

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP: SUSTAINING DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

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Fullan (2003) writes that a strong education system is the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society, and Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2005) state, "In a democratic society, it is vital that students learn to think reflectively, function at high stages of moral reasoning, and be autonomous decision makers" (p. 156). Hence, the role of school leader and/or teacher becomes critical in providing the example and environment to foster such democratic ethos. Today, many of our schools are moving toward a more collegial, cooperative, transformative, service approach in the learning community. Murphy and Seashore-Louis (1999) state the changes reflected in present-day educational institutions:

In these new postindustrial educational organizations, there are important shifts in roles, relationships, and responsibilities; traditional patterns of relationships are altered; authority flows are less hierarchical; role definitions are both more general and more flexible; leadership is connected to competence for needed tasks rather than to formal position; and independence and isolation are replaced by cooperative work. (p. xxii)

Such understandings affect how we see ourselves as educational leaders. Bennis and Goldsmith (1997) state, "In order to transform ourselves as leaders, we must recognize and shift the paradigm through which we view leadership itself" (p. 71). The present essay introduces readers to such a paradigm shift, toward servant-leadership, a concept that helps foster the development of democratic schools. This essay will provide: (1) the theoretical framework for servant-leadership, a leadership concept identified by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal work, *The Servant as Leader* (1970)

1991); (2) a summary of the Manitoba educational stakeholders who have been introduced to servant-leadership and how these groups have integrated the concept within their educational environment; and (3) recommendations for future research.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The old leadership paradigm of the 19th and early 20th centuries suggested three particular beliefs: (1) leaders were born and not made (your lineage or pedigree class endowed you with the look and personality of a leader—a hierarchical position); (2) good management made successful organizations; and (3) one should avoid failure at all costs, a belief that promoted risk-avoidance and fear (Block, 1996; Hickman, 1998). Leadership was defined in the literature as being hierarchical, patriarchal, coercive, and related to wealth and influence (Bennis, 1997; Block, 1993; Hickman, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992).

The paradoxical term *servant-leadership* is inclusive of personal service to society regardless of position (Block, 1996). This premise of a leadership-service combination was in direct opposition to the hierarchical model of leadership. In hierarchical leadership the power of the leader was visible and obeyed by those lower in the organization (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard, & Schubert, 1998; Senge, 1990), whereas in servant-leadership, it was through strategies of service and stewardship that a leader was identified by the people to be first among equals or *primus inter pares* (DePree, 1989, 1992; Greenleaf, 1976).

Robert Kiefner Greenleaf (1904-1990) introduced the term *servant-leadership*, a new leadership paradigm, in his first essay, entitled *The Servant as Leader*, which he wrote in 1970 at the age of 66. Greenleaf worked first as a lineman and eventually moved into organizational management at AT&T between the mid 1920s and 1960s. He lectured at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.), Dartmouth, and the Harvard Business School. Greenleaf (Spears, 1998a) tells the story of how he discovered the concept of servant-leadership through reading a small book called *Journey*

to the East, by Herman Hesse (1956). The book tells the story of a band of men who set out on a long journey. Accompanying the men was a fellow named Leo; his job was to care for the band of men by doing all of the menial chores and providing for their comfort. The journey progressed well until Leo disappeared. At this point, the travelers aborted the journey when they fell into disarray without Leo.

Many years later, the narrator of the story encountered Leo. It was at this point that the narrator realized Leo was the titular head of the order that sponsored the journey. He was the leader, but his nature was that of a servant. His leadership was bestowed upon him and could be taken away by the band of men. His desire to serve the group of men came from his heart and reflected the real person. Leo wanted to be of service to the band of men. Leo was a servant first, by taking care of their basic needs each day while on the journey. Greenleaf believed the message of the story was that one has to first serve society and through one's service one is recognized as a leader. Leadership must be about service (Spears, 1998a). Greenleaf (1970/1991) states,

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 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? (p. 7)

Greenleaf, a Quaker, believed strongly in the equality of all human beings, and he worked with educational, business, and industrial organizations (Spears, 1998a) with the goal of developing strong, effective, caring communities in all segments of our society (Greenleaf, 1976; Spears, 1998b). Greenleaf (2002) identifies an important realization. He tells of the subtleness of the servant-leader in action and how he or she is viewed

by others, "They do not see the servant-leadership in action as you saw it. And that may be the fundamental key. Effective servant-leaders can be so subtle about it that all anybody is likely to see is the result. They don't see the cause" (p. 151).

Within the servant-leadership paradigm the voices of educational leadership may be heard: Nel Noddings (2003) and her ethic of care; William Purkey and Betty Siegel's (2002) invitational leader; Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) and his moral leadership; Robert Starrat (2003) and the cultivation of meaning, community, and responsibility; and Michael Fullan (2003) and building sustainability and democratic schools through collaborative cultures.

