

**SERVANT LEADERSHIP:  
AN ETHICAL, PRACTICAL, AND MEANINGFUL WAY TO LEAD**

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Good morning! It is my pleasure to be here with you today to talk about servant leadership, an ethical, practical, and meaningful way to lead. I will divide my topic into four parts. The first part will be about defining the servant-leader, the second will be about the ethical nature of servant leadership, the third part will be about the practical aspects of servant leadership, and the fourth part will be about the meaningful lives of servant leaders.

Let's start by defining servant leadership. The importance of serving others has been recognized throughout the world. Serving others is a fundamental, universal human value. I believe that you work for the government because you do, in fact, want to serve. When we look deeply into ourselves, most of us discover that we truly care about people, and want to make a positive difference in their lives. This "better nature" may take time to emerge, and even when it does, it can be crowded out by the pressures of daily life. But it is there. We can still hear the call to serve, and we can respond.

The importance of serving others is emphasized in the world's great religions, as well as statements by many respected thinkers and leaders. For example, Albert Schweitzer said: "The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to help others." Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?" Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel-Prize winning Indian poet, said: "I slept and dreamed that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."

Personally, I think that serving others is not just something you do—it's what life is *about*. It is why we are here on this planet--to love and help each other. One way to help others is by becoming a leader. That is what a servant-leader does. A servant-leader decides to serve by leading.

The idea of serving by leading is an old idea that goes back thousands of years. The modern servant leadership movement in America was launched by Robert K. Greenleaf. In 1970 he published his essay, "The Servant as Leader," in which he coined the phrase "servant leader."

This is how Robert Greenleaf defined the servant leader. He said:

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. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

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: 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?

A servant leader is simply a leader who is focused on serving others. A servant-leader loves people, and wants to help them. The servant-leader remembers that leadership is only worthwhile if it is a way of helping others.

Servant-leaders can hold any position in any group or organization. What sets them apart from other kinds of leaders is that servant leaders are focused on others, not just themselves, and they want to make life better for others, not just themselves. This is what distinguished them as servant-leaders, no matter what their title or role or position may be.

Servant leadership is known by other names. Jim Collins defined the “Level 5” leader—the highest level of leader in his study of “Good to Great” companies—in the same way that others define servant leaders. Ken Jennings and John Stahl-Wert write about the serving leader. Peter Drucker defined “the effective executive” as someone who focuses on his or her contribution and focuses on the client, customer, patient, or student. So servant leadership shows up under different names and labels.

The concept of servant leadership is closely aligned with the concepts of stewardship, co-leadership, and transforming leadership. Peter Block emphasized the idea of *Stewardship*. In their book *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships*, David Heenan and Warren Bennis described the essential roles played by people who are not the stars or celebrities in their organizations, but rather key subordinates—deputies, chief operating officers, or vice presidents who are committed, skilled, supportive partners and members of the leadership team. Many of these people are servant-leaders. Servant leadership is also related to transforming leadership, as defined by James MacGregor Burns in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *Leadership*.

Let’s look at the ethical aspects of servant leadership. This has to do with how leaders treat others— whether they serve people or use people. Serving people is ethical. Using people is not.

Robert Greenleaf worked for AT&T from 1926 to 1964, during a time in which AT&T was one of the biggest corporations in the world. Toward the end of his career he was the Director of Management Research, which meant that it was his job to figure out how to educate and train the leaders and managers of AT&T to make them as effective as possible. After 38 years with AT&T, Greenleaf knew that some leaders are motivated by a desire for power and money, and others are motivated by a desire to serve others. He concluded that the most effective leaders were servant-first, or servant-leaders.

Greenleaf basically rejected the power model of leadership in favor of the service model of leadership. Unfortunately, the power model of leadership is the dominant model of leadership in many countries today. Leadership is most often described in terms of acquiring and wielding power, and making people do things. It is about coercion, and manipulation, and clever strategies, and how to attack and win. It is all about power.

