

Character and Servant Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders

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We are experiencing a rapid shift in many businesses and not-for-profit organizations— away from the more traditional autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership and toward servant leadership as a way of being in relationship with others. Servant leadership seeks to involve others in decision making, is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and enhances the growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizational life. This article examines a set of ten characteristics of the servant leader that are of critical importance. They are: *listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.*

Much of the leadership literature includes as an implicit assumption the belief that positive characteristics can-and-should be encouraged and practiced by leaders. Robert K. Greenleaf, the originator of the term, servant leadership, is someone who thought and wrote a great deal about the nature of servant leadership and character.

Servant Leadership and Character

“The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. 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?” (Robert K. Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27)

With that definition in 1970, retired AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) coined the term servant leadership and launched a quiet revolution in the way in which we view and practice leadership. Several decades later the concept of servant leadership is increasingly viewed as an ideal leadership form to which untold numbers of people and organizations aspire. In fact, we are witnessing today an unparalleled explosion of interest in, and practice of, servant leadership. The words servant and leader are usually thought of as being opposites. In deliberately bringing those words together in a meaningful way, Robert Greenleaf gave birth to the paradoxical term servant leadership. In the years since then, many of today’s most creative thinkers are writing and speaking about servant leadership as an emerging leadership paradigm for the 21st century.

Ten Characteristics of a Servant Leader

After some years of carefully considering Greenleaf’s original writings, I have identified a set of ten characteristics of the servant leader that I view as being of critical importance—central to the development of servant leaders. My own work currently involves a deepening understanding of the following characteristics and how they contribute to the meaningful practice of servant leadership. These ten characteristics include:

Listening:

Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. Although 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 to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid. Listening also encompasses hearing one’s own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being 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 co-workers and colleagues and does not reject them as people, even when one may be forced to refuse to accept certain behaviors or performance. The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners.

Healing:

The healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant leadership is the potential for healing one's self and one's relationship to others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact. In his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf (1977/2002) writes, "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share" (p. 50).

Awareness:

General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant leader. Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position. As Greenleaf (1977/2002) 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" (p. 41).

Persuasion:

Another characteristic of servant leaders is reliance on persuasion, rather than on one's 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. This emphasis on persuasion over coercion finds its roots in the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)—the denominational body to which Robert Greenleaf belonged.

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 leaders, this is a characteristic that requires discipline and practice. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The leader who wishes to also be a servant leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Within organizations, conceptualization is, by its very nature, a key role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations—something that should be discouraged—and, thus, fail to provide the visionary concept for an institution. Trustees need to be mostly conceptual in their orientation, staffs need to be mostly operational in their perspective, and the most effective executive leaders probably need to develop both perspectives within themselves. Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

Foresight:

Closely related to conceptualization, the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation is hard to define, but easier to identify. One knows foresight when one experiences 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. 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.

Stewardship:

Peter Block (1993)—author of *Stewardship and The Empowered Manager*—has defined stewardship as "holding something in trust for another" (p. xx). Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEO's, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant leadership, like 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. As such, the servant leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization. The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making funds available for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making, and actively assisting laid-off employees to find other positions.

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 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 (1977/2002) 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 or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group." (p. 53)

Conclusion

These ten characteristics of servant leadership are by no means exhaustive. However, they do serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge. Interest in the meaning and practice of servant leadership continues to grow. Hundreds of books, articles, and papers on the subject have now been published. Many of the companies named to Fortune Magazine's annual listing of "The 100 Best Companies to Work For" espouse servant leadership and have integrated it into their corporate cultures. Servant leadership characteristics often occur naturally within many individuals; and, like many natural tendencies, they can be enhanced through learning and practice. Servant leadership offers great hope for the future in creating better, more caring, institutions.

Characteristics of Servant Leadership

Listening

Empathy

Healing

Awareness

Persuasion

Conceptualization

Foresight

Stewardship

Commitment to the growth of people

Building community