

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND THE PARADOXICAL COMMANDMENTS

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Good afternoon! It's an honor to speak to you this afternoon...

[Opening remarks omitted]

I am here to talk about something that I think is both very important and very Rotarian, and that is servant leadership.

I don't know what it was like for you, but when I was going to school, it seemed that people always talked about leadership in terms of power. Leadership was about how to accumulate and wield power; how to make people do things; how to attack and win. It was about clever strategies and applying pressure. It was about manipulation and coercion. When I was in college, a word that was used a lot was *realpolitik*, which means politics and the exercise of power without reference to morality or ethics. It was the power model of leadership.

During the past 30 years I have been an attorney, a state government official, a high tech park developer, and university president, and a YMCA executive. So I have had the opportunity to lead and manage in the public sector, private sector, non-profit sector, and academic sector, and I have learned that there are some severe problems with the power model.

First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. There is no purpose or moral content. Second, it glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. If leadership is about acquiring and wielding power, anyone who wants to be a leader assumes they have to build a power base. So he builds his, and she builds hers, and after a while, you have all these power groups that are paying so much attention to their rivalry with each other, that they have little time or energy to solve problems or seize opportunities. Finally, the power model defines success in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for their group or organization or community. These are severe problems.

Other problems with power relate to the leader herself or himself. 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. Even worse, people who seek power can never get enough of it. It becomes a kind of addiction or disease. They always want more, and more, and more. This easily results in spiritual corruption and an unhappy life of self-torment.

Fortunately, there is another model of leadership, and we all know what it is—the service model. It goes back thousands of years, and it is explicit in many traditions, including the Rotary tradition. The motto “service above self” is a great motto for servant leaders. I know that there are lots of Rotarians working hard as servant leaders within their own clubs and communities. I know that there are a lot of servant-leaders right here in this room.

Defining the Servant Leader

Well, who exactly is a servant leader? I like to say that a servant leader is simply a leader who is focused on serving others. A servant leader loves people, and wants to help them.

The words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership” were coined by Robert K. Greenleaf, who founded the Center at which I work. Greenleaf was born and raised in Indiana, and worked for AT&T for 38 years, from 1926 to 1964, when AT&T was one of the largest corporations in the world. He rose through the ranks to become the Director of Management Research, which meant that 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 leaders who were focused on serving others. He concluded that the most effective leaders were those who desired to serve. 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? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?”

Power Model vs. Service Model

Servant-leaders live the service model. So a 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's the mission of a servant leader: To identify and meet the needs of others.

There are several ways I like to compare or contrast the power model and the service model of leadership. One way 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.

A second way to contrast the two models is this. The power model assumes the traditional organizational hierarchy—the pyramid. Only a few people have power—those at the top of the pyramid. The service model doesn't depend on the organizational structure. The reason is that *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 the two models is this. The power model is about *grabbing*. The service model is about *giving*. And we know that when we give, we get something in return—meaning and satisfaction.

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. What is important is that 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. To a servant-leader, power is only a tool, only a means and not an end.

Difference Focus, Different Motivation

Servant leaders can be political leaders, business leaders, non-profit leaders, coaches, friends, or neighbors. Servant leaders do most of the things that other leaders do— they provide a vision, they motivate, they manage, they communicate,

and so forth. What sets servant leaders apart from other leaders is that they are focused on others, not themselves, and they are motivated to make life better for others, not for themselves. This difference in focus and motivation is what really distinguishes servant leaders, regardless of their titles, roles, or positions.

That difference in focus and motivation is easiest to see, I think, in the decisions that people make every day. A power-oriented leader who sits down to make a decision asks a different set of questions than a servant leader. A power-oriented leader will ask questions like this: What decision will enhance my power? What decision will make me look good? What decision will be a great way to get ahead of my chief rival? What decision will improve my relationship with my boss? What decision will position me better for my promotion? These are all power-oriented questions about the leader who is making the decision.

