**The Qualities of Servant Leadership**

*By Don Eastman – 2013; updated 2022*

**Servant Leadership**

Current notions of servant leadership are not new. They are found in the words of ancient philosophers and the teaching of Jesus. *So Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant….”* Mark 10:42-43 (New Living Translation)

Servant leadership is a philosophy and practice of leadership articulated by business executive Robert Greenleaf in his immensely influential book, *Servant Leadership*, which was published in 1977. This concept of leadership has since been popularized by many contemporary leadership and management writers.

Many of the goals and norms of current approaches to servant leadership were envisioned by MIT professor Douglas McGregor in his classic work, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, published in 1960. McGregor’s view of human motivation was expressed in Theory X – that employees are lazy, inherently dislike work and will avoid it if they can; versus Theory Y – that employees may be ambitious, self-motivated and willing to exercise self control. Theory Y helped point the way toward models of work, organizations and society characterized by increasingly participative, interdependent, authentic, inventive and productive relationships.

Unlike leadership approaches with a top-down hierarchical style, servant leadership instead emphasizes collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power. At heart, the individual is a servant first, making the conscious decision to lead in order to better serve others, not to increase their own power. The objective is to enhance the growth of individuals in the organization and increase teamwork and personal involvement.

Ken Blanchard and his associates, in *Leading at a Higher Level (2007),* include a chapter on “Servant Leadership.” Their discussion of the roles, practices, motivations and egos of servant leaders provides excellent insight on the qualities of servant leadership.

There are two roles of servant leaders. The first is the visionary role. *This is the leadership aspect of servant leadership*. It is strategic, answering the questions what and why? It defines direction. It communicates what the organization stands for and intends to accomplish. The second is the implementation role. *This is the servant aspect of servant leadership*. It is operational, answering the questions how, when and where? It helps people achieve their goals. It makes a difference in peoples’ lives. Although the authors do not say this, I see these two roles as reflecting the vital need for a servant leader to possess competencies in both leadership and management.

There are five practices which express what servant leaders do. They are outlined with the acronym SERVE.

1. ***S****ee the Future*. For Servant leaders a clear and compelling vision is foundational to setting direction with goals and strategies.
2. ***E****ngage and Develop People*. Finding and equipping effective individuals and teams is essential to high performance implementation.
3. ***R****einvent Continuously*. Constant learning followed by relevant action leads to continuous improvement.
4. ***V****alue Results and Relationships*. Maximize effectiveness as a leader with high expectations for both results and relationships.
5. ***E****mbody the Values*. Build trust by consistently living and frequently communicating the core values.

A distinction is made between leaders who are *driven* versus those who are *called*. This is a matter of motivation. It is a difference between self-serving leaders and servant leaders. Driven people think they own everything; their relationships, their possessions, their positions. Most of their time is spent protecting what they own. Called people believe everything is on loan. Called people who are servant leaders understand that their position is on loan from all the stakeholders, including the people who report to them. They thrive on listening to, developing and partnering with others.

There are two ways in which the human ego can keep persons from becoming servant leaders. The first is false pride, an inflated sense of self, which has been called *ego-edema*. The other is fear or self-doubt, thinking less of one’s self then is true, which has been called *ego-anemia*. The antidote for both of these conditions is true humility; a solid sense of self-esteem along with genuine love and respect for others.

Margaret Wheatley, author of the best-selling *Leadership and the New Science (1992),* says in the concluding essay in *Insights on Leadership (1998)*, **"**There are many patterns, many beliefs, out there about leadership, about people, about motivation, about human development. The essential truth I’m discovering right now is that when we are together, more becomes possible…. The belief that called you to be a servant-leader, I believe, is the belief of who we are as a species. We have need for each other. We have a desire for each other, and, more and more, I believe that if *the real work is to stay together*, then we are not only the best resource to move into this future—we are the *only* resource….We need to learn how to be together: that is the essential work of the servant-leader.**"**

**Level Five Leadership**

Another perspective on leadership comes from Jim Collins, a former business professor at Stanford University. Collins and his associates studied a number of business corporations with a long record of average market performance, followed by a transition point after which the market performance of the companies was dramatically higher than similar comparison corporations. The distinctive characteristics of these companies are discussed in Collin’s best-selling book, *Good to Great (2001)*. In a sequel monograph, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors (2005)*, Collins adapts the findings to not-for-profit organizations.

