



## THE ACCOMPANYING SERVANT-LEADER

*Facilitating Change That Builds Engaged Partnerships*

— JOSH P. ARMSTRONG AND LARRY C. SPEARS

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?

— Robert K. Greenleaf

Those who seek to practice accompaniment are encouraged to generate opportunities to receive in the places where you serve, to become mutually indebted, and to develop real relationships with the community.

— Aaron Ausland

**M**any of us want to make a difference in our communities, and in our personal and professional lives. We want to be leaders, bringing change to a world that seems increasingly hungry for transformation. However, one doesn't need to look very far to see examples of those leaders with good intentions,



both home and abroad, who get in the way of true change (Ellerman, 2006; Moyo, 2009). Often as not, the source of failure is overemphasizing tangible results while underemphasizing process. If we are to make a sustainable difference, we must focus on accompaniment more than accomplishment.

Many well-intentioned leaders enter into community-service volunteer work or international community development work without developing a set of guiding principles and values. By utilizing characteristics from servant-leadership and the practice of accompaniment, leaders can facilitate true change that builds partnerships (Ausland, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977, 1998, 2003). The ethic of accompaniment has been defined as “walking together in solidarity which is characterized by mutuality and interdependence” (Padilla, 2008, p. 87). Accompaniment is the act of *being with* and *doing with*, rather than doing for; walking together along the same path with a community who identifies objectives, creates a plan, and manages these activities in its own leadership or development process (Aaker, 1993; Ausland, 2005; Chupp, 2000; Pope, 2015). In this way, accompaniment is not about giving service to the people, as a traditional charity would, but about *serving alongside them* in a relationship of mutual reciprocity.

Great leaders remember that the process of communicating with their people is as important as the result, and they make space for the process by taking time to invest in the people and discover their assumptions and expectations (Ferch & Spears,



2011; Russell & Stone, 2002). This core commitment allows the best leaders—whom we call *accompanying servant-leaders*—to more effectively practice two key elements—exploring values and giving back the work—that can unlock its power and facilitate real change in the world.

## UNDERSTANDING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

It has been 45 years since Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term “servant-leader” and first wrote about it in his classic essay, “The Servant as Leader” (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004, p. 81; Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010, p. 5). The 1970 publication of “The Servant as Leader” essay (Greenleaf, 1970) was followed in 1972 by “The Institution as Servant,” and the 1974 publication, “Trustees as Servants.” In 1977, Paulist Press published those first three essays, plus other writings by Greenleaf (1977), in the book, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*.

Greenleaf, born in Terre Haute, Indiana, spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development, and education at AT&T. Following a 40-year career at AT&T, Greenleaf enjoyed a second career that lasted 25 years, during which time he served as an influential consultant to a number of major institutions, including Ohio University, MIT, Ford Foundation, R.K. Mellon Foundation, the Mead Corporation, the American Foundation for Management Research, and Lilly Endowment Inc. In 1964 Greenleaf also founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985.



As a lifelong student of how things get done in organizations, Greenleaf (1977) distilled his observations in a series of essays and books on the theme of “The Servant as Leader”—the objective of which was to stimulate thought and action for building a better, more caring society.

The servant-leader concept continues to grow in its influence and impact (Ferch, Spears, McFarland, & Carey, 2015; Patrnochak, 2015; van Dierendonck, 2010). In fact, we have witnessed an unparalleled explosion of interest and practice of servant-leadership. In many ways, it can truly be said that the times are only now beginning to catch up with Robert Greenleaf’s visionary call to servant-leadership.

The idea of servant-leadership, now in its fifth decade as a concept bearing that name, continues to create a quiet revolution in workplaces around the world. In countless for-profit and not-for-profit organizations today we are seeing traditional, autocratic, and hierarchical modes of leadership yielding to a different way of working—one based on teamwork and community, one that seeks to involve others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and one that is attempting to enhance the personal growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions (Ferch et al., 2015). This emerging approach to leadership and service is called *servant-leadership*.

