

A UNIVERSAL GIVEN

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In 1970, the American organizational expert, Robert K. Greenleaf, coined the term ‘servant-leadership’ in his essay, *The Servant as Leader*.¹ This visionary book brought on a new movement in the area of management.

At first glance, a servant-leader is a contradiction in terms. Someone is either a leader *or* a servant. To have both together at the same time does not seem logical. However, Robert Greenleaf merged these two seemingly opposite concepts into a practical, powerful combination. According to him, servant-leadership is a management style in which leading and serving are in harmony, and thoughtful interaction with the environment. A servant-leader is someone who has a strong wish to serve as well as a strong ability to lead and, most importantly, is able to combine both in such a way that they strengthen each other positively.

Background in consulting

Greenleaf developed his vision of leadership during the several years that he worked at the telecom giant, AT&T. He stood out as a management consultant because he had unusual approach. In contrast to many of his colleagues, he looked not

only at numbers and systems, but viewed these things in their context. Early in his career, he promoted the idea that ‘work is as important for the person, as the person is for the work.’ He was part of the avant-garde in advocating courses in listening and he brought in theologians and philosophers for management advice. Shortly before retirement, he became a professor at the Sloan School of Management of MIT and at Harvard Business School. He also gave lectures at Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia.

Theoretical foundation

During his work as a consultant, he was known for the idea that the purpose of leaders was to serve their people and to bring the best out of them. After he left AT&T, he began to further develop his thoughts, which led to the publication in 1970 of the essay mentioned above: *The servant as leader*. In various books and articles, he saw the solid foundation and possibilities for a future movement of servant-leadership. The essence of leadership is the service of others according to Greenleaf. Servant-leadership is more than just another variation of leadership styles. It is a lifestyle that arises from the deep belief that the heart of your mission as a leader is to continually challenge others, to encourage them and to give them a chance to develop their talents. You can spot a servant-leader, therefore, by the fact that the people around them also grow.

At that time, during a period in management theory that was known for hierarchy and striving for power, this was a revolutionary thought. But it was exactly that revolutionary element that appealed to people. His concept was inspiring and people everywhere started employing it in practice. Companies that were built on this foundation often turned out to be especially successful, owing to the fact that people

there were valued for their talents, which in turn resulted in highly motivated employees, better production metrics, fewer absences due to illness and higher profits.

A long tradition

Though Greenleaf might have introduced the term of servant-leadership, the idea has been around for thousands of years. Servant-leadership stems from many long and respectable traditions. Kent Keith, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, and someone highly inspired by Robert Greenleaf gave the following overview in his book *The Case for Servant Leadership*.²

Religious belief systems

In the Western tradition, Jesus is the epitome of a servant-leader. With his pronouncement: ‘I did not come to be served, but to serve,’ he made servitude a central principle of Christianity. John Wesley, the well-known preacher, said it more simply: ‘Do all the good you can, to all the people you can, for as long as you can.’

The Jewish Talmud says: ‘All men are responsible for one another.’

The Sufi sheik M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen preached: ‘To realize the pain and suffering of others, and to offer your hands in assistance, to help alleviate their suffering, that is Islam.’

The classic Tao scripture, Tao Te Ching, reads: ‘The way to heaven is to benefit others and to not injure.’

The Hindu Bhagavad Gita states: ‘Through selfless service, you will always be fruitful and find the fulfillment of your desires. That is the promise of the Creator ... he is present in every act of service.’

And finally, the Buddhist text, Shantideva or the Path of the Bodhisattva: ‘If I employ others for my own purposes, I myself shall experience servitude. But if I use myself for the sake of others, I shall experience only lordliness.’

The ancients

Plato can be seen as one of the authors of this principle. He named four virtues for the basis of a good life – courage, righteousness, moderation and wisdom – the pillars of servant-leadership.

Aristotle answered the question of what is the essence of life: ‘To serve others and do good.’

And the Roman orator and philosopher Cicero said: ‘Men were brought into existence for the sake of men that they might do one another good.’

The modern age

This idea is also visible in the modern age. For example, Albert Schweitzer said, ‘The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to help others.’

Martin Luther King, Jr. said the same thing in a different way: ‘Life’s most persistent question is: What are you doing for others?’

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore was more poetic when he philosophized, ‘I awoke and saw that life is service. I acted and, behold, service was joy.’

One of the most well-known servant-leaders of the twentieth century was Mother Theresa, who was quoted as saying, ‘There is joy in transcending yourself to serve others.’

The importance of service is clearly a universal given – and that says something about the value of this principle. Universal values are actually an expression of wisdom.

