

The Servant-Leadership Concepts of Robert K. Greenleaf

ADRIAN GIORGIOV

Emanuel University

ABSTRACT. Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) stands out as the person who introduced the term “servant leadership” to modern times, and has captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide in the realm of education, business, and church life. The central meaning of his theory is that the great leader is first seen as a servant to others, and this simple fact is a key to his or her greatness. Greenleaf contends that it is possible to fuse the role of servant and leader. This fusion was perfectly achieved in Jesus Christ, whose service during his earthly ministry reflected a true servant leader. The paper presents the characteristics of a servant leader and of a servant institution; it then discusses the concepts of servant leadership in churches. It concludes with an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of the concepts, followed by theological perspectives on the issues.

KEY WORDS: servant leadership, trustees, servant institution, core values, society

Introduction

Among the prominent personalities who spent a considerable amount of energy and dedication to effective leadership is Robert K. Greenleaf. He was concerned about the effectiveness of both individual leaders and institutions. He wants to help those leaders who have tried to live in the confusion and ambiguity of their work by themselves.

Greenleaf is convinced that the truly energetic organizations are not places to which people escape; they demand time, involvement, participation from the people. He expresses his be-

belief in the necessity of using operating as well as conceptual talents in revolutionizing our society. The operating talent carries the institution toward its objectives. Conceptual talent sees the whole in perspective. Institutions need an optimal balance between the two types of leadership. This paper will give an overview of the basic leadership concepts of Greenleaf, evaluate his strengths and weaknesses and, finally, view these concepts from theological perspectives.

Summary of Basic Leadership/Management Concepts

Biographical Information

Robert Kiefner Greenleaf was born on July 14, 1904, in Terre Haute, Indiana. Upon his graduation from Carleton College (1926), he went to work for AT&T and spent his first career of 38 years working with them, retiring in 1964 as vice-president for Management Research. Just before his retirement, he held a joint appointment as visiting lecturer at Sloan School of Management of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M. I. T.) and at the Harvard Business School. In addition, he has held teaching positions at both Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia.

His consultancies include Ohio University, M. I. T., Ford Foundation, R. K. Mellon Foundation, Lilly Endowment and the American Foundation for Management Research.

Greenleaf's religious background (Quaker) is reflected in the principles and illustrations used in most of his writings. He died on September 29, 1990 at the age of 86, after suffering a series of strokes.¹

Servant Leadership

The idea of servant leadership was crystallized as Greenleaf read Herman Hesse's short novel, *Journey to the East*. Greenleaf came to the understanding that the central meaning of the nov-

¹ Alfonso A. Narvaez, "Robert K. Greenleaf, 86, Pioneer of Humanist Business Philosophy," *New York Times*, 2 October 1990.

el was that the great leader is first seen as a servant to others, and that this simple fact is a key to his or her greatness.

In 1970, at the age of 66, Greenleaf wrote a small essay called *The Servant as Leader*, which introduced the term “servant leadership”. Since that time, this modest, 32-page essay has captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide. In it, Greenleaf described some of the characteristics and activities of servant leaders, providing examples which show that individual efforts, inspired by vision and a servant ethic, can make a substantial difference in the quality of society.

Definition of Servant Leadership

The central definition of servant leadership, as stated by Greenleaf is, as follows:

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, 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 they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?²

Being servant first means that “leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away.”³ “The leader—first and the servant—first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that

² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership. A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

are part of the infinite variety of human nature."⁴ Servant leaders are not merely servants of what is, but shapers of what might be.

"The followers will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants."⁵ The followers accept the leadership because the other sees more clearly where it is best to go.

Characteristics of the Servant Leader

According to Larry Spears, the executive director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, there are ten key elements of servant leadership described by Greenleaf.⁶ The first one is listening receptively to what others have to say. In the Situational Leadership model the leader needs to know the followers' level of readiness. Receptive listening is one of the essential ways of acquiring the necessary information and determine the readiness level.