The words *servant* and *leader* are usually thought of as being opposites. When two opposites are brought together in a creative and meaningful way, a paradox emerges. And so, the words *servant* and *leader* have been brought together to create



the paradoxical idea of servant-leadership. The basic idea of servant-leadership is both logical and intuitive. Since the time of the industrial revolution, managers have tended to view people as objects; institutions have considered workers as cogs within a machine. In the past few decades, we have witnessed a shift in that long-held view. Standard practices are rapidly shifting toward the ideas put forward by Robert Greenleaf, Peter Block, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, Max DePree, Margaret Wheatley, Ken Blanchard, Richard Leider, Shann Ferch, James Autry and many, many others who suggest that there is a better way to lead our organizations. Robert Greenleaf's writings on the subject of servant-leadership helped to get this movement started, and his views have had a profound and growing effect on many.

#### EXPLORING ACCOMPANIMENT

Many drawn to the servant-leadership philosophy want to make a difference in service for others. However, unless a servant-leader is mindful of the ethic of accompaniment, this service can be disempowering for the community (Easterly, 2006; Wiggs-Stevenson, 2013). Ausland (2005) posited,

You can actually disempower the members of the community by cultivating an image of having it all together and having all the answers. It is actually easy and tempting to abuse the power differential with which you may have come into the community. (p. 6)

Instead, Ausland encouraged those participating in international service or work to “be honest about your own



needs and vulnerabilities, to generate opportunities to receive in the places where you serve, to become mutually indebted and to develop real relationships that help you operate at eye-level with the community” (p. 6). For Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), accompaniment is an essential element of the mission of their work (Hampson, Crea, Calvo, & Alvarez, 2014). While working in global refugee camps, these Jesuits seek to be a companion: working alongside the poor and outcast (Keenan, 2016). Accompaniment pushes projects into a relational mode. The ethic of accompaniment has three additional characteristics worth mentioning. First, it is grounded in the intrinsic dignity of every human being. Accompaniment calls servant-leaders to operate at “eye-level” while cultivating a presence that allows marginalized people to see their worth (Ausland, 2005). Accompaniment is only possible if servant-leaders are willing to listen and share stories. Personal narrative gives us a unique window into experiences, needs, and potential ways forward. Chupp (2000) believes that “accompaniment involves observing, listening, and reflecting” (p. 114). Advocacy in the context of accompaniment enables those served to speak for themselves, often in ways that give rise to unexpected insights and creative solutions.

Second, an ethic of accompaniment is grounded in values-based planning or asset-based community development (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Instead of mapping problems through needs to external solutions, servant-leaders assist the community in identifying its values and then map these through local resources to develop a vision and action plan



(Karlan & Appel, 2011). Accompaniment seeks to assist marginalized people to expand their own leadership capacities. The concept of *reciprocity* within service is an important distinguishing factor within accompaniment. According to Camacho (2004), “Reciprocity is the key to community service learning; this is what differentiates it from philanthropy and charity” (p. 31). Participants are not giving service to the people, as in the case of charity, but they are serving alongside with them, in a relationship of mutual reciprocity. Porter and Monard (2001) articulated this concept not as a “hand-out,” or even a “hand-up,” but instead as a “hand-to” (p. 16). Green (2001) asserted,

Well-intentioned white people, both students and faculty, must learn racial awareness, and middle class people of all races must think about how class affects the service situation. It is absolutely important to talk about the intersections of race, class, and service in order to prevent service-learning from replicating the power imbalances and economic injustices that create the need for service-learning in the first place. (p. 18)

Finally, accompaniment calls for the servant-leader to recognize that the welfare of the community doesn't depend solely on you. Chupp (2000) experienced accompaniment as a concept promoted by those working with the *Mennonite Central Committee* and writes, “to accompany, or walk alongside, our Central American brothers and sisters meant to support them while not taking over or playing too large a role as an outsider” (p. 114). Again, Ausland (2005) writes,



We may play a critical role in the positive transformation of a few, but on the whole, the trajectory of the community we serve depends little on us. In fact, it is more likely that they will have a greater impact on the course of our lives than we on theirs. (p. 13)

Accompaniment is fundamentally about relationship, and as such it invites us to redefine work. The role of the accompanying servant-leader seeks to inspire hope and be part of a positive process of transformation.

