

The Spirit of Real Leaders – Servant Leadership

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Introduction

In our first presentation we invited you to think of different words you associate with “leadership”. The list looked like: power, position, control, domination, authority, command, mastery, example, vision, direction, guiding, coercion, influence, organizing, management, excellence, inspiration etc. We can all think of a leader who might show some of these traits and features, but not others, even excelling in some while being in a dire deficit in others.

There are different models or types or styles of leadership (see our lesson #3). We are bound to think of leadership in terms of *managerial* models (or industrial models), whether it is business, politics, or the military. In recent decades the *postindustrial* models have come to forefront, where *relationships*, *ethics*, and *processes* are also emphasised. (Komives) “Debate continues as to whether leadership and management are separate processes, but emerging research emphasises the *process* of leadership. [...] Among these emerging leadership approaches are: authentic leadership, **spiritual leadership**, **servant leadership**, adaptive leadership.” (Northouse)

One of the most intriguing models, particularly resonant in education, is called “Servant Leadership”. It is well known and applied both in religious contexts and in secular (consider the cultures of Southwest Airlines, Marriott International, FedEx or Starbucks, companies known for prioritising the customer and the employee).

Servant Leadership

This approach was promoted by Robert Greenleaf. The idea came from reading Herman Hesse's novel *The Journey to the East*, in which a person called Leo served a group as a *servant*, although he was the unknown *president* of the higher organisation managing that group.

For Greenleaf, a real leader is one who had been a servant first.

Servant leadership in essence

"The servant-leader *is* servant first. [...] It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*." (Greenleaf, 2008. The author covers also the alternative, when one is called first as a leader and only later discovers the servant role.)

Greenleaf's thesis is clear: "The great leader is seen as servant first". In other words, the leader "was servant first" and then "leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant". Indeed, imagining the future, Greenleaf notes that people "will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants".

Greenleaf's program is simple:

1. it is "servants [that] should emerge as leaders";
2. and its corollary is: servants "should follow only servant-leaders".

Put others first

(applied in Education)

"Servant leaders put followers *first*." Can you apply that to your context?

"Putting others first is the *sine qua non* of servant leadership – the defining characteristic" (Northouse, 2016). The servant leadership approach focuses on the leader, on their behaviour, on being attentive to the followers, empathising with them, nurturing them, empowering them, and helping them develop full capacities.

For educators, this means prioritizing **students first**, always. It means seeing beyond the curriculum to the individual child, empathizing with their struggles, celebrating their unique strengths, and fostering an environment where every learner feels empowered to reach their full potential.

"A servant leader has a social responsibility to be concerned about the 'have-nots' and those less privileged" (Northouse, 2016). In a school context, this extends to supporting vulnerable students, engaging with **families** facing challenges, and actively working towards equity in education.

The servant leader also values **community**. Greenleaf argues that “the selfless servant in a group has an extraordinary impact on other members” (Northouse, 2016) and such an approach “is unique because it makes altruism the main component of leadership process” (Northouse, 2016).

Can you believe it?

(the tension between two terms – servant and leader)

“Servant leadership is a **paradox** – an approach that runs counter to common sense [...] seems contradictory and challenges our traditional beliefs about leadership.” (Northouse, 2016). Greenleaf acknowledges the tension of his proposed approach. “Servant and leader. Can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels of status or calling?” (Greenleaf, 2008).

The tensions has been recognised by others also “Servant leadership is not about a personal quest for power, prestige, or material rewards. Instead, from this perspective, leadership begins with a true motivation to serve others.” (Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammell).

Greenleaf goes even further: “As I ponder the fusing of servant and leader it seems a dangerous creation: dangerous for the natural servant to become a leader, dangerous for the leader to be a servant first, and dangerous for a follower to insist that he be led by a servant” (Greenleaf, 2008).

In education, this paradox is particularly potent. It challenges the traditional image of the “leader at the front of the class” and instead positions the educator as

- someone who **serves the learning process**, the individual student's journey, and the collective growth of the school community.
- Someone who empowers **others to lead their own learning** and their own lives, rather than simply directing them.

How will a servant leader act?

Some ten characteristics identified by Spears (2002) offer a practical framework for educators:

1. **Listening:** Deeply listening to students, parents, and colleagues.
2. **Empathy:** Understanding and sharing the feelings of others – especially important when a student is struggling.
3. **Healing:** Fostering an environment where emotional and relational wounds can mend, contributing to a healthy learning space.

4. **Awareness:** Being attuned to the dynamics within the classroom and school, recognizing unspoken needs.
5. **Persuasion:** Guiding and influencing through understanding and logic, rather than coercion, in promoting student engagement and positive behaviour.
6. **Conceptualization:** Envisioning the broader educational goals and how daily actions contribute to them.
7. **Foresight:** Anticipating challenges and opportunities in the learning process and planning accordingly.
8. **Stewardship:** Taking responsibility for the well-being of the school community and its resources.
9. **Commitment to the growth of people:** This is central to teaching – dedicated to the academic, emotional, and social growth of every student and staff member.
10. **Building community:** Fostering a sense of belonging, collaboration, and mutual respect among students and staff.

Outcomes of Servant Leadership

The fruits of this approach can and should be seen in three directions: **followers (students/staff), the organization (school), and the broader community.**

1. **Do those served grow as persons?**

In an educational context, this asks: Do our students become more confident, curious, resilient, and well-rounded individuals? Do our colleagues feel supported in their professional and personal development?

2. **Do they become servants themselves?**

Do we inspire students to act with kindness, compassion, and a desire to contribute positively to their world? Do we see teachers mentoring newer colleagues, fostering a culture of mutual support?

3. **Do the least privileged in society benefit from it?**

Does our school proactively work to address inequalities, provide equitable opportunities, and uplift those who face the most significant barriers?

The authors emphasize it several times:

“The outcomes of servant leadership are **follower performance and growth** (think student achievement and teacher efficacy), **organizational performance** (a thriving school culture), and **societal impact** (graduates who contribute positively to the world)” (Northouse, 2016).

“Servant leaders create value for the community by consciously and intentionally giving back to the community. They are involved in local activities and encourage followers to also

volunteer for community service” (Northouse, 2016). This might mean educators connecting students with local community service projects, or school leaders fostering partnerships that benefit the wider community.

“In an ideal world, servant leadership results in **community and societal change**” (Northouse, 2016). One expected result of servant leadership is that “**followers themselves become servant leaders**” (Northouse, 2016).

Imagine a school where students and staff consistently embody these principles, creating a ripple effect that extends far beyond the school gates.

Conclusion

As Greenleaf’s inspiration was Hesse’s book, let us know how the book ends. The narrator, a character of the book, looks at Leo, the president mistaken for a servant. As now he could see in real light the entire reality, the author concludes: “He must grow, I must disappear” (Hesse, 2018).

Robert Greenleaf, in *Servant as Leader*, challenges us: “The servant as leader must constantly ask himself, **how can I use myself to serve best?**”

For us, as educators, this means constantly reflecting:

- How can I best **serve my students** in discovering their own values, meaning, and purpose?
- How can I help them find their calling and feel a sense of belonging and contribution to a greater cause – whether that's within the school, their community, or the world?
- How can I serve my colleagues and foster a truly collaborative and supportive learning environment for everyone?

This isn't about being a passive presence; it's about **active, intentional service** that empowers, elevates, and inspires. It's about leading by nurturing the potential in every single person you encounter in the educational landscape. Don't forget:

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