Second, the servant leader accepts others and has empathy for them. The servant never rejects but always accepts the person. "Sometimes he refuses to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough."⁷

Third, the servant leader has foresight and intuition. The leader needs a sense for the unknowable and to foresee the unforeseeable. These are usually not formally assessed in an academic way.⁸ Foresight is the "lead" that the leader has. The loss of leadership is often due to the failure "to foresee what reasonably could have been foreseen, and from failure to act on that knowledge while the leader had freedom to act."⁹ Through in-

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Larry C. Spears, "Servant Leadership. Quest for Caring Leadership," *Inner Quest* 2 (1994): 2.

⁷ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 20.

⁸ Ibid., 21-2.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

tuition, the leader bridges the gap between the available solid information and what is needed.¹⁰

Fourth, the servant leader has awareness and perception. These allow the leader to discern between the urgent and the important.

Fifth, the servant leader has highly developed powers of persuasion. The leader initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and takes the risk of failure along with the chance of success.¹¹

Sixth, the servant leader is able to conceptualize and to communicate concepts. He or she always sees the goal and can articulate it for any who are unsure. Greenleaf uses the term goal in the special sense of overarching purpose, big dream, visionary concept.

Seventh, the servant leader recognizes that servant leadership begins with the desire to change oneself. "If a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts *in here*, in the servant, not *out there*."¹² The last three characteristics are the ability to exert a healing influence upon individuals and institutions, building community in the workplace, and practicing the art of contemplation.

Spirit

Greenleaf is an advocate of the restoration of a word fallen into disuse. "That word is *entheos*, from the same roots as enthusiasm, which means *possessed of the spirit*."¹³

There are eight indicators of the existence of *entheos*. First, the existence of two paradoxes, a concurrent satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Second, a concurrent feeling of broadening responsibilities and centering down. Third, a growing sense of purpose in whatever one does. Forth, there are

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Teacher As Servant. A Parable* (Newton Centre, MA: Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1979), 60.

changing patterns and depths of one's interests. Fifth, as *entheos* becomes a more constant companion, one moves toward the minimum of difference between the outside and inside images of the self; "one becomes more willing to be seen as one is."¹⁴ Sixth, one becomes conscious of the good use of time and uncomfortable with the waste of time. Seventh, a growing sense of achieving one's basic personal goals through one's work is achieved. Finally, there is a developing view of people. "All people are seen as being to be trusted, believed in, and loved; and not as objects to be used, competed with, or judged."¹⁵ The ultimate test of *entheos* is an intuitive feeling of oneness, of wholeness, of rightness.¹⁶

The Servant Institution

In 1972, Greenleaf published a second essay, *The Institution As Servant*, which was based on the idea that institutions could also be servants. Greenleaf said that much of the caring for persons in today's society is mediated by large, complex institutions. He challenges conventional wisdom about hierarchical organization and the use of power in major institutions.¹⁷

"If a better society is to be built ... 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."¹⁸

Greenleaf defines institution as "a gathering of persons who have accepted a common purpose, and a common discipline to guide the pursuit of that purpose, to the end that each involved person reaches higher fulfillment as a person, through serving

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ "Who was Robert K. Greenleaf?" Available from www.greenleaf.org/rkgbio.html. Accessed 10 October 1997. Internet.

¹⁸ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 49.

and being served by the common venture, than would be achieved alone or in a less committed relationship.”¹⁹

The attitude of the institution toward work is that “work exists as much for the enrichment of the life of the person who does it as for the service of the person who receives the benefit of it or the reward to the investor who put up the money to do it.”²⁰

Core Values

In a servant institution, there are some basic principles about purpose and structure that make it different. These are the core values of that institution. Commitment and evaluation are important values. For instance, Greenleaf gives the example of a church where each member reviews his commitment to the church each year and discusses it with others.²¹

Questioning relates not only to the act of listening but it is “one of the most effective means by which the servant is able to relate to the consciousness and conscience of others.”²² Students need to learn that it is a high form of art to ask the right questions.²³

Organization Traditions

There are two organization traditions that have strongly influenced the way people lead. The *hierarchical tradition* comes down from Moses. This principle places one person in charge as the lone chief atop a pyramidal structure. This tradition holds that one person responsible. At the same time, “the natural reaction to a call for stronger leadership is to try to strengthen the control of the one person at the top.”²⁴ This system, as Greenleaf observes, is abnormal and corrupting. The pyramidal

¹⁹ Ibid., 237.

