

# **Servant Leadership and the Paradoxical Commandments**

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**Presented to the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership U.K.  
& Happy People Conference  
“Leaders Serving People Conference 2008”  
Ambassador Hotel, Euston, London, England  
November 4, 2008**

Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to be here, and to learn from all the wonderful presentations we have heard so far. I appreciate your hospitality and fellowship and insights.

[Opening remarks omitted]

I find servant leadership to be both simple and complex—both fundamental common sense, and delicately attuned to subtle shifts in the meaning of words and ideas. I find it a bit of a challenge to sort through so many angles and interpretations. The fact that there are so many angles and interpretations is a good thing. It is the reason that the dialogue and daily experience are so rich, and worth sharing. However, it is easy to get confused.

First, I notice that there are those who simply cannot combine those two nouns, “servant” and “leader.” To them, leadership is about power, and servanthood is about obsequiousness, so the two words can’t possibly go together. They are tempted to talk about servant leadership as a kind of alternating current. Sometimes, one is a servant, and sometimes, one is a leader. It would be like me saying, “Call me on Tuesday. I am a servant on Tuesday. But if you really want any help, don’t call me on Wednesday. I am a power-oriented leader son of a gun on Wednesday.”

Others pick one of the two words, and emphasize that word alone. For example, some people emphasize the word “servant,” and leave out the leader. We know that we need servants, so that is good—but not all servants are leaders. Others talk about leaders, good leaders, skillful leaders, and simply assume that they are servant leaders because anybody can see that

they are serving the interests of the organization. But not all leaders are servant-leaders.

Some people believe that servant leadership is about “being.” It is about character, and values. It is about being humble, and caring. Others believe that servant leadership is about “doing.” It is about key practices. It seems to me that many people who are devoted to servant leadership will come across a “good practice” and simply announce that it is a servant leadership practice. Servant leadership is good, and that particular practice is good, therefore that practice must be a practice of servant leadership. I am not championing that logic, merely reporting it.

And then, for some people, servant leadership is a religious concept. That is not surprising. All the world’s great religions teach the importance of serving others. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Lao-Tzu described a facilitating leader, and two thousand years ago Jesus described a servant leader. But servant leadership itself is a teaching, not a religious doctrine. It is not theology. It is therefore not necessary to have any particular religious belief, or any religious belief at all, to understand and live the life of servant leadership.

In my work at the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, I find myself striving for a focus, a description, and some definitions to help others understand what Robert Greenleaf had in mind and what we think is especially useful today. I find myself returning over and over again to the common sense logic of servant leadership. Here is what makes sense to me.

I believe that every organization exists to meet people’s needs. Whether the organization is public, or private, or non-profit, or academic—whether it’s a business or a government agency or a social service organization or a school or university—the purpose of the organization is to meet people’s needs. Organizations receive income in different ways—from sales, or fees, or donations, or tax revenues—but each organization serves customers, clients, patients, students, members, or citizens.

I enjoy challenging private sector business people who think that their businesses exist to make money—to make a profit. Obviously, businesses need to make money, and won’t last long if they don’t make a profit. But businesses don’t exist to make money, they make money to exist. Their purpose is not money, their purpose is to serve their customers and clients.

If businesses exist to make money, then governments exist to collect taxes, universities exist to collect tuition, and non-profit organizations exist to collect donations. Certainly, they need to do those things, but that is not why they exist. They exist to serve their customers, clients, patients, members, and citizens. If organizations aren't serving others, and serving them well, the organizations should not exist.

My next belief is that organizations cannot meet the needs of customers without meeting the needs of employees or colleagues or associates. I agree with the concept that if you take care of your employees, they will take care of your customers, and the result will be a successful business. Of course, employees have their own needs. They need the skills and equipment and time to meet the needs of customers. They need to earn a living, so they can take care of themselves and their families. They also need meaning and purpose in their lives. That meaning should not be hard to find. After all, when we go to work each day, we help people get food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, and recreation. Meeting the needs of others is a meaningful activity. So when we go to work each day, we get what we need by helping other people to get what they need.

