



THE EMERGENCE, EXPANSION, AND CRITIQUE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS A LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

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Editor's note: This article is the first in a three-part series that will give a comprehensive literature review of the extant theory and research currently available on servant-leadership. In this first installment, scholar Jeff McClellan reveals the evocative depths of Greenleaf's thought and life-work that led to Greenleaf's subtle, profound articulation of the concept of the servant-leader.

ROBERT GREENLEAF

The term *servant-leader* was coined and the modern concept of servant-leadership suggested by Robert K. Greenleaf during the turbulent student movements of the 1960s. Troubled by what he witnessed, Greenleaf (1977) pondered the issues of the times that spawned such an amazing sense of distrust and even contempt for leaders (p. 17). Out of his musings, and drawing upon his background and experience, Greenleaf wrote what became the seminal essay on the subject of servant-leadership—*The Servant as Leader*. In this work, he laid out his argument for leadership rooted not in the desire for power or influence, but rather in the natural desire to serve and the willingness, initiative, and ability to lead.

Although this article was originally written in 1969 and revised and published in 1970 (then later rewritten and republished in 1973), the concept of servant-leadership grew out of a lifetime of experiences and a rich cultural heritage. Greenleaf (2003a) specifically outlined five critical ideas



that “guided choices in [his] work” and that contributed to the concept of servant-leadership (p. 243).

Given Greenleaf’s argument that “the servant quality probably emerges when one is quite young and is shaped more by example than by precept” (Greenleaf, 2003b, p. 40), it comes as no surprise that the first contributing “idea” came from the example of Greenleaf’s father. Greenleaf (2003a) wrote of his father and the influence he had:

He was a good, intelligent man with but a fifth-grade education, and he had a life of limited opportunity. But he managed, by the prudent use of his life, to leave a little corner of the world a bit better than he found it. Many years passed before I came to a mature appreciation of him. In the perspective of considerable experience, he stands tall as a true servant-leader. This model deeply etched from childhood and youth was the first pivotal idea. Without it, the four ideas that came later in words might not have challenged me. (pp. 243-244)

Consequently, Greenleaf’s childhood years provided a seedbed for the germination and development of the concept of the servant-leader, which grew and blossomed within the environment of his college and professional endeavors.

The second significant idea cited by Greenleaf (2003a) as a source of inspiration for his work came from a professor of sociology during his senior year in college. This professor challenged students to consider a career working for a large organization. He reasoned that such institutions represented a major force in society that was not serving humanity as it should. He further argued that the only way to change such institutions would be from within. As a result of this challenge, Greenleaf determined to enter the world of business. Opting to work for ATT, because it was the largest employer in the country at the time, he set out to make a difference. Of his experience, he wrote,

Life there was not always easy and pleasant, and it needed much more help than I could give it. There were some dreary, depressing years, and a



few dreadful ones that really tested my sustaining spirit. But I stayed with it; I cared intensely about the quality of the institution, and I kept a deep interest in the company's history and myth. (p. 245)

In spite of the challenges, Greenleaf did what he could to achieve what his college professor had challenged him to do. In so doing, he learned about what it means to serve within a large institution. He also learned of the burden that befalls a would-be servant-leader.

The third idea that contributed to the development of the concept of servant-leadership resulted from Greenleaf's devotion to the writings of E. B. White (Greenleaf, 2003a). From White he learned the importance of, and developed, the capacity to "see things whole" (Greenleaf, p. 245). This concept of seeing and contributing to the wholeness of individuals, organizations, and society represents a major theme in his writings on servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, 2003b; Spears, 1998a).

The fourth idea came from an article entitled "The Uses of Old People." Greenleaf (2003a) explained that "the gist of the article was that there are useful and necessary things to be done by old people, partly because old people have a greater perspective" and a better opportunity to do them (pp. 245-246). As a result of this article, Greenleaf opted to retire as soon as he was able and determined to dedicate himself to serving through "long-term consulting arrangements" (p. 246). These arrangements included work in colleges, businesses, universities and foundations. It was during this period that Greenleaf worked with two universities that were struggling amidst the student revolts of the sixties. It was also during this time that he came in contact with the works of Herman Hesse.

