

A Servant Leadership Primer

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People who first hear the phrase *servant-leader* naturally ask “What does it mean?” Fair enough, but be warned that it is a catchy term with big arms that can embrace multiple meanings. Dozens of writers have tried their hand at decoding Greenleaf. Nearly all of their bullet point lists are right, as far as they go, but none are complete. Perhaps this is as it should be because Greenleaf was not a bullet-point kind of thinker, and perhaps no such list could be complete. Still, a short introduction to the basics of servant leadership should be useful in understanding Robert Greenleaf’s life, just as his biography should illuminate his writings. The short primer that follows uses Greenleaf’s own words as much as possible.

Who and what is a leader?

For openers, begin with a leader—any leader. Greenleaf says a leader is one who “goes out ahead and shows the way . . . He says, ‘I will go, follow me!’ when he knows that the path is uncertain, even dangerous.”¹ The leader is open to inspiration, but “the leader needs more than inspiration . . . He initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and takes the risk of failure along with the chance of success.”² The leader always knows the goal and “can articulate it for any who are unsure. By clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty in achieving it for themselves....The word *goal* is used here in the special sense of the overarching purpose, the big dream, the visionary concept, the ultimate consummation which one approaches but never really achieves.”³

People follow leaders because they believe leaders “see more clearly where it is best to go.”⁴ In that sense, followers make the leaders. Hitler was a leader, but his vision of where to go was ethically warped. Still, he could not have accomplished what he did without followers who not only believed in his goal, but coerced unbelievers into followership.

How does one “see more clearly where it is best to go?” Through foresight. “Foresight is the ‘lead’ that the leader has. Once he loses this lead and events start to force his hand, he is leader in name only. He is not leading; he is reacting to immediate events and he probably will not long be a leader.”⁵ Machiavelli knew this. Here is his advice to princes who wished to survive, quoted by Greenleaf in a modern paraphrase. “Thus it happens in matters of state; for knowing afar off (which it is only given a prudent man to do) the evils that are brewing, they are easily cured. But when, for want of such knowledge, they are allowed to grow so that everyone can recognize them, there is no longer any remedy to be found.”⁶

By this definition a leader can be moral or amoral, kind or cruel. Mother Teresa, Winston Churchill and Ivan the Terrible were all leaders. In defining servant leadership, Greenleaf takes the common notion of heroic leadership (known in leadership circles as “The Great Man” theory) and turns it on its head.

Who is a servant-leader?

Greenleaf's first servant writing was titled "The Servant as Leader," not "The Leader as Servant." Greenleaf explains the difference:

The servant-leader *is* servant first . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.⁷

Even though motives are critical to one's identity as a servant-leader, personal qualities are not enough. The "best test" of a servant-leader is one of sheer pragmatism, based on mostly-observable outcomes.

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?⁸

Neither Greenleaf's definition of a servant-leader nor its best test requires one to hold a formal leadership position. What matters is what we do in "our little corner of the world"—as Greenleaf often said—and why we are doing it. In his workshops, Richard Smith, a former colleague at the Greenleaf Center and a thoughtful Greenleaf scholar, teaches that servant leadership "turns leadership into a territory," a field of action in which various people can operate depending upon their individual abilities and capacities to serve the mission of the enterprise and the people who make it all happen.

Skills and capacities of the servant-leader.

Few of the skills and capacities of a servant-leader are taught in schools. If they are, they are often reduced to formulas.

Listening is the premier skill, even though Greenleaf sees it as more than a skill. "Listening might be defined as an attitude toward other people and what they are attempting to express."⁹ "I have a bias about this," he writes, "which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first. When he is a leader, this disposition causes him to be *seen* as servant first. This suggests that a non-servant who wants to be a servant might become a *natural* servant through a long arduous discipline of learning to listen, a discipline sufficiently sustained that the automatic response to any problem is to listen first."¹⁰ "Listening isn't just keeping quiet; and it isn't just making appropriate responses that indicate one is awake and

paying attention,” says Greenleaf. “Listening is a healing attitude, the attitude of intensely holding the belief—faith if you wish to call it thus—that the person or persons being listened to will rise to the challenge of grappling with the issues involved in finding their own wholeness.”¹¹

Servant-leaders *use power ethically, with persuasion as the preferred mode*. Persuasion “involves arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one’s own intuitive sense. . . . The act of persuasion, thus defined, would help order the logic and favor the intuitive step. But *the person being persuaded* must take that intuitive step alone, untrammelled by coercive or manipulative stratagems of any kind.”¹² [Italics added] Greenleaf recognized that there were times when manipulation, and perhaps even coercion, were in order, but only when it involved the well-being of others or institutional survival, not for the purpose of inflating one’s ego. Persuasion is not easy. It is, “on a critical issue, a difficult, time-consuming process. It demands one of the most exacting of human skills.”¹³

