

**Is Servant Leadership Radical Enough for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**  
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The conference theme is a question: Is servant leadership radical enough for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The answer is yes, absolutely.

**Power model vs service model**

By radical, I mean fundamentally different, and by fundamentally different, I mean fundamentally different from the power model of leadership that is dominant in most parts of the world.

The power model says that leadership is about acquiring and wielding power. Unfortunately, there are some serious problems with this model. First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely or responsibly. There is no purpose or moral content. Power is seen as an end, not a means.

Second, the power model glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. If leadership is about acquiring and wielding power, anyone who wants to be a leader assumes they have to build a power base. So he builds his, and she builds hers, and after a while, you have all these power groups that are paying so much attention to their rivalry with each other, that they have little time or energy to solve problems or seize opportunities. As a result, organizations and communities get stuck, unable to move forward.

Third, the power model defines success in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for their group or organization or community. These are severe drawbacks.

Another problem is that the power model is not good for the leader. The power-oriented leader thinks that leadership is about him or her, so the leader stops listening to others, and eventually becomes irrelevant, out of touch with those he or she is supposed to be leading. Even worse, the power-oriented leader can never get *enough* power. It becomes an addiction, a disease. The leader always wants *more* power. This can easily result in spiritual corruption and even a life of self-torment.

For power-oriented leaders, power is self-justifying. Power is the end they seek. That is why leaders who live the power model are not very effective in meeting human needs or making life better for others. It's not what they are trying to do. It's not their focus. It's not what they care about. Often, they can gain and maintain power while being remarkably indifferent to the needs of others. In fact, a power-oriented leader may feel justified in making life *worse* for a lot of people, so long as he or she gains and maintains power.

The problems we will be facing in the coming decades are going to be very large. With climate change, we will be facing major migrations due to the rise in sea levels, and changes in food-growing regions due to changes in temperatures. We will need tremendous innovation if we are to combat climate change with zero-carbon alternatives. And if we continue to cut down natural habitats, more people will come in contact with animals that are reservoirs for harmful viruses, and we are likely to have more pandemics. Meanwhile, the rise of China and India in world politics and economics will result in new international competition and will require new relationships and agreements. And then there are religious differences that can continue to result in conflict and violence. All of these factors will have local, national, and international impacts. Organizations will need to learn how to navigate and succeed in the face of these very large challenges.

The power model of leadership isn't good enough to meet this difficult future. We need a model of leadership that works better. We need the service model of leadership. The service model is not about acquiring and wielding power, it is about making a positive difference in the lives of others. Those who live the service model of leadership are often called servant leaders.

### **What is servant leadership?**

So what is servant leadership? Servant leadership is a philosophy of leadership that is based on the desire to serve others. It is ethical, practical, and meaningful. It is ethical because it is about serving people, not using people. It is practical because servant-leaders get results. And it is meaningful because identifying and meeting the needs of others is a meaningful way to live and lead.

A servant leader does not ask, "How can I get power? How can I make people do things?" The servant leader asks, "What do people need? How can I help them to get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization to do it?" Thus, rather than embarking on a quest for personal power, the servant

leader embarks on a quest to identify and meet the needs of others. Servant leaders identify and meet the needs of their colleagues so they can perform at their highest levels. And they identify and meet the needs of whomever their organization serves— customers, clients, patients, members, students, or citizens. As a result, colleagues perform well, and customers get what they need.

By the way, servant leaders *can* exercise power, but power is not their goal. They see power as a tool, and they don't use power very often. On the rare occasions in which they must exercise power, they exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and they exercise it to *serve and protect* others, not to benefit themselves personally.

The idea that leaders should serve others is an idea that goes back thousands of years and can be found in a number of traditions. However, there is a modern servant leadership movement. It was launched in the United States by a businessman, Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf worked for AT&T from 1926 to 1964, during a time in which AT&T was one of the largest companies in the world. He became involved in teaching, training, and personnel assessment. Eventually, he became AT&T's Director of Management Research. It was his job to train and educate the senior leaders of this huge corporation. What he concluded after thirty-eight years of experience was that the most effective leaders were focused on serving others.

Robert Greenleaf coined the words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership” in his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, first published in 1970. This is how Greenleaf defined the servant leader in that essay:

The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... 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.

This is not about being weak or servile. This is about paying attention to the needs of others. It's also about growing people.

Greenleaf said that whatever business we are in, our most fundamental business should be the business of growing people. He said that the best test of

servant leadership is this: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

Growing people is a triple win. When people grow, they benefit personally and professionally. Also, when they grow, the capacity of the organization grows. When the capacity of the organization grows, it can do things better, or do things it was never able to do before. Individuals benefit, the organization benefits, and those served benefit.

Greenleaf was also concerned about the impact that a leader’s decisions have on the least privileged. He asked: “*And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?”

