

# SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, BUILDING OF COMMUNITY, AND PRISONERS OF WAR

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When there is war, there inevitably are those who are captured and taken as prisoners. Since the American Revolutionary War, there have been more than 609,180 published cases of persons who have obtained Prisoner of War (POW) status (Advocacy & Intelligence Index For POWs-MIAs Archives, 2007). The perpetration of brutal, inhumane, and vile actions by one human on another has been documented throughout these wars. Although these accounts of human suffering and domination are plentiful, there exist stories of healing and self-sacrifice, of people who overcame the physical and mental torture, those who endured and not only survived, but thrived as individuals. These stories coincide with the macabre accounts of torture and provide documents of human survival, endurance, and spirit. When such biographies of POW survivors emerged, they often revealed the transformation from suffering to strength and the need for community building in POW situations.

Several lived experiences of POWs provide testimony concerning how they survived captivity. From these accounts, particular attributes and practices contribute to the body of knowledge regarding survival in a POW situation. Personal actions, such as maintaining faith in God, faith in country, and faith in fellow American POWs, are commonly recognized as being essential to resisting the enemy (McCain & Salter, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate community building occurring in a POW situation as evidence of servant-leadership. First, a description of servant-leadership is provided, followed by a definition of community building in relation to servant-leadership. An account of a POW

camp will then be investigated. Finally, the application of community building in the POW camp as reflection of servant-leadership will be explored.

#### THE SERVANT-LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

To understand servant-leadership that occurs within POW camps, a definition of servant-leadership is required. Servant-leadership is a leadership theory rooted in the concept that true leadership occurs from a deep desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 2002). It is a practical philosophy supporting those people who choose to serve first and lead second as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Servant-leaders may or may not hold formal leadership positions. The philosophy encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment (Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2007).

The philosophy of servant-leadership was coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s (Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2007). Now in its fourth decade, the idea of servant-leadership is creating a revolution in the workplace around the world (Spears & Lawrence, 2004, pp. 9-10). While other leadership models and theories have approached leadership from the view of contingencies, situations, traits, and transactions (Heifetz, 1994), the theory of servant-leadership moves beyond the concept of these characteristics and focuses on the notion that a servant-leader aspires to serve first, then lead (Greenleaf, 2002).

In his seminal essay on servant-leadership, Greenleaf (2002) affirmed the idea of a servant as leader from his reading of Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East* (1956). In this story, the central figure, Leo, is a servant accompanying a group of men on a mythical journey. Leo performs all the menial chores, carries their bags, but also sustains them with his song and spirit. As the journey progresses, Leo disappears and the group falls into dysfunction. After several years, one of the men from the original group locates Leo and is accepted into the same Order that sponsored the journey. This is when the man learns that Leo was not merely a servant, but was in fact the leader of the Order. To Greenleaf (2002), "[The] story clearly said that the great

leader is servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (p. 21).

Greenleaf (2002) reflected on Leo's leadership as something bestowed on a person who was a natural servant (pp. 21-22). It was a natural way of being for Leo. Greenleaf stated that "a fresh critical look is being taken towards leadership" (p. 23). At the time of his first writing on servant-leadership, Greenleaf noted that people were beginning to relate to one another in "less coercive and more creatively supporting ways" (p. 23). He also argued that the only authority deserving of followers was that which the followers themselves had granted in response to their servant stature (p. 24). These ideas have provided profound implications for leaders in all types of organizations, from the military, to non-profit, to educational institutions and beyond.

Servant-leadership offers a leadership philosophy that supports people in becoming more than mere workers in an organization (Ruschman, 2002). Under the auspices of servant-leadership, people grow as individuals and find meaning in and through their work. Discussing and reflecting on servant-leadership, Ruschman (2002) observed that servant-leadership offers new ways to capitalize on the knowledge and wisdom of all employees. The business strategy is shared throughout the company, rather than with just the few top executives, while individuals are encouraged to grow beyond just doing a job, toward having "fully engaged minds and hearts" (p. 126).

