

# **CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

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Good afternoon! It's an honor to speak to you this afternoon. I hope that what I share today will be useful to you. I would like to talk about changing the world through servant leadership.

As we look around the world, we have plenty of reasons to be concerned. Wars are still raging. Genocide still occurs. There are still thousands of nuclear warheads that could destroy us. Millions are dying of HIV/AIDS, leaving behind millions of orphans. Hundreds of millions go to bed hungry every night. And global warming is melting the ice caps, a process that could result eventually in massive flooding of coastal cities, affecting hundreds of millions—possibly billions—of people. Then there is the economic meltdown that is affecting so many of us. There are plenty of problems in our world.

I believe that there does not have to be so much pain and suffering, so much war and violence, so much starvation and disease, so many crushed dreams and untapped talents, so many problems unsolved and so many opportunities ignored. *The world does not have to be like this.* One reason the