Greenleaf believed that modern institutions could build a better society for all of us if they truly served people. In his second essay, *The Institution as Servant*, he said:

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions— often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

For Greenleaf, the ultimate goal was to make the world a better place. Servant-leaders help their organizations to become servant-institutions, and those servant-institutions truly serve their employees, customers, business partners, communities, and society as a whole.

I think it is significant that Greenleaf’s ideas about servant leadership grew out of his experience in the world of business. During his career at AT&T, he was dealing with practical issues in one of the world’s largest companies. He saw servant leadership as the best way to get things done. It wasn’t a philosophy developed in a think tank or an ivory tower. It wasn’t an abstract idea. It arose from the daily reality he experienced in a large, competitive business.

Today, servant leadership principles are being applied in the public, private, nonprofit, military, and academic sectors. As a result, we have anecdotal evidence about how it works. In addition, leadership scholars have been conducting empirically rigorous studies of servant leadership in the workplace. The results have been very positive.

For example, research has shown that servant leaders facilitate effective teamwork. Servant leaders promote open and problem-driven communication. Servant-leaders may inspire followers to serve the community in which the organization is embedded. Servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction. Recently, Dr. Bob Liden, a professor of management at the University of Illinois at Chicago, conducted research on 147 small to medium-sized companies in South Korea that showed that as servant leadership goes up, profits go up.

So, anecdotal evidence and empirical research demonstrate that servant leadership works. But *why* does it work? Well, why *wouldn't* it work? Think about it. Servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They identify and meet the needs of their colleagues so they can perform at their highest levels. They identify and meet the needs of their customers so that they are truly served. Colleagues perform well, and customers get what they need. Why wouldn't that work? At the most fundamental level, it's pretty simple.

### **Why we need servant leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Looking ahead, there are a number of reasons that we will need more servant leadership during the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let me focus on just three reasons. First, people led by servant leaders perform at higher levels. Second, people led by servant leaders are more creative. Third, servant leaders take into account a broader range of stakeholders, and that helps them to be more successful.

#### *Higher Levels of Performance*

First, people led by servant leaders perform at higher levels. We are going to need higher levels of performance to meet the challenges of the coming decades.

Bob Liden, Sandy Wayne, Hao Zhao, and David Henderson published the result of their research in an article in *The Leadership Quarterly* in 2008. They concluded that servant leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization.

Research by Mark Ehrhart that was published in *Personnel Psychology* in 2004, and research by Fred Walumbwa, Chad Hartnell, and Adegoke Oke that was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2010, described how servant leaders encourage positive organizational citizenship behaviors. Basically, servant leaders establish a fair workplace and create a service climate at work. The result is that employees are willing to give back. They reciprocate with organizational citizenship behaviors that help to get the work done. They go beyond their job descriptions by pitching in to do whatever needs doing.

This willingness to “pitch in to get the work done” is exceptionally important in light of the problem of employee disengagement. I think that this is one of the most extraordinary facts of organizational life— the fact that so many employees are disengaged. Employee disengagement greatly reduces organizational productivity.

The Gallup organization surveys employees worldwide, and divides them into three groups. “Engaged” employees work with passion and feel a proud connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward. “Not engaged” employees are essentially “checked out.” They’re sleepwalking through their workday, putting time— but not energy or passion— into their work. “Actively disengaged” employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

Gallup has concluded that a majority of the global workforce is not engaged. Typically, their surveys indicate that fewer than 20% of employees are actively engaged, 60% are moderately engaged, and as many as 20% are actively *disengaged*, which means that they are working *against* the organization. Gallup points out that converting this group of employees into engaged workers is the most effective strategy that any organization can implement if it wants to increase performance and sustainable long-term growth.

Servant leaders know how to engage employees. They treat people with respect. They listen to people, they include people, and they share information with people. They pay attention to what their colleagues need, and they help their colleagues to grow.

Joe Patrnochak provides us with an example. He tells the story of how he applied servant leadership principles at the Cleveland Clinic to improve employee engagement and patient satisfaction.

The Cleveland Clinic is rated as one of the top healthcare systems in the United States in multiple categories. In 2017, the Cleveland Clinic's operating revenue was \$8.4 billion. It had 7.6 million patient visits and more than 229,000 admissions. As of 2019, it had 67,500 employees, including over 17,000 registered nurses and advanced practice providers, and over 4,520 physicians and scientists in 140 specialties.

Joe Patrnochak introduced servant leadership principles at the Cleveland Clinic while serving as Chief Human Resources Officer from 2007 to 2013. His basic premise was that “if you want people to thrive you need to create a great place for them to work and grow.” A survey on employee engagement showed engagement was low, and a survey of patient satisfaction showed clinical results were superior but the overall patient experience was only average. Those surveys gave Joe the leverage he needed to generate the desire for change.