Collins and his associates found that there was a unique pattern of leadership by the leading executive in each of the *Good to Great* companies. They called this pattern *Level 5 Leadership*. A hierarchy of executive capabilities identifies five levels of traits listed as follows in ascending order of a pyramid:

1. *Highly Capable Individual*: Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills, and good work habits.
2. *Contributing Team Member*: Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting.
3. *Competent Manager*: Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of pre-determined objectives.
4. *Effective Leader*: Catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.
5. *Level 5 Executive*: Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

He says, “Level 5 leaders are a study in duality: modest and willful, humble and fearless.” “In contrast to the very I-centric style of the comparison leaders, we were struck by how the good-to-great leaders *didn’t* talk about themselves.”

“The good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results.”

But Level 5 Leadership is not just about the humility of selfless executives. Each of these individuals had a forceful determination to do what was necessary to make the company great. They were characterized by a fierce commitment to excellence.

Collins also notes that “While you don’t need to move in sequence from Level 1 to Level 5 – it might be possible to fill in some of the lower levels later – **fully developed Level 5 Leaders embody all five layers of the pyramid.”**

Can an individual learn to be a Level 5 Leader? To that question Collins hypothesizes that there are two categories of people; those who have the seed of Level 5 Leadership and those who do not. There are those who would never subordinate their egotistic needs to forego the fortune, power or fame for which they strive. Life will always be about what they can get. However, Collins sees a larger group of people who have the potential to evolve to Level 5 Leadership. For them the right circumstances or a key relationship may offer the path toward development as a Level 5 Leader.

**Summary: The Two Sides of Level 5 Leadership**

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| **Professional Will** | **Personal Humility** |
| Creates superb results, a clear catalyst in the transition from good to great. | Demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning adulation; never boastful |
| Demonstrates an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult. | Acts with quiet, calm determination; relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate |
| Sets the standard of building an enduring great company; will settle for nothing less. | Channels ambition into the company, not the self; sets up successors for even greater success in the next generation |
| Looks in the mirror, not out the window, to apportion responsibility for poor results, never blaming other people, external factors or bad luck. | Looks out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit for the success of the company – to other people, external factors, and good luck. |

**Benchmarks of Excellence: Guiding Principles for Servant Leadership**

Note: This excerpt is an update of the *Benchmarks of Excellence for Transformational Leadership* written originally in 1999 by Rev. Elder Don Eastman and Rev. Dr. Justin Tanis, then the Director of Clergy Development for Metropolitan Community Churches.

*“As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader’s work is done, the people say, ‘we did it ourselves.’ ”*

*Lao-Tzu, Chinese philosopher*

*“Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. The gifts given were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ....”*

*Ephesians 4:7, 11-12*

A new kind of leadership is needed for healthy churches in the new millennium. The secular definitions of charisma and bureaucratic norms of leadership are not working in these rapidly changing times. Leadership for churches today is not about creating a new breed of super-pastors. It is not about finding rare individuals in the church who are naturally talented with leadership abilities. It is about developing, equipping and empowering effective leaders throughout the church.

Rather than dependence on an elite class of caregivers called “clergy” plus a small core of “faithful” members to shoulder the weight of a church’s ministry, the goal of healthy churches is to mobilize all of their congregants into meaningful ministry. Leadership skills and styles of twenty-first century churches must equip and empower all people in the body of Christ to reach their God-given potential to grow and to give. In healthy churches of the twenty-first century paths to participation are easy to find, barriers to participation are removed.

Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.” Servant leadership is rooted in concern for the growth, development and advancement of those being led. Servant leadership has a deep sense of accountability to followers and welcomes feedback on performance. Servant leadership is committed to making life and work easier for those being led. Servant leaders are happily willing to give credit to the people with whom they work rather than take credit for themselves.

Servant leadership is also both shared and situational. The real strength of leadership is not simply in one individual; it is in the group. John Maxwell says, “Leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less.” At various times, various individuals in a group can exercise leadership by the power of their influence. Thus, an individual who is a follower in one situation may become a leader in another.

Servant leadership is transformational through the strength of purpose and values. Rather than being preoccupied with power, servant leaders focus on instilling purpose and shaping values. In the words of political scientist James MacGregor Burns, “Transforming leadership is dynamic leadership in the sense that the leaders throw themselves into a relationship with followers who will feel ‘elevated’ by it and often become more active themselves, thereby creating new cadres of leaders.”

Anderson and Jones, in the *Management of Ministry* *(1978),* identify three essential tasks of church leadership, which are useful categories for framing the basic functions of both lay and clergy leaders.