Now—if the purpose of every organization is to meet people's needs, both inside and outside the organization, then the most important leadership issue is this: What kind of leadership is best suited to meet the needs of both employees and customers? It is important to know what kind of leadership serves others best, because that is the reason for each organization's existence, and it is also the key to each organization's success. This is a fundamental bottom-line question.

## **Listening**

Here's what I think organizations need to do to be really successful at serving others.

First, you need to do a huge amount of listening. Find customers or potential customers and ask them about their wants and needs, their hopes and dreams. Gather feedback in as many ways as possible from your colleagues, about their own needs, and about what they know about their customers' needs. Conduct informal interviews, formal interviews, surveys, discussion groups, focus groups, and market research.

Spend a lot of time asking, listening, watching, and thinking about what you learn. This is really the starting point. How can you meet people's needs if you don't know what those needs are? You have to find out. Once you know what your customers and colleagues want and need, you can focus on how to provide it. And if you are able to provide it, you will be very successful as an organization. You will have happy, productive employees, and happy, satisfied customers.

The main point is that you don't begin with the answer. You don't begin with your own knowledge or expertise. You begin with questions that help identify the wants and needs of your customers and colleagues. Not nearly enough organizations spend time asking questions, or if they do it, they don't do it often enough, or broadly enough, or deeply enough.

One challenge is that most organizations are run by experienced professionals who know a lot about what their colleagues and customers want and need. They know a lot, so they may not feel driven to learn more, which means that *they don't know enough*. Times change, communities change, demographics and economics change, technology changes, and they get out of touch, out of synch with the lives of those they serve. Remember: Nothing is harder than trying to ram a product or service down the throats of people who don't want it. If you are good at listening and responding to what you hear, people will be asking for your product or service, not resisting it.

One of the most relentless listeners I have ever met is Richard Pieper, Chairman of PPC Partners, Inc., headquartered in Milwaukee. Dick Pieper is on the Board of the Greenleaf Center in the United States. Dick's company, PPC Partners, owns a series of electrical service and construction firms. Dick joined Pieper Electric as President in 1960, when the family-owned business had eight employees doing \$250,000 of business per year. Today, PPC Partners, Inc. employs 900 to 1,100 people, does hundreds of millions dollars in sales, and is one of the top electrical contracting firms in the United States.

One reason for the company's dramatic growth is that Dick is always getting feedback from colleagues and customers. He is always asking and listening, inside and outside the company. After every company meeting, he asks each person who attended to give a complete evaluation of the meeting,

with recommendations on how to make the next meeting better. Dick even has a Chairman's Office Survey in which he asks each employee to rate him and his executive assistant on their quality of service, reliability, knowledge, and timeliness. Then of course there are regular surveys of customers. The comments are studied, and follow-up is comprehensive. At Dick's company, listening is a broad-based, systematic process with a focus on constant improvement.

### **Changing the Pyramid**

To do a good job of listening, you need to be sure that everyone in your organization, from top to bottom, is paying attention to your customers every day.

That is hard to do if you operate with a traditional hierarchy, shaped like a pyramid, with only a few people at the top—the President or CEO, COO, CFO, CIO—the “C” class—and then middle managers, and then the employees who actually deliver the programs, products, or services. You have to change this pyramid if you want everybody to stay focused on customers.

The first reason is that in the traditional pyramid, people pay more attention to their bosses than to their customers. People are looking “up” to their bosses, rather than “out” to the customer. The problem is that pleasing your boss may have nothing to do with serving your customers. You can please your boss, and she can please her boss, and he can please the Board of Directors, without anybody really paying attention to the wants and needs of the customer. So you have to invert the pyramid, or tip it over, so that everyone can focus on the customer.

Of course, if you are the leader, it makes sense to stand at the top of the pyramid long enough to articulate the mission and the vision and establish the goals, so that everyone knows where they are headed. But then you need to focus on implementation, or the mission and vision and goals will come to nothing. Focusing on implementation means helping your direct reports, who help their direct reports, who help the customers. You make sure that everyone has the training, and the resources, and the time to implement the vision and serve the customer. You run interference for your direct reports when they need it. You give them the help they need to be effective.