The final idea and the catalytic event that gave birth to the notion of servant-leadership came as Greenleaf reflected on his reading of Hesse's (1956) *Journey to the East* following a challenging consulting experience at Prescott College in Arizona (Frick, 2004). As Greenleaf (2003a) explained,

Journey to the East is an account of a mythical journey by a band of men on a search to the East. . . . The central figure of the story is Leo, who



accompanies the party as the servant who does the menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. (p. 247).

Unfortunately, when Leo suddenly disappears, the party falls into disarray and soon disbands. The narrator of the text abandons his quest and determines to write the tale of its misfortunate demise. As he attempts to do so, however, Leo re-emerges and the narrator comes to realize that Leo was actually the titular head of the order that sponsored the quest. Leo was the leader all along. As he pondered Leo's paradoxical role in this narrative tale, as both servant and leader, Greenleaf experienced an epiphany. As a result of this metanoic experience, he began to articulate the concept of servant-leadership and coined the term "servant leader."

Though not mentioned by Greenleaf as one of the five foundational contributory ideas of servant-leadership, it is obvious that Greenleaf's Judeo-Christian background, through the Methodist and Quaker traditions, contributed significantly to the development of the concept of servant-leadership (Frick, 2004; Greenleaf, 1996b; Nielsen, 1998). This is evident in his citation of biblical works, his specific references to Quaker historical events, and the influence of practices of the Religious Society of Friends on his writings about the characteristics and behaviors of servant-leaders (Greenleaf, 1977, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Miller & Tuckett, 1975). It is also evidenced in his management practices at AT&T (Nielsen). However, although some researchers dedicate considerable time to expanding upon the Judeo-Christian foundation of servant-leadership (Ming, 2005; Russell, 2000; Thompson, 2002), no additional time will be spent on further developing this theme within this work. The decision to forego this discussion is partially based on the extensive nature of some of these works, as well as on Greenleaf's and others' suggestion that the concept of the servant-leader has emerged and existed within multiple historical, religious, and philosophical constructs (Anderson, 2005, p. 40; Greenleaf, 1996b; Spears, 1998a; Spears & Noble, 2005). Consequently, these authors recognized the Christian tradi-



tion as only one of many that reflect the value and practices of servant-leadership.

In summary, these significant events and aspects of Greenleaf's personal history resulted in the recognition of the reality of, and the birth of the term denoting, the servant-leader. This concept was then operationalized in Greenleaf's original essay on servant-leadership.

Greenleaf's Description of Servant-Leadership

In Greenleaf's (2003b) 1970 essay, he outlined the need for and described the nature of servant-leadership. In its original form, this essay addressed the turbulent revolutionary times and, drawing upon insights gleaned from student leaders, suggested that at the heart of the problems of Greenleaf's era was a lack of trust. Greenleaf attributed this lack of trust partly to a deficit of leaders who chose to lead out of a desire to serve, and to an abundance of followers who casually accepted the leadership of non-servants or who chose to engage the world solely as social critics, rather than as builders (pp. 33-36). The primary "enemy," in Greenleaf's estimation, precluding the emergence of a better society, was "not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the 'system.' Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries" (p. 40). Instead, he argued, "The enemy is servants who have the capacity to lead but do not lead" (p. 40). As a result, he proposed a new model of leadership grounded in the desire of the individual to serve.

At the core of this model of leadership, and what distinguishes it from all others, is the motivation and initiative of the individual. In a later revision of this original essay, Greenleaf (1977) explained this important point in the following terms: "The servant-leader is servant first . . . [Servant-leadership] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (p. 27).

Thus, this natural feeling, which begins "with caring for individual persons," propels the individual to choose to lead "in ways that require ded-



ication and skill and that help them to grow and become healthier, stronger and more autonomous” (Greenleaf, 2003b, p. 37).

In contrast to other models of leadership that focus on the achievement of organizational goals or the transformation of the individual, leader, or organization, Greenleaf (1977) prescribed a way of leading that focuses on serving the highest needs of individuals (p. 27). As a result, he argued that the best test of the servant-leader is the following questions:

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 of society? Will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27).