Among other things, the Cleveland Clinic’s leaders adopted the slogan “we are all caregivers.” The “Cleveland Clinic Experience” was launched to bring together caregivers from different functions and levels. Servant leadership was introduced as the leadership model, and within two years, 3,000 leaders were trained. New programs were established, including the Adoption Assistance Benefit, Caregiver Hardship Program, Tuition Reimbursement Program, and the School at Work Program. The Caregiver Wellness Program provided free access to Weight Watchers and Curves. Over 12,500 employees participated in those programs and lost a total of 75,000 pounds, saving the clinic \$78 million in healthcare costs.

The results were not immediate. Joe didn’t begin to see results until two years after he started the new programs and initiatives. However, after five years, the ratio of “engaged” to “actively disengaged” employees had changed from 2.5 to 1 in 2008 to a world-class 10.5 to 1 in 2013. Patient satisfaction improved just as dramatically. Joe improved employee engagement by growing people and building a stronger community at work.

Greenleaf emphasized the importance of community in his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*. He believed that we need to rediscover vital lost knowledge about how to live in community. He said that without participating in community,

it is difficult to learn trust, respect, and ethical behavior. The love that grows from participation in a community can be exported to businesses, churches, governments, and schools so that they can become communities as well. All that we need to rebuild community is enough servant leaders who are willing to show the way.

Management professor Henry Mintzberg has pointed out that we need communities at work. He said that a crisis deeper than any economic crisis is the depreciation of communities within companies. There has been a decrease in people's sense of belonging to, and caring for, something larger than themselves. Mintzberg says that community is 'the social glue that binds us together for the greater good.' Our organizations need to be communities in which people are engaged, committed to one another, and committed to the organization and its work.

When people belong to a community at work, they support each other in getting the work done. Simon Sinek describes this kind of support in his book, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Sinek talks about the importance of creating a Circle of Safety at work. He says:

By creating a Circle of Safety around the people in the organization, leadership reduces the threats people feel inside the group, which frees them up to focus more time and energy to protect the organization from the constant dangers outside and seize the big opportunities."

Sinek says that in a Circle of Safety:

...we feel valued by our colleagues and we feel cared for by our superiors. We become absolutely confident that the leaders of the organization and all those with whom we work are there for us and will do what they can to help us succeed... When the Circle is strong and that feeling of belonging is ubiquitous, collaboration, trust and innovation result.

So servant leaders can increase performance by engaging employees, and one way they can do that is by building the organization's community, a community that provides a Circle of Safety.

Servant leaders also increase performance by focusing on motivation and meaning at work. Motivation and meaning can have a very large, positive impact on performance and productivity.

We all know the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is about what you *have* to do, not what you *want* to do. The task needs to be done, but it is not something that you really want to do. Managers therefore offer incentives or threats of punishment to get the task done. They tell people that if you do *this*, you will get *that*. And *that* is a reward not related to the work itself.

Intrinsic motivation is the opposite. It is about what you *want* to do, not what you *have* to do. People are intrinsically motivated when they do something because it is fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. When you are intrinsically motivated, the work itself is your reward.

Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and his colleagues spent many years studying motivation at work. In his book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy and Commitment*, Dr. Thomas identified a sense of meaning as an important intrinsic reward.

Meaningful work was central to Greenleaf's business ethic. Greenleaf said:

...the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work. Put another way, the business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customer.

How important is meaning at work? Dr. Catherine Bailey and Dr. Adrian Madden interviewed 135 people in the United Kingdom who work in a variety of occupations. They published their results in an article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* titled "What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless." They said that the research shows that meaningfulness is more important to employees than *any other aspect of work*. It is more important to employees than pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions. Bailey and Madden said that meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved employee performance, commitment, and satisfaction.

This makes sense. If you find meaning in your work and you are intrinsically motivated, it is likely that you will be more productive—you will be able to do more, and do it better, for longer. Dr. Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, explored this issue in his research. He separated prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation to study their effects, if any, on each other. He defined prosocial motivation as the desire to benefit or help others—to serve a greater

purpose. He said that intrinsic motivation comes from interest in the work or the enjoyment of doing the work.

Dr. Grant studied 140 workers at a telephone call center and 58 employees at a fire department. He focused on the issues of persistence, performance, and productivity. Grant concluded that employees display higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity when they experience prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation together.

Dr. Grant's conclusion matches what Greenleaf said about servant leadership. Greenleaf said that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, to benefit others. That's the prosocial motivation. Greenleaf also emphasized growth and meaning. That's the intrinsic motivation. When you put the two together, you get the result that Grant got in his research— higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

Because meaning is so important, servant leaders do whatever they can to create an environment in which meaning is enhanced for their colleagues. Servant leaders are meaning-makers. They find meaning in the work of others and share that meaning with them. They also seek to redesign work to make it more meaningful.

