

Servant Leadership Summit
Panel on *The Servant as Leader at Fifty:*
How Do Greenleaf’s Writings Apply Today?

Remarks by Dr. Kent M. Keith
June 10, 2021

A lot has happened since 1970 when the first version of *The Servant as Leader* was published. It was followed by *The Institution as Servant* in 1972, *Trustees as Servants* in 1974, *The Teacher as Servant* in 1979, and finally *Servant: Retrospect and Prospect* in 1980. People began reading Greenleaf’s essays in the 1970s, and the idea of servant leadership took hold. Today servant leadership is an international movement, with people all over the world practicing, teaching, and researching servant leadership.

My impression is that the movement has evolved through three cumulative phases. In the early years, perhaps the 70s through the 80s, the focus was heavily on the servant leader as a person. What are the characteristics of the servant leader? That focus later expanded to add the question, what do servant leaders do? What are the practices that make them effective? And then, in the early 2000s, we began to see rigorous, peer-reviewed, empirical research on servant leadership—the development and testing of dimensions and characteristics, theories that contrast servant leadership with other ideas about leadership, and research on the impact of servant leadership in the workplace. All three of these stages or phases are important, and all three are ongoing today, greatly enriching the servant leadership movement. Fifty years after the first publication of *The Servant as Leader*, the servant leadership movement is in a good place.

When it comes to the research, I recommend the Greenleaf Center publication, *Inspiration for Servant-Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice*. It was edited by Dr. John Burkhardt and Dr. Jessica Joslin, and was published last year. The whole book is good, but chapter two is a summary of the research on servant leadership, including 13 pages of references just for that chapter. If you don’t have a copy of the book, I encourage you to get one—it is available on Amazon.com for only \$18.95.

Now I want to make a distinction that has been important in my own life and helps me to appreciate the work of both servant leadership practitioners and servant leadership researchers. I believe that the needs and goals of practitioners and

researchers are related but they are not the same—nor do they have to be the same. They can be different and still enrich each other.

This is what Greenleaf said in the introduction to his 1977 collection of essays, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Let me quote from him:

Early on I made a distinction between wisdom and scholarship; and the former, what works well in practice, has long been my central interest. This is not said to denigrate scholarship. It has its place, and there is a subtle interaction between the two, but they are different things.

So by his own account, Greenleaf was focused on wisdom and what works in practice. Late in his career at AT&T he conducted his own kind of research, but it was in search of wisdom and practical applications in the workplace.

Some scholars have said that Greenleaf didn't define servant leadership. My own view is that Greenleaf *did* define it, but he defined it the way a practitioner would define it, not the way a scholar would define it. He did what a practitioner does: he watched and listened, figured out what worked in the daily reality of a business, and through his essays he shared his observations and challenged us to think and act in new ways. He invited us to follow him into a different kind of leadership, a kind of leadership that in his experience worked better than the alternatives.

In my view, Greenleaf defined servant leadership sufficiently for practitioners to know what to do to be servant leaders. When I came across *The Servant as Leader* in 1989, Greenleaf's definition of servant leadership changed my life. It gave me plenty of guidance as a practitioner. I immediately started implementing his ideas to the best of my ability.

To me it was clear: We can become servant leaders by identifying and meeting the needs of others, by growing people, by caring about the least privileged, by being good listeners, by having awareness and empathy, by caring about all stakeholders, and so forth. We can transform our institutions into servant institutions, making sure they have both conceptual and operational leaders, and a team at the top. We can develop and support board members, who can provide leadership and use their legal authority to make sure their institutions strive for and reach excellence, truly serving others and society at large.

So in my opinion, Greenleaf gave practitioners plenty of guidance. That's why the servant leadership movement grew. People knew what to do. They weren't waiting for an academic theory. It is a simple fact that the servant leadership movement grew for decades without academic theories or definitions.

Scholars are correct when they say that Greenleaf did not create an *academic* definition that would distinguish servant leadership from other academic definitions. They are right when they say that Greenleaf did not propose and test a theory that would explain why and how servant leadership works. In other words, Greenleaf didn't do what scholars do.

Fortunately, scholars *are* now doing what scholars do, and they are doing it very well indeed. Dr. Jill Graham published her groundbreaking article in 1991, and Dr. Bob Liden and his colleagues published their article in 2008, and gradually more and more scholars turned their attention away from transformational leadership and leader-member exchange and began exploring servant leadership. Today we have the benefit of rigorous scholarly work that is being done by dozens of scholars all over the world. In my university teaching, I enjoy assigning research articles and incorporating research results into my lectures. There are many good research articles to choose from.

So far as I can tell, scholars are not in agreement regarding their definitions of servant leadership, but that is part of the richness of the research and dialogue that is going on. More than one view or definition is being tested and compared with other views and definitions. I find this exciting.

I am grateful to have lived long enough to see the research that has been produced—and is being produced—about servant leadership. I am grateful for two reasons. First, it has added immense credibility to the practice of servant leadership. For decades, we have had personal testimonies and anecdotal evidence about servant leadership. Now we have a growing body of rigorous, empirical evidence from the workplace that helps us understand why and how servant leadership works. I love sharing that evidence with others.

Second, I am grateful for the new research because it not only affirms some of my personal experience as a practitioner, it also helps me to think about how I might *improve* as a servant leader. I didn't need the research to know what to do, but I am grateful to have it, because it is helping me to do *better*.

The research is helping me to do better because much of it is research in the workplace. It is about the real world. And I am sure that what scholars learn when they study workplaces gives them ideas that in turn shape their research agendas for the future. The wisdom and experience of practitioners can give scholars insights that can be tested by future research.

So the needs and goals of practitioners and researchers are not the same, but each can enrich the other. It is my hope that more of that interaction and enrichment will continue, strengthening the servant leadership movement in ways that could not have been predicted 50 years ago, when the first edition of *The Servant as Leader* was published.

I say that because there is still a lot to do, and a lot of issues to examine. For example, we should respond to the challenges in Greenleaf's subsequent essays. We need many more servant institutions, with both conceptual and operational talent, led by teams, and guided by wise and engaged board members who demand that their institutions serve with distinction. We need liberating visions for our institutions and society at large. And we need more mentors, raising up young people to be the next generation of servant leaders. In short, Greenleaf is still ahead of us. And to me, that means that the future will be exciting and fulfilling indeed.

Thank you!