Greenleaf (1977, 2003b) recognized that this standard created a challenge for leaders in that assessing the outcome of one’s leadership is nearly impossible. Such leaders may not always achieve organizational goals and they may not be popular. In addition, they will likely be burdened with the conflicting needs of the multitudes of people whom they are called to serve. This, Greenleaf (1977) argued, “is part of the human dilemma; one cannot know for sure” if he or she is having the desired impact (pp. 27-28). Therefore, servant-leadership, he asserted, is more about engaging in a learning process that includes studying and developing hypotheses about how best to serve individuals, and pursuing and refining these notions to establish better ways to develop people (p. 28). It is about faith (Greenleaf, 1996b). Thus it is not an easy way of leading, but rather “exacting and hard to attain” (Greenleaf, 2003b, p. 37). Part of this difficulty emerges from the paradoxical, ambiguous, and non-prescriptive nature of servant-leadership.

Paradoxes of Servant-Leadership

Greenleaf (1977) wrote,

Just as there may be a real contradiction in the servant as leader, so my perceptual world is full of contradictions. Some examples: I believe in



order, and I want creation out of chaos. My good society will have strong individualism amid community. It will have elitism along with populism. I listen to the old and to the young and find myself baffled and heartened by both. Reason and intuition, each in its own way, both comfort and dismay me. (pp. 26-7).

These internal paradoxes are manifested in Greenleaf's conceptualization of the servant-leader. Indeed, they are embodied in the very name he selected to describe his ideas. Both the term "leader" and the word "servant" carry powerful connotative, denotative and emotional meanings. Each has left a deep path across the history of time littered with meaning and emotion.

The word *leader*, throughout history and even today, has conjured up images of great men or women who, through the force of their own personality, characteristics, or skills, acted as the driving force behind nations, armies, organizations, and groups of people (Carlyle, 1973; Northouse, 2004; Wren, 1995). At the same time, philosophers and scholars have challenged and continue to challenge this notion of great men or women as the driving force in society. These individuals have argued that the emergence of leaders is more a result of the interaction between individual leaders and society (Kelley, 1998; Michelet, 1973; Wren, 1995). Leadership theorists have also argued that leadership is a function of traits possessed by leaders, a reflection of the behaviors and skills they exhibit derived from the individual style of the leader, or a complex amalgamation of various situational or contingency factors such as leader-member relations, task structure, and a leader's positional power (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004; Northouse, 2004; Smart, 2005). All of these competing and even paradoxical ways of defining leadership have thrust it into a realm of conceptual ambiguity (Antonakis et al., 2004; Dhar & Mishra, 2001; Thompson, 2000).

While this ambiguity burdens the term *leadership* with definitional challenges, the practical use and application of the word further burdens it with emotional baggage. This onerous weight arises from the tendency to ascribe leadership to those who, through power and influence, whether role- or class-based, control and manipulate the lives of those over whom they



wield power. As a result of these individuals' often elitist and self-aggrandizing use of the power derived from their role as leaders, *leadership* has become synonymous with distrust and resistance (Valley & Thompson, 1998).

The term *servant* is likewise loaded with deep contradictions. For many cultural reasons, *servanthood* has become synonymous with everything from slavery and oppression to the more benign notion of "one employed to perform domestic services" (*The American Heritage Concise Dictionary*, 1994, p. 784). However it is conceptualized along this meaning continuum, the word's connotation is typically negative, implying submission and subservience. This is particularly true within the socio-cultural context of American society (Foster, 2000, p. 45). Nonetheless, many great philosophers and prophets have elevated servanthood to a status of preeminence. In Jowett's translation, Plato (2000) argued for the notion of philosopher-kings who, having come to know "the good," serve their people. Buddhist teachings accord great honor to those who achieve enlightenment and return to serve others (Fisher, 1994; Humphreys, 1951). Likewise, Christ declared, "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23: 11). Thus the term *servant* is similarly paradoxical and emotion-laden.