#### DR. JOSH ARMSTRONG'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH ACCOMPANIMENT

"I crave to know." Christopher Mulenga, an 80-year-old Zambian man, made this proclamation while attending daily computer lessons at the Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Parish in Zambezi, Zambia. Each day, Christopher left his thatched roof home to walk two miles in order to attend the courses facilitated by Gonzaga University students. Christopher is one of many African students who modeled a sincere commitment to education and personal development, in an area of the world lacking in opportunity. Christopher, like so many of his fellow students, became a teacher and cultural mentor for Gonzaga students through this remarkable reciprocal relationship (Porter & Monard, 2001).

For the past twelve years, Gonzaga University students have traveled to Zambezi, a community in the southern central African nation of Zambia, to participate in a faculty-led study abroad program. Zambia/Malawi has the distinction of being a



“twinned province” with the Oregon Jesuits, with many needs and opportunities for collaboration. The worldwide mission of the Society of Jesus is focusing increased energy and attention to areas of the world where those in greatest poverty and disease live, especially Africa.

Gonzaga-in-Zambezi provides a transformational opportunity for students to develop leadership skills and immerse themselves in another culture. Students return home with a deeper understanding of culturally intelligent leadership, a greater sense of self-awareness, and critical engagement with intercultural competencies. Essential to this learning is student involvement in community development projects, including leadership development/capacity-building training, literacy projects in local schools, health education partnerships, and basic computer education (Gonzaga University, 2016).

Each day in class, Gonzaga students are grounding their experience in leadership and intercultural research, and receiving lectures from local leaders pertaining to health care, legal systems, political structures and local language. The essence of the program, however, is rooted in accompaniment—meaning that, while in Zambezi, students generate opportunities *to receive* in the places they are serving, become mutually indebted to the community, and develop meaningful relationships that assist them in operating at eye-level within this community.

My recent experience watching students partner with Zambians to improve their stoves was another lesson in *accompaniment*, and I believe it has implications for the ways



that we act as servant-leaders around the world and in our local communities (Crabtree, 1998).

I saw it first in their eyes: A handful of Zambian leaders “switched on” when working alongside Gonzaga engineering students to build a more effective and sustainable cooking stove in Zambezi, a rural African town. After three lessons on heat generation from our students, our Zambian partners were ready to get their hands dirty. Using bricks and other locally sourced materials, we developed a stove together. Then something *really* interesting occurred. One day while we were out gathering new materials, the Zambian leaders made another, improved stove. When we stepped aside, they used their new knowledge and took ownership of the project. With each additional iteration, the stove and our global relationship improved.

Near the end of our stove project, one of our trusted friends named Sandu told me, “We believe knowledge is the weapon to success in life.” This core value has allowed the Zambezi community to shape the dialogue on change toward a focus on education. After careful listening, the Gonzaga program has come alongside a primary rural school in the Zambezi district to build a community library. When it opened, it was the first library of its kind in this region of Zambia. While we are financial partners in this endeavor, we have not spent our time physically working on the construction of the library, believing the Zambian people to be experts in this regard. Rather we have dedicated our time listening and posing questions that seek to understand the values and goals that will integrate this library into the fabric of the community (Beazley, 2003; Chupp,



2000). Sustainable change that allows a community to “stand on its own two feet” must be rooted in the core values of the community.

### WHAT IS SERVANT-LEADERSHIP?

In his works, Greenleaf (1970) discusses the need for a better approach to leadership, one that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision-making (Spears & Lawrence, 2004).