Over the past 30 years, I have learned that there are some severe problems with the power model. First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. Second, it glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. People want to be leaders, so they assume they have to get power, so they form power cliques. Pretty soon, those power cliques become so focused on vying for power against each other, that they have little time to focus on solving problems or seizing opportunities. Third, it defines victory in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes more for their organization or society at large. These are three serious drawbacks.

The power model also leads to poor leadership and unhappy leaders. First, people who seek power, often become irrelevant as leaders. They focus on what they want, instead of what other people need, and they can easily 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.

Greenleaf argued for the service model, which is the model that servant leaders live and breathe. This model is not about power—it is about being of service and making a difference. I think that is why most people join the government. They want to be of service and make a difference.

A servant leader doesn't ask, "How can I get power? How can I make people do things?" Instead, a 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's the mission of a servant leader: To identify and meet the needs of others.

There are several ways I like to compare the service model and the power model. One 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 often partners, coordinators, facilitators, healers, and coalition builders.

Another way to compare the power model and the service model is this. The power model assumes a hierarchy, like a pyramid, with the president or CEO at the top, and then the vice-president or chief operating officer, and so

on down the line until you get to the base of the pyramid which is where people create and deliver programs, products, and services. The assumption in the power model is that only the people at the top of the pyramid have power.

In the service model, the hierarchy is not really relevant. 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 be a servant leader.

A third way to compare or contrast is this: The power model is about *grabbing*. The service model is about *giving*.

A servant leader can exercise power. The difference is that servant leaders understand that power is a means, not an end. It is only a tool, and it may not even be the most important tool—the most important tools may be listening and coaching. And when servant leaders exercise power, they do it *on behalf of others*, not on behalf of themselves. They exercise power in order to meet the needs of others.

The difference between the power-oriented leader and the servant leader has very practical impacts. For example, it shows itself in the questions that people ask themselves when they make decisions in their daily life and work. A power-oriented individual will make decisions that enhance his power, and meet his personal needs. A service-oriented individual will make decisions that enhance his service, and meet the needs of others.

Okay, that brings us to the practical aspects of servant leadership. There are many practices that help servant-leaders to be effective. We will look briefly at seven key practices. Those key practices are self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing colleagues, coaching instead of controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and the use of foresight.

Our first key practice is self-awareness. Each of us is the instrument through which we lead. If we want to be effective, and have positive impacts on others, we need to be aware of who we are—our personalities, our strengths and weaknesses, our biases, our skills and experiences, the way we talk and move and act. Other people are always watching us and taking their cues from us. We need to make sure we are acting in positive ways that help our colleagues and our organization to achieve at high levels.

Our next key practice is listening. Listening to your colleagues and citizens is of fundamental importance. This is how you become relevant, how you link up. How can you meet the needs of others if you don't know what those needs are? And how will you know if you don't ask? You need to listen, in the broad sense of getting all the information you can about the wants and needs of your colleagues and the public.

Robert Greenleaf said that “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*.” Servant leaders are always asking, listening, watching, and thinking about what they learn. This is the foundation of their relevance and effectiveness.

When I served as Director of Planning and Economic Development for the state of Hawaii, our department had 180 people. I sat down with each person, one-on-one, to ask them about themselves, their families, their hobbies, and their work. I only had 15 minutes per person, but I spent it listening, so it helped me to understand my colleagues much better.

Our next key practice is changing the pyramid. The traditional organizational hierarchy is a pyramid. One of the problems with the traditional pyramidal structure is that workers look up the chain, and focus on pleasing their “bosses.” That is understandable, but if everyone is looking up, to please his or her boss, who is looking out, and paying attention to the needs of the citizens you serve? That's why servant-leaders talk about inverting the pyramid, or laying it on its side, so that everyone in the organization is focused on the people whom the organization is designed to serve.

Robert Greenleaf pointed out that the person on the top of the pyramid has no colleagues, only subordinates. As a result, it is hard to get information, and it is hard to test new ideas. The solution is obvious—you need a team at the top. You need a group of senior leaders who are loyal to the organization and to each other, who will share information, and will challenge ideas. The chief is still the chief, and makes final decisions, but he or she is far better informed and connected and able to lead.