Another problem with the traditional pyramid is that the person at the top of the pyramid—let's call that person the chief or President—has difficulty getting accurate information or testing his or her ideas. The chief is usually not part of the grapevine, and people tend to tell the chief only what they *want* the chief to know, not what the chief *needs* to know. Information gets filtered.

This problem is actually easy to solve. You may have solved it long ago. What you need leading your organization is not an individual chief, but a team. You need a council of senior leaders and managers who trust each other, share information with each other, and test each other's ideas. You need a team of senior leaders whose members are comfortable talking to each other as equals. The chief or President or CEO should be *first* among equals, with the authority to make the final decisions. That is clear. But he or she needs to be accessible, open to challenge, and receptive to the real news, not the filtered news. This will help connect the chief with the rest of the organization and the customers it serves.

### **Developing your people**

Okay— we are committed to listening, and we have changed the pyramid so that everyone can focus on the customer. Our chief or President is part of a team, and is not isolated from the rest of the organization. We're off to a good start.

Obviously, our organization's ability to listen to and serve our customers will only be as good as our people—our colleagues, associates, or employees. We need to train and develop our people, so that they are good at listening and serving our customers, in addition to having whatever technical skills are required by their jobs. If we take care of our people, they will take care of our customers.

This certainly works in the business world. TDIndustries, located in Dallas, Texas, is a highly successful air conditioning and specialty construction company. The company's Chairman is Jack Lowe, another member of the Greenleaf Center Board in the United States. Jack's company, TDIndustries, has been on *Fortune* magazine's list of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America. In fact, it has been on the list every year

since the list was started, so *Fortune* magazine has put TDIndustries in its Hall of Fame.

It is significant that the TDIndustries “Mission Statement” is not about profit, or market share, or leadership in technology. The Mission Statement is about developing people. It says: “We are committed to providing outstanding career opportunities by exceeding our customers’ expectations through continuous aggressive improvement.” The Mission Statement is elaborated by saying, “We believe in continuous, intense ‘people-development’ efforts, including substantial training budgets.” In a world in which employee turnover is very expensive, TDIndustries has the competitive advantage of attracting and keeping excellent employees. They do it by constantly developing their people.

### **Coaching, not Controlling**

One of the best ways to develop your people is to coach and mentor them.

In a lot of old management textbooks, the assumption was that a manager is there to “control” his or her unit or organization. The people who report to the manager constitute his or her “span of control.” The manager’s job is to “keep things under control.”

Certainly, we need some rules and procedures and controls. The problem with focusing on control is that *nobody really controls anybody else*. Each of us controls our own time and attention, but nobody else’s. A leader may have “authority” and may issue an order, but followers have to accept the leader’s authority and decide to comply with the order, or nothing will happen.

Yes, a leader can threaten punishment, but even then, individuals have to decide if they are going to cooperate or accept the punishment. If you work in the kind of organization that allows you to fire a person who resists authority, you can go ahead and fire that person, but the person still hasn’t complied with the order. And when that person leaves, you have to pay the cost of lost productivity while a new person is being hired and trained and brought up to speed as the replacement. And some skills are in short supply.

So giving orders is not enough. You have to make sure that people understand the order, see the purpose of the order, and are willing and able to do what needs to be done. That requires inspiring, engaging, coaching, and mentoring.

### **Unleashing the energy and intelligence of others**

If you are training and developing your colleagues, and you spend time coaching and mentoring them, then you will be comfortable allowing them to make decisions. You can unleash the energy and intelligence of your employees. Many people call this “empowerment.” I am not especially comfortable with that word, because it sounds as though I have power and others don’t, so I am giving some of my power to them. I believe that everyone already has power—the question is whether or not we are going to allow them to use it.

Not unleashing the energy and intelligence of others is extraordinarily sad and wasteful. Knowledge and skill are needed at all levels, and everyone counts. Not everybody has the same qualifications, or experience, or role, or level of pay. But everybody’s job is important, or it should not exist. Everybody is part of the team, so everybody should be invited to make the biggest contribution they can make. After all, the organization is paying for *all* its people. Why not engage them fully in the work at hand?

