

# Practicing Servant-Leadership

Larry C. Spears

As many small trickles of water feed the mightiest of rivers, the growing number of individuals and organizations practicing servant-leadership has increased into a torrent, one that carries with it a deep current of meaning and passion.

Robert K. Greenleaf's idea of servant-leadership, now in its fourth decade as a concept bearing that name, continues to create a quiet revolution in workplaces around the world. Since the time of the Industrial Revolution, managers have tended to view people as tools, while organizations have considered workers as cogs in a machine. In the past few decades we have witnessed a shift in that long-held view. In countless for-profit and nonprofit organizations today we are seeing traditional, autocratic, and hierarchical modes of leadership yielding to a different way of



working—one based on teamwork and community, one that seeks to involve others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and one that is attempting to enhance the personal growth of people while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions. This emerging approach to leadership and service began with Greenleaf.

The term *servant-leadership* was first coined by Greenleaf (1904–1990) in a 1970 essay titled “The Servant as Leader.” Since that time, more than half a million copies of his books and essays have been sold worldwide. Greenleaf spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development, and education at AT&T. Following a 40-year career at AT&T, Greenleaf enjoyed a second career that lasted 25 years, during which time he served as an influential consultant

to a number of major institutions, including Ohio University, MIT, the Ford Foundation, the R. K. Mellon Foundation, the Mead Corporation, the American Foundation for Management Research, and the Lilly Endowment. In 1964 Greenleaf also founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985 and is now headquartered in Indianapolis.

Slowly but surely, Greenleaf's servant-leadership writings have made a deep, lasting impression on leaders, educators, and many others who are concerned with issues of leadership, management, service, and personal growth. Standard practices are rapidly shifting toward the ideas put forward by Greenleaf, as witnessed by the work of Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Max DePree, Margaret Wheatley, Ken Blanchard, and many others who suggest that there is a better way to lead and manage our organizations. Greenleaf's writings on the subject of servant-leadership helped to get this movement started, and his views have had a profound and growing effect on many people.

## What Is Servant-Leadership?

The idea of the servant as leader came partly out of Greenleaf's half-century of experience in

working to shape large institutions. However, the event that crystallized Greenleaf's thinking came in the 1960s, when he read Hermann Hesse's short novel *Journey to the East*—an account of a mythical journey by a group of people on a spiritual quest.

After reading this story, Greenleaf concluded that its central meaning was that the great leader is first experienced as a servant to others, and that this simple fact is central to the leader's greatness. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.

■

***The great leader is first experienced  
as a servant to others.***

■

In his works, Greenleaf discusses the need for a better approach to leadership, one that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making. The words *servant* and *leader* are usually thought of as being opposites. When two opposites are brought

together in a creative and meaningful way, a paradox emerges. So the words *servant* and *leader* have been brought together to create the paradoxical idea of servant-leadership.

Who is a servant-leader? Greenleaf said that the servant-leader is one who is a servant first. In “The Servant as Leader” he wrote, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. 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. The best test 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 they benefit or at least not be further deprived?”

At its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the poten-

tial for creating positive change throughout our society.

### **Characteristics of the Servant-Leader**

After some years of carefully considering Greenleaf's original writings, I have extracted the following set of characteristics central to the development of servant-leaders:

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. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is 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 coworkers and does not reject them as people, even if one finds it necessary to refuse to accept their behavior or performance.

3. *Healing.* 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, servant-leaders recognize that they also have 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."

5. *Persuasion.* Another characteristic of servant-leaders is a primary reliance on persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups.

6. *Conceptualization.* Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." The ability to

present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind. Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.

8. *Stewardship.* Peter Block has defined stewardship as "holding something in trust for another." Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, 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 a result, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within the institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to nurture the growth of employees.

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

■  
***Able leaders are usually sharply awake  
and reasonably disturbed.***  
■

4. *Awareness.* General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. 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, holistic 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."

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 that requires discipline and practice. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach.

7. *Foresight.* Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the

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, but they serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge.