Who *is* a servant-leader? Greenleaf said that the servant-leader is one who is a servant first. In “The Servant as Leader” he wrote,

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. 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 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 servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 6)

It is important to stress that servant-leadership is *not* a “quick-fix” approach. Nor is it something that can be quickly



instilled within an institution. At its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society (Ferch & Spears, 2011).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ACCOMPANYING SERVANT-LEADER

After some years of carefully considering Greenleaf’s original writings, Larry Spears (1998) extracted a set of ten characteristics of the servant-leader that have taken on global significance in the understanding of servant-leadership. While these ten characteristics of the servant-leader are by no means exhaustive, they serve to communicate the power and promise of the development and practice of servant-leaders. They are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 1998). Servant leadership characteristics often occur naturally within many leaders and, like many natural tendencies, they can be enhanced through learning and practice. In particular, for the accompanying servant leader we will explore three essential characteristics that offer great hope for the future in creating sustainable and relational-focused transformation; *Listening*, *Conceptualization*, and *Commitment to the Growth of People*.

### *Listening*

Leaders have traditionally been valued for their 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 to others. The accompanying 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 (and not said!). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008). When the accompanying servant-leader values listening over project-driven agendas, he or she will develop a posture that places the community in the center of their own success and solutions.

When entering a new community to serve, listening is the first and most critical step. Smith et al. (2004) argue that “servant leadership stresses a leader’s concern for the follower’s well-being reflected in receptive non-judgmental listening and willingness to learn from others” (p. 85). One assumes the good intentions of a community and does not reject them as people, even while refusing to accept their behavior or performance. The most successful accompanying servant-leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners. Empathy at its most powerful is not merely good will and understanding from a comfortable and secure distance but friendship within a community of interdependent equals – it is not serving the other, but being one with the other. One way in which the accompanying servant-leader can foster a mutually respectful relationship with the communities that they serve is through storytelling (Denning, 2011). The accompanying



servant-leader needs to develop the opportunity to listen to their hosts' stories and share their own stories with them.

### *Conceptualization*

Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to dream great dreams. The ability to look at a problem (or a community) from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. For many, this characteristic requires discipline and practice. The traditional manager is focused on the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The manager who wishes also to be an accompanying servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking (Russell & Stone, 2002). The advancement of a grand shared vision is achieved by empowering and developing followers through a variety of mechanisms that will lead them to becoming servants as well. Within organizations, conceptualization is also the proper role of boards of trustees or directors. Unfortunately, boards can sometimes become involved in the day-to-day operations and 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 CEOs and leaders probably need to develop both perspectives (Spears, 1998). Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach. The accompanying servant-leader has the opportunity to assist communities in dreaming *their* big



dreams. A fundamental acknowledgement of accompaniment is that the presence of outsiders into a community has an impact, with the power differential and the ever-present temptation toward paternalism. The ethic of accompaniment is grounded in the belief that community development is an ongoing, organic process. It doesn't simply lurch along dependent on outsiders arriving with solutions and resources. In fact, this kind of "help" is likely to stunt development because it tends to create dependency, conflict, and feelings of helplessness. However, there are occasions when use of conceptualization will be critical for the accompanying servant-leader, particularly when building consensus within communities, and acknowledging their capacity to address community issues through inspiring hope and vision for the future by gathering key community stakeholders and asking them to "see around the corner."

### *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 every individual within his or her institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of others. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making available funds for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in the ideas and suggestions from everyone,



encouraging community involvement in decision making, and actively assisting laid-off workers to find other employment. This principle is at the heart of the ethic of accompaniment. Fr. Greg Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries, an organization dedicated to helping former gang members and at-risk youth receive job training and skills they need to lead rewarding lives (Boyle, 2010). Boyle distinguishes service from kinship – service as a relationship in which “haves” help “have-nots” to “kinship – not serving the other, but being one with the other” (p. 188). Accompaniment levels the playing field of development. Through accompaniment, a servant-leader can facilitate healing for those with hopelessness in the face of suffering, and foster the space for those yearning to be listened to and to tell one’s story. Healing can lead to the journey which gives back self-worth and hope for the future (Boyle, 2010). Those who accompany come to know the joys, hopes, and dreams of others as well as their worries and sorrows. Commitment to the growth of people is vital to accompaniment. Showkeir and Showkeir (2011) described this characteristic as a desire “to actively create an environment where people are encouraged and supported as they develop their unique traits and maximize their potential” (p. 163). Through this mutuality, we can see our own needs and desires. A commitment to kinship or accompaniment calls the servant-leader to be invested in the growth of each individual, to see their intrinsic worth and potential for development.