So—if we want to serve others, inside and outside our organizations, we need to listen to our customers, change the pyramid to listen to them even better, and develop, coach, and unleash the potential of our employees or colleagues or associates. If we do that, we will be on target. We will know what our customers want, and our employees will be empowered to deliver it. As a result, our organizations will be successful.

### **What we call it: Servant Leadership**

That’s not just my opinion. A lot of experts on leadership and management think that the practices I have just described will lead to an organization’s success. These experts include Ken Blanchard, Jim Collins, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, Joseph Jaworski, Peter Senge, and Meg Wheatley.

Of course, people have used different words to describe these leadership practices. You could call it service leadership, or serving leadership, or needs-based leadership, or Level 5 leadership. In the end, it doesn't matter what we call this kind of leadership. What matters is that *it works*. What matters is that you will be most successful when you truly meet the needs of your customers and colleagues.

At the Greenleaf Center, we call these leadership practices *servant leadership*. Where did those two words, "servant leadership," come from? They came from an experienced businessman.

Robert Greenleaf was a highly respected businessman who worked for AT&T for 38 years, from 1926 to 1964. Toward the end of his career, he was AT&T's Director of Management Research. It was his job to figure out how leaders and managers at AT&T could become more effective.

After Greenleaf retired in 1964, he reflected and decided that there had to be a better model than the power model of leadership he saw at AT&T. In 1970 he published an essay entitled "The Servant as Leader," in which he coined the phrase "servant-leader" and launched the modern servant leadership movement in America. We have sold hundreds of thousands of copies of that essay since it was first published.

Greenleaf distinguished between leaders who are "leader first," and those who are a "servant first." Those who are leader-first are power-oriented leaders, while those who are a servant first are service-oriented leaders or servant-leaders. Here is Greenleaf's definition:

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 leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types...

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, 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? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

What I see in Greenleaf's definition is the idea that one's deepest desire must be to serve others. That must be one's first priority. One must have a servant's heart. Then when one emerges into a leadership position, one will remember that leading is a way of serving. Servant leadership is about both "being" and "doing," because without the appropriate character traits and values, without being a certain kind of person, it will be hard if not impossible to do what servant leaders do.

### **The Power Model**

There is something else that I see in Greenleaf's definition, and that is the abandonment of the power model of leadership in favor of the service model of leadership. That was a bold move, because the power model of leadership is the dominant model in most cultures.

I remember that when I was growing up, leadership was always defined in terms of power. It was about acquiring and wielding power. It was about making people do things. It was about clever strategies, and how to attack and win. It was about raw power, with no relationship to ethics or morality.

I have learned over the past 30 years that there are a lot of problems with the power model. Here are the problems that I have seen in my own work experience—in the public sector, private sector, non-profit sector, and academic sector.

First, the power model of leadership focuses on *having* power, not on using it wisely. Power is an end in itself. There is no purpose, no moral content. It is just power for its own sake.

Second, the power model of leadership promotes conflict between power groups or factions. People are taught that leadership is about power, so they establish themselves in power groups that compete with other power groups. These power groups become so focused on their rivalries with each other, that they can't focus on solving problems or seizing opportunities. They are also reluctant to cooperate with each other, because if things go

well, they might have to share the credit, and that would change their relative power.

Third, the power model defines victory in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for his or her organization or community. Those are some severe drawbacks.

Unfortunately, there are two more problems with the power model, and that is the impact that it has on the leaders who use it. First, people who seek power, often become irrelevant as leaders. They focus on what they want, instead of what other people want, and they lose touch with the people they are supposed to be serving. Second, people who seek power can never get enough of it. It becomes a kind of disease. They always want more, and more, and more. This easily results in spiritual corruption and an unhappy life of self-torment.

### **The Service Model**

By contrast, servant-leaders live the service model of leadership. I think a servant-leader is simply a leader who is focused on serving others. A servant-leader loves people, and wants to help them. Loving and helping others gives a servant-leader meaning and satisfaction in life.

The 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. That is the key concept: Identify and meet the needs of others. That is the mission of the servant-leader.