Although he recognized that the terms "[s]erve and lead are overused and words with negative connotations," Greenleaf (2003b) did not shy away from their use, because the very paradoxes they contain made them essential to his theory (p. 31). Thus proponents of servant-leadership argue that leadership is about both the identity of the leader as servant, one who is humble and sincerely desires to improve the lot of all whom he or she contacts, and the choice of the servant to lead, to engage in the challenging act of trying to serve within the conflict-laden context of leadership.

Consequently, leadership, according to Greenleaf, involves many of the elements found in any theory of leadership. Leaders must be self-driven and confident, provide ideas, take risks, provide vision, articulate and achieve goals, expect people to do their best, and lead the way (Greenleaf,



1977, 2003b). Paradoxically, however, they must also be concerned with the personal and emotional growth of others, be humble, be open and receptive, recognize great ideas, act with responsibility and unlimited liability, identify and follow a vision, listen to and learn from others, and accept failure (Greenleaf, 1977, 1996b, 2003c).

Additional paradoxes referred to by Greenleaf (1996a) include the recognition that: “Evil is an aspect of good” (p. 44); absolute values become proximate in the minds of people (p. 45); any virtue or idea, when carried to the extreme, becomes absurd (p. 45); too much freedom is bondage (pp. 45-46); perceived understanding reveals lack of comprehension (p. 46); sometimes the best way to serve others is to not to give them what they want (p. 48); and creativity can come out of conformity (p. 50). The capacity to balance such apparent contradictions is derived from the awareness that servant-leadership is not a matter of simply behaving like a leader, but rather of being a leader who is motivated from within by a deep core of service and love.

From this core identity, and as the servant-leader develops and uses the knowledge and skills required to lead others, behaviors are engaged in and skills acquired as an extension of the servant-leader’s servanthood and as a means of pursuing the desire to serve. The expertise derived from this hard work and experience are essential to leadership, but not sufficient. Greenleaf (2003b) wrote, “Leadership overarches expertise” (p. 41). Furthermore, personality and style are also insufficient descriptors of and means for engaging in servant-leadership (p. 41). What is essential is the integration of all of these actionable elements with the servanthood core of the person. This integration of intent and action is evident in the characteristics of servant-leaders Greenleaf (2003b) proposed in his original essay. These include initiative, goal development, willingness to listen and understand, language and imagination, the ability to withdraw effectively so as to engage creativity, acceptance and empathy, intuition and foresight, profound awareness and keen perception, the use of persuasion rather than coercion, a strong awareness of self, patience, a willingness to define one’s



own roles, and healing and serving. When he revised this original essay, he added community building to this list of characteristics (Greenleaf, 1977).

While, at first glance, these “characteristics” appear to describe behaviors, the reality is they do not, for a fundamental reason. Consider, for example, listening. There is an astounding difference between a leader who listens and a listening leader. This difference is evidenced in the following statements: “Listening is basically an attitude—really wanting to understand. It is also a technique. But the technique without the attitude is phony” (Greenleaf, 2003b, p. 46). This is so because

[g]iven a little time, we can always tell when we’re being coped with, manipulated, or outsmarted. We can always detect the hypocrisy . . . It won’t matter if the person tries sitting on the edge of the chair to practice active listening . . . or any other skill learned in order to be effective. What we’ll know and respond to is how that person is regarding us when doing those things. (Arbinger Institute, 2000, p. 27)

Another example of a way in which technique and attitude combine to create the characteristics of servant-leadership is explained by Lad and Luechauer (1998):

Servant-leaders typically have a passionate zeal for creating a preferred future. Then again, Hitler, Mussolini and Jim Jones all had visions. What differentiates servant-leaders from maniacal dictators is their deep desire to pursue this vision from the basis of humility, empathy, compassion, and commitment to ethical behavior. In short, they articulate a vision and then enable, ennoble and empower those around them to work for the attainment of that vision. In essence, servant-leadership represents a pull rather than a push model of vision attainment. (p. 64)

Hence it is not merely the ability to develop and pursue vision, but the attitude with which one does so that distinguishes the servant-leader. It is in the integration of the attitude and action that behaviors become characteristics and the skilled leader becomes a servant-leader. Lanctot and Irving (2007) refer to the resultant form of this integration as *virtues*. This same



significant distinction can be applied to each leadership characteristic delineated by Greenleaf.

