



## DARE TO BE A SERVANT-LEADER: AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY SPEARS

—BARBARA TEY

The frontiers of space have been tested, the cloning of human beings toyed with. Bearing lofty aspirations and tools that yield great power, would a man or a woman of this millennium willingly become a servant-leader rather than a super leader? Larry Spears, President and CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, dares to be one, and dares you too.

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We had the great privilege of linking up with Larry Spears in cyberspace for this interview. By virtue of his designation as well as experience, vocation and personal philosophy, Spears is presumably the world's leading advocate of servant-leadership.

In this interview, Spears gives straight-to-the-heart responses that give us a better understanding of the philosophy behind servant-leadership. One senses the passion and conviction in Spears as he plainly presents the profile of a servant-leader and challenges us to contemplate this “new old” leadership paradigm.





Tey: Please enlighten us on the mission, objective and activities of the Greenleaf Center.

Spears: The Greenleaf Center's mission is the creation of a just and caring society by promoting the awareness, commitment and practice of servant-leadership. Founded in 1964 as the Center for Applied Ethics by former AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf, our center was renamed The Greenleaf Center in 1985.

We believe that "if a better society is to be built, . . . providing opportunity for people to grow, the most open way (and the most effective and economical course, while supportive of the social order) is to raise the performance as servant of as many institutions as possible by voluntary regenerative actions initiated within them by committed individuals: servants."

The Center's goals and objectives span six broad areas: education, institutional change, modeling, partner services, research, and collaboration.

Tey: How do you monitor or assess the outcome of your efforts?

Spears: We are an international, non-profit organization headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana. We monitor and assess our own performance as an organization through an annual assessment of the result of our goals-and-objectives plan in any given year. Generally speaking, we also look at indicators such as numbers of publications sold, increase in the number of individuals and companies practicing servant-leadership, and other indicators.

Tey: Is servant-leadership closely linked to religious teaching? If so, is it universally taught among major faiths?

Spears: Servant-Leadership is practiced by people of all faiths, as well as by those who find it helpful in secular contexts. Our members include a wide range of religious traditions: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Bahai, Buddhist and many others. We also have many humanists, agnostics and atheists who practice servant-leadership. I believe that servant-leadership is one of the most universal of ideas—everyone can believe in serving others—and anyone can be a servant-leader. I haven't found a religious or philosophical



expression yet where there was any conflict with servant-leadership. In that way, I believe that servant-leadership may ultimately prove to be one of the great uniting concepts of our time.

Tey: Are there other terms that are synonymous to or interchangeable with the term *servant-leadership*? Do you know of situations where people have regarded the term *servant-leadership* to be politically incorrect or have expressed reservations about it?

Spears: I have seen some close variations used here and there, service-leadership being one of them. Beyond that, most people are drawn to the term *servant-leadership* that Robert Greenleaf coined in his 1970 essay, “The Servant-Leader.” It doesn’t happen often, but occasionally someone will object to the term servant-leader. When there is an objection, it is usually to the “servant” part of that term, though there are occasionally objections to the “leader” part, too! I believe that there is an inherent learning moment that is found in the word servant-leader. For many people hearing it for the first time, there is often an intuitive “aha!” moment. *Fortune* magazine once likened the term servant-leader to a Zen koan. Over the past fifteen years in which I have headed The Greenleaf Center, I have heard hundreds of people say to me virtually the same comment: “This is how I’ve tried to live my life, but I never quite knew what to call it.” Servant-leadership is, for many of us, the perfect term for how we wish to lead our lives.

Tey: Why is servant-leadership so important today?

Spears: There are so many reasons. I will focus on two of the most important ones. First, over the last thirty years there has been an interesting level of dissatisfaction in many people when it comes to the workplace. Most people in organizations today expect much more of their companies in terms of caring and encouraging behaviors. While the old “top-down” model is still out there, it is going the way of the dinosaurs. In its place, you find organizations that are flatter (not so pyramidal and hierarchical), and where decisions are more often made by teams than by a single individual. To that extent, servant-leadership has helped to lead the way in offer-



ing a different approach—one that is increasingly more in tune with contemporary organizations and expectations. Second, expectations are now much higher for organizations when it comes to their customers, clients and communities, on both the service side and the leadership side of the equation. As such, organizations and companies that practice servant-leadership well are increasingly at the top of their industries.

Tey: Is servant-leadership more of a “stand alone” leadership model, rather than one that is normally used in tandem with other types of leadership approaches?

Spears: While servant-leadership is sometimes called a model, I think it is much more of a philosophy of life. It is about who we want to be in relation to others, and a deep expression of the innate desire to serve and to lead others. There is no single way that companies have sought to implement servant-leadership. Servant-leadership is taught and practiced in different ways in various organizations. The common thread is the belief in wanting to understand and practice servant-leadership according to Robert Greenleaf’s “Best Test” of servant-leadership:

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. 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?

With that as a basic understanding of servant-leadership, it is easy to see how businesses and other organizations can utilize both servant-leadership and some other approach. Systems-thinking and servant-leadership go remarkably well together.

Tey: What is the advantage of servant-leadership over other types of leadership approaches?

Spears: Some businesses in the U.S. have commented on how servant-lead-



ership has helped their bottom line financially, as a result of the higher attention to quality relationships and by extension, performance. Many individuals practicing servant-leadership say that the advantage is to be found in the way in which it makes them feel better—more whole. There are still many people who feel like they have to be one kind of person in the workplace and another person at home. Part of the great appeal of servant-leadership is that it encourages people to simply be who they are at all times. It also encourages others to be more accepting of their colleagues, family, etc. without feeling a need to change them. That's a powerful and healing perspective.