When possible, a servant-leader seeks consensus in group decisions. “Consensus is used in its commonly understood meaning of unanimity or general agreement in matters of opinion, as opposed to taking a vote,” says Greenleaf. “[Individuals] either accept the decision as the right or best one, or they agree to support it as a feasible resolution of the issue. . . . the individual’s position is intuitively derived in the absence of any coercive pressure to conform.” To further consensus, a servant-leader must be able to: (1) deeply understand the issue under consideration and articulate it clearly and succinctly, (2) listen, (3) “decide when it is feasible to begin to search for consensus. This may be early or late in the discussion. . . .” and (4) decide when it is feasible to adjourn to speak privately with remaining holdouts, realizing that “[holdouts] may be of great value, but they may function best as lone workers or in groups that operate by majority rule.”¹⁴

A servant leader practices foresight. We have already seen that foresight is a core skill for all leaders. For servant-leaders, Greenleaf believes that foresight is the central ethic of leadership.

The failure (or refusal) of a leader to foresee may be viewed as an ethical failure; because a serious ethical compromise today (when the usual judgment on ethical inadequacy is made) is sometimes the result of a failure to make the effort at an earlier date to foresee today’s events and take the right actions when there was freedom for initiative to act....By this standard a lot of guilty people are walking around with an air of innocence that they would not have if society were able always to pin the label ‘unethical’ on the failure to foresee and the consequent failure to act constructively when there was freedom to act.¹⁵

One need not look far to see how short-term thinking and lack of foresight have led to business failures, bankrupt government policies and individual ruin. In fact, Greenleaf believed prudent foresight could have gone a long way toward saving AT&T from its breakup.

Greenleaf’s view of foresight was somewhat nontraditional. Imagine time as a line drawn from the dim past to the infinite future. *Now* is but one point on the line, a point which moves incessantly towards the future like a tireless rabbit chasing a carrot just out of reach. Here is the nontraditional part—imagine a flashlight beam focused on *now*, moving with the action. The beam is most intense at the present moment, but it also illuminates part of the past and the future. “*Now* includes all of this,” says Greenleaf, “all of history and all of the future. As I view it, it

simply gradually intensifies in the degree of illumination as this moment of clock time is approached.”¹⁶ Knowing history helps us understand patterns of the past. Foresight, based on intuition, can help us tentatively understand and predict patterns of the future. Paradoxically, one must live fully in the *now*, with high awareness of conscious and non-conscious realities and potentials, to access information about the future. Given these conditions, everyone can learn the art of foresight.

A servant-leader *uses language* in a way that avoids the “closed verbal worlds” of narrow disciplines or cults. Specifically, he or she “must have facility in tempting the hearer into that leap of imagination that connects the verbal concept to the hearer’s own experience. The limitation on language, to the communicator, is that the hearer must make that leap of imagination. . . Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much.”¹⁷

The art of *withdrawal* serves leaders who love intense pressure as well as those who do not. For both kinds of leaders, we can assume the intention is to be performing at one’s optimum, a state which Greenleaf defines as “that pace and set of choices that give one the best performance over a lifespan.” To reach optimum performance “out there” in the world, a servant-leader, paradoxically, goes “in here,” seeking the quiet which allows deep wisdom and intuition to emerge. “That sounds great, but you should see my schedule!” many will object. Greenleaf suggests another skill to enable withdrawal. “The ability to withdraw and reorient oneself, if only for a moment, presumes that one has learned the art of *systematic neglect*, to sort out the more important from the less important—and the important from the urgent—and attend to the more important...”¹⁸ (Italics added)

A servant-leader practices *acceptance and empathy*..

The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepts the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person’s effort or performance as good enough.¹⁹

It is part of the enigma of human nature that the ‘typical’ person—immature, stumbling, inept, lazy—is capable of great dedication and heroism *if* he is wisely led. Many otherwise able people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people, who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.²⁰

Conceptualizing is an ability that requires more than verbal skills. Greenleaf called it the prime leadership talent. The conceptualizer has “the ability to see the whole in the perspective of history—past and future—to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way ahead. . . The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder.”²¹ By contrast, much of management is accomplished through the skills of “operators,” who have “the ability to carry the enterprise toward its objectives in the situation, from day to day, and resolve the issues that arise as this movement takes place.” Organizations need the skills of both operators and conceptualizers. The latter are often passed over for promotion in this can-do world, but they “usually emerge when an organization makes a strong push for distinction.”²²