²⁰ Greenleaf, *Teacher As Servant*, 124.

²¹ Ibid., 146.

²² Ibid., 120.

²³ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 188.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

structure weakens informal links and “dries up channels of honest reaction and feedback.”²⁵ A self-protective image of omniscience often evolves from the filtered communications, and the person atop the pyramid experiences real loneliness.

The second tradition comes down from Roman times. It is the form where the principal leader is *primus inter pares*—first among equals. The leadership abilities of that person are constantly tested among a group of able peers.²⁶

The *primus inter pares* is responsible that each of the people will make their optimal contribution to the whole with their talents. An advantage of this system is that collegiality favors the growth of the individuals in the group as persons, as people whose full human potential is worked toward. “People are not used up by the struggle; they do not ‘burn out’ after a few years.”²⁷

Formal and Informal Structure

An institution has two types of organizational structure: formal and informal. The formal structure consists of the more or less definite arrangements and ways of working, which are delineated in various documents. The informal structure responds more to leadership and it involves building purpose and challenging with opportunity, judicious use of incentives, astute ordering of priorities, and allocating resources where they count the most. “The result is team effort and a network of constructive interpersonal relationships that support the total effort ... These informal initiatives are the ‘glue’ that holds the formal structure together and makes it function well.”²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Ibid., 61.

²⁷ Greenleaf, *Teacher As Servant*, 123.

²⁸ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 60.

Power and Servanthood

The powerful can best serve as they use their power to make serving institutions of those they influence or control. ... *Servanthood is ultimately tested wherever one is with one's power! ... The primary moral test is what one does with one's power—in those places where one's power is greatest.*²⁹

Humbly receiving is, according to Greenleaf, the best protection against the arrogance of power.³⁰ Coercive power is sometimes overt and brutal, other times it is covert and subtly manipulative. The trouble with coercive power is that it only strengthens resistance. If it is successful, its controlling effect lasts only as long as the force is strong. Trustees hold ultimate power but they do not use it operationally. Yet they are responsible for its use.

Trustees

As he continued to reflect on the way organizations operate, Greenleaf realized that institutions were controlled by trustees. This reflection prompted a third essay in 1974, *Trustees As Servants*, in which he seeks to address the needs of senior executives for sustained, caring (but demanding) assistance from able trustees.³¹

Two Teams

An effective institution is led by two strong teams: the trustees and the leadership. "Trustees supply the standard of quality and determination so that the institution could be exceptional."³² They are the pacesetters. Trustees care for all of the people the institution touches.³³

²⁹ Greenleaf, *Teacher As Servant*, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

³¹ "Who was Robert K. Greenleaf?" Available from www.greenleaf.org/rkgbio.html. Accessed 10 October 1997. Internet.

³² Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

The institution where there is a low level participation of board members and a single chief executive is a clear design for mediocrity.³⁴ There is a difference between the active administrators and the trustees. The administrators are too involved to have objective judgment about top level organization. "That is why trustees with their relative detachment from administration are so important."³⁵

Greenleaf goes back to the story of Moses, as his father-in-law, Jethro, advises him to delegate the work. "In the end the Lord sacked Moses. Why? Because in that dramatic incident of drawing water from the rock he acted as if he were God. This confirms the fatal flaw in Jethro's advice."³⁶ The delegation of work was important; however, according to Greenleaf, missing was the necessary guardianship of strong trustees.³⁷ The abuse of power is curbed if the holder of power is surrounded by equals who are strong. Greenleaf insists that no one is to be entrusted with the operational use of power without the close oversight of fully functioning trustees.³⁸

Tasks of Trustees

"Defining the institution and stating its goals and purposes is probably the most critical task that confronts trustees. Everything else that trustees do rests on this one basic decision."³⁹

Trustees are important because the leadership of an institution needs them, if the leaders want to remain effective. "Few of us, regardless of how able, have the ability to perform consistently at a high level of excellence, to set the goals for our own performance, and to judge our own performance objectively."⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid., 83.

