

The Servant as Leader

Excerpts from the essay, *The Servant as Leader*, by Robert K. Greenleaf
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The great leader is seen as servant first. He is servant first because that is what he is, *deep down inside*.

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. *Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders, because they are proven and trusted as servants.* To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant-led.

Who is the Servant Leader?

The servant leader *is* servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He is sharply different from the person who is *leader first*, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.

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 he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?

The natural servant, the person who is *servant first*, is more likely to persevere and refine his hypothesis on what serves another's highest priority needs than is the person who is *leader first* and who later serves out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations.

Everything Begins with the Initiative of an Individual

The very essence of leadership, going out ahead to show the way, derives from more than usual openness to inspiration. Why would anybody accept the leadership of another except that the other sees more clearly where it is best to go? Perhaps this is the current problem: too many who presume to lead do not see more clearly and, in defense of their inadequacy, they all the more strongly argue that the "system" must be preserved.

But the leader needs more than inspiration. He ventures to say, "I will go; come with me!" He initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and takes the risk of failure along with the chance of success. He says, "I will go, follow me!" when he knows that the path is uncertain, even dangerous. And he trusts those who go with him.

What Are You Trying to Do?

The leader always knows the answer to this question and can articulate it for any who are unsure. By clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty and purpose to others. The goal is the overarching purpose, the big dream, the visionary concept, the ultimate consummation which one approaches but never really achieves. It is something presently out of reach; it is

something to strive for, to move toward, or become. It is so stated that it excites the imagination and challenges people to work for something they do not yet know how to do, something they can be proud of as they move toward it.

The one who states the goal must elicit trust, especially if it is a high risk or visionary goal, because those who follow are asked to accept the risk along with the leader. A leader does not elicit trust unless one has confidence in his values and his competence (including judgment) and unless he has a sustaining spirit (enthusiasm) that will support the tenacious pursuit of a goal.

Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality; but the dream must be there first.

Listening and Understanding

Why is there so little listening? Part of it, I believe, with those who lead, is that the usual leader in the face of a difficulty tends to react by trying to find someone else on whom to pin the problem, rather than his automatic response being, "I have a problem. What is it? What can I do about *my* problem?"

I have a bias about this which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*. When he is a leader, this disposition causes him to be *seen* as servant first. This suggests that a non-servant who wants to be a servant might become a *natural* servant through a long arduous discipline of learning to listen. I have seen enough remarkable transformation in people who have been trained to listen to have some confidence in this approach. It is because true listening builds strength in other people.

The best test of whether we are communicating with someone in depth is to ask ourselves, first, are we really listening? Are we listening to the one we want to communicate to? Is our basic attitude, as we approach the confrontation, one of wanting to understand?

Withdrawal - Finding One's Optimum

The ability to withdraw and reorient oneself, if only for a moment, presumes that one has learned the art of systematic neglect, to sort out the more important from the less important - and the important from the urgent - and to attend to the more important, even though there may be penalties and censure for the neglect of something else.

Pacing oneself by appropriate withdrawal is one of the best approaches to making optimal use of one's resources. The servant-as-leader must constantly ask himself, how can I use myself to serve best?

Acceptance and Empathy

The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects. The interest in and affection for his followers which a leader has, and it is a mark of true greatness when it is genuine, is clearly something the followers "haven't to deserve." The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepts the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person's effort or performance as good enough.

Acceptance of the person, though, requires a tolerance of imperfection. Anybody could lead perfect people - if there were any. But there aren't any perfect people. And parents who try to raise perfect children are certain to raise neurotics.

It is part of the enigma of human nature that the “typical” person - immature, stumbling, inept - is capable of great dedication and heroism *if* he is wisely led. Many otherwise capable people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.

Men grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for who they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted.

Know the Unknowable - Beyond Conscious Rationality

The leader needs two intellectual abilities that are usually not formally assessed in an academic way: he needs to have a *sense for the unknowable* and be able to *foresee the unforeseeable*. The leader knows some things and foresees some things which those he is presuming to lead do not know or foresee as clearly. This is partly what gives him his “lead,” what puts him out ahead and qualifies him to show the way.

