

**SERVANT LEADERSHIP**  
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**presented to the**  
**Rotary Young Professionals**  
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Good evening! Thank you for the opportunity to share a few ideas with you this evening. I hope you are safe and healthy during this very challenging time.

I have been asked to say a few words about leading at work. I am happy to do that.

My experience is that the dominant model or idea about leadership is what I call the power model. According to the power model, leadership is about acquiring and wielding power. It's about taking charge, and making people do things. It's about how attack and win. It's about manipulation and coercion. Most of all, it is about grabbing power for oneself.

I do not recommend being a power-oriented leader. If power is what you seek, you will never get enough, and you will never be happy. In the meantime, the power model easily becomes unethical, because it is about using people for one's own ends. Finally, it just doesn't work very well. It's not good for colleagues, and it's not good at serving customers and the larger community.

There is another model or idea about leadership, and it is *not* the dominant model. I call it the service model of leadership. The service model is not about acquiring and wielding power, it is about making a difference in the lives of others. It is ethical, practical, and meaningful. We have plenty of evidence that it is highly effective. This is the model of leadership that I strongly recommend to you. It's the perfect model for implementing the Rotary motto, "Service above Self."

People who ascribe to the service model are often called servant-leaders. If the word "servant" is not comfortable for you, you can call it "service leadership" or "serving leadership" or just "good leadership." Actually, you can call it whatever you want. What you *do* matters more than what you call it. I have been part of the international servant leadership movement for thirty years, and I am comfortable with the words "servant" and "servant leadership," so those are the words I will be using.

The mission of the servant leader is 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. They identify and meet the needs of their customers, so they will be happy, and will come back, and will tell their friends. At its most fundamental level, it is very simple.

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 including the Rotary tradition. However, there is a modern servant leadership movement. It was launched in the United States in 1970 by Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership” in his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*.

Greenleaf was born and raised in Indiana, and worked for AT&T for 38 years, from 1926 to 1964. During those years, AT&T had a million employees and was the largest or one of the largest corporations in the world. Greenleaf did personnel and training work, and gradually rose through the ranks to become the Director of Management Research. It was his job to educate and train the leaders and managers of AT&T to be as *effective* as possible.

Greenleaf noticed that there were leaders who were focused on acquiring power and wealth for themselves, and there were leaders who were focused on serving others—their colleagues and customers. After 38 years of experience, he concluded that the most effective leaders were those who focused on serving others.

Greenleaf said that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, not the desire to lead. Of course, there are many ways to serve. When a person with the desire to serve sees the opportunity to serve *by leading*, then that person accepts leadership responsibility and becomes a servant leader.

Greenleaf focused on growing people, because it is a triple win. When people grow, they benefit personally and professionally. Their capacity grows, so the capacity of their organization grows. When the capacity of their organization grows, it can do things better, or do things it was never able to do before. So individuals benefit, the organization benefits, and those served by the organization benefit.

That’s why Greenleaf said that the best test of servant leadership was this: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” Greenleaf also thought that servant leaders should be aware of the impact of their

decisions on those who are disadvantaged. He asked: “what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” Finally, he thought that servant leaders should care about everyone their organizations touch—all stakeholders, not just one group, such as shareholders.

Before we go further, let me comment on two common misconceptions about servant leadership. First, servant leadership is not soft. Servant leaders can make hard decisions whenever necessary in order to serve others. Second, servant-leaders can exercise power. However, when they exercise power, they exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and they exercise it *on behalf of* others, not for their own personal benefit. To a servant-leader, power is only a tool, and usually not the most important tool. It is only a means and not an end.

### **Servant Leadership Works**

I love the fact that the modern servant leadership movement grew out of Robert Greenleaf’s experience in a large, competitive, for-profit business. He was making a practical observation about what worked best for the business. He knew that what worked best was servant leadership.

For centuries, servant leaders have provided anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of servant leadership. We know that servant leadership principles are being implemented in the public, private, academic, military, and non-profit sectors. Of course, every organization has its own culture and applies servant leadership principles in its own way.

We know that for-profit companies that have implemented servant leadership principles have been financially successful. Many have been on the *Fortune* magazine list of “The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America.” Those companies include Starbucks, The Container Store, Aflac, Synovus Financial, Southwest Airlines, and TDIndustries. While surprising to some people, there are military leaders who promote servant leadership. They focus on taking care of their troops.

About 15 years ago, leadership scholars began to conduct 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 leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization. Servant-leaders may inspire followers to serve the community in which the organization is embedded. Research has revealed that employees of

servant-leaders are more helping and creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership. And servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction.

Back in 2012, Dr. Suzanne Peterson and her colleagues studied 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.

