

Servant Leadership and Culture in the United States

**By Dr. Kent M. Keith
Chief Executive Officer
Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership**

**Presented to the
Greenleaf Center-Europe Conference
Bussum, The Netherlands
December 4, 2007**

© Copyright Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership 2007

I am fascinated by the relationship between the idea of servant leadership and culture—family culture, organizational culture, or national culture. I will offer some personal observations about servant leadership in the context of our national culture in the United States.

As many of you know, the modern servant leadership movement in the United States was launched by Robert Greenleaf, with his essay, “The Servant as Leader,” published in 1970. In that essay, he contrasted leaders who are “servant first” and those who are “leader first.” I think that this distinction is very significant. The servant-first lives the *service* model of leadership. The leader-first lives the *power* model of leadership.

The Power Model of Leadership

My experience over the last thirty years has made it clear to me that the power model of leadership is the dominant model of leadership in the United States. I know that when I was going to school, ideas about leadership were ideas about 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 how to apply pressure. It was about the raw use of power.

During the past thirty years, I have worked as a leader or manager in the public sector, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and the academic sector. I have discovered that there are some severe problems with the power model. First, it focuses on *having* power, not on using it wisely. Power is an end in itself.

Second, the power model of leadership promotes conflict between power groups or factions. People are taught that leadership is about power, so they establish themselves in power groups that compete with other power groups. These power groups become so focused on their rivalries with each other, that they can't focus on solving problems or seizing opportunities. There is also a bias against cooperation, because if you cooperate and succeed, you have to share the credit with another power group.

Third, the power model defines success in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for his or her organization or community. These are serious drawbacks.

There are two more problems with power, and that is the impact that it has on those who seek it. First, 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. 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.

The Service Model of Leadership

The service model of leadership contrasts sharply with the power model. The 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 is the key concept: Identify and meet the needs of others. That is the mission of the servant leader.

Now, we live in a real world. 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. The difference 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.

Servant leaders can be many different types of leader, depending on their personalities and the specific circumstances. What they have in common is this. They go into a group or organization and ask, is there a gap or missing link or blockage of some kind that is making it hard for this group to achieve what it wants to achieve? If so, can I identify what that gap or missing link or blockage is? If I can identify it, can I do something about it? If I can't do anything about it, can I find someone who can? Since the missing link or gap or blockage will not always be the same, the servant leader does not always perform the same role or service in each case.

The wonderful thing about servant leadership is that it is the entire package—it is moral, ethical, practical, and effective. It is not just virtuous—it gets results. If you are good at identifying and meeting the needs of those you serve—your customers, clients, patients, students, members, or citizens—your organization will be very successful. You will be offering people what they really want. That means you will have a very strong “bottom line” for your organization, however you define or measure it.

Servant Leadership in the United States

The advantages of servant leadership seem so obvious to me, that it is sad to see that it is not more widely practiced in the United States. And when I think about what our national leaders are doing today, it makes me especially sad. Personally, I find it painful to see hundreds of billions of dollars being spent on a war in Iraq, while millions of our own children do not have healthcare, and millions of our own children go to bed hungry every night. I think this is what happens when the power model is the dominant model of leadership.

The fact that the power model is the dominant model in our culture is somewhat surprising, given our history and our religion. As for our history, we got off to a good start. Our first president, George Washington, was a classic servant leader. Washington was a surveyor and a farmer, widely respected as a person of good character who was focused on public service. He was general of our Continental Army, president of our Constitutional Convention, and the first president of our country.

Washington was so admired that some historians speculate that if he had wanted to be king, the United States might have become a constitutional monarchy. But that is not what Washington wanted. He didn't want to be king, he wanted to be a public servant. He voluntarily resigned his commission as general

after the war, and later, after two terms as president, he decided not to run again, giving the nation a peaceful, successful transition of power. Historian Joseph Ellis said that Washington was “the supreme example of the leader who could be trusted with power because he was so ready to give it up.”

It is possible that the westward expansion across the American continent during the 19th century turned our culture toward individualism and away from community. Pioneers set out to conquer the land, and they valued individual initiative, hard work, and material rewards. There were small towns and other kinds of communities, and individuals who lived far apart still came together from time to time to help each other harvest crops or build barns. But for more than a century, many Americans lived in a highly individualist, self-reliant culture. It was said that the famous pioneer Daniel Boone moved house every time another family took up residence within a few miles of his home.