Tey: Is there such a thing as typical servant-leadership personality type?

Spears: I don't think so. If you think of Myers-Briggs and its sixteen types, you will find representatives from each type. Certain people are just naturally drawn to servant-leadership. But there are many who come to servant-leadership through either learning or experience. I have noticed over the years that when it comes to servant-leader trainers they tend to be more Intuitive-Feeling, while servant-leader executives are more often Sensing-Thinking. I, myself, am an ISTJ (Introverted-Sensing-Thinking-Judging). I am actually working on an article with a colleague in the United Kingdom on the subject of servant-leadership and Myers-Briggs, which we hope to complete by the end of 2005.

Tey: Are there different types of servant-leaders? If so, are some types of servant-leaders more successful or effective than others?

Spears: While people can be very different from one another, servant-leadership is a common ideal that can bind very different people into a more cohesive whole. Servant-leadership is the foundation or inner core which can be practiced by very different people. I don't believe that any one type of servant-leader is inherently more effective than another, though we all benefit from becoming clearer on our own gifts and talents and then trying to focus on those as much as possible.

Tey: Who are some of the servant-leaders that have impressed you?



Spears: In business, I tend to think more of servant-led institutions, rather than individuals, though you usually find impressive servant-leaders at the top of impressive servant-led institutions. Companies and CEOs who have impressed me by their commitment to the understanding and practice of servant-leadership are many. Some of the better known companies would be Starbucks, The Men's Warehouse, Synovus Financial, Vanguard, TDIndustries and Southwest Airlines.

Tey: Are there any special circumstances or types of organizations where servant-leadership would fail to be beneficial or effective?

Spears: I do not know of any types of organizations or specific institutions where it has been practiced and found not to be beneficial.

Tey: Would an adage such as "Once a servant-leader, always a servant-leader" be true? If not, do you know cases of "fallen servant-leaders" or rather, servant-leaders who have changed their leadership model to a so-called better one?

Spears: I don't know of servant-leaders who have advocated it, only to reject it later. Servant-leaders are mortal, flesh-and-blood human beings and are therefore prone to the same maladies as anyone else: making mistakes, losing one's temper, feeling dejected, etc. People sometimes have a tendency to think that unless you are a Mother Teresa or a Martin Luther King (both exemplary servant-leaders in my estimation) you can't be a servant-leader, so why bother?

The danger in that is two-fold: first, it perpetuates an inaccurate perception of servant-leadership as only for the rare individual. Servant-leadership is for everyone! Anyone who desires to be a servant-leader can become one. It only takes sincere commitment to learning (and learning from your mistakes), coupled with lots of practice. A servant-leader never truly reaches the finish line—all of us who espouse servant-leadership are imperfect human beings. The trick is to keep trying. My second point in this vein is that there are people who are skeptical of anyone that advocates a commitment to what one might call a "high ideal." As such, there will



always be people who, as soon as they see a servant-leader make a mistake or somehow miss the mark, say something like: “See, I told you it was all smoke-and-mirrors!”

There is something about servant-leadership that can be very ennobling. If you are a fallible human being, striving to live as a servant-leader, and you do something that you believe is short of the mark, the very best thing that you can do is to own up to it and to say you’re sorry. As for the perpetual cynic, I suspect that they yearn to believe in some higher ideal—whatever that might be—but that they have often been hurt or betrayed. To that extent, I believe it pays for servant-leaders to embrace and encourage cynics as a sincere act of service.

Tey: Which book would you recommend that a newcomer to servant-leadership read for a start?

Spears: The best book on the concept of servant-leadership is *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*, by Robert K. Greenleaf (Paulist Press, 1977 & 2002). If you are interested in contemporary practices of servant-leadership from a dozen different authors, I would recommend a collection of essays which I co-edited with my colleague, Michele Lawrence, titled, *Practicing Servant-Leadership: Succeeding Through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness* (Jossey-Bass, 2004). It includes some powerful essays on servant-leadership in practice by Robert Greenleaf, Margaret Wheatley, James Autry, John Bogle, John Carver and others.

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Larry Spears has 25 years of experience in organizational leadership, entrepreneurial development, non-profit management and grant writing. In 1990, Spears was named President & CEO of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership.

Currently the Senior Editor of the Greenleaf Center’s newsletter, The Servant-leader, Spears is also the editor, and sometimes a contributing



author, of nine books: *Practicing Servant-Leadership: Succeeding Through Trust, Bravery and Forgiveness* (with Michele Lawrence, 2004, Jossey-Bass), *The Servant-Leader Within* (with Hamilton Beazley & Julie Beggs, 2003, Paulist Press), *Servant-Leadership* (2002 Silver Anniversary edition, Paulist Press), *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership in the 21st Century* (with Michele Lawrence, 2002, John Wiley & Sons), *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (1998, Berrett-Koehler), *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (1998, John Wiley & Sons), *Seeker and Servant* (with Anne Fraker, 1996, Jossey-Bass), *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (with Don Frick, 1996, Jossey-Bass), and *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's Theory of Servant-leadership Influenced Today's Top Management Thinkers* (1995, John Wiley & Sons).

Under Spears' leadership The Greenleaf Center has expanded to ten branch offices located around the world in Australia/New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Korea, The Netherlands, The Philippines, Singapore, South Africa and the United Kingdom. He is a long-time member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, and a Fellow of the World Business



Academy. He is also the Senior Advisory Editor of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. He and his wife, Beth, have two sons: James, 18 and Matthew, 15.

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