



## TOP TEN LESSONS I'VE LEARNED OVER A LIFETIME

—LARRY SPEARS

I was recently invited to give several talks at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Sponsored by the 21st Century Leadership program at St. Mary's University, for one of the presentations I was invited to speak on the specific theme of the "Top Ten Lessons I've Learned Over a Lifetime." I was grateful to receive this invitation as it encouraged me to think about particular life lessons that have had considerable meaning for me. I found that I had many more than ten, but I managed to whittle the list down to the requested number. Here, in the second volume of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, I thought I would share these with you, and invite you to engage in the same exercise yourself. You may find coming up with your list to be as thought-provoking as I found my own experience!

### *1. Be kind to others/Be kind to yourself.*

This seems so obvious, so fundamental, and yet it is a life lesson that is sometimes difficult to practice faithfully. Being kind to others is a desirable trait in-and-of-itself. But it can also have the added benefit of encouraging others to be kind in turn. Being kind to yourself is sometimes more challenging than showing kindness to others. While I have generally sought to learn from my own mistakes, I am increasingly convinced that it is just as important to show loving kindness to both yourself and others around you.

### *2. Seek to understand others and listen carefully to what they have to say.*

"Seek first to understand" is one of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of*



*Highly Effective People.* It means, in part, placing a greater emphasis upon truly understanding others. Robert K. Greenleaf encouraged us to “listen receptively” to others. That’s a kind of intense listening coupled with a genuine openness to the possibility of being persuaded by what others have to say. Understanding others and listening carefully to others is a fundamental aspect of effective servant-leadership.

3. *Avoid making assumptions.*

Some years ago I came across the following comment that has stuck with me as being both humorous and quite meaningful: “When we ‘assume,’ we make an ‘ass’ of ‘u’ and ‘me.’” It is difficult for many of us to avoid making assumptions in life. It sometimes seems like it is a part of human nature. However, making assumptions about others nearly always reduces our real understanding and sometimes diminishes ourselves and others. We make assumptions about family, friends, strangers and enemies. Rather than assume we know what someone thinks, I’ve come to learn over time, we’re usually better off asking questions!

4. *All things considered, it’s generally best to be cautiously optimistic in life.*

In my own experience, it is best to avoid being either overly pessimistic or overly optimistic. I’ve observed that both extremes occasionally seem to trip up people. Being overly optimistic can lead to frequent disappointment. And while pessimists are less likely to be disappointed, they can also miss out on the sheer joy of feeling hopeful. To thine own self be true—as for me, a cautiously optimistic perspective seems to work best.



5. *Recognize and understand your fears, then resolve to grow in your own bravery over time by gradually confronting and overcoming those fears.*

Learn to understand what sorts of things scare you, and why. Sometimes people don't know that they're even scared of certain things. Sometimes people know they're scared of something, but don't know why. And then there are those who know what scares them, along with knowing why. This depth of consciousness can be helpful in avoiding certain negative actions or behaviors. This isn't easy work. My own single greatest fear has always been the fear of poverty. My father was permanently disabled in his thirties and was unable to work for the last thirty years of his life. Our family barely made ends meet on the Social Security disability check that he received each month. This constant uncertainty touched each of us in our family in different ways. For me, it created a deep fear of not having the money to pay for basic human needs—and is thus something that I continue to address in my own life. And now, a word or two about bravery. Bravery, or courage, isn't the absence of fear. If anyone exists who is afraid of nothing (and I have yet to meet them), I would have to call that person "fearless." While most of us are afraid of something, we may be considered brave or courageous when we take action in spite of our fears. Gradually letting go of your fears while growing in your own bravery is a very important life lesson.

6. *Live life in a conscientious fashion, holding good values and high ethics.*

Seek to act in ways that reflect positive values such as fairness, trust, caring, honesty, commitment to others, and similar ethical and helpful behaviors.



7. *Be an active learner throughout life.*

Stay curious about people and ideas. I have found that determining how we learn best, and then devoting ourselves to expanding our knowledge base and experiences with the end goal of gaining wisdom, is important. Experience has taught me that some combination of gaining deeper knowledge, coupled with learning about some completely new subjects, makes life interesting. From my own life I can tell you that up until a year ago I had never thought much about my own family genealogy. And yet, in recent months I have found it to be an absolutely fascinating endeavor as it combines a number of things that make it exciting for me: solving mysteries, studying history, conducting research, using my imagination. I would say that it doesn't matter so much what you choose to learn about—just keep learning.

8. *Leading is good. Serving is better. Serving and leading is best of all.*

Robert Greenleaf's writings have influenced several generations of people. Part of Greenleaf's great contribution to the world was the simple act of bringing together the words "servant" and "leader" in an innovative hyphenated word, "servant-leader." In providing us with a name for something that many of us intuitively understand, he has helped to link together many who might otherwise have felt even more isolated in their beliefs and in their workplaces. I believe that leading others can be quite meaningful. Serving others is better yet. But, both serving and leading others—at least for me—is the best. It offers opportunities for wholeness, for making a difference in the world, and for helping to fulfill Bob Greenleaf's "Best Test" of a servant-leader: Is one healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely oneself to serve others? And what is the impact on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?



9. *To the greatest extent possible, insist upon the right to make decisions that affect your own life, and support others in their own quests for those same rights.*

We can't always do whatever it is we think we want to do. And sometimes, what we think we want to do isn't even something worth doing! Still, I have come to believe that, to the greatest extent possible, we should insist upon having choices and making decisions for ourselves, rather than having decisions forced upon us by others—no matter how well-intentioned. We should also become powerful advocates for allowing others to have those same rights. Yes, we live in an increasingly interdependent world, and we should take very seriously the careful balancing of personal choice with the greater social good. However, as Gordon Livingston says in his excellent book, *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now*: “Nobody likes to be told what to do. It seems too obvious to mention, and yet look how much that passes for intimate communication involves admonitions and instructions.” For me, this is another place where Robert Greenleaf's ideas have great relevance—particularly around his encouragement of the use of persuasion as much as possible. Instead of telling others what to do, or what to think, I believe the world would be a happier place if we saved our admonitions for ourselves and expected to persuade others (and to be persuaded in turn).

10. *Show people they matter to you.*

While I'm listing this one last, it is the single greatest lesson that I have learned in my life—and one that I continue to work hard at learning and remembering. Let people know they matter to you. This has a broad range of expressions and includes such things as: showing your love for family, friends, colleagues; sharing your appreciation for others in your life; saying please and thank you frequently. You may even wish to make a point of thanking people whom you have never met, but who have nevertheless had a positive impact on your life. Demonstrate through large and



small ways that you value those who are around you, and let them know they make a real difference in your life.

Thank you for considering the ten ideas I've presented here. I hope you find ways for you and those you care about to gather and talk about their ten and your own. What an honor to be in a conversation in which people deepen each other. I have found the authors and articles in the second volume of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* very enlightening; they are so enriching to our common humanity. I hope your own discoveries in reading and dialogue bring joy and meaning!

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