Perhaps for many Americans, individual rights and rewards simply outweighed the sense of community rights and community needs. Individual self-reliance is still considered very important today, and that may shift the focus away from contributing to the community. If so, that shift in focus makes it harder to promote servant leadership.

The Impact of Religion

Let me talk about the impact of religion in the United States. First of all, let me say that you don't have to be a Christian to be a servant leader. Servant leadership is a philosophy, a set of values, and a series of daily practices that can be lived by anyone, regardless of their faith or lack of faith.

However, Jesus taught his followers to be servant leaders, and the United States began as, and in many ways still is, a Christian country. We are diverse in religious beliefs, but our culture, politics, and history have been influenced by Christianity. Somewhere between 75 and 80% of Americans today describe themselves as Christians. Unfortunately, the fact that Jesus taught his followers to be servant leaders does not seem to have had a very big impact on his followers.

Jesus clearly distinguished between the power model of leadership and the service model, and called upon his followers to be servants—to be servant leaders. In fact, his teaching on this topic is probably the earliest, most direct teaching on servant leadership in recorded history—far more direct, and far more demanding than the concept of a facilitating leader that we find in Lao-Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching*.

And the teaching of Jesus on this topic is found in *both* the Gospel of Mark *and* the Gospel of Matthew. Here is the scriptural passage. Jesus gathered his disciples together, and said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus was so desirous of making this point that on his last night with his disciples, he washed their feet, to demonstrate how they should serve each other. These teachings are not theological; they are not about the nature of God or the divinity of Jesus. They are about how to live, and how to treat each other.

Many Christians have indeed taken these words to heart, and are living and teaching servant leadership. What I find intriguing is the question: Why aren't *more* Christians in the United States living a life of servant leadership? The answer, I think, is in the impact of our culture.

I gained some insight into this question a number of months ago when I attended a national leadership conference hosted by a large church in the United States. The conference was 2 ½ days long, with many speakers and presentations. *None* of them mentioned the teachings of Jesus in which he rejected the power model and called on his followers to be servants. The speakers talked about the leadership and management techniques of the secular, commercial world. The idea was to lead the way the secular world leads, but *do it for God*.

I think this what many Christians have decided to do. The power model is still the dominant model of leadership in our culture, and it is hard to fight one's culture. So instead of following the counter-cultural teachings of Jesus, some Christians look to the Old Testament, to leaders like Moses or David, who can be characterized as using the power model of leadership. Others simply adopt current management and leadership techniques and ignore what Jesus said. Still others have never heard of the teachings of Jesus on this subject.

So I conclude that even though our country began as a Christian nation, and at least three quarters of our citizens describe themselves as Christian, the teachings about servant leadership have not had much influence. Actually, I think we get the worst of both sides. Some people shy away from servant leadership

because they think they have to be religious to adopt it, while many who are religious are ignoring servant leadership in favor of getting along in their culture—a culture in which the power model is dominant.

Prospects for change

What does the future look like? I am optimistic. I see three reasons that prospects for servant leadership may improve in the coming decades.

First, the increase in the African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American populations in the United States may have a positive influence. Juana Bordas, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Greenleaf Center, recently published a book titled *Salsa, Soul and Spirit*. The book describes Hispanic, African-American, and Native American Indian attitudes toward leadership. While there are differences, they all see leadership in terms of service to the community. The purpose of leadership in these cultures has not been to acquire power, wealth, or fame for oneself, but to improve life for community members. And positions of leadership in these cultures do not belong to individuals—they belong to the communities that the leaders serve. These ideas clearly support servant leadership. If these ethnic groups retain these ideas as they grow in influence, they will have a positive effect on mainstream thinking about servant leadership in the United States.

The second reason that I am optimistic about the future is that Americans are beginning to learn that power, wealth, and fame are nice but not especially meaningful. They don't make people happy.