One way to contrast a power-oriented leader and a service-oriented leader is this: Power-oriented leaders want to *make* people do things. Servant-leaders want to *help* people do things. That's why servant-leaders are usually facilitators, coordinators, healers, partners, and coalition-builders.

There is another big difference between the power model and the service model of leadership. The power model assumes a hierarchy. Only a few people have power— those at the top of the hierarchy. In the service

model, the hierarchy doesn't matter. That's because *anybody* in a family, organization, or community can be of service. *Anybody* can identify and meet the needs of others. *Anybody* can respond to the call to be a servant-leader.

Perhaps the simplest way to explain the difference is this: The power model is about *grabbing*. The service model is about *giving*.

Now, we live in a real world. We know that power abhors a vacuum. Somebody is going to exercise power, and it makes a difference who that somebody is. Certainly, a servant-leader can accumulate and exercise power. A servant-leader can even become angry and enter the fray to do battle. However, for the servant-leader, power is only a tool, one among many tools. It is only a means, not an end. So the servant-leader accumulates power or becomes angry *on behalf of others*. A servant-leader acts in response to the way *others* are treated, not in response to the way he or she is treated.

Servant-leaders can be many different types of leader, depending on their personalities and the specific circumstances. What they have in common is this. They go into a group or organization and ask, is there a gap or missing link or blockage of some kind that is making it hard for this group to achieve what it wants to achieve? If so, can I identify what that gap or missing link or blockage is? If I can identify it, can I do something about it? If I can't do anything about it, can I find someone who can? Since the missing link or gap or blockage will not always be the same, the servant-leader does not always perform the same role or service in each case.

### **The Three Options**

Now, let me ask this question: Why would anyone want to be a servant-leader? Some begin by serving, and as they emerge into leadership positions, they remember they are there to serve—that leading only has meaning if it is a way to serve. Others become servant-leaders as a result of their faith—they are following the scriptures in their religion. But I think most servant-leaders back into it, over time, as part of their life experience. I can think of two reasons that that happens. First, servant-leaders make a moral decision, and second, they discover where to find the most meaning in life.

Let's start with the moral decision. When you understand that people have many needs, I think you have only three basic options:

- (1) do nothing, and ignore the needs of others--which is an option I consider a moral failure; or
- (2) take advantage of people's weaknesses, cynically exploit their needs, and seek personal gain at their expense-- which is an option I consider an even worse moral failure; or
- (3) do the right thing, and try to meet people's needs.

The third option is the servant-leader option, and it is the only moral one. That is still the right option, even if you fail to achieve what you hope to achieve.

If you try to do what is right and good and true, and feel that you have failed, you may be tempted to shift to the cynical option of exploiting others or the indifferent option of doing nothing. But there is no justification for falling into the two *immoral* options, just because things are not going the way you had hoped, or people don't appreciate what you have done, or people even criticize you for the good you are trying to do. Servant-leaders stay with the third option, no matter how difficult it may be.

Each of us likes to be appreciated. That's normal. But it is hard to be a servant leader if you crave applause. Focusing on applause means that you are focused on yourself, not others. You should focus instead on the meaning and satisfaction that you receive when you help others. That is something that nobody can take away from you. The meaning and satisfaction are yours, whether anybody else applauds or not.

I was fortunate to learn this early in life. One of the really important experiences of my life occurred as I walked to the stadium for the student awards ceremony at Roosevelt High School my senior year. It occurred to me that I was so happy about what I had done that year, and felt so good about what I had learned, and who I had helped, that I didn't need any awards. *I had already been rewarded.* I already had the sense of meaning and satisfaction that came from doing a good job. That realization was a major breakthrough for me. I felt liberated. I felt an immense inner peace.

## **The Paradoxical Commandments**

Two years later, in 1968, at the height of the student unrest on American college campuses, I urged high school student leaders to learn how to work through the system to get things done. I challenged them with what I called "The Paradoxical Commandments of Leadership." Here is what I wrote:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

And finally:

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Ten Paradoxical Commandments. The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. So each one begins with a statement that's difficult, that's about adversity. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered; or the good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow; or people really need help, but may attack you if you do help them.

But each statement of adversity is followed by the positive commandment: Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Help people anyway.