Servant-leaders nurture community. “Living in community as one’s basic involvement will generate an exportable surplus of love which the individual may carry into his many involvements with institutions which are usually not communities: businesses, churches, governments, schools.”²³ Community is diminished when its members limit their liability for each other. It is enhanced when “the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited, or as close to it as it is possible to get.”²⁴ Unlimited liability. Strange words in a society where individuals and institutions seek to limit liability, words judged as unwise to many a lawyer’s ear. Still, it is a requirement of love, which is something we say we want more of in private and public life. “As soon as one’s liability for another is qualified *to any degree*, love is diminished by that much.”²⁵

A servant-leader chooses to lead. The enemy is “Not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the ‘system.’ Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries...*In short, the enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non-servant.*”²⁶ [Italics are Greenleaf’s.] Followers will appear—will, in fact, make the leader—“because [servant-leaders] are proven and trusted as servants.”²⁷

Servant Leadership in the World

In his 1972 essay *The Institution as Servant* which was directed to businesses, universities and churches, Greenleaf expands the idea of an individual servant-leader by suggesting that institutions should also function as servants.

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions—often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.²⁸ [Italics are Greenleaf’s.]

One might ask how such a thing is possible, or if it is even desirable. Greenleaf makes the case that “with the present level of education, and the extent of information sources, too many people judge our institutions as not meeting the standard of what is reasonable and possible in their service.”²⁹ He points his finger at three culprits: trustees who don’t care enough for their institutions and the people in them, institutions organized around the idea of a single chief, and lack of trust.

He claims that trustees—board members—are the “prime movers in institutional regeneration” when they accept full responsibility for the fate of the organization, ask the right “big picture” questions that lead to clear institutional goals and strategic plans, and employ staff answerable only to the board.³⁰

In place of a single chief—a heroic figure who wields king-like power from the top of the organizational pyramid—Greenleaf suggests an organizational structure based on the ancient Roman notion of *primus inter pares*, “first among equals.” Greenleaf explains: “What is proposed here for the top leadership team of large institutions is a shift from the hierarchical principle, with one chief, to a team of equals with a *primus* (a “first”), preceded by the change in trustee attitude and the role necessary to assure its success.”³¹

As for trust, Directors or Trustees—and everyone else in the organization—should hold the institution “in trust,” but they must also trust each other. “This must come first,” says Greenleaf. “Trust is first. Nothing will move until trust is firm.”³²

In his third essay, *Trustees as Servants* (1974), Greenleaf expands on how trustees can exercise a servant role, becoming more proactive rather than reactive, closely overseeing operational use of power without micromanaging, operating by consensus in their own proceedings, gathering their own information, employing a trustee coach, and claiming their own power.

Having power (and every trustee has some power) one *initiates* the means whereby power is used to serve and not to hurt. *Serve* is used in the sense that anyone touched by the institution or its work becomes, because of that influence, healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants. . . . What shall one do, as a trustee who is aware of this necessity, if one finds that one cannot persuade one’s fellow trustees to accept such an obligation, and if one does not foresee the possibility of doing so in a reasonable period? *My advice is to resign.*³³ [Italics are Greenleaf’s.]

In later years, Greenleaf suggested an Institute of Chairing be established to prepare people to chair boards—and other groups—using the strategies of *primus inter pares* and consensus decision making. He eventually concluded that organizations that train religious leaders could be the levers to change society if they taught the skills, capacities and strategies necessary for servant-leaders to operate in the wider world. If ritual leaders of churches, synagogues and mosques modeled and taught such ideas, and demanded distinction of their own religious institutions, the ripple effect could change our society into one which was more serving. It was an idea with which virtually no one agreed.

Bob Greenleaf had much more to say about how servant leadership could operate in business, education, foundations, churches and the society at large—those resources are annotated in the bibliography—but the basics are to be found in his first three essays: *The Servant as Leader*, *The Institution as Servant* and *Trustees as Servants*. These writings comprise the first three chapters of the Paulist Press book *Servant Leadership* (1977 and 2002).

NOTES

1. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1970, 1991), 8.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 8.
5. *Ibid.*, 18.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Robert K. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 70.
10. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 10.
11. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, 95.
12. *Ibid.*, 129.
13. *Ibid.*, 14.
14. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, 141-143.
15. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 16.
16. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, 317.
17. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 11.
18. *Ibid.*, 12.
19. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
20. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
21. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader*, 217.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 29.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, 34-35.
27. *Ibid.*, 4.
28. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Institution As Servant*, (Indianapolis: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1972, 1976), 1.
29. *Ibid.*, 6.
30. *Ibid.*, 6-8.
31. *Ibid.*, 12.
32. *Ibid.*, 34.
33. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Trustees as Servants*, (Indianapolis: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1974, 1991), 37.