systems. Yet now, as we move into the Information Age and a new millennium, we've come to recognize the limitations of the traditional “bottom line.”

A servant-leadership approach can help us overcome these limitations and accomplish a true and lasting transformation within our organizations. To be sure, as we envision the many peaks and valleys before us in undertaking this journey, we sometimes may feel that we are alone. But we are not alone—many others are headed in the same direction. For instance, in Fortune magazine's (1999) listing of the “100 Best Companies to Work For in America,” three of the top four follow the principles of servant-leadership: Synovus Financial (#1), TDIndustries (#2), and Southwest Airlines (#4). In addition to providing a nurturing and inspiring work environment, each of these businesses is recognized as a leader in its industry.

On a personal level, as many of us begin to come to terms with our own mortality, our desire to leave a legacy grows. “What can I contribute that will continue long after I am gone?” Some yearn to
have their names emblazoned on a building or some other form of ego recognition. Servant-leaders find fulfillment in the deeper joy of lifting others to new levels of possibility, an outcome that goes far beyond what one person could accomplish alone. The magical synergy that results when egos are put aside, vision is shared, and a true learning organization takes root is something that brings incredible joy, satisfaction, and results to the participants and their organizations. For, as Margaret Mead put it, “Never doubt the power of a small group of committed individuals to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” The true heroes of the new millennium will be servant-leaders, quietly working out of the spotlight to transform our world.

Practicing Servant-Leadership

1. *Listen without Judgment.* When a team member comes to you with a concern, listen first to understand. Listen for feelings as well as for facts. Before giving advice or solutions, repeat back what you thought you heard, and state your understanding of the person’s feelings. Then ask how you can help. Did the individual just need a sounding board, or would he or she like you to help brainstorm solutions?

2. *Be Authentic.* Admit mistakes openly. At the end of meetings, discuss what went well during the week and what needs to change. Be open and accountable to others for your role in the things that weren’t successful.

3. *Build Community.* Show appreciation to those who work with you. A handwritten thank-you note for a job well done means a lot. Also, find ways to thank team members for everyday, routine work that is often taken for granted.

4. *Share Power.* Ask those you supervise or team with: “What decisions am I making or actions am I taking that could be improved if I had more information or input from the team?” Plan to incorporate this feedback into your decision-making process.

5. *Develop People.* Take time each week to develop others to grow into higher levels of leadership. Give them opportunities to attend meetings that they would not usually be invited to. Find projects that you can co-lead, and coach the others as you work together.
Servant leadership is both a leadership philosophy and set of leadership practices. Traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the top of the pyramid. A servant leader’s purpose should be to inspire and equip the people they influence. (Contributed by the Servant Leadership Institute) Servant leadership is an ancient philosophy. There are passages that relate to servant leadership in the Tao Te Ching, attributed to Lao-Tzu, who is believed to have lived in China sometime between 570 BCE and 490 BCE: The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware. Next comes one whom they love and praise. Next comes one whom they fear.