³⁵ Ibid., 57.

³⁶ Ibid., 84.

³⁷ Ibid., 84.

³⁸ Ibid., 117.

³⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 99.

Servant Leadership in Churches

Greenleaf does not confine his views to the church or educational institutions. However, the servant leader style is most fitting in the church. He speaks of a “growing edge” church that would live up to its opportunities in our world.

Greenleaf brings up a theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices are speaking cogently all of the time. The variable that marks some periods as barren and some as rich is in the level of seeking of the hearers. It is seekers who make the prophets.⁴¹ Greenleaf himself is a seeker. He embodies what he claims seekers need to be doing. “By their intense and sustained listening they will make the new prophet who will help them find that wholeness that is only achieved by serving.”⁴²

Society is in great need of ethical leaders “to go out ahead to show the way so that the moral standards and the perceptions of the many will be raised, and so that they will serve better with what they have and what they know.”⁴³

Religious leadership is needed to respond to widespread alienation in all sectors of society as well as to many institutions’ inability or unwillingness to serve society. The primary mission of the seminary should be leading and supporting churches as influential institutions.

Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses

The concepts of leadership espoused by Greenleaf come largely out of his own experience and from watching and talking to able practitioners.⁴⁴ Servant leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Servant leadership encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment.

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

⁴² Ibid., 222.

⁴³ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁴ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 3.

Greenleaf rightly points out that competition is a powerful motivating force, but it is a low-grade and debasing motivation.

Greenleaf is an advocate of persuasive power. He rejects coercive power, although it may have a certain role according to the situational leadership model, especially in the case of the lowest readiness level.⁴⁵

Greenleaf is a strong supporter of large organizations. He contends that small organizations cannot make a big difference in shaping society. However, the history of many organizations proves that a small beginning does not necessarily mean remaining small and having no influence on society. The church and Christianity itself was a small beginning and has been a powerful change agent in many societies for the last two millennia. At the same time, large organizations may actually hinder the implementation of changes. In many cases even large churches can become irrelevant, mediocre, and obstruct transformation in the lives of individuals in particular and society in general.

Theological Perspectives

Greenleaf expresses his belief that the only way to change society is to produce enough people who will change it. The doctrine of redemption claims the same belief. It is possible to change the society if there are enough people who are changed; and the ultimate transformation is clearly expressed by the doctrine of Eschatology, which reminds us that a perfect "society" will become reality in the new world.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, those who are already citizens of that still invisible world can make a difference in this present world, being the salt and light of it.⁴⁷

Most institutions have too few leaders because they are structured so that only one at the time can emerge. "When there is but a single chief, there is a major interruption when that per-

⁴⁵ Hersey and Blanchard, 236.

⁴⁶ Revelations 21:1-5.

⁴⁷ Matthew 5:13-16.

son leaves.”⁴⁸ The Bible gives such examples, and an even worse situation occurs when the leader does not train other potential leaders in order to avoid such major interruptions. The example of the period of judges is classical. After Joshua was entrusted by Moses with the leadership of Israel, he failed to train other potential leaders and the result was that the subsequent period is described in the Book of Judges as every man doing what was right in his own eyes.⁴⁹

One of Greenleaf’s examples of awareness and perception is the story of Jesus when confronted with the woman taken in adultery. When Jesus silently writes in the sand, he actually withdraws for a short time to cut the stress and open his awareness to creative insight.

Greenleaf’s philosophy of leadership is value-driven, supporting people who wish to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to their families, friends, teams, institutions, and communities.