One leader who focused on purpose and meaning as a way of lifting her colleagues and her company was Cheryl Bachelder. Bachelder was the CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen from 2007 to 2017. The restaurant chain had \$2.4 billion in sales and 2,187 restaurants in 27 countries. Sales and profits had been declining for years. But six years after Bachelder assumed leadership, the improvement was dramatic. Sales had climbed 25%, market share had grown from 14 to 21%, profitability was up by 40%, and the stock price was up 450%.

In her book, *Dare to Serve*, Bachelder said that one important step she took was to invite the company's leaders to develop a personal purpose that gave meaning to their work. She said that it was the leader's responsibility to bring purpose and meaning to the work of the organization. Popeyes conducted workshops that took team members through several exercises regarding their life experiences, values, strengths, and action plans. Bachelder said that the leaders at Popeyes who had an action plan for their personal purpose were having more impact on the business. She concluded that personal purpose leads to sustained superior performance.

So, this is the first reason we need servant leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Servant leaders will improve performance in their organizations by engaging more employees, creating communities at work, and helping employees to find meaning so that they will be intrinsically motivated and perform at high levels.

### *Creativity and innovation*

The second reason that we need servant leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that servant leaders create conditions in which their employees are more creative. We will need lots of creativity and innovation to succeed in the future.

Employee creativity is influenced by the focus of their leaders. According to scholars, “prevention focus” is evoked by leaders when needs for security, attention to losses, or the fulfillment of duties and obligations are emphasized. By contrast, “promotion focus” is evoked by leaders when needs for growth, attention to gains, or the attainment of aspirations and ideals are emphasized. Individuals who are prevention focused tend to be more conservative and less open to creativity and innovation, whereas individuals who are promotion focused tend to exhibit “exploratory” behaviors, such as creativity and innovation. Servant leaders understand the need for structure and the fulfillment of duties, but they are promotion focused, encouraging creativity.

Mitchell Neubert, Michele Kacmar, Dawn Carlson, Lawrence Chonko, and James Roberts published an article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2008. They concluded that leaders who model servant leadership induce in employees a focus on nurturance, aspirations, and gains. Employees of servant-leaders were shown to be more helping and creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership.

This is important because creativity will not only be a competitive advantage— it will be a *necessity* in the coming decades. Servant leaders will help their organizations to be flexible, adaptable, creative, and innovative during a future that will be characterized by significant turmoil.

### *Including all stakeholders*

The third reason that we need servant leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that servant leaders typically look beyond their organizations and take into account a broad range of stakeholders. Greenleaf said that an organization should care about everyone it touches— employees, customers, creditors, shareholders, members,

communities, and society at large, including the least privileged. Research suggests that this broad view, this inclusive approach, results in greater organizational success.

In 2012, Suzanne Peterson, Benjamin Galvin, and Donald Lange published an article in the journal *Personnel Psychology*. Their study was based on interviews of 126 chief executive officers in technology organizations in Silicon Valley. They interviewed the CEOs at length, and then classified them as founders, narcissists, or servant leaders. They found a positive relationship between servant leadership and firm performance. Companies led by servant leaders generated better financial results than companies led by founders or narcissists. The researchers said that CEOs could improve their firms' performance if they adopted more inclusive forms of leadership, such as servant leadership, that take into account a broader number of stakeholders and that are more other-focused.

James Lemoine, Nathan Eva, Jeremy Meuser, and Patricia Falotico published an article in 2020 in *Business Horizons* in which they examined the stakeholder approach to leadership. They drew on more than 200 peer-reviewed articles as well as a number of case studies. They concluded that a broad stakeholder focus that includes employees, customers, suppliers, and communities, not just shareholders, is the optimal path for successful business performance.

I think that this broad view will be even more crucial in the coming decades because the world will continue to change in dramatic ways. Servant leaders will be tracking the broader changes and will take into account more stakeholders. This will make them more responsive to the changing external environment, giving them the opportunity to adapt and succeed. They will be better informed and will make better decisions.

## **Conclusion**

So these are just three reasons why I believe that servant leadership is radical enough for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, I believe that servant leadership is the *only* approach to leadership that is radical enough to meet the coming challenges. Servant leaders will improve performance in their organizations by engaging more employees, building communities at work, and helping employees to find meaning so that they will be intrinsically motivated and perform at high levels. Servant leaders will make sure their work environments encourage people to be more helpful and creative. And they will take a broader view of the world around them,

making them more responsive and more successful in the very challenging years to come.

My hope is that many, many more people will learn and apply the principles of servant leadership. Servant leadership is what leadership *should* be. It is also what leadership *must* be, if we are to survive and thrive in the coming decades.

Thank you.

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