In conclusion, Greenleaf's model of leadership identifies servant-leaders as individuals who, motivated by love and a desire to serve others, choose to lead. They then integrate their expertise and actions with their motivational core to achieve the ends of the "best test." In so doing they serve others to grow and develop through the characteristic-based disciplines of the servant-leader.

Spears' Model of Servant-Leadership

After Robert Greenleaf's death in 1990, Larry Spears took over direction of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership and, after an intense review of Greenleaf's writings, proposed the following ten characteristics of servant-leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 1998a). This model of servant-leadership represents a simple integration and re-conceptualization of Greenleaf's proposed characteristics. However, as Spears explains, this list is "by no means exhaustive" (p. 6). Instead it is meant to "serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge" (p. 6). Thus, like that of his predecessor, Spears' focus is on inviting and guiding practitioners to engage in effective servant-leadership. This focus on practice and the philosophical, moralistic nature of servant-leadership combined with the notion that traditional outcomes, such as profitability and return on investment, are secondary in importance, have limited the acceptance of servant-leadership within both the academic and the practitioner community.

Criticisms, Limitations, and Challenges of Servant-Leadership

Numerous criticisms have been levied against servant-leadership as a valid theoretical construct. While many of these are based on a limited



understanding of Greenleaf's writings, or a limited recognition and acceptance of the paradoxes of servant-leadership, others are more substantial and may limit the research potential of the concept.

One group of analysts of servant-leadership, Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004), conducted an in-depth, comparative analysis of the concepts of transformational leadership and servant-leadership. In contrast to the major proposition of this dissertation, and to much of the literature on servant-leadership, Smith and her associates argued that embracing the human-growth focus of servant-leadership, instead of transformational leadership, would lead to the development of a "spiritual generative culture," as opposed to an "empowered dynamic culture," which would limit the effectiveness of servant-leadership within a high-change context (pp. 86-87). These researchers presented the following argument:

The servant-leadership model works better in a more stable environment and serves evolutionary development purposes, whereas transformational leadership is the model for organizations facing intense external pressure where revolutionary change is a necessity to survival. (p. 87)

There are, however, some fundamental flaws in this argument. First, although Greenleaf's (1996b) commitment to gradualism supports the claim that servant-leadership tends to lead to evolutionary, developmental change, in the context of his writings, he is typically referring to larger-scale social and cultural transformation rather than to the smaller-scale changes involved in organizational responsiveness that are implied in the work under consideration. In addition, a large research study conducted by Ogbanna and Harris (2000) determined that, while competitive and innovative cultures tended to be more productive than community-based cultures, the reason for this distinction was the external focus of the former cultures. Furthermore, such cultures were even more effective when led by individuals with supportive and participative styles. Since servant-leadership supports a strong focus on external learning and the valuing of external constituencies, it is unlikely that a truly servant-led organization's perform-



ance would suffer from these issues (Greenleaf, 1996b). This claim is supported by the success of some of the institutions that are servant-led and successful in high-change contexts (Ruschman, 2002).

Additionally, Smith et al.'s (2004) arguments are based on an overly simplified understanding of Greenleaf's work on servant-leadership. For example, they claim that the literature on servant-leadership does not advocate risk-taking and innovation (p. 87). However, in contrast to this claim, the literature on servant-leadership is actually littered with a recognition of the need for risk-taking and with claims that the open, intuitive, conceptual nature of servant-leaders nurtures innovation and creativity (Freeman, Isaksen, & Dorval, 2002; Greenleaf, 1977, 1996a, 1996b; McGee-Cooper & Looper, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 1998b). Indeed, Greenleaf (1996b) wrote, "As I use the word lead it involves creative venture and risk (as contrasted with maintenance)" (p. 54). Furthermore, in his study of the comparison of values and behaviors of servant-leaders versus non-servant-leaders, Russell (2000) found pioneering, which involves "creating new directions and developing new approaches" as a result of risk-taking, innovation, and experimentation, to be a key primary attribute exhibited more frequently by servant-leaders than those who are not servant-leaders (p. 8).