As a practical matter, on most important decisions there is an information gap. There usually is an information gap between the solid information in hand and what is needed. The art of leadership rests, in part, on the ability to bridge the gap by intuition. Leaders, therefore, must be more creative than most; and creativity is largely discovery, a push into the uncharted and the unknown.

Awareness and Perception

Awareness strengthens one’s effectiveness as a leader. When one is aware, there is more than the usual alertness, more intense contact with the immediate situation, and more is stored away in the unconscious computer to produce intuitive insights when needed.

William Blake has said, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite.” Most of us, though, move about with very narrow perception - sight, sound, smell, tactile - and we miss most of the grandeur that is in the minutest thing, the smallest experience. A qualification for leadership is that one can tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness so that he better “sees it as it is.”

The opening of awareness is value building and value clarifying and it armors one to meet the stress of life by helping build serenity in the face of stress and uncertainty. The cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and see oneself in perspective in the context of one’s own experience, amidst the ever present dangers, threats and alarms of life. Then one sees one’s own peculiar assortment of obligations and responsibilities in a way that permits one to sort out the urgent from the important and perhaps deal with the important. Awareness is *not* a giver of solace - 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.

A leader must have more of an armor of confidence in facing the unknown - more than those who accept his leadership. This is partly anticipation and preparation, but it is also a very firm belief that in the stress of real life situations one can compose oneself in a way that permits the creative process to operate.

Persuasion - Sometimes One Man at a Time (John Woolman)

Woolman almost single-handedly rid the Society of friends (Quakers) of slaves. Leadership by gentle persuasion has the virtue of change by conviction rather than by coercion. Its advantages are obvious.

One Action at a Time - The Way Great Things Get Done (Thomas Jefferson)

Jefferson believed the Revolutionary war would be won by the Colonies and dedicated himself to writing new statutes embodying new principles of law for the new nation. He knew who he was and he resolved to be his own man. He chose his own role. Such are the wondrous ways in which leaders do their work - they accept making their way to their goal by one action at a time, with a lot of frustration along the way.

Conceptualizing - The Prime Leadership Talent (Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig)

“The spirit (not knowledge) is power.” This was one of the maxims that guided the establishment of the Danish Folk High Schools. A truly remarkable social, political, and economic transformation in Denmark stemmed from one man’s conceptual leadership. The “cultured” at the time thought him to be a confused visionary and contemptuously turned their backs on him.

What he gave was his love for the peasant class, his clear vision of what they must do for themselves, his long articulate dedication - some of it through very barren years, and his passionately communicated faith in the worth of these people and their strength to raise themselves - *if only their spirit could be aroused*. It is a great story of the supremacy of the human spirit.

And Now ... Useful Hints for Today

The three examples above from previous centuries illustrate very different types of leadership for the common good. The leadership of trailblazers like Woolman, Jefferson, and Grundtvig is so “situational” that it rarely draws on known models. Rather it seems to be a fresh creative response to hear-and-now opportunities. Too much concern with how others did it may be inhibitive.

Study the examples of these three men not to copy the details of their methods but as examples of highly creative men, each of whom invented a role that was uniquely appropriate for himself as an individual, that drew heavily on his strengths and demanded little that was unnatural for him, and that was very right for the time and place he happened to be.

Institutions and Community

Men once lived in communities and, in the developing world, many still do. Human society can be much better than it is (or was) in primitive communities. But if community itself is lost in the process of development, will what is put in its place survive? Only community can give the healing love that is essential for health.

Human services that require love cannot be satisfactorily dispensed by specialized institutions (e.g. orphanages, penal institutions, retirement homes, even schools and hospitals) that exist apart from community, that take the problem out of sight of the community. Both those being cared for and the community suffer.

Love is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability! As soon as one’s liability for another is qualified to *any degree*, love is diminished by that much. Any human service where he who is

served should be loved in the process, requires community, a face-to-face group in which the liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited, or as close to it as it is possible to get.