When I served as Director of Planning and Economic Development for the state of Hawaii, I developed a shared management system with the

top 12 division heads and office directors. We shared information and ideas on a regular basis. This helped us to make much better decisions.

Our next key practice is developing your colleagues. Robert Greenleaf said that proposed a new business ethic, which was that “*the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work*. To put it 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.” One way to make work meaningful for your colleagues is to help them to learn and grow on the job. As they learn and grow, they become more productive and effective, and more satisfied with their work. As their talent and ability is developed, the capacity of your organization grows as well.

When I served in government, I encouraged each of my colleagues—all 180 of them—to keep learning and growing. We created an individual development program, so that each year, each person in the department would attend a seminar, or a luncheon discussion about a book or topic of interest to them.

One of the best ways to develop your people is to constantly 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.

We know that organizations need rules and regulations and procedures. But servant leaders don't focus on control, they focus on coaching and mentoring. One reason is that people tend to do their best when they are inspired, engaged, coached, and mentored. Servant-leaders are good at this. They bring out the best in people. They encourage their colleagues to perform at their highest possible level.

Our next key practice is unleashing the energy and intelligence of others. If you have developed your colleagues, and coached and mentored them, then you should be ready to unleash their energy and potential. You should be comfortable allowing them to make decisions. Servant leaders teach, mentor, and coach so that others will use their energy and intelligence wisely, for the good of the organization and those the organization serves.

When I was in government, I appointed colleagues from different parts of the department, with different backgrounds and experience, to serve

on task forces to make recommendations to me on economic development policy. That was one way to unleash their energy and intelligence.

Let's take a look at our final key practice, foresight. Robert Greenleaf said that foresight is the central ethic of leadership is foresight. He said that "foresight is a better than average guess about *what* is going to happen *when* in the future." Greenleaf said that foresight is the 'lead' that the leader has. If you aren't out in front, you really aren't leading—you are just reacting. And if you are just reacting, you may run out of options, and get boxed in, and start making bad decisions—including unethical ones. Greenleaf said that the failure of a leader to foresee events may be viewed as an *ethical* failure, because a failure of foresight can put an organization in a bad situation that might have been avoided.

Foresight is not about predicting specific events, but understanding the underlying trends and issues and opportunities, and then planning accordingly. Leaders with foresight can provide and maintain momentum in their organizations. This is important, because leaders hold the future of their colleagues and citizens in their hands. Foresight is needed to form the vision and support the momentum that will make that future a good one for everyone.

One result of these key practices is trust. Trust is essential to leading any organization. One of the best ways to build trust is to make it clear in word and deed that you truly are about the people you lead—that you know them and have their best interests at heart. The seven key practices we have talked about will build trust. If you are busy listening, and developing, and coaching, and unleashing, then you will know a lot about your people, and they will know that you have their best interests at heart.

While there is more to servant leadership than financial results, the financial results are there. Two of our colleagues did a comparison of the companies made famous by Jim Collins's book, *Good to Great*, with companies that have been applying servant leadership principles. The comparison focused on the ten-year period ending in 2005. The authors found that during those years, stocks from the five hundred largest public companies averaged a 10.8 percent pre-tax portfolio return. The eleven companies studied by Collins averaged a 17.5 percent return. However, the servant-led companies' returns averaged 24.2 percent. The servant-led companies produced superior financial results.



This brings us to our final section, the meaningful lives of servant-leaders. I like to say that servant leaders get material results for their organizations, and spiritual returns for themselves. The spiritual returns are in the form of the meaning and satisfaction that come to them through a life of servant leadership.

There are many benefits of finding meaning in one's life and work. Meaning is an intrinsic motivator, meaning is good for mental health, meaning is good for physical health and longevity, and meaning is a key to being deeply happy. Let's look at each of those benefits.

Finding meaning is important, because personal meaning is an intrinsic motivator. People are intrinsically motivated when they do something because they want to, not because they have to. They are intrinsically motivated when their work is interesting, and fulfilling, and meaningful. Research and common sense tell us that people who are intrinsically motivated are more productive, more innovative, more committed, and less likely to burn out than those who are extrinsically motivated.