## A Servant-Leader

A servant-leader is an individual who aspires to serve first and espouses servant-leadership theory not only in belief, but also in action. Spears asserted the classic image embodying servant-leadership is that of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (Phillips, 2004). Additionally, examples of servant-leaders have lived in more recent times, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Mother Teresa. These leaders established their leadership not in the traditional power-driven approach of Western

achievement, but as a result of serving others. Greenleaf (2002) described a servant-leader thus:

The servant leader is a 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. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first . . . The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as a person? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 27)

From this definition, it is clear that a servant-leader becomes so from an inner pull, a sincere longing to lead a life of service. Additionally, servant-leaders demonstrate specific characteristics in their leadership practices. Greenleaf (2002) indicated that servant-leaders seek first to ensure that other people's needs are being served (p. 27). Profit becomes a secondary or tertiary aim, with the primary goal being that of meeting others' needs. Lad and Luechauer (1998) noted that the paradox in the journey of servant-leadership is that there is no single best way, technique, model, or path to follow. However, many understand that a servant-leader's journey must begin from within.

Every journey of inner growth must have a starting point, and one good starting point is to move toward understanding oneself. Failing to recognize personal limitations and competencies can be detrimental to the leader, as well as to the organization. When Palmer (1998) discussed the negative effects of a leader's shadow, he offered the insight that the failure of leaders to deal with their own inner lives creates conditions of misery for individuals as well as institutions (p. 207). Greenleaf (2002) posited that servant-leadership emerges from deep within a person as a natural state of being. Covey (1998) encapsulated this inward-to-outward path with the notion that servant-leaders are the programmers of the principles of servant-leadership. Covey (2004) expounded on these ideas in his book *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. As part of the definition of a servant-leader, the leader's characteristics are taken into account. For a person

to be defined as a servant-leader, specific aspects of that person's being must be present. Covey described and defined these characteristics as being those of a whole person: one who "consists of a voice made up of mind, body, heart, and spirit" (p. 21). A servant-leader must establish and nurture this vital connection within to sustain a servant-leader perspective.

One path to the inner journey of knowing oneself is to work toward self-transcendence. Viktor Frankl (1986) articulated that being human means reaching out of oneself for something or someone. He maintained that being human always means transcending oneself (1986). He conveyed that self-actualization is a worthy pursuit, but is a by-product of transcendence (1986). To self-actualize, people must first find meaning in their lives. In *The Will to Meaning* (1985), Frankl claimed that meaning can be found by anyone anywhere through doing a deed or creating work, encountering someone or something, or by turning a tragedy into an accomplishment. In this respect, humans seek to find meaning in their work, but this path is essentially an inward journey.

Frankl (1986) demonstrated a fundamental human drive to find meaning through a personal and inward journey; a servant-leader must also embark on this path. From this inward actualization and awareness, the servant-leader then moves outward toward others. This idea complements Greenleaf's (2002) theory that servant-leadership starts from within, from a natural way of being. Thus, an individual can propel an organization toward servant-leadership. Covey (1998) exemplified this effect of an individual on others with the example of a trim tab. A trim tab is a small rudder that moves the bigger rudder, which in turn steers the entire ship. The analogy of a trim tab demonstrates how a servant-leader works within the leadership position. It is through individuals' work that an organization as a whole becomes a servant-leader.

Senge (1990) also described the need for a leader's individual growth and development in relation to organizational growth and development. Senge wrote, "Organizations learn only when individuals learn" (p. 139). When a servant-leader concentrates on his or her own learning, he or she is

then in a better position to encourage and cultivate other individuals to become servant-leaders.

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Although servant-leadership begins with an individual desire to serve, there are several paths to becoming a servant-leader. One crucial element in practicing servant-leadership is that of community building. Lad and Luechauer (1998) examined five "pathways" to servant-leadership, the fifth one being the community path. The authors explained that the pathway of community is the action path of service and discovery in community. Through service and volunteer opportunities, discovery and contribution can be realized. The authors maintained that community nourishes, connects, and breaks down barriers. It is through the acts of service and discovery in community that our view of ourselves as a "separate self" changes to one of self embedded in community (p. 59). Servant-leaders contribute to the greater good, while growing personally. This system loop of personal growth and commitment to the growth of others provides the fundamental basis of community building. Without a commitment to personal development, the building of community would be unachievable.

Mead (1934) called this idea the "generalized other." The generalized other is the community or social group that gives to the individual his or her unity of self. It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it (p. 154). In this way, the community injects influence into the individual's thinking. The person becomes concerned about his or her actions and their effects on society. "It is as social beings that we are moral beings," said Mead (p. 385). On one hand, society makes the self possible, and on the other hand, the self makes highly organized society possible. The two answer to each other in moral conduct. Wheatley (1999, p. 167) asserted the idea that "self includes awareness of those others it must relate to as part of its system."