The paradox is this: Even when the world out there is difficult—even when the world out there is crazy—you and I can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We do that by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves. Facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves.

You and I know that as individuals, we can't control all kinds of things that go on in the world. I mean, as individuals we can control the world economy or population growth, or natural disasters like fires and floods, or when a hurricane might hit or when a terrorist might strike or when a war might break out, or which company will buy which company, which jobs will be created and which jobs will be eliminated. There are so many things we can't control. We can work hard, and prepare, and seize opportunities—we got to do that. We can join with others, and try to influence those external events—we ought to do that. But there are so many things that, as individuals, we just can't control.

What we can control is our inner lives. You and I get to decide who we're going to be and how we're going to live. And we can live our most cherished values, and we can be close to our family and friends, and we can do what we know is right and good and true—no matter what. *No matter what*. And the good news is, that's where people have been finding a lot of meaning, for a long, long time.

Some people look at the Paradoxical Commandments a personal declaration of independence. I can be independent of all that stuff that's happening out there, when it comes to finding meaning and happiness. I can find it anyway.

Other people look at the commandments as a “no excuses” policy. Okay, some people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. So what? That’s no excuse. You have to love them anyway. You don’t want to limit your life by limiting your love. You have to love them anyway. And maybe the good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. So what? That’s no excuse. You don’t run out and do bad. You have to do good anyway. That’s who you are, that’s your character, that’s where the meaning comes from. You have to do good anyway.

I think it’s three times now that somebody has come up to me after a presentation and basically said: “You know, Kent, you must have been having a really bad year when you wrote these things.” What can I say? I was a sophomore in college, I was 19 when I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments, and I have admitted publicly that I couldn’t get a date. Actually, it was worse than that. I could get a date, but then I would spend the evening talking about the meaning of life. And then I couldn’t get the next date. So I had a lot of time on Friday and Saturday nights to write things for student leaders like the Paradoxical Commandments. Life is very humbling, isn’t it? I mean, none of this would have happened to me if I had had a normal social life.

I was optimistic then, and I am optimistic now. I believe that if you go out and do what is right, and good, and true, you will often be successful, you will often be recognized, you will often be rewarded. So the question is: What if you aren’t? What if you put your heart and mind and soul into it, and your project fails? What if you do a brilliant job, and nobody notices? And the answer is: So what? So what? You still have to be who you have to be. You still have to do what you have to do. You still have to live your most cherished values, and be close to your family and friends, and do what you know is right and good and true—because that’s where you’re going to find the most meaning. That’s where you’re going to find the deep happiness. And you don’t want to give that up—don’t ever give that up, certainly not when times are tough; certainly not then.

### **Where the Paradoxical Commandments traveled**

Well, I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments in a little booklet for student leaders. The booklet was published in 1968, and we sold about 25,000 or 30,000 copies around the United States, and that was great.

I went on with my life, extended my adolescence as long as possible, went to five different universities. I finally settled down, got married, started a job, started a family. And 25 years went by, and I didn't know what was happening to the Paradoxical Commandments. I know now that what was happening is that people were lifting the Paradoxical Commandments out of that little student council booklet and putting them up on their walls, and their refrigerator doors, and passing them to friends. And they traveled—they traveled all over the world. It is estimated that, as of today, millions of people have used the Paradoxical Commandments.

In 1997, I learned that Mother Teresa had put the Paradoxical Commandments up on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta. That discovery changed my life. I decided to start speaking and writing about the Paradoxical Commandments again, 30 years after I first published them.

Servant-leaders understand the Paradoxical Commandments. The Paradoxical Commandments focus on personal meaning, and so do servant-leaders. That is what makes it possible for them to keep working, whether they get applause, indifference, or even a negative response. They like to be treated well, but they are not especially concerned when they are treated badly. Servant leaders are not worried about the attention others pay to them, but the attention they pay to others. That's where the meaning is to be found.

### **Meaning Maximizers**

So what's it all about? It's about finding meaning. Remember I said that I think there are two reasons that people kind of back into becoming servant leaders. First, they choose the third option, to help people no matter how difficult it is.

