

Changing the World through Servant Leadership

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Each of us can be, and *should be*, deeply happy. To be deeply happy, we need to find meaning in our lives and work. A great way to find that meaning is to make the world a better place.

But how do you do that? A good way to do that is to become a servant-leader, and transform your organization into a servant-institution. You can make a difference that is worth your lifetime—a difference that is so meaningful that when you look back at the end of your life, you will be completely satisfied. You will know why you lived. You will have left a significant legacy that will continue to benefit others.

The Modern Servant Leadership Movement

While the idea of serving by leading has ancient roots, the modern servant leadership movement was launched by Robert K. Greenleaf with his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, first published in 1970. Greenleaf was a businessman. He spent thirty-eight years working for AT&T at a time when it was one of the biggest corporations in the world. He understood business, and he understood leadership. In fact, he was the Director of Management Research at AT&T, which meant that it was his job to train and educate the leaders and managers of the corporation to be as effective as possible.

Greenleaf noticed that there were leaders who were in it for their own personal advantage—their own power, wealth, and fame. But there were also leaders who were in it to help their colleagues and serve their customers. Greenleaf concluded that those who were in it for others were the most *effective* leaders. He called them servant-leaders. They were the ones who really got things done.

Servant-leaders are effective because they pay attention to people. They pay attention to their colleagues, so they can help them to grow and perform at their highest possible levels. They pay attention to their customers, so they can understand what their customers need, and can provide it to them.

Servant-leaders have many characteristics, but the most important characteristic is *the desire to serve*. Servant-leaders know that it is not about themselves, it is about others. And serving others—family members, friends, colleagues, and customers—is not just one more item on the daily to-do list. It is what life is about. It is why we are here. It is what gives life meaning and significance.

Servant-leaders are not servile or soft. They can make tough decisions. They simply care about other people, and find joy in helping them to grow and succeed. Greenleaf said that the best test of the servant leader 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?

This focus on growing people is strategic. When you help your colleagues to grow, it's a triple win. Your colleagues find fulfillment, the capacity of your organization grows, and the organization's service to its customers is enhanced. Your organization can do things better, or can do new things it wasn't able to do before. In a rapidly changing economy that is knowledge-based, your colleagues need to keep learning and growing if your organization is to remain competitive.

Changing the World by Changing Our Institutions

Servant leadership is ultimately about changing the world. Greenleaf thought that the best way to do that is to change our institutions—from the inside. In *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership*, Don Frick shares Greenleaf's recollection of how he became interested in working for a large institution. As a student at Carleton College in the 1920s, Greenleaf took a course from Dr. Oscar Helming, Chairman of the Economics Department. One day, during a lecture, Helming said something like this:

‘We are becoming a nation of large institutions... Everything is getting big—government, churches, businesses, labor unions, universities—and none of these big institutions are serving well, either the people whom they are set up to serve or the people who staff them to render the service... These institutions can be bludgeoned, coerced, threatened from the outside. But they can only be changed from the inside by somebody who knows how to do it *and who wants to do it*. Some of you folks ought to make your

careers inside these institutions and become the ones who respond to the idea that they could do better.'

Greenleaf took Dr. Helming's advice, and spent his career at AT&T, helping the company to do better.

In the years since then, large corporations have become even more dominant in our lives. The United States is still a small-business nation, but the impact of big businesses is obvious. For example, it has been estimated that the Fortune 1,000 companies control about 70 percent of the American economy. The twenty most profitable companies in the United States recorded combined profits of \$226 billion in 2009. Those combined profits were greater than the gross national products of 150 countries. The \$19.3 billion in profit earned by ExxonMobil alone was greater than the gross national products of 110 countries.

The non-profit sector has also grown in importance. As of 2005, a total of 12.9 million people, or 9.7 percent of the nation's workforce, were employed by non-profits. The revenues of non-profits totaled \$1.6 billion and their assets totaled \$3.4 trillion, double the revenues and assets recorded ten years earlier.

Greenleaf knew that our world would be a better place if all of our institutions were servant-institutions. He said:

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.

The Characteristics of Servant-Institutions

Servant-institutions care about everyone they touch—employees, customers, business partners, creditors, shareholders, and communities. When it comes to employees, servant-institutions:

- emphasize training and continuing education programs, individualized growth and development programs, and advancement and promotion opportunities;

- strive to create a culture of trust, and offer positive treatment from day one (for example, employees are not put on probation, and they are immediately eligible for benefits);
- are good at seeing the whole person, not just the worker; emphasize and reward teamwork; and distribute decision-making to the action level, the level closest to the customer; and
- gear employee training to the next job, not just the current one, because the servant-institution is committed to providing promotion opportunities for its employees.

One result of these practices is that servant-institutions have low employee turnover. People like working there.

Servant-institutions listen carefully to their customers so they can create the programs, products, and services that their customers truly need. As a result, customers become loyal supporters of the organization, and continue to use the programs, products, and services that are offered. That gives the servant-institution the opportunity to do more business with their current customers as well as growing their market share.

Servant-institutions know that business partners are important, so they are good at listening to their vendors or suppliers. They see the benefit of having long-term relationships, and devote time to learning about each other's businesses, so they can work together effectively. Because of their mutual trust and understanding, the organization and its business partners can focus together on the "end customers." Servant-institutions that are publicly held companies are good at listening to shareholders, and are committed to providing accurate and timely information to them as well as to their creditors and the general public.

Servant-institutions care about the communities in which they operate. They learn about the local social and economic networks and the natural environment. They respect and listen to the different community voices. They enter into partnerships with community groups, and encourage community service by their employees and customers.

Living the Dream

Changing the world for the better has never been easy. It not only takes hard work, it takes a dream. Greenleaf said:

For anything to happen there must be a dream. And for anything great to happen there must be a great dream... One of these great dreams is for the good society made up of predominantly serving institutions that shape its character by encouraging serving individuals and providing scope and shelter for large creative acts of service—by individuals and groups.

Not all dreams come true. If our dreams are big enough, they will not come true in our lifetimes. But we can still find meaning and deep happiness as we work toward our dreams. By harnessing our institutions for the benefit of society, we can change lives, and save lives. We can raise the performance of our organizations as servant-institutions, and change the world for the better—for all of us.

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More information about Dr. Keith and servant leadership is available at www.toservefirst.com.