Additional common, and related, arguments against servant-leadership include the following claims, as described by Showkeir (2002), that the concept is

too soft and touchy-feely, it does not have enough business focus; it has too many religious overtones; it is not for companies under financial strain; or it is good when times are good, but, under stress, "business as usual" prevails. (p. 155)

Many of these claims are merely extensions of the argument previously discussed, in that they represent misunderstandings of the theoretical concept of servant-leadership. For example, the claim that servant-leadership is too soft and touchy-feely overlooks the emphasis on tough-minded leadership that demands that people and institutions perform to high standards



(Batten, 1998, p. 119; DePree, 1995; Greenleaf, 1996a; Lad & Luechauer, 1998).

However, unlike some of these less accurate perceptions, the notion that under intense pressure and stress servant-leadership may be abandoned for other, less ethical and people-centered, means of leading is significant and well supported. Regarding this claim, Tom Thibault, an executive leader in an organization actively practicing servant-leadership, declared:

The starting point of personal integration is often challenging to executives. The difficulty is not one of desire or ability, it is one of overcoming established patterns and the realities of their world. This is just plain hard to do when you are judged on your ability to get things done through people (not through focusing on personal change); when your success has been gained with behaviors that might not always be viewed as congruent with all the values; and when your normal workday is so packed that introspection about personal values integration is indeed a luxury. (Cited in Lore, 1998, p. 304)

Consequently, Thibault explained, “It’s easiest to be a values-based leader in fair weather . . . but when our backs are against the wall, we tend to revert to old behaviors” (cited in Lore, p. 304). Such a challenge is not unique to these leaders (Foster, 2000; McGee-Cooper & Looper, 2001). A wide body of research supports the notion that ingrained emotional and behavioral patterns, such as traditional command-and-control styles of leadership, are not easily replaced, and that stress and conflict add to the challenge of engaging in new, more emotionally intelligent behaviors (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Khoshaba & Maddi, 2005; LeDoux, 1996).

Finally, Foster (2000), recognizing the paradoxical nature of Greenleaf’s (1977) work, identified some theoretical problems related to servant-leadership, as well as “dangers to which an inexperienced servant-leader might succumb” (pp. 55-56). These included the danger of paternalism, the notion of seminaries as a pivotal institution for introducing a paradigm for servant-leadership, the tendency to assume that servant-leaders are born not



made, the challenge of choosing to serve only servant-leaders in a predominantly non-servant-led society, and the emotionally challenging nature of the process of developing experientially as a servant-leader (p. 56-60). While many of these theoretical issues are, once again, based on a limited review of Greenleaf's work (he lists only one book by Greenleaf and one book chapter in his references), Foster does identify real challenges that may emerge as one pursues the path to growth as a servant-leader. Of particular significance to this study is the emotionally challenging nature of engaging in servant-leadership.

Although he strongly and passionately advocated for the notion of servanthood, Greenleaf was very aware of and straightforward about the deep emotional challenges that accompany servant-leadership. Greenleaf (1977) acknowledged that "[s]tress is a condition of most of modern life, and if one is a servant-leader and carrying the burdens of other people—going out ahead to show the way, one takes the rough and tumble (and it really is rough and tumble in some leader roles)" (p. 39). Part of this burden is due to the inherent challenges involved in making decisions that influence others. Greenleaf wrote:

Two separate "anxiety" processes may be involved in a leader's intuitive decision, an important aspect of which is timing, the decision to decide. One is the anxiety of holding the decision until as much information as possible is in. The other is the anxiety of making the decision when there really isn't enough information—which on critical decisions, is usually the case. All of this is complicated by pressures building up from those who want an answer. (p. 37)

These pressures are amplified by the call for "unlimited liability" in relation to those whom one is striving to serve (p. 57). As a result of this call, would-be servant-leaders "cannot escape many challenges and tests" (Tarr, 1995, p. 81).