* First, church leaders must provide authentic spiritual direction. Church leaders shape the values of a congregation. Church leadership needs to function from a solid foundation of biblical and theological competence and the strength of personal integrity and credible ethics.
* Second, a church needs effective associational leadership. As a voluntary association, a church has only the people who choose to be there. People are more likely to choose a church where leaders articulate a compelling vision and are effectively leading change needed to realize the vision.
* Third, church leaders must assure efficient organizational management. Effective management requires plans, processes and methods necessary to achieve the vision with integrity to values.

**Principles of Servant Leadership**

1. Servant leadership is rooted in the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. It is a way of being rather than a position of status. Its hallmarks are integrity, trust, vision, passion, compassion, empathy, daring, and humility.
2. Servant leadership is shared. The real strength of leadership is not simply in one individual; it is in the group. The organization is also the servant.
3. Leadership and followership are integral. We are all followers. Excellence of skills in both leadership and followership are equally important. Followers often exercise leadership. An individual who is a follower in one circumstance may exercise influence to become a leader in another.
4. The concept of servant leadership does not imply that rules, hierarchy, or structure should be abolished. What changes are the roles of servant leaders; they still lead but in a different way.
5. Servant leadership is a gift of grace, *charisma*, given by God to numerous individuals in the church and realized more fully as each of whom develop leadership wisdom and skills.
6. Servant leadership requires lifelong discipleship; an unending journey of personal discovery and development that results in constant learning and continuous improvement.

Stephen Covey, in his foreword to the book *Insights on Leadership* (ed. Larry C. Spears,1998), says the concept of servant leadership is a principle, a natural law, “…*something at the soul of an organization that does not change that will enable people to live with change.”* This unchanging core is focused on the four basic needs of life – physical, social, mental, and spiritual:

1. *To live* is simple physical and financial survival, fairness and security.
2. *To love* has to do with the quality of relationships.
3. *To learn* is the development of the mind and our talents.
4. *To leave a legacy* is to be involved in ways that contribute and truly make a difference in every area of life.

**Other Helpful Books**

**Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant Leadership**

**Larry C. Spears, Editor (1998)**

This book is a collection of 30 essays by various authors on topics related to servant leadership. It is a project of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership at Seton Hall University. It provides a wide range of leadership insights by its authors, some of whom are well-known through their previous books and other publications.

**Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness**

**James MacGregor Burns, (2003)**

You can look at leaders through the lens of power *or* through the lens of service; serving the greater good. To read this book is to focus on the latter. One sees the difference between ruling and leading. As a political scientist, Burns introduced a new paradigm of leadership in his seminal 1978 book *Leadership*. His theory compared transactional and transformational leadership styles. This book offers a rich discussion of how transforming leaders use a healthy mix of transactional and transformational styles to bring revolutionary change for a better world.

**Transformational Leadership**

**Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio (Second Edition, 2006)**

Written by two industrial/organizational psychologists who are leadership scholars, and influenced by the work of James MacGregor Burns, this book offers a comprehensive review of theory and research on transformational leadership. Most valuably, it constructs a *Full Range of Leadership Model* that defines components of both transformational and transactional styles. “Fundamental to the FRL model is that every leader displays each style to some amount.” But transforming leaders have greater strengths in the transformational components.

**Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World**

**Bob Johansen (Second Edition, 2012)**

The author, a longtime futurist and Distinguished Fellow of the Institute for the Future, collaborates with the prestigious Center for Creative Leadership to propose new leadership skills needed in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Highly relevant to servant leadership is the chapter on “Quiet Transparency” which concludes with “humble strength will be the best leadership profile of the future.”

**Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success**

**Adam Grant (2013)**

This is a book about the value of generosity and the realities of reciprocity. It is a New York Times best-seller written by a popular professor of psychology at the Wharton Business School. *Give and Take* brings fresh insight into the age-old mix of giving, taking, and matching common to every human culture. Although a totally secular book, it is highly compatible with the wisdom of great religions, including the teachings of Jesus.

**Good People: The Only Leadership Decision That Really Matters**

**Anthony Tjan (2017)**

Written by a successful young entrepreneur, venture capitalist, and best-selling author, this book beautifully reframes some of the best concepts and principles related to servant leadership. Although it often targets people in the business world it is highly relevant for those in other domains of life. It is easy to read; key points are summarized at the end of each chapter. Note especially the “Goodness Pyramid” graphic on page 33 which conveys the essence of the whole book. It’s not a religious book but speaks strongly of spiritual values.