There are studies now being prepared for publication in academic journals that conclude that servant leadership is good for all stakeholders, including shareholders, because servant leadership increases the profitability of for-profit corporations. For example, Dr. Bob Liden, a professor of management at the University of Illinois at Chicago, will be publishing research that he and his team conducted in South Korea. The study showed that as servant leadership goes up, profits go up. Other scholars have seen similar results in their research on businesses here in the United States.

Today, there are so many studies of servant leadership in the workplace that we are now seeing meta-studies, or studies of the studies. These, too, are very positive.

Dr. Liden reports that these meta-studies have concluded servant leadership is significantly related to outcomes in all cultures. Servant leadership is a win-win approach in which employees flourish while at the same time revenue and profits grow. Servant leadership is effective in motivating even employees who are high in self-interest to also engage in serving/helping behaviors. Finally, very recent studies show that servant leadership works in times of crisis, as evidenced by the ability of servant leaders to help employees deal with the anxiety produced by Covid-19 and motivate them to stay engaged in their jobs and help members of their communities.

### **Why Does Servant Leadership Work?**

So, anecdotal evidence and empirical research make it clear that servant

leadership is very effective. It works, and it works very well indeed. 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 will be truly served. Colleagues perform well, and customers get what they need. Why wouldn't that work? When you think about it, it's pretty simple.

Of course, there are specific leadership practices that help servant leaders to be effective. For example, in my own writing and speaking, I talk about self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight. Those are seven practices that I consider to be *key* practices.

Right now, a number of us are working on a five-module Rotary leadership program that includes the seven key practices I have mentioned, plus persuasion instead of coercion, conceptualization, and stewardship. These are all practical things that servant leaders do that help them to be successful.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Beyond the key practices, there are underlying attitudes and principles that help servant leaders to be effective. I'd like to talk about two of them. First, servant leaders go beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation, which supports higher levels of performance. Second, servant leaders promote meaning at work, a very important intrinsic motivator. These ideas are important foundations for the success of servant leaders. So let's look at each of them.

First, let's talk about motivation. When we talk about motivation, we usually compare extrinsic motivation with intrinsic motivation. We all know the difference. 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 fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. 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.

One of the most-read articles in the history of the *Harvard Business Review* was an article by Frederick Herzberg published in 1968 titled: “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” Herzberg argued that some factors are “hygiene factors” and others are “intrinsic motivators.”

Hygiene factors are company policy and administration, supervision, relationship with the supervisor, work conditions, salary, relationships with peers, personal life, relationships with subordinates, status, and security. These factors are the primary cause of extreme *dissatisfaction* on the job. Employers need to get these factors right so that employees will not be *dissatisfied*.

However, more and better hygiene factors will not produce extreme satisfaction—only intrinsic motivators will do that. Those intrinsic motivators include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth. The hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators are *not* the opposite of each other; they represent different needs. They are both important. However, if you want high levels of performance, your colleagues need to be *intrinsically* motivated. That’s why servant leaders focus on intrinsic motivation instead of extrinsic motivation.

### **Meaning at Work**

This is where meaning becomes important. Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and his colleagues spent 16 years studying intrinsic motivation at work, and identified a sense of meaning as an important intrinsic reward at work. So people who find meaning in their work are intrinsically motivated and perform at higher levels.

Meaningful work was central to Greenleaf’s business ethic. He 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.” That focus on meaning turns out to be very practical in terms of employee performance, commitment, and satisfaction.

Common sense tells us that if you find meaning in your work and you are intrinsically motivated, 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.

Well, that 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 proved in his research— higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

How important is meaning at work? Well, Catherine Bailey and 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.

So how do you promote meaning at work? Dr. Thomas recommended five building blocks of meaningfulness: (1) building a non-cynical climate; (2) clearly identifying passions; (3) providing an exciting vision; (4) ensuring relevant task purposes; and (5) providing whole tasks.

Because meaning is so important, servant leaders do their best to become meaning-makers. They do whatever they can to create an environment in which meaning is enhanced for their colleagues. They find meaning in the work of others and share that meaning with them. They may even 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, sales had climbed 25%, market share had grown from 14 to 21%, profitability was up by 40%, and the stock price was up 450%. The improvement was dramatic.

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 the modern servant leadership movement was launched by a businessman who concluded that servant leaders were more effective and got better business results than power-oriented leaders. We have anecdotal evidence and strong empirical research that demonstrate that servant leadership works well for all stakeholders. There are key practices that help servant leaders to be effective. Servant leaders also promote intrinsic motivation and enhance the meaning and purpose that help people to perform at their highest levels.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to close by saying that if you wish to succeed during your career, I highly recommend that you lead the way servant leaders do. Identify and meet the needs of others. Implement key practices like listening to people and growing people. Lay a strong foundation by promoting intrinsic motivation and meaning at work. If you do, you will make a positive difference in the lives of your colleagues and customers, and you and your organization will be successful indeed.

Thank you!