According to the biblical account in the book of Genesis, work was given to man before the Fall. Work was intended to be a blessing, not a curse. The Fall had consequences on every aspect of human life, including work. The principles of servant leadership can change the way people approach work and empower them, leading to the liberation of the human spirit.

The team-oriented approach to leadership is not new. The New Testament considers the church a living body, an organism in which all the parts are essential, and each of the parts has a well-defined role. The ministry of the church was intended to be performed by the whole body, and those who lead the church are, as Greenleaf leads us to see, *primus inter pares*.

Servant leadership reminds those who are in leadership positions that their primary responsibility is in serving others. Jesus Christ had the same attitude when he said that “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever

⁴⁸ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 64.

⁴⁹ Judges 21:25.

would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁵⁰

Greenleaf contends that it is possible to fuse the role of servant and leader. This fusion was perfectly achieved in Jesus Christ, whose incarnation and service during his earthly ministry reflected a true servant leader. “To become a servant leader, therefore, requires the desire to reflect through our leadership that which we see in God,”⁵¹ his incarnation and servant attitude displayed in the life of Jesus Christ.

Human nature, with all of its imperfections, is still able to learn how to live better by serving. The ability to serve and to lead at the same time, despite of our imperfections, is in a sense a reminder of the fact that humans are still the bearers of God’s image, even though that image was distorted by sin.

Acceptance of persons requires a tolerance of imperfection. “Anybody could lead perfect people—if there were any.”⁵² It is part of the enigma of human nature that the imperfect, immature person is capable of great dedication if wisely led. The servant leader can lead an immature follower along Argyris’s Immature-Mature Continuum in a wise way.⁵³ Ken Blanchard’s one minute reprimand is in consonance with Greenleaf’s statement that “people grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically.”⁵⁴

Power is benign when, in the course of using it, both the user and the subject grow as persons, when they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.⁵⁵ “Power is malignant force when people are

⁵⁰ Matthew 20:26-28.

⁵¹ Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation. Caring for Yourself While Serving the People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 35.

⁵² Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 21.

⁵³ Hersey and Blanchard, 73-75.

⁵⁴ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 21.

⁵⁵ Greenleaf, *Teacher As Servant*, 77-8.

coerced by it. No one grows when coerced. The best that can be hoped for is that they will conform—not a very happy state.”⁵⁶ Compared this with the Situational Leadership Model it seems that it does not agree that for the lowest readiness level coercive power may be used. Also, theologically this statement can cause some problems. The Bible abounds with cases when God had to utilize coercive power.

Greenleaf contends that “the enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non-servant.”⁵⁷ This is a realistic observation in light of the servant leadership model; however, he does not go into details concerning the motives and reasons that are behind such actions. In light of the biblical revelation, the situation described by his is the result a fallen world, and the image of the enemy is a complex one.

Conclusion

Greenleaf is concerned about the leaders, but his frame of reference seems to be broader. He proposes that his servant-leadership model could bring change not only to leadership-effectiveness, but also revolutionize institutions and, in the long run, change the society.

“Reducing mediocrity in positions of influence ... is a manageable task with our available resources ... it will be done on a substantial scale when the people ... concentrate on the one thing that will turn us about the quickest: excellence in place of mediocrity.”⁵⁸

Appendix

What Does the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership Do?

Originally founded in 1964 as the Center for Applied Ethics, Inc., the Center was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁷ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 45.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 149.

1985. The Center is an international, not-for-profit institution headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The Greenleaf Center's goals are:

- To help deepen an understanding of the original ideas of Robert K. Greenleaf and the principles of servant-leadership, via the preservation and promotion of his writings.
- To nurture colleagues and institutions by providing a focal point, and opportunities to share thoughts and ideas on servant-leadership.
- To produce and publish new resources by others on servant-leadership.
- To connect servant-leaders in a network of learning.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Excerpt from "What Does the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership Do?" Available from <http://www.greenleaf.org/goals.html>. Accessed 10 October 1997. Internet.