A servant leader asks a different set of questions. What needs should we be addressing? If we address this need, is there one that is really more important that we should be addressing first? If we address this need, are we going to harm someone, or leave someone out? Is there going to be some harm that we can mitigate or reduce? What decision would be most consistent with the mission and values and goals of my organization? Those are different kinds of questions.

And this is where the 4-Way Test fits so perfectly. The questions asked in the 4-Way Test are the questions that servant leaders should ask and *do* ask. You notice they are not questions about power, they are questions about how we pay attention to other people. Are we truthful with them? Are we being fair to them? Are we building good relationships with them? Are we sharing the benefits—are we concerned that it be beneficial to all concerned? Those are the right questions for servant leaders. The 4-Way Test is a wonderful set of core questions for people who are effective servant leaders.

Now you ask these different sets of questions, you get different answers, and over time, the power-oriented leader and servant leader move in different directions. The power oriented leader moves toward getting the things that she or he wants, while the servant-leader moves toward getting the things that other people need.

Key Practices of Servant Leaders

Servant leadership is not just ethical, it is also very practical. The practical benefits of servant leadership gain high praise from leadership and management

experts like Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Max DePree, Peter Drucker, Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley, and many others who have spoken at Greenleaf conferences. The simple fact is that servant leadership works. Let me share a few of the key practices of servant leaders.

Listening/changing the pyramid

First, servant leaders are good listeners. This is of huge importance. This is how you become relevant—how you link up. How can you meet people’s needs if you don’t know what those needs are? And how are you going to know what they are, if you don’t listen? I mean listening in the broad sense of getting all the information you can about the wants and needs of the people you serve. Servant leaders use personal observation, discussions, suggestion boxes, informal interviews, formal interviews, surveys, focus groups, and other forms of research to identify the needs of others. They watch and listen before they take action. They try hard to identify needs, before they try to meet them.

Taking time to identify needs is moral and respectful. It is also very practical. If we are good at identifying needs, we will be in a great position to meet those needs. If we meet those needs, we will be effective leaders and we will provide relevant products, programs, and services. That means we will succeed in having customers, clients, patients, members, and students. Our organizations will thrive, because we listened, and made sure that what we offer is what people need.

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 or clients or patients or students 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, CFO, CIO—and then more middle managers, and then the largest number of people at the bottom, the people who deliver the programs, products, or services. You have to invert this pyramid, or at least lay the pyramid on its side, if you want everybody to stay focused on customers.

The 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 pleasing 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.

Another problem with the traditional pyramid is that the person at the top of the pyramid—let’s call that person the chief—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 president only what they *want* the chief to know, not what the chief *needs* to know. Information gets filtered. And not too many people are comfortable telling the president that his newest idea is a lousy one. Unless they have already announced their retirement or have another job lined up, they just aren’t going to tell him what they really think. So the chief can lose touch, and may come to think of himself as exceedingly brilliant and nearly infallible. His ideas must be great. After all, nobody is challenging them.

This problem is actually easy to solve. 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, 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 should be *first* among equals, with the authority to make the final decisions, but she needs to be accessible, open to challenge, and receptive to the real news, not the filtered news. This will help connect the President with the rest of the organization and the customers it serves.

Developing, coaching, unleashing

In addition to listening, servant-leaders are good at developing their colleagues, associates, or employees. Servant leaders know that if they take care of their people, their people will take care of the customers, and the business will have a way of taking care of itself.

TDIndustries is a highly successful air conditioning and specialty construction company based in Dallas. It 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. The company’s “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.”

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. The people who report to the manager constitute his or her “span of control.” The manager’s job is to “keep things under control.”

We know that organizations need rules and regulations. However, servant leaders don’t focus on control, they focus on coaching and mentoring. One reason is that micromanaging, and focusing only on compliance, doesn’t bring out the best in most people. It can even generate resentment and poor performance. People tend to do their best when they are inspired, engaged, coached, and mentored.

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.