These three essential characteristics of the accompanying servant-leader are by no means exhaustive. However, they



serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to accompanying servant-leaders who are open to its invitation and challenge.

## ACCOMPANYING SERVANT-LEADERS

We often gain credibility and leadership by demonstrating our capacity to take other people's problems off their shoulders and give them back solutions. While this can be an important skill, the servant-leader who practices accompaniment mobilizes the work of others, rather than simply pointing the way. The leader reflects on ways to take the work off her shoulders and place it into the various factions within the organization to work on the problem together. This way of proceeding models accompaniment by operating at eye-level with the community. Ausland (2005) believes leaders need to "cultivate a servant's heart" (p. 19). This begins with realizing that "people with self-respect resist arrogant generosity, make sure to operate at eye level" (p. 19). Gonzaga-in-Zambezi students who embody the notion of eye-to-eye better serve our Zambian partners because they alleviate some of the inherent power dynamics between the more "privileged" students and the local people "in need." In the same way, leaders must forge partnerships built on mutual respect and trust and seek opportunities to give back the work.

Gonzaga student Paxton Richardson reflected on an experience in Zambezi when, James, a respected community member, understood the stove well enough that he took over the second half of our lesson. Here I



was, learning from the people I thought I would be serving and teaching. There was no division between them and us, that line was shattered the minute we received their warm joyous welcoming. (P. Richardson, personal communication, June 25, 2014)

In Zambezi, to Paxton's surprise and satisfaction, she stumbled upon friendship, a new understanding of community development, and the opportunity to practice accompaniment. We hope that servant-leaders everywhere will find opportunities to practice *accompaniment* in their own local and global communities.

Another exemplary "learning lab" for Gonzaga students has been *Zambia Gold Honey*, an eye-level partnership built between Zambian beekeepers and Gonzaga students. Zambia Gold is a non-profit organization run by students from Gonzaga University's Comprehensive Leadership Program (CLP) that exports fair trade goods from the Northwest Province of Zambia. The Zambia Gold Honey project began unexpectedly in 2007, when ten students participating in our study abroad program were encouraged to build collaborative relationships with the people of the community in hopes of bringing more opportunity to the region. After tasting this pure African honey, students spent time with local bee farmers, exploring ways to provide a sustainable market for fair trade organic forest honey in the U.S.

During the past ten years, sales from Zambia Gold Honey and other goods have raised over \$50,000 for a school library and other community projects. In the process, Gonzaga



students have learned deep lessons about community partnerships and international development. This intersection of Gonzaga students and the Zambezi community lies at the heart of the mission of Gonzaga University. It is our intention that students will be exposed to the realities of a global community to prepare them to enter, succeed, and provide leadership wherever their professions may call them.

Accompaniment and servant leadership are intrinsically tied together for those who want to serve and work in developing nations, or engage in community development at home and abroad. These guiding set of principles and values assist the accompanying servant leader in being an intentional factor in the positive process of transformation for communities.

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Larry C. Spears ([www.spearscenter.org](http://www.spearscenter.org)) is President & CEO of The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership. He is the editor and contributing author to fifteen books on servant-leadership, including the critically acclaimed *Insights on Leadership*. Spears, who knew Robert Greenleaf, is also the creator and editor of five books of Greenleaf's writings. From 1990 to 2007, Larry served as President & CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. Since 2008, he has divided his time between The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership and his work as Servant-Leadership Scholar at Gonzaga University. Larry also serves as Senior Advisory Editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, a collaborative project of Gonzaga University and the Spears Center.