

## SUCCEEDING THROUGH TRUST AND FORGIVENESS: PRACTICING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Since the time of the industrial revolution, managers have tended to view people as mere tools, while organisations have considered workers as moving parts in a machine. In the past few decades, at least in the advanced economies, we have seen a shift in that long-held view. In many of the organisations today, we are witnessing the gradual transformation from the bureaucratic, traditional, autocratic, and hierarchical modes of leadership to a different way of working. This new way is based on teamwork and community. It seeks to involve others in decision making. It is firmly grounded in ethical and caring behavior, which attempts to enhance the personal growth and development of people while improving the caring and quality of the institutions themselves. This emerging approach to leadership and service began with Robert Greenleaf about five decades ago.

### What Is Servant-Leadership?

The idea of the leader as a servant came out of Greenleaf's half-century experience in working to shape large institutions. He believes that "True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others."

In his works, Greenleaf discusses the need for a better approach to leadership, one that puts serving employees, customers, and community – as a number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others. It is a holistic approach to work which operates by 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. However, 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.

One may ask: Who is a servant-leader? Greenleaf said that the servant-leader is one who is a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one

wants to serve, to serve first before being a leader. 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 effectively 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 outstanding servants? In addition, one may also ask the following two questions: what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? At its core, a servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work. In essence, it is way of being that has potential for creating change throughout relevant institutions and societies.

### Characteristics of the Servant-Leader

After some years of carefully considering Greenleaf's original writings, Larry Spears extracted the following set of characteristics central to the development of servant-leaders.

- **Listening:** Leaders have traditionally been valued for their visioning, 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, actively and pro-actively 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.
- **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 colleagues and does not reject them as people, even if one finds it necessary to refuse to accept their behavior or performance.
- **Healing:** One of the greatest strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and others. Many people have

broken spirits, emotions, egos. They have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognise that they also have an opportunity to "help make whole" those with whom they come into contact.

- **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, and holistic perspectives.
- **Persuasion:** Another characteristic of an effective servant-leader is a primary reliance on persuasion through personal competence 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 harmony and "we" mentality within groups.
- **Foresight:** Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences 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.
- **Conceptualization:** Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." The ability to look at a problem from conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many managers, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and constant practice. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach.
- **Stewardship:** Peter Block defines stewardship as "holding something in trust for another.

Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which the chief executives, staffs, and trustees played significant roles in "holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society at large". Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness, trust, and persuasion rather than control.

- **Commitment to the growth of people:** Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value, merit, and dignity beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As a result, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth and development of each and every individual within the institution. The servant-leader recognises the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to nurture the growth of employees or others.
- **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 some means for building a distinct 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 a community into 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 quite specific community-related group."

The ten characteristics of servant-leadership listed above are not exhaustive. However, they serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge.

### The Impact of Servant-Leadership

According to Larry Spears, most individuals and institutions have adopted servant-leadership as a