Not unleashing the energy and intelligence of others is extraordinarily sad and wasteful. Knowledge and skill are needed at all levels, and everyone counts. It doesn’t make any sense to have lots of people in an organization, but let only a few people—those at the top—use their full potential. The people at the top of the pyramid can’t *know* everything or *do* everything. They are only human; they have limits. Meanwhile, the organization is paying for *all* its people. Why not engage them fully in the work at hand? Why not let them make the contribution they can make? When everybody is fully engaged, the organization will be most likely to succeed.

These are just a few of the key practices of servant leadership that are extremely practical, and get very positive bottom-line results.

The Three Options

Now—why would anybody want to *be* a servant leader? There are lots of reasons, but for many people, the decision to be a servant-leader follows from a basic moral decision and a discovery about where to find the most meaning in life. Let’s start with the moral decision.

When you understand that people have many needs, 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 help people— try to meet people's needs.

The third option is the only moral one. It is still the right option, even if you fail to achieve what you hope to achieve. Servant leaders make the moral decision to stay with the third option—to do the right thing and try to meet people's needs.

How do servant leaders keep going, when they aren't appreciated, or face opposition or even ridicule? They keep going because they have discovered that loving and helping others gives their lives a depth of meaning that is not available in any other way. They may not get applause, but they get tremendous personal meaning and satisfaction. They know that the meaning and satisfaction will be theirs, whether anybody else applauds or not. They haven't all discovered Rotary, but they know that service above self is a meaningful way to live.

The Paradoxical Commandments

I was fortunate to learn this early in life. One of the pivotal 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 whom 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.

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." There are copies on your tables. 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.
10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. That's why the first phrase in each commandment is about adversity, or difficulty, or disappointment. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. People really need help, but may attack you if you do help them.

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

The paradox is that even when the world out there is going badly—even when the world is crazy—we can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We do that by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves.

The fact is that, as individuals, we can't control the external world. We can't control the world economy, and the rate of population growth. We can't control the

weather, or natural disasters like fires and floods. We can't control when terrorists may strike or wars may break out. We can't control which companies will acquire which companies, and which jobs will be downsized and which jobs will open up. We can work hard, and prepare, and seize opportunities—we have to do that. We can join with others, and try to influence the external world—we should do that, too. But there are lots of things that we just can't control.

What we can control is our inner lives. You and I get to decide who we are going to be and how we are going to live. And we can live our faith, and we can live our most cherished values, and we can be close to our families and friends, and we can do what we know is right and good and true—no matter what. *No matter what*. The good news is that these are the things that have been giving people a lot of personal meaning for thousands of years. The even better news is that 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's hard to define. Some people talk about self-actualization, or self-fulfillment, or being centered. Others talk about living their passion, and following their bliss. People of faith may talk about finding the divine will for their lives, and then living that will. But whatever we call it, personal meaning is a key.

Some people call the Paradoxical Commandments a personal declaration of independence. It's a declaration of independence from all the external factors that we don't control. Whatever the world does to us, we can still find meaning and be happy.

Other people look at the Paradoxical Commandments as a “no excuses” policy. Sure, 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. 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 your character, that's your spirit, that's where you're going to find the most meaning.

Some people have told me that when they first read the Paradoxical Commandments, they thought I must have been having a very, very bad year when I wrote them. That's not true. Well, not completely true. There was one problem: I was 19, a college sophomore, and I couldn't get a date. Well, actually, I could get a date, but I spent 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 like the Paradoxical Commandments. It's humbling to know that I wouldn't be here talking about this if I had had a normal social life in college.

But I was optimistic then, and I am optimistic now. I think that if you go out and do what is right, and good, and true, things will usually work out for you, you will often receive recognition and praise, you will often be successful.