Current management thinking

Today's management gurus also have positive things to say about servant-leadership. Many have been influenced by Robert Greenleaf. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*,³ Peter Senge is quoted as saying: 'In the past 30 years, no one has had a more profound effect on Leadership thought than Robert Greenleaf.' Warren Bennis, author of *On Becoming a Leader*,⁴ has the opinion: 'When dealing with leadership, I believe that Greenleaf and his writings are the most original, useful, accessible and moral.'

Ken Blanchard, author of *Leading at a Higher Level*,⁵ writes:

'I sincerely believe that servant-leadership has never been as applicable in the world of leadership as it is today. People are looking not only for a higher goal, for meaning and for ways to rise to the challenges of a changing world; but also for the principles and views that really work. Servant-leadership works. Servant-leadership teaches you how you can bring people to a higher level by leading them there.'

In Jim Collins' article 'Level 5 Leadership', he describes the 'level 5 leader' as someone with a special mix between professional willpower and personal modesty. This is also another reference to servant-leadership.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*,⁷ is also in favor of servant-leadership. He says: ‘At the core of our being there is the thing we draw upon to rise above our current circumstances and our nature. When you do this, you can tap into an entirely new source of human motivation.’ That is exactly why Robert Greenleaf’s servant-leadership ideas are so stirring, encouraging and inspirational.

There are important changes taking place in the world, changes that stem from two forces. The first is the dramatic rate of globalization of both markets and technology. This change strengthens the impact of the second: timeless, universal principles that are the foundation for every kind of lasting success.

One of these fundamental, timeless principles is the idea of servant-leadership. We are convinced that its importance will grow even more. People are under continual pressures to produce more for less money, and in less time than ever before. The only way that this will be achieved is through *empowerment*, giving people the necessary tools. And the only way to achieve that is to create a culture of trust, where bosses are transformed into servants and coaches. That is precisely what servant-leadership stands for.

Leaders are starting to learn that this kind of *empowerment* is the most important. For organizations, it is this principle that makes the difference between sustained success and their possible downfall.

Self-realization

‘A servant-leader loves people and wants to help them. The mission of a servant-leader is, therefore, to identify the needs of others and try to satisfy those needs,’ says Kent Keith.⁸

That is exactly what makes servant-leadership so effective and why, according to Keith, it is so much more than yet another leadership model. According to him, servant-leadership is nothing less than ‘the creation of a better world.’

‘I have no doubt that, if more leaders and organizations put servant-leadership into practice, the world would be a better place. It is the most meaningful, satisfying manner of leadership. It is not about self-sacrifice or self-denial – it is actually about self-realization.’

What appeals to him most in terms of servant-leadership is the readiness and capability to reconcile opposites and to optimize on diversity. In 1968, in the middle of student protests the world over, Kent Keith published the pamphlet *The Paradoxical Commandments*.⁹ He wanted to support his fellow students by showing them that it was possible to get things done, even with polar opposites.

The paradoxical commandments of leadership

- People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway.

- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.
- The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.
Think big anyway.
- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.
Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.
- People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.
Help people anyway.
- Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.
Give the world the best you have anyway.

Lasting solutions

The 'paradoxical commandments' describe perfectly what servant-leadership is all about. The message is clear: even in the most difficult situations, it is possible to find an alternative. How? According to Keith, the answer is: by confronting the worst in the world with the best in ourselves. In the end, it is not the circumstances that determine how the world looks; it is *our reactions* – and these reactions can always be positive!

Herein lies the key to resolving dilemmas, no matter what kind they are. The paradoxical commandments are custom-made for servant-leaders because they focus on personal meaning. Instead of letting themselves be led by their circumstances, they are internally driven, starting from

within themselves and guided by their own morals. As a result, they are not thrown off by problems and they are not dependent on recognition. Whereas the classic *power* model gets stuck in problems, a servant-leader's internal compass provides the possibility of lasting solutions.

Notes

- 1 Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, first distributed as pamphlet in 1970, [revised edition] (Indianapolis, Ind.: Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1991).
- 2 Kent M. Keith, *The Case for the Servant Leadership* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008).
- 3 Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (London: Random House Business Books; 2nd revised edition, 2006).
- 4 Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Basic Books; revised edition, 2003).
- 5 Ken Blanchard and the Founding Associates and Consulting Partners of the Ken Blanchard Companies, *Leading at a Higher Level: Blanchard on Leadership and Creating High Performing Organizations* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Blanchard Management Corporation Publishing as Prentice Hall, 2007).
- 6 Jim Collins article, 'Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve', in *Best of Harvard Business Review*, HBR, July–August, 2005.
- 7 Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Free Press, division of Simon & Schuster, 2004).
- 8 Kent M. Keith, *The Case for the Servant Leadership* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008).
- 9 Kent Keith, *The Paradoxical Commandments* originally distributed in 1968 as a pamphlet. *The Paradoxical Commandments: Finding Personal Meaning in a Crazy World* (The first edition Maui, Hawaii: Inner Ocean Publishing, 2001).