The second reason is that servant leaders discover where to find the most meaning in life. What they learn is that the search for success and the search for meaning are not the same search. They can overlap, but they are not the same. The things that our secular, commercial, society pushes hard as symbols of success may provide relatively little personal meaning.

For example, power is a symbol of success, but people learn that there is more meaning in service—more meaning in helping people than in ordering them around. Wealth is a big symbol of success, but people learn over time that there is more meaning in just enjoying the richness of daily

life—friends, family, hobbies, sunsets. Fame is a symbol of success, but people know there is more meaning in being known intimately by a few people than in being known superficially by millions of people. Winning is a symbol of success, but people learn over time that there is so much more meaning in always doing one’s personal best, no matter what.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with the symbols of success. I think we have all been given certain gifts, and we should all work hard and be as successful as we can be. I don’t get up in the morning and rush out to fail, and I hope you don’t either. The problem with the symbols of success is that they’re *not enough*. We need more than success. It is not enough to get ahead. We also need to get meaning.

I believe that there are at least three benefits to finding meaning in life and at work: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) good mental health, and (3) deep happiness. I’d like to talk about each of these three benefits.

### **Meaning as an intrinsic motivator**

The second benefit of finding meaning or purpose is that meaning is an intrinsic motivator. This is important, because people who are intrinsically motivated are more productive, more innovative, more committed, and less likely to feel stress or burn out, than those who are extrinsically motivated.

As you know, extrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by something other than the work or activity, while intrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by the work or activity itself. For example, in school, a student who studies to get a good grade in order to get money from Dad or Mom, is *extrinsically* motivated. A student who studies because he or she is interested in learning, and enjoys learning, is *intrinsically* motivated. We are intrinsically motivated when we do things because we want to, not because we have to. We are intrinsically motivated when we do something because it is fun or good or the right thing to do, or it is meaningful and fulfilling.

As many of you know, dramatic testimony on the importance of meaning as an intrinsic motivator point came from Viktor Frankl in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl described his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II. It is a painful story

of suffering and death. Prisoners had to work hard each day, with little food, clothing, sleep, or medicine in an environment of constant brutality and fear. Frankl observed that prisoners who had faith in the future, who still had a reason to live, were the ones who were most likely to survive. From this experience, he developed his theory of *logotherapy*, or meaning therapy, in which a patient is “confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life.” Frankl believed that “striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.” That meaning varies from person to person, because each person’s circumstances and tasks are different.

### **Meaning and mental health**

A second benefit of finding meaning at work is that meaning is an intrinsic motivator, and those who are intrinsically motivated have better mental health. Edward L. Deci wrote a book titled, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self Motivation*. The book reports on a study done on six types of life aspirations. Three were extrinsic— the aspiration to be wealthy, famous, and physically attractive. The other three were intrinsic— the aspiration to have meaningful personal relationships, to make contributions to the community, and to grow as individuals.

Notice that the extrinsic goals are about what one *has*. The intrinsic goals are about who one *is*. The research showed that people who were heavily focused on extrinsic rewards had poor mental health, while those who were focused on intrinsic rewards had more vitality, higher-self esteem, and a greater sense of well being.

### **Meaning and Deep Happiness**

Finally, I believe that each of us can be and should be deeply happy. What do I mean by “deep happiness”? I mean the kind of happiness that touches your spirit and connects with your soul. It is hard to describe. Some people call it self-fulfillment, or self-actualization, or being centered. Others call it living their passion, or following their bliss. For people of faith, it is about finding the divine will for their lives, and then living that will.

Seeking deep happiness is not selfish. I am not suggesting that you try to be happy *instead* of others or *at the expense* of others. I am suggesting that you should be deeply happy so that you will be at your best, and will be able to help others to be deeply happy and at their best, as well. When we

experience deep happiness—we are ready to really help others. We become more loving, more giving, more patient, more enthusiastic. We become a gift to others. So we should be deeply happy for their sake as well as ours.