In his dissertation, Foster (2000) sought to identify the barriers that act as challenges and tests that delimit the effectiveness of and increase the stress experienced by servant-leaders within a traditional command-and-



control hierarchy. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative methodology, he interviewed twenty leaders who worked for a large, traditionally-led organization. These individuals were identified by their peers as possessing the qualities and engaging in the behaviors of servant-leaders. As a result of his research and analysis, Foster identified 180 barriers that revolved around six important mega-categories that he identified as having the most impact as barriers to engaging in servant-leadership for these twenty leaders. These mega-categories included: distrust and unrealistic expectations, embedded leadership model conflict, disengagement and lack of teaming, self-service and reward conflicts, inadequate communications and collaboration, and underutilized learning and development (p. 251).

In addition to identifying these barriers, Foster (2000) revealed the significant frustration, confusion, and stress that servant-leaders experience as a result of the inherently emotionally demanding nature of engaging in servant-leadership and the additional challenges derived from striving to do so within the context of a traditional command-and-control hierarchy. Such challenges were particularly apparent in relation to the issues of conflicting leadership models (p. 271), misunderstanding of servant-leadership (p. 281), inadequate communication (p. 313), lack of development (p. 317), and lack of listening (p. 320). In particular, Foster's participants described the "difficulty of deeper emotional involvement" (p. 139). He wrote, "One of the challenges of servant-leadership is that a deeper emotional environment can tax the individual. The participants seemed to care deeply about people, which takes energy and effort" (p. 139).

Expanding upon this theme, Tarr (1995) described some of these contributing factors that make servant-leadership emotionally taxing. He wrote:

Being empathetic presents a challenge. It is not easy to walk the second or third mile in someone else's shoes. . . . It's much easier to walk away from a problem or [an] unpleasant task. In fact, it takes an extremely tough person to be a true listener, to be a person who can empathize with another. (p. 81)



Tarr went on to argue that collaboration, which “involves risk and vulnerability” and embracing and working through conflict as a result of “different goals, different beliefs and values, and different methodologies,” (p. 81) is similarly challenging.

Lad and Luechauer (1998) also suggested that “anger, frustration, vulnerability, and despondence” are not uncommon emotions one encounters along the path to servant-leadership (p. 65). In part, they attributed this to the effort to empower, when some people do not wish to be empowered. As a result of these emotional challenges, servant-leadership requires perseverance and strength. Greenleaf (1996a) similarly argued that servant-leaders must be strong, which he defined as being able to compose oneself and make difficult decisions amidst stress and, as Kyker (2003) explained, to “maintain serenity in the face of uncertainty” (p. 22).

Given these challenges and demands, one has to wonder why some leaders choose to engage and to stay engaged in servant-leadership. While not specifically stated, the answer, according to Foster (2000), appears to be hardiness. He stated:

Servant-leaders are mission oriented. They are focused on making the world a better place. They have a sense of calling and do not easily walk away from challenge. They gain significant satisfaction from the positive feedback that results from caring for people and treating them with respect. A command and control environment provides a rich opportunity for growth. (p. 248)

Within this statement, the hardiness attributes of commitment and challenge are clearly described. Additionally, the following statement supports the notion of control: “Within their sphere of influence, the servant-leader can make a dramatic difference, especially to his or her associates” (p. 249). Thus, while the participants in Foster’s study felt that the conflict between their leadership style and that of the company was a source of “increased stress” (p. 151), through hardiness they remained committed to their way of leading and “said they refused to give up their principles” (p. 152). Thus, as Greenleaf (1998) wrote,



My best suggestion to you is to clarify, for yourself, what you believe about yourself; because if you seek to go far in realizing your potential for service, you will be venturing into the dangerous and the unknown and the ever-present anxiety may defeat you if you do not have some kind of faith. (p. 109)

This researcher believes that the faith Greenleaf was alluding to may be hardiness, which Maddi might refer to as existential courage (Maddi, 2004). Given the inherently challenging nature of servant-leadership, this quality may constitute an essential characteristic that is bound to develop among servant-leaders and to facilitate their work.

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