Gregg Easterbrook wrote a book titled *The Progress Paradox*. He reported that since the end of World War II, the objective indicators of social welfare in America and Europe have trended upward. Per-capita income, “real” income, longevity, home size, cars per driver, phone calls made annually, trips taken annually, highest degree earned, IQ scores, just about every objective indicator of social welfare has trended upward on a pretty much uninterrupted basis for two generations.

But the trend line for happiness has been flat for fifty years. The trend line is negative for the number of people who consider themselves “very happy,” that percentage gradually declining since the 1940s. And the trend is very unfavorable when it comes to avoiding psychological depression. Adjusting for population growth, ten times as many people in the Western nations today suffer from

“unipolar” depression, or unremitting bad feelings without a specific cause, than was the case half a century ago. Easterbrook concluded that “Americans and Europeans have ever more of everything except happiness.”

For generations, many Americans have sought to achieve the American dream. Unfortunately, the dream has been a materialistic dream, and now that many people are achieving it, they are discovering it is not especially meaningful. In our relentless drive for materialistic well-being, we have wandered away from the things that have given people the most meaning and happiness for thousands of years—giving and receiving love, being close to our family and friends, living our values, and doing what’s right.

What servant leaders know is that the search for success and the search for meaning are not the same search. They may overlap, but they are not the same. In fact, the things that our commercial, secular culture considers to be attributes of success may have little to do with personal meaning.

For example, power is a symbol of success, but people learn that there is more meaning in service. Wealth is a symbol of success, but people find more meaning in the richness of daily life—family, friends, hobbies, sunsets. Fame is a symbol of success, but there is more meaning in being known intimately by a few than in being known superficially by millions. Winning is a symbol of success, but there is more meaning in always doing one’s personal best, win or lose.

Here’s the point: The symbols of success that are promoted by the secular, commercial culture in the United States are not necessarily bad. They’re just *not enough*. They’re not enough when it comes to finding personal meaning and deep happiness. There is more to life than success. It is not enough to get ahead—we also need to get meaning.

As Americans rediscover where to find the most meaning and happiness in life, many of them will become less focused on power, wealth, and fame, and more focused on loving and helping others. This will support increased interest in servant leadership, because it is the best leadership model for those who do want to love and help others.

The third reason that I am optimistic about the future is that Americans see themselves as very practical people. Americans want to get things done. Ideas are good if they can be applied. And servant leadership simply works very well when it is applied. Servant leadership is highly effective, because it focuses on

developing, coaching, and empowering employees, so that they in turn can effectively serve customers, clients, members, patients, students, or citizens. When the focus is truly on identifying and meeting the needs of colleagues and customers, the business is in a great position to be successful.

There is much that we could say about the key practices of servant leaders. I include in my list the following seven practices: personal self-awareness, listening, inverting the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching instead of controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of your employees, and foresight. We know from the work of Joseph Jaworski, who is here today, as well as Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Jim Collins, Meg Wheatley, and others that these practices yield strong business results. My own opinion is that these practices will be even more effective with our upcoming generations than they were with previous generations, so the effectiveness of servant leadership will become even more obvious as the years go by.

In the coming years, the Greenleaf Center in the United States will focus more on proving and explaining the practical effectiveness of servant leadership. We can identify more organizations using servant leadership principles, and learn from their examples. We can provide a forum for sharing the results of research on the impact of servant leadership. While I am grateful for the moral, ethical, and spiritual advantages of servant leadership, it seems to me that our best next step is to prove to our fellow Americans that servant leadership is not only virtuous but also very practical. It's a great way to get results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the power model is the dominant leadership model in the United States, in spite of the example of early leaders like George Washington, and the importance of Christianity in our history and culture. Servant leaders do exist, and they flourish, but they are counter-cultural.

I am optimistic about the prospects for servant leadership in the United States because of three factors: (1) growth in the influence of Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American, and other ethnic groups for which leadership is about serving the community; (2) the discovery by Americans that the power model is not as meaningful, and does not provide as much happiness, as the service model of leadership; and (3) proof that servant leadership is actually the most effective, practical way to serve customers, clients, patients, members, students, and citizens.

Proving and explaining the practical benefits of servant leadership may be our best next step. Since I am confident that we *can* prove and explain the practical benefits, I am very hopeful for the future of servant leadership in the United States.