So the question is: What if you aren't? What if you put your heart and mind and soul into a project or program, and it fails? It just fails. What if you do a great job and nobody notices? Nobody. 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 faith, and live your most cherished values, and stay close to your family and friends, and do what you know is right and good and true—because that's where you will find the most meaning, and 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

I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments when I was 19 years old, a college sophomore. They were part of a book I wrote for high school student leaders, entitled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*, published by Harvard Student Agencies and later by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. About 25,000 or 30,000 copies were sold between 1968 and the mid-seventies.

I went on with my life, and for 25 years, I didn't know that the Paradoxical Commandments were spreading around the world. What I know now is that people were taking the Paradoxical Commandments out of that little student council booklet and putting them up on their walls, and their refrigerator doors, and putting them into speeches and articles. They were used by business leaders, politicians, military leaders, religious leaders, teachers, social workers, coaches, and students. They have been used by many Rotary Clubs. The first time I went on the internet to do a search, I found the Paradoxical Commandments on the websites for Rotary Clubs in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Alabama—I like that combination!

The discovery that changed my life happened at my Rotary Club meeting, the Rotary Club of Honolulu, nearly 12 years ago, in September 1997. My fellow Rotarian got up to do the inspiration. He noted that Mother Teresa had died two

weeks before, and said that in her memory, he wanted to read a poem she had written. I bowed my head in contemplation, and what I heard was eight of the original ten Paradoxical Commandments, exactly as I had written them, thirty years before.

Well, I recognized them. I was calm—I didn't go "Hey!" But I went up after the meeting and asked him where he got the poem. He said, "Isn't it wonderful?" And I said, "Well, actually, I wrote it." Now he was a Rotarian, so he was courteous, and he didn't say anything, but he gave me a look. I don't know what that look meant to him, but to me, it meant "you poor self-delusional megalomaniac." I asked him again where he got it and he said it was in a book about Mother Teresa, but he couldn't remember the title.

So the next night I went to a bookstore and started looking through the shelf of books about the life and works of Mother Teresa. I found it, on the last page before the appendices in a book entitled, *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Vardey. The Paradoxical Commandments had been reformatted to look like a poem, and they had been re-titled "Anyway." There was no author listed, but at the bottom, it said: "From a sign on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, the children's home in Calcutta."

That really hit me. I wanted to laugh, and cry, and shout—and I was getting chills up and down my spine. The idea that Mother Teresa had put the Paradoxical Commandments up on the wall to look at from time to time as they ministered to their children—that touched me deeply. That was when I decided to write and speak about the Paradoxical Commandments again after 30 years.

The New York Times called me the Rip Van Winkle of inspirational gurus. I wrote something when I was 19, thirty years went by, and then I woke up and discovered where it had traveled all those years. I have published four books now that relate to the Paradoxical Commandments, and as a result of my books and the national publicity, I get 10,000 to 15,000 people visiting my website every month, from 70 or 80 countries. Some of them send me messages. They tell me how the Paradoxical Commandments helped them raise their children, or get through a tough time at work, or clarify their personal goals. Others say they have carried the Paradoxical Commandments around in their wallets for twenty years, and they look at them each morning, to help them remember what is most important in their lives. I set out to inspire people, and now they are inspiring me. I feel very blessed. I feel part of a growing network of kindred spirits.

Servant leaders understand the Paradoxical Commandments. They choose to do what is meaningful, no matter what. The meaning and satisfaction are theirs whether they get applause, indifference, or even a negative response as a result of their efforts. It is the meaning and satisfaction that keep them going. It is the meaning and satisfaction that give them deep happiness.

Conclusion

I am sure that by now, it is clear that servant leadership is what most of us would just call *good* leadership. I believe that we need many, many more servant leaders, building, healing, and facilitating. We'll have more servant leaders if we establish the service model as *the* accepted standard of leadership. We'll have more servant leaders if we teach our young people about the service model. And we'll have more servant leaders if we continue to demonstrate the service model in each of our own lives. That, after all, is at the core of our tradition as Rotarians. The commitment to service is an idea that can give us meaning, while assuring a strong future for our families, our communities, and the country we love so much.

Thank you!