There is no question that meaning and purpose are keys to being deeply happy. There is lots of research, and we learn this through our own experience. So—if you want to be deeply happy, the most fundamental question is not: Am I a success or a failure? The most fundamental question is not: Is my life hard or easy? The most fundamental question is not: Do people appreciate me? The most fundamental question is: Is my life meaningful? *Is my life meaningful?* If you can answer yes to that question, you can be deeply happy.

The symbols of success are not necessarily bad. They're just *not enough*. It is not enough to get ahead. We also need to get meaning.

### **My Hobby**

If meaning is so important, where do we find it? Over the past seven years, I have been surveying people in the United States, and asking them about the sources of personal meaning in their lives. I've collected about 3,000 survey forms.

I don't have any random samples, so I can't extrapolate to a larger population. But I'm really interested in what I've learned from these 3,000 people. I've done about 30 groups, and all but one of the groups rated the same source of meaning highest. That source was "family." And the one group that didn't put "family" highest put "giving and receiving love" the highest, and family was right behind.

You know what always comes out high? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is low and 10 is high, the high 8's and 9's are always "my family," "giving and receiving love," "intimate relationships," "doing my personal best," "living my values," and "a sense of accomplishment." Those are wonderful sources of personal meaning.

I think it's also interesting to see what gets a low rating. Power, wealth, fame, and winning—they're always down low, a 3, 4, 5, or 6. People are not against these symbols of success, they just know that they don't provide a lot of meaning.

## **Four Universal Sources of Meaning**

If I had to boil it down to just four things, I'd pick these. These are four principles or ideas that I think can be found in most of the world's great religions and the teachings of many spiritual leaders, and are things that we learn as we grow and experience life. You won't be surprised. Here they are: One, love people. Two, help people. Three, live ethically. Four, don't be too attached to material things. Love people, help people, live ethically, and don't be too attached to material things.

I think there is probably a causal relationship here, because I think that when you love people, you want to help them. And if you are loving people and helping people, you want to treat them right—you want to be ethical in the way you behave. And if you are focused on people, you're probably not too worried about material things.

### **Two core sources of meaning**

There is another way to narrow it down, to only two core sources of meaning: (1) focus on others, and (2) become part of something larger than yourself. Focusing on others includes loving people, and helping people, and treating them right. Becoming part of something larger than yourself is about joining with others in a team, an organization, a movement, a cause that makes a bigger difference than you can make as an individual.

### **One simple source of meaning**

Finally, if you are ever feeling down, or discouraged, or empty, and you know you are disconnected from your sources of meaning, there is a simple solution: *Go help somebody*. Just go help somebody. That will get you focused on someone else, and help you to make a meaningful difference in the world.

The important point here is that servant leaders love people, and help people, and these are tremendous sources of meaning. I like to say that servant-leaders get material results for their organizations and spiritual returns for themselves. The spiritual returns are in the meaning and satisfaction that come from making a difference in the lives of colleagues and customers. That is a special advantage that servant leaders have over

other kinds of leaders. The meaning keeps them motivated, and mentally healthy, and within reach of deep happiness.

## **Conclusion**

Let me make some concluding remarks. Servant leadership is ethical, because it is about serving others, not about acquiring power, wealth, and fame for oneself. Servant leadership is practical, because the practices of servant leaders actually work—servant leaders get bottom-line results. And servant leadership is meaningful, because it is about loving and helping others.

Some of you may have seen the movie, *Man of La Mancha*, when it came out many years ago, starring Peter O'Toole and Sophia Loren. The story line in the movie is that Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*, is arrested by the Inquisition and taken to prison, where he tells the story of *Don Quixote* and the other prisoners help him act it out. Cervantes said something in that movie that really struck me. He said that he had seen people dying with a question on their lips. The question was not: Why am I dying? The question was: Why did I live? What a terrible question to be asking yourself as you breathe your last breath! They wondered why they had ever lived.

There are a lot of benefits to being a servant leader, but one benefit is this. If you love and help others, and focus on meaning, and live a paradoxical life, then at the end of your life, when you look back, you're not going to have a lot of regrets. You may not have any. You're going to look back on a life filled with meaning. Even more important, you will not wonder why you have lived. You'll know. *You'll know*. And that may be the greatest blessing of all.

Thank you!