Ten Characteristics

Autry (2001) states that the transition to a culture of servant-leadership requires time for the development of necessary features or qualities for a servant-leader. Spears (1998b), CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, identified ten characteristics of servant-leadership: (1) listening, (2) empathy, (3) healing, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptualization, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship, (9) commitment to the growth of others, and (10) building community. These qualities are in a connected field that begins with the internal action of listening. A description of each of the ten characteristics follows:

- 1. Listening—This refers to a deep commitment of listening to others. Autry (2001), Bennis and Goldsmith (1997), Frick and Spears (1996), and Greenleaf (1970/1991) emphasize the need for silence, reflection, meditation, active listening, and actually "hearing" what is said and unsaid. The best communication forces you to listen (DePree, 1989). Effective educational leaders are great communicators and must be good listeners, to themselves (through their inner voice), as well as to students, parents, teachers, and other members of the learning community.
- 2. *Empathy*—A good servant-leader strives to understand and empathizes with others, but this understanding should be supportive as opposed to

patronizing. "It is a misuse of our power (as leaders) to take responsibility for solving problems that belong to others" (Block, 1993, p. 72). Greenleaf (cited in Spears, 1998a) wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy when he stated,

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (p. 81)

- 3. Healing—The servant-leader has the potential to heal him- or herself and others. Sturnick (1998) writes extensively about six stages of healing leadership. One must first have an understanding about personal and/or institutional health. She describes the six stages as: (1) consciousness of health or being honestly aware of one's state of health, which is often triggered by an event, for instance, a heart attack; (2) willingness to change and realizing that one must do certain things to achieve improved health; (3) a teachable moment or a time when one seeks information or advice; (4) healthy support systems, which are needed to change behavior and may include one person, a group or an organization; (5) immersion in the duality of our inner lives and the realization of the good and bad or the strengths and weaknesses we each have; and (6) eventually the return to service in leadership through seeking honest answers from friends and colleagues. Sturnick warns that it is not always possible as a healthy leader to find followers, and she believes that "sick organizations really do contaminate" (p. 191). Gardiner (1998, p. 122) suggests that healing can come through just quietly being and that a "quiet presence is an act of renewal," and Greenleaf, a lifelong meditator, tells us that he views the action of meditation as a service because one is taking time to think about things, to reflect, and he writes, "I prefer to meditate; I have come to view my meditating as serving" (Gardiner, p. 123).
- 4. Awareness—The servant-leader has a general awareness, especially self-awareness. One develops awareness through self-reflection, through

listening to what others tell us about ourselves, through being continually open to learning, and by making the connection from what we know and believe to what we say or do. This is called in the vernacular "walking your talk" (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1997, pp. 70-71).

5. Persuasion—The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather then coerce compliance. Greenleaf speaks in Frick and Spears (1996) about persuasion:

One is persuaded upon arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one's own intuitive sense; persuasion is usually too undramatic to be newsworthy. Significant instances of persuasion may be known to only one or a few and they are rarely noted in history. Simply put, consensus is a method of using persuasion in a group. (pp. 139-140)

6. Conceptualization—The servant-leader seeks to nurture his or her own abilities to dream great dreams. Greenleaf describes conceptual talent in Frick and Spears (1998) as having

the ability to see the whole in the perspective of history—past and future—to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way ahead. Leadership, in the sense of going out ahead to show the way, is more conceptual than operating. The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder. (p. 217)

7. Foresight—This is the ability to foresee or know the likely outcome of a situation. Greenleaf (1991) says it is a better than average guess about what is going to happen when in the future. He says it is "the lead that a leader has" (p. 18), and goes on to state:

Foresight is seen as a wholly rational process, the product of a constantly running internal computer that deals with intersecting series and random inputs and is vastly more complicated than anything technology has yet produced. Foresight means regarding the events of the instant moment and constantly comparing them with a series of projections made in the

past and at the same time projecting future events—with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite future. (p. 18)

- 8. Stewardship—Greenleaf believed all members of an institution or organization play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust (caring for the well being of the institution and serving the needs of others in the institution) for the greater good of society. Fullan (2003) suggests that school principals and teachers must be mindful that "changing context is the key to deeper change" (p. 21) and they must ask, "What is my role in making a difference in the school as a whole?" (p.21). De Pree (1989) emphasizes the need for us to make a contribution to society: "The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values" (p. 13). Sergiovanni (1992) explains that stewardship "involves the leader's personal responsibility to manage her or his life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare" (p. 139). Greenleaf speaks of primus inter pares or the "first among equals" where the leader is among the people, not above.
- 9. Commitment to the growth of people—The servant-leader is committed to the individual growth of human beings and will do everything she or he can to nurture others. "The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving?" (De Pree, 1989, p. 12). Sergiovanni (2001) puts this in a school perspective:

The leader serves as head follower by leading the discussion about what is worth following, and by modeling, teaching, and helping others to become better followers. When this happens, the emphasis changes from direct leadership based on rules and personality, to a different kind of leadership based on stewardship and service. (p. 34)

10. Building community—The servant-leader seeks to identify some means for building community. There are several approaches to building community outlined in the literature; three approaches mentioned include

giving back through service to the community, investing financially into the community, and caring about one's community. When Pinchot (cited in Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard & Schubert, 1998) considers the concept of community, he suggests that the person who gives or contributes or invests the most to a community has the highest status; in other words, "giving it away, rather than keeping it, earns status" (p. 126). Sergiovanni (1994) believes that caring is an integral part of shared community. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (cited in Hesselbein et al., 1998) emphasize the sense of belonging defined by a shared sense of purpose that does not eliminate one's uniqueness, but focuses all energies into a resilient community. Starrat (2003) states, "In appealing to their sense of community, we invite youngsters to work toward it" (p. 95).

MANITOBA EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

During the past eight years, over 1500 people in Manitoba have received in-service, heard, and studied the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf (1970/1991, 1992, 2002) and the philosophy of servant-leadership. This group included the following participants/members:

- a) Parkland Leadership Academy: With financial support from the provincial government, five superintendents in the Parkland region of rural Manitoba formed an academy for all school principals within their school divisions (districts) that met several times as a group each year. Greenleaf's writing (Servant as Leader, 1970/1991) was studied. Principals discussed ways in which they could implement the philosophy of servant-leadership into their schools. The group continues today.
- b) Clear Lake Summer Leadership Course: Each summer for a full week the Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education sponsors in-service sessions in educational leadership at the Manitoba resort. During three successive summers the writer facilitated full day sessions on servant-leadership. These sessions created a ripple effect whereby participants requested courses on the subject.

- c) Manitoba Teachers Society (MTS): This is the teachers' union for all elementary and secondary school teachers in the province. In response to specific in-service requests, a servant-leadership session was provided by the writer to accommodate teachers and administrators in Winnipeg. As well, the Manitoba Teachers' Society named Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness (Greenleaf, 1977) one of their top ten books to read for educators in the province.
- d) Manitoba Association of School Trustees: Recently the number of school divisions (districts) in Manitoba was reduced by government legislation. More than fifty divisions became thirty-six divisions. The anxiety, anger, and resentment that resulted were palpable. A few months prior to the formal amalgamation, I was invited to speak to 450 trustees about servant-leadership. It was a tense and bleak environment, but the message seemed well received. Once amalgamation had become a reality, I was invited to return several times to work with table groups of trustees to problem solve and focus on the future. The journey of understanding and healing continues today.
- e) University of Manitoba, Faculty of Education: Beginning in 1998, the writer integrated the concept of servant-leadership into several university leadership courses, as formal lessons, with specific course texts, and as inservice for teacher candidates. Over 120 Special Education Resource teachers (129.567, Strategies for Inclusionary Schools and Classrooms) have studied The Servant as Leader and applied it to their work environment. The ten characteristics of servant-leadership provided a framework for the teachers to focus on their attitude of service and behavior in their schools. Two classes of post-baccalaureate students and practicing teachers have studied Servant-leadership and the Art of Teaching (Powers and Moore, 2004) as required reading for their Instructional Supervision Course. Several hundred graduate and post baccalaureate students have studied servant-leadership through a variety of texts in Courses 129.508 and 129.509 Issues in Educational Administration (Parts I & II) during the past 5 years: On Becoming a Servant Leader (Greenleaf, 1996); Teacher as Servant

(Greenleaf, 1979/1987); The Servant-Leader Within: A Transformative Path (Greenleaf, 1977/2002); Insights on Leadership (Spears, Ed., 1998). f) Winnipeg School Division School Administrators: This is the largest school division in the province and often sets direction for the rest. The topic of servant-leadership was introduced early in 2005 during a retreat of school administrators and superintendents. The day involved case studies and the application of servant-leadership in problem solving. Louis Riel School Division followed recently with a 3-part series on servant-leadership and school democracy for administrators.

These educational organizations have integrated servant-leadership in various ways: (1) as study groups analyzing Greenleaf's writing; (2) using the ten characteristics as a guide for developing a positive learning environment and integrating it into school plans; (3) as a modus operandi for school administrators; (4) as a healing and basis for discussion during the school division amalgamation process; (5) as professional development for teacher candidates going into the field; (6) as a foundation and responsive action for special education resource teachers; (7) as a means for building shared leadership within schools; and (8) as a component of university educational administration course readings. Greenleaf (1986) states,

This is not a bandwagon idea; it is not a best-seller kind of thing; but nevertheless, these people (servant-leaders) do exist, and some of them have become very important to me. (p. 343)

And.

The difference between organizations is how people relate and how they actually function, which may not bear a whole lot of relationship to how the thing is sketched out on paper. (p. 347)

EARLY OUTCOMES OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership is a collaborative, empowering, serving way to

build democratic learning communities. Noddings (2003) believes democracy produces freedom for individual and collective action while supporting equality and satisfying human needs. Servant-leadership is built upon the premise of individual respect, stewardship, and service to one's community and is useful as a foundation for building a democratic school culture. A sense of equality, regardless of position, permeates a school that embeds servant-leadership as its raison d'être. Noddings (2003) would say, "What is required is a sincere and meaningful respect for all positive human capacities" (p. 232). Custodian, principal, student, teacher, secretary, bus driver, all are valued members of the school community. Staff meetings and school plans invite participation and input from all the various stakeholders. Planning and meetings are transparent and build trust. The school is enriched by the presence of each member. Children need to feel wanted, and today the democratic school often becomes an inviting and safe haven for many children. Decisions are made through collaboration, ongoing dialogue, and sensitive and open listening, through caring and respect for individual opinions. Children absorb this type of environment and perhaps will transfer some of these skills into their daily lives. At present, this process is being put into action in two Manitoba school divisions as part of school plans. These plans are reviewed in the late spring for outcomes related to issues of attendance, suspensions, staff development, contribution to the learning community, and student achievement. Noddings (2003) suggests that interest in service learning seems to be on the rise and states, "Active participation in community life may also be a direct source of happiness" (p. 236).

Kowalski (cites Burns, 2006) describes democratic leaders as collaborative (working towards mutual goals), while Greenleaf would suggest "primus inter pares." Sergiovanni would suggest "that everyone gets a chance to be quarterback and is free to call the play; if it is a good call, then the team runs with it" (p. 134). Teachers often are the genesis for creative ideas and through encouragement and valuing of input may lead the way for effective change in a school. Democratic leaders have been granted authority (which may be withdrawn) by those within the school organization.

These "leaders have a moral responsibility to fulfill social contracts with the organization's members" (Kowalski, 2006, p. 211). In addition, Sergiovanni stresses the importance of moral authority: "Such ideas as servant-leadership bring with them a different kind of strength—one based on moral authority. When one places one's leadership practice in service to ideas, and to others who also seek to serve these ideas, issues of leadership role and leadership style become far less important" (pp. 128-129).

CONCLUSION

Initially, most information about servant-leadership came from the world of business, from the work of researchers such as Autry (2001); Block (1993); Bennis (1997); De Pree (1989, 1992); Pinchot (1998); Senge (1990); and Sturnick (1998). Today, the Greenleaf Center lists many doctoral dissertations in education related to servant-leadership, and the educational research base is growing. Is servant-leadership a viable model for present day schools? Greenleaf (1977) speaks directly to educators:

Many teachers. . .have sufficient latitude in dealing with students that they could, on their own, help nurture the servant leader potential which I believe, is latent to some degree in almost every young person. Could not many respected teachers speak those few words that might change the course of life, or give it new purpose? (p. 5)

Consider how this leadership paradigm could be implemented, for instance, in the areas of speakers, study groups, mentors, service activities to help the community, student and parent council partnerships, pilot projects, and action research. What outcomes could be expected? What are the obvious visible changes? Has productivity improved within the school? Is the school reaching outward and inward? Surveys and questionnaires could measure the pulse of the servant-leader initiative. The simple concept of working on the ten characteristics over a school year, and helping students and staff to focus upon one at a time, can increase the awareness and understanding of the ripple effect created in the learning environment. Analysis

of leadership styles for evidence of servant-leadership traits in teacher candidates and senior administrators could prove interesting. Much research needs to be done to uncover the potential of servant-leadership in our schools.

Senge (1990) reminds us that systems that change require a variety of leadership types at different times in organizational development. Thus, it appears as our schools move toward democratization that servant-leadership may be a vehicle for major systems change at every level in educational organizations. In conclusion, we are encouraged by Sergiovanni (1999) to consider servant-leadership as an approach for present-day schools and our raison d'être:

What matters are issues of substance. What are we about? Why? Are students being served? Is the school as learning community being served? What are our obligations to this community? With these questions in mind, how can we best get the job done? (p. 61)

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