Next, people who are intrinsically motivated are also psychologically healthier. A study was 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. The study found that those who had intrinsic aspirations had a greater sense of well-being, more vitality, and higher self-esteem. They were more content—they felt better about who they are and displayed more evidence of psychological health.

In addition to being mentally healthier, finding meaning in life may also help you to be physically healthier, and to live a longer life.

Finally, we know from life experience, spiritual teachings, and from research that finding personal meaning is a key to being 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. It is about

following the teachings and living the faith. But however you define it, personal meaning is a key.

By focusing on meaning, servant leaders are intrinsically motivated, are psychologically healthier, can be physically healthier, and can find deep happiness. These are tremendous advantages.

Since personal meaning is so important, I like to ask people about the sources of meaning in their lives and their work. Over the past eight or nine years I have surveyed about 3,500 people on the sources of meaning in their lives. The surveys were almost all done in the United States. Also, I have been using samples of convenience, not random samples, so I can't extrapolate from them to larger populations. However, I would like to tell you what I have learned.

The highest-rated sources of meaning in the surveys have been "my family," "giving and receiving love," "intimate relationships," "living my values," "doing my personal best," and "a sense of accomplishment."

Even more interesting, I think, is that all the groups I have surveyed so far have given low average ratings to power, wealth, fame, and winning. People are not against the things, they just know that these "symbols of success" are not important sources of personal meaning.

People have asked me— are there some really fundamental sources of meaning in life? I would say yes. I think there are at least four fundamental, universal sources of meaning. These are sources of meaning that can be found in the world's great religions and spiritual teachings, as well as our own life experience. You won't be surprised. Here they are: Love people, help people, live ethically, and don't be too attached to material things.

I can't prove it, but I think there is a causal link between these four principles. If you love people, you will want to help them. And if you are loving and helping people, you will want to treat them ethically. And if you are busy loving and helping and treating people ethically, you are probably more focused on people and aren't too attached to material things.

If I had to narrow down the sources of meaning even further, to only two things, I would pick these two: (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 difference.

If I had to narrow it down to one source of meaning, I would say “love.” But if you ever feel down, or disconnected from meaning, there is a simple source of meaning that is always available: Go help somebody. Just go and help somebody. That will get you out of yourself, and focused on others, and it will give you the immediate meaning that comes with helping others.

I think what is so wonderful is that all of these sources of meaning are available to servant-leaders every day. Every day, servant leaders love people and help people and treat them ethically. Every day, servant leaders focus on others and are part of something larger than themselves. Every day, servant leaders go and help people. So meaning is always available to servant leaders, and that is a tremendous advantage, because meaning is an intrinsic motivator, is good for mental health, is good for physical health and longevity, and is a key to being deeply happy.

Most societies measure people by “symbols of success” like power, wealth, and fame. But servant leaders know that the search for success and the search for meaning are not the same thing. They may overlap, but they are not the same. The symbols of success may have little to do with personal meaning.

Each of us has talents and abilities, and we should use them to the fullest. There is no point in going out into the world each day to fail. Servant leaders work hard, and when they do, they are often “successful.” 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. Servant leaders know that the symbols of success do not give them the deep happiness that comes from the most important sources of meaning in their lives and work. So they live close to their sources of meaning.

I know people will often say that servant leadership is about giving up one’s self-interest. They think a life of servant leadership is about self-sacrifice or self-denial. I disagree. *Servant leadership is not about self-sacrifice or self-denial. It is about self-fulfillment.* It is about living closely to your most important sources of meaning, and thereby finding *more* meaning and deep happiness than are available in any other way.

I hope that these ideas are useful to you. I am convinced that servant leadership is ethical, practical, and meaningful. It is based on the desire to serve. I believe that serving others is not just something you do—it is what life is about.

There are a lot of benefits to a life of servant leadership, but let me leave you with this one. If you focus on loving and helping others, then, when you look back at the end of your life, you won't have a lot of regrets. You may not have any. You'll look back on a life filled with meaning. You will have changed many lives in positive ways. One of the lives you will have changed for the better will be your own.

Thank you!