Trust and respect are highest in this circumstance and an accepted ethic that gives strength to all is reinforced. Where there is not community, trust, respect, ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain. Living in community as one's basic involvement will generate an exportable surplus of love which the individual may carry into his many involvements with institutions which are usually not communities: businesses, churches, governments, and schools.

The opportunities are tremendous for rediscovering vital lost knowledge about how to live in community while retaining as much as we can of the value in our present urban, institution-bound society. 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, by each servant-leader demonstrating his own liability for a specific community-related group.

It is our task to rediscover the elementary knowledge of community while we refine and radically improve much of the vast non-community institutional structure on which we depend and without which we could not survive. A hopeful sign, in the sector of society where it seems least expected - highly competitive business, people-building institutions are holding their own while they struggle successfully in the market place. The first order of business is to build a group of people who, under the influence of the institution, grow taller and become healthier, stronger, and more autonomous.

Some institutions achieve distinction for a short time by the intelligent *use* of people; but it is not a happy achievement, and eminence, so derived, does not last long. Others aspire to distinction (or the reduction of problems) by embracing "gimmicks": profit sharing, work enlargement, information, participation, suggestion plans, paternalism, and motivational management. There's nothing wrong with these in a people-building institution. But in a people-using institution they are like aspirin - sometimes stimulating and pain relieving, and they may produce an immediate measurable improvement of sorts. But these are not the means whereby an institution moves from people-using to people-building.

An institution starts on a course toward people-building with leadership that has a firmly established context of *people first*. With that, the right actions fall naturally into place.

Power and Authority - The Strength and the Weakness

In a complex institution-centered society, there will be large and small concentrations of power. Sometimes it will be a servant's power of persuasion and example. Sometimes it will be coercive power used to dominate and manipulate people. The difference is that, in the former, power is used to create opportunity and alternatives so that the individual may choose and build autonomy. In the latter the individual is coerced into a pre-determined path. Even if it is "good" for him, if he experiences nothing else, ultimately his autonomy will be diminished.

Some coercive power is overt and brutal. Some is covert and subtly manipulative. The former is open and acknowledged, the latter is insidious and hard to detect. Most of us are more coerced than we know. The trouble with coercive power is that it only strengthens resistance.

In Here, Not Out There

The servant views any problem in the world as *in here*, inside himself, not *out there*. And 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*. This is a difficult concept for that busybody, modern man. So it is with joy. Joy is inward, it is generated inside. It is not found outside and brought in.

Who is the Enemy?

Who is the enemy? Who is holding back more rapid movement to a better society that is reasonable and possible with available resources? Who is responsible for the mediocre performance of so many of our institutions? Who is standing in the way of a larger consensus on the definition of the better society and the paths to reaching it?

Not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the “system.” Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries.

Granting that fewer evil, stupid, or apathetic people or a better “system” might make the job easier, their removal would not change matters, not for long. The better society will come, if it comes, with plenty of evil, stupid, apathetic people around and with an imperfect, ponderous, inertia-charged “system” as the vehicle for change. Liquidate the offending people, radically alter or destroy the system, and in less than a generation they will all be back. It is not in the nature of things that a society can be cleaned up once and for all according to an ideal plan. Evil, stupidity, apathy, the “system” are not the enemy even though society building forces will be contending with them all the time. The healthy society, like the healthy body, is not the one that has taken the most medicine. It is the one in which the internal health building forces are in the best shape.

The real enemy is fuzzy thinking on the part of good, intelligent, vital people, and their failure to lead, and to follow servants as leaders. Too many settle for being critics and experts. There is too much intellectual wheel spinning, too much retreating into “research,” too little preparation for and willingness to undertake the hard and high risk tasks of building better institutions in an imperfect world, too little disposition to see “the problem” as residing *in here* and not *out there*.

In short, *the enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non servant*. They suffer. Society suffers. And so it may be in the future.

Many people finding their wholeness through many and varied contributions make a good society. *Able servants with potential to lead must lead and, where appropriate, they must follow only servant-leaders*. Not much else counts if this does not happen.

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