### **The Growing Impact of Servant Leadership**

Many individuals and organizations have adopted servant-leadership as a guiding philosophy. For individuals it offers a means to personal growth—spiritually, professionally, emotionally, and intellectually. It has ties to the ideas of M. Scott Peck (*The Road Less Traveled*), Parker Palmer (*The Active Life*), Ann McGee-Cooper (*You Don't Have to Go Home from Work Exhausted!*), and others who have written on ex-

panding human potential. A particular strength of servant-leadership is that it encourages everyone to actively seek opportunities to both serve and lead others, thereby setting up the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society.

An increasing number of companies have adopted servant-leadership as part of their corporate philosophy or as a foundation for their mission statement. Among these are the Toro Company (Minneapolis, Minnesota), Synovus Financial Corporation (Columbus, Georgia), ServiceMaster Company (Downers Grove, Illinois), the Men's Warehouse (Fremont, California), Southwest Airlines (Dallas, Texas), and TDIndustries (Dallas, Texas).

TDIndustries, one of the earliest practitioners of servant-leadership in the corporate setting, is a heating and plumbing contracting firm that has consistently ranked in the top ten of *Fortune* magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for in America. The founder, Jack Lowe Sr., came upon "The Servant as Leader" in the early 1970s and began to distribute copies of it to his employees. They were invited to read through the essay and then to gather in small groups to discuss its meaning. The belief that managers should serve their employees became an important value for TDIndustries.

Thirty years later, Jack Lowe Jr. continues to use servant-leadership as the company's guiding philosophy. Even today, any TDPartner who supervises even one person must go through training in servant-leadership. In addition, all new employees continue to receive a copy of "The Servant as Leader," and TDIndustries has developed elaborate training modules designed to encourage the understanding and practice of servant-leadership.

Servant-leadership has influenced many noted writers, thinkers, and leaders. Max DePree, former chairman of the Herman Miller Company and author of *Leadership Is an Art* and *Leadership Jazz*, has said, "The servanthood of leadership needs to be felt, understood, believed, and practiced." And Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, has said that he tells people "not to bother reading any other book about leadership until you first read Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant-Leadership*. I believe it is the most singular and useful statement on leadership I've come across."

Servant-leadership is also increasingly in use in both formal and informal education and training programs. This is taking place through leadership and management courses in colleges and universities, as well as through corporate training programs. A number of under-

graduate and graduate courses on management and leadership incorporate servant-leadership within their syllabi. Several colleges and universities now offer specific courses on servant-leadership.

In the world of corporate education and training programs, many management and leadership consultants now employ servant-leadership materials as part of their ongoing work with corporations. Through internal training and education, organizations are discovering that servant-leadership can truly improve how business is developed and conducted, while still successfully turning a profit.

of literature available on the understanding and practice of servant-leadership.

The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership ([www.greenleaf.org](http://www.greenleaf.org)) is an international nonprofit educational organization that seeks to encourage the understanding and practice of servant-leadership. The Center's mission is to fundamentally improve the caring and quality of all institutions through a servant-leader approach to leadership, structure, and decision making.

Life is full of curious and meaningful paradoxes. Servant-leadership is one such paradox that has slowly

Servant-leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions.

■  
***Servant-leadership has influenced many noted writers, thinkers, and leaders.***  
■

### **A Growing Movement**

Interest in the philosophy and practice of servant-leadership is now at an all-time high. Hundreds of articles on servant-leadership have appeared in various magazines, journals, and newspapers over the past decade. Many books on the general subject of leadership have been published that recommend servant-leadership as a more holistic way of being. And there is a growing body

but surely gained hundreds of thousands of adherents over the past 35 years. The seeds that have been planted have begun to sprout in many institutions, as well as in the hearts of many who long to improve the human condition. Servant-leadership is providing a framework from which many thousands of known and unknown individuals are helping to improve how we treat those who do the work within our many institutions.

*Larry C. Spears has served as president and CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership since 1990. He has edited or coedited nine books on servant-leadership, including "Practicing Servant-Leadership: Succeeding Through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness," on which this article is based. He is senior editor of the Greenleaf Center's quarterly newsletter, "The Servant-Leader," and series editor of the Greenleaf Center's contemporary essay series, "Voices of Servant-Leadership."*