Community building provides the foundation in organizational relationships. Greenleaf (2003) noted that "servant leadership advocates a

group-oriented approach to analysis and decision making as a means of strengthening institutions and improving society" (p. 20). He also emphasized turning the hierarchical pyramid upside down through the power of persuasion and seeking consensus. Therefore relationships become important for gaining trust and influence through persuasion. Wheatley (1999) wrote, "No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished" (p. 165). In an organization that supports relationships, "interdependence and individual autonomy are necessary" (p. 168). Hence, this is another symbiotic relationship: The more an organization serves its employees, the more these people will follow the leadership.

Documented success has grown from following the servant-leadership philosophy. Many individuals have adopted the servant-leadership model, as have many companies (Greenleaf, Beazley, Beggs, & Spears, 2003, p. 20). Some of these companies are the Toro Company, Synovus Financial Corporation, ServiceMaster Company, The Men's Wearhouse, Southwest Airlines, and TDIndustries (p. 20). Recently, Google, another servant-leadership oriented company, made the number one spot on Fortune's top one hundred companies for which to work (Fortune, 2007). By turning the pyramid upside down and empowering its workers with decision making, by following a business model of service to the employee and to the customer, Google achieved widespread success (Lashinsky, 2007). General Electric also realized great results when it understood that the company's success was dependent on those traditionally at the bottom of the pyramid, the workers (Kelley, 1995). Ken Blanchard (1998) said this is where servant-leadership really takes over.

While Greenleaf spent most of his professional life in the context of one of America's largest corporations, "he maintained a deep sense of the importance of community in the lives of people" (Burkhardt & Spears, 2004, p. 87). Greenleaf understood that no organization could be oriented to serve if it lacked its own sense of internal cohesion and purpose (p. 87). The truth of this notion cannot be seen better than through the eyes of POWs.

#### COMMUNITY BUILDING AND MILITARY BROTHERHOOD

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners.

—Article IV, Code of U.S. Fighting Force (Department of Defense, 1988)

On October 27, 1967, John McCain began a new chapter in his life. While serving his country as a naval aviator on a bombing mission over unfriendly Hanoi during the Vietnam Conflict, John McCain's A-4 aircraft was shot down (McCain & Salter, 1999). He sustained severe injury and was quickly captured by enemy forces and taken to the now infamous "Hanoi Hilton." McCain described feeling "a deeper dread than [he] had ever felt" when he heard the massive steel doors clank loudly behind him (p. 190). This was the beginning of a horror that would last five and one half years until his release on March 15, 1973.

It wasn't long after being captured by the enemy that McCain realized that he would have to rely on his fellow servicemen to survive the ordeal. When McCain was delivered to two fellow Prisoners of War (POW), Bud Day and Norris Overly, they thought he was on the threshold of death (McCain & Salter, 1999). The two cared for McCain for the following months by feeding him and even helping him go to the bathroom. There is no doubt in McCain's mind that these two POWs saved his life. McCain said, "Bud had an indomitable will to survive with his reputation intact, and he strengthened my will to live" (p. 206). The only sustenance McCain had in those early days he took from the example of Bud's abiding moral and physical courage. Up until then, McCain had not relied on another person for emotional and physical support to the extent that he relied on Bud (pp. 200-206). McCain's senior ranking officer in the Hanoi Hilton also recognized the value of helping each other through the ordeal.

The senior ranking naval officer in the Hanoi Hilton was Jim Stockdale. Stockdale (1995) referred to the period stretching from 1965 to 1969 as the hard years. During this time, torture and ill-treatment of prisoners were routine and regular, as well as extraordinarily difficult to endure both physically and mentally. It was clear to Stockdale that during those first hard years, survival required "social binding of lost souls" (p. 207). Relying on each other was the rule of the day. When a new "shootdown" would ask for something to hang on to as a way to survive, Stockdale's answer was, the guy next door. "Protect him. Love him. He is precious. He is your only link with our civilization in here" (p. 49).

To help build camaraderie, Stockdale (1995) issued guidelines concerning the amount of torture and significant pain to be endured before submitting to the enemy's demands. This helped diminish some of the guilt prisoners felt after divulging information to stop the enemy's torture. He also told them to let the enemy know he [Stockdale] was the leader of the "underground" (p. 71). After the issuance of the guidance, Stockdale asserted that their lives as POWs began making sense; they knew right from wrong, and comradeship and love were present.

### Value of Community Realized

I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

—Article VI, Code of U.S. Fighting Force (Department of Defense, 1988)

Stockdale (1995) claimed that in Hanoi, the prisoners' instincts told them they had to have public virtue and comradeship. This first required that they build a culture. Since most of the prisoners were in solitary confinement, the culture had to be built secretly though the use of covert communication, known as "the tap code." Through the tap code, their society took root and grew. It was a society made up of their own laws, customs, heroes, folklore and citizenship (p. 124). Each member of their society grew to understand that his society's fate was his fate, and that he was therefore

responsible for its fate and honor (p. 140). "Death before dishonor" and "Unity over self" were phrases that they came to live by (p. 124). "Over the years our prison civilization, tied together with those thin strings of surreptitious and highly risky wall taps, became our country, our family" (p. 49). The enemy did all they could to quash the community. Solitary confinement was a favorite technique in this effort.

As the leader of the camp, Stockdale would spend over four years in solitary (Stockdale, 1995). McCain (1999) spent two years in solitary confinement. McCain described solitary confinement as an "awful thing that crushes your spirit and weakens one's resistance more than any other form of mistreatment" (p. 206). Although in a cell by himself, McCain was able to communicate with other prisoners through the tap code. However, the price of being caught communicating was severe. When caught communicating, prisoners were beaten savagely. Even so, of all the activities McCain devised to survive solitary confinement with his wits and strength intact, nothing was more beneficial than communicating with other prisoners. To suffer at the hands of the enemy was one thing, but to do it alone was less tolerable than any torture the enemy conjured up. The tap code helped ensure the prisoners were among fellow Americans. "Communicating not only affirmed our humanity. It kept us alive" (pp. 211-215).

Later in his captivity, McCain was moved to a horrible place called Calcutta. What made Calcutta so miserable was the fact that each cell was separated by 50 feet, making it nearly impossible to communicate with fellow prisoners (McCain & Salter, 1999, p. 308). Without the communication, "it was hard to derive strength from others" (p. 308). McCain felt that without the counsel of fellow prisoners he would begin to doubt his own judgment: "When I was deprived of any contact with my comrades, I was in serious trouble" (p. 308).

During the Christmas season of 1971, the most welcome event of the imprisonment took place. McCain and several other prisoners were transferred to an area called Camp Unity. Camp Unity had seven cell blocks that held thirty to forty prisoners each. There McCain was united with old

friends, including Bob Craner and Bud Day. Of this event, McCain had to say, "No other experience in my life could ever replicate my first night in Camp Unity, and the feeling of relief that overcame me to be living among my friends" (McCain & Salter, 1999, p. 314). The very strength acquired in fraternity with others of shared fate is immeasurable. Free to communicate and organize, the POWs strengthened relationships and formed a fraternity recognizable only to those who experienced the ordeal.

#### SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Through the POW experience during the Vietnam Conflict, both Stockdale and McCain unintentionally learned the value of servant-leader-ship—although they were in prison before they ever heard of the philosophy. Through his experience in captivity, McCain (1999) discovered he was dependent on others to a greater extent than he had realized (p. 348). The fraternity of POWs helped him to gain a larger sense of self than he possessed before the war. Stockdale (1995) understood that there needed to be a culture, public virtue, and comradeship. Together, along with the rest of their brothers in arms, the two men established a community exemplifying servant-leadership.

In the early days of captivity, Stockdale became keenly aware of the need for guidance within the camp (1995). Sheltered away from his followers, it became almost impossible for him to communicate with them. Without communication, the scalar structure of the military was difficult to maintain. But even at great risk of torture or death, the tap code became the vehicle of forming organized resistance against the common enemy. It became the means of forming relationships.

Stockdale (1995) observed that prisoners were suffering immeasurable torture trying to uphold the essence of the Code of U.S. Fighting Forces. When and if the prisoners failed, they felt guilty and suffered internally for months. Stockdale knew he had to organize and issue guidance to allow the anguish to end, or at least minimize it. Thus, he issued orders saying that each prisoner was to take torture before giving any information to the

enemy (p. 205). When he saw positive results from the guidance, he continued with further instructions. Through the orders and additional guidance, virtues and social contracts among the prisoners began to take form. In essence, this began the establishing of a community. Also, the secret communication network allowed prisoners to share with each other their torture experience and the information passed to the enemy (McCain & Salter, 1999; Stockdale, 1995). The prisoners also established relationships while they offered each other support at perceived failures. It was not uncommon for prisoners to get to know each other very well via the tap code, sometimes better than they knew their own spouses prior to the war (McCain & Salter, 1999). Through this method of communicating, the POWs established the culture of the community with a shared vision of hope and mutual support, all the while maintaining the scalar structure of military command and control.

When a person was pulled out of the community via solitary confinement, the value of the community was realized. McCain (1999) asserted that solitary was the cruelest of punishments. When he was isolated and unable to communicate, he was in serious trouble. When isolated, he was unable to receive the gifts the community offered, such as comfort, support, and comradeship. Without the communication, without the relationships, he was alone, fighting two wars: one against a known aggressor, and one of inner turmoil.

Through this building of community and the formation of relationship, additional evidence of servant-leadership within the POW camp can be observed, especially through the examples of the prisoners providing for each other. When Spears (as cited in Phillips, 2004) reflected that the ultimate vision of a servant-leader was that of Jesus cleaning his disciples' feet, the image reminded me of how McCain (1999) was cared for when he first arrived in the camp. He could not feed himself; nor could he even use the latrine alone. He needed help. His fellow prisoners cared for him in a self-less manner. They provided for him when he could not provide for himself. They put his needs before their own. Part of Greenleaf's (2002) definition

of a servant-leader is that such a one makes sure that other people's highest priority needs are being met. In this case, it was McCain's need for sustenance and health care that took priority. Without Day and Overly, McCain would have died (McCain & Salter, 1999, p. 200). Day's and Overly's care for McCain exemplified Stockdale's promotion of community when they followed his lead of placing extreme value on their fellow prisoners.

Yet another example of how servant-leadership was displayed was through Stockdale's leadership. When Stockdale issued guidance to the other prisoners, he did not tie their hands by micro-managing. He allowed the followers to decide when the idea of significant torture had been met, ultimately turning the pyramid upside down. Knowing that each person had his own threshold of pain, Stockdale left the decision up to the one who was being tortured, which was the lowest level possible in their chain of command. Stockdale (1995) also advised all the prisoners to tell the enemy that he personally was in charge of the prisoner organization. Stockdale therefore received an extra dose of torture for having established an organization within the confines of the camp, an act that was against the rules. He gave these orders so that his followers would not be further tortured for withholding the name of their commanding officer. Ultimately, being a leader in this prisoner camp was not advantageous. Stockdale endured additional suffering at the hands of the enemy because of his leader title. Stockdale led because he wanted to serve his followers and was willing to sacrifice for them, just as they were willing to sacrifice for him and each other, supporting the idea of fraternity. "People would willingly absorb physical punishment rather than let it fall to their comrades" (p. 62). This shared sacrifice enforced the idea of community.

It is through these selfless acts that examples of servant-leadership emerge. The building of community facilitated relationships and built a culture from which the prisoners grew strong and united. It was through the idea of community that the prisoners were able to build a formable resistance to the enemy and survive with dignity and honor. Without the community, prisoners found it extremely difficult not only to resist, but even to

survive. Community was of great importance to the POWs, and servant-leadership can be observed through their efforts.

#### CONCLUSION

Servant-leadership is a philosophy that is rooted in the concept of service before leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). It aims at providing for the needs of followers and facilitates personal growth. While anyone can be a servant-leader, there are several characteristics that define a servant-leader (Spears, 1998). Leading in a servant nature is a natural occurrence that is developed from deep within a person.

Servant-leadership can have profound effects on both individuals and organizations. The servant-leadership characteristic of building community was important to POWs enduring in Vietnam. The reliance on community became the stronghold for survival (Stockdale, 1995). While solitary confinement highlighted the strain of isolation, Camp Unity, a community environment, was glorified as the most welcomed event of the captivity (McCain & Salter, 1999). Servant-leadership can occur in any environment, and the building of community is at least one path that allows it to transpire.

John McCain's and Jim Stockdale's stories highlight the value that community brought to them and their fraternity of prisoners. While McCain (1999) realized for the first time in his life he had to rely on others to survive, Stockdale (1995) knew the value of being united and proceeded to build a community. Through the lived experiences of the Vietnam prisoners of war, the ideals of true servant-leadership emerge. The caring for one another, the service provided to fellow prisoners, the torture endured for each other, all reflect service in an effort to provide for another's needs. It was through the idea of building community that servant-leadership surfaced in the path of danger and immense pain.

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