

## prescription for organizational health

# servant leadership

Have what it takes to be a servant leader?

by Larry C. Spears



**I**N COUNTLESS for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, especially within health care, successful approaches to leadership are rapidly shifting toward a better 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 attempts to enhance the personal growth of employees while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions. This emerging approach to leadership and service is called servant leadership.

### Robert K. Greenleaf and servant leadership

The term “servant leadership” was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) titled *The Servant as Leader*. 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, teacher and author. In 1964, Greenleaf founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985 and now is headquartered in Indianapolis.

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?”

### Characteristics of the servant leader

The following characteristics are central to the development of servant leaders:

**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, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant leader.

**Empathy:** The servant leader strives to understand others and empathize with them. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. A servant leader assumes the good intentions of co-workers and does not reject them as people, even while refusing to

accept undesirable behavior or performance. The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners.

**Healing:** Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant leadership is its potential for healing one's self and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant leaders recognize they 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 [one who is] led is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share."

**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 viewing 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."

**Persuasion:** Another characteristic of servant leaders is a primary reliance on persuasion, rather than use of 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.

**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 that requires discipline and practice. The traditional manager is focused on the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The manager who



wishes to be a servant leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach.

**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 that 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.

**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 CEOs, staffs and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. 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.

**Commitment to the growth of people:** Servant leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. Therefore, 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 professional and personal growth of employees.

**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 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.”

### Prescription for healthy organizations

Servant leadership crosses all boundaries and is being applied by a wide variety of people working with for-profit businesses and not-for-profit organizations. They include churches, universities, health care institutions and foundations.

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.” Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, has said that he tells people, “[Don’t] 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 has gained hundreds of thousands of adherents over the past 35 years. The seeds 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 are helping improve how we treat those who do the work within institutions. Servant leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development and a prescription for creating healthy organizations. RNL

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*Numerous hospitals and health care systems across the United States are involved with servant leadership and the Greenleaf Center, including: Ascension Health (St. Louis, Mo.), Austin Medical Center (Austin, Minn.), Centegra Health System (McHenry, Ill.), Kingston Hospital (Kingston, N.Y.), Parkland Hospital (Dallas, Texas), St. Joseph’s Hospital (Chippewa Falls, Wis.), and St. John’s Hospital (Springfield, Ill.).*