

Servant Leadership
by
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The most effective and timeless style of leadership ever found is Servant Leadership as taught and modeled by Christ Jesus. Servant Leadership means “to provide aid to others and help them to grow in spiritual lives and skills as leaders without any expectation of even the least of returns.”

The Scriptural basis is found in Matthew 20:20-28. The background to this text is that the Jews were looking for a Messiah who would lead them to a military victory over all of their enemies. With that in mind, James and John have their mother ask Jesus for a favor. She wants Jesus to give James and John a position of being on His right and left side in His (earthly) kingdom. Jesus addresses James and John and tells them that they do not know what they are asking. Soon the other ten find about this request and become “indignant.” Jesus uses this situation to teach all twelve and all who read this text about Servant Leadership.

- Lesson 1 – “Rulers of the Gentiles and their high officials exercise authority.” The word for authority is “raw power.” He does not say it is wrong. Paul in Romans Chapter 13 tells his readers to “submit to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established.” Governments need to use their power to protect its citizens. Because they deal with evil, they need the raw power given them. (20:25)
- Lesson 2 – The “raw power” approach is not to be used in His Church. (20:26)
- Lesson 3 – “Great” means to hold a higher position. That person is expected to “be your servant” and use that position to willingly serve and meet the needs of others. (20:26)
- Lesson 4 – “First” means most prominent. To be a slave is to be at the lowest rung of servanthood. Non-Jewish slaves had no rights, had no hope of freedom and could be called upon any time of day or night. Based on verse 27, the higher we would ascend, the lower we must be willing to descend in our labor of love. We shall disregard our own will and honor and consecrate ourselves to the relief of others. (Ylvisaker) (20:27)
- Lesson 5 – Jesus was the ultimate Servant Leader. He gave His life “as a ransom for many.” Christ giving Himself for our salvation empowers us to be freed to serve others (20:28)

From a non-biblical perspective there some examples below:

Robert Greenleaf in his book Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness, gives this definition of Servant Leadership:

“Do those being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants?” (pp. 13-14)

Greenleaf in the same book tells the following story:

“The idea of the servant leader came out of reading Hermann Hesse’s “Journey to the East.” In this story we see a band of men on a mythical journey, probably also Hesse’s own journey. The central figure of the story is Leo who accompanies the party as the servant who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They cannot make it without Leo. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo was the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.”

Tom Clancy in his book Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces tells what small groups like special forces or rebel forces must do to not only survive but also succeed.

He says of Mao’s campaigns: “His soldiers treated people very generously and kindly and with great respect. And instead of fleeing to get out of the way of the Communists, in the normal way civilians might react to armies, the people welcomed them.”

“Green Berets paid attention to all kinds of little things that other soldiers rarely cared about. For example, they helped a villager increase his water supply by showing him a simple well-digging technique. They worked side by side with him to build a log bridge that would save a half-mile trudge around a swamp to reach his primitive farmland.”

Ten Characteristics of the Servant-Leader

By Larry Spears, Executive Director

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(The following is excerpted from “Servant-Leadership: Toward a New Era of Caring,” from the book Leadership for a New Era, 1994, New Leaders Press.)

After some years of carefully considering Greenleaf’s original writings, I have identified a set of ten characteristics of the servant-leader which I view as being of critical importance. The following characteristics are ones which appear to me to be central to the development of servant-leaders. They are:

(1). Listening: Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision making skills. While these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group, and helps clarify that will. He or she seeks to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said!). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice, and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, are essential to the growth of the servant-leader.

(2). Empathy: The servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. One assumes the good intentions of co-workers and does not reject them as people, even when one is forced to refuse to accept their behavior or performance. The most successful servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners. It is interesting to note that Robert Greenleaf developed a course in "receptive listening" in the 1950's for the Wainwright House in New York. This course continues to be offered to the present day.

(3). Healing: Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self, and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, the servant-leader recognizes that he or she has an opportunity to "help make whole" those with whom they come in contact. In The Servant as Leader Greenleaf writes: "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share."

(4). Awareness: General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Making a commitment to foster awareness can be scary—you never know what you may discover! Awareness also aids one in understanding issues involving ethics and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, wholistic position. As Greenleaf observed: "Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity."

(5). Persuasion: Another characteristic of servant-leaders is a reliance upon persuasion, rather than using one's positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is

effective at building consensus within groups. This emphasis on persuasion over coercion probably has its roots within the beliefs of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)—the denomination with which Robert Greenleaf himself was most closely allied.

(6). Conceptualization: Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to “dream great dreams.” The ability to look at a problem (or an organization) from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many managers this is a characteristic which requires discipline and practice. The traditional manager is consumed by the need to achieve short term operational goals. The manager who wishes to also be a servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, the proper role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations (something which should always be discouraged!) and fail to provide the visionary concept for an institution. Trustees need to be mostly conceptual in their orientations; staffs need to be mostly operational in their perspective; and, the most effective C.E.O.’s and managers probably need to develop both perspectives. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach.

(7). Foresight: Closely related to conceptualization, the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easy to identify. One knows it when one sees it! Foresight is a characteristic which enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. As such, one can conjecture that foresight is the one servant-leader characteristic with which one may be born. All other characteristics are ones which can be consciously developed. There hasn’t been a great deal written on foresight. It remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.

(8). Stewardship. Peter Block (author of Stewardship, and The Empowered Manager) has defined stewardship as “holding something in trust for another.” Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEO’s, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first-and-foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion, rather than control.

(9). Commitment to the growth of people: Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his

or her institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional and spiritual growth of employees. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as: making available funds for personal and professional development; taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone; encouraging worker involvement in decision-making; and, actively assisting laid-off workers to find other employment.

(10). Building Community: The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf said: “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.”

These ten characteristics of servant-leadership are by no means exhaustive. However, I believe that the ones I have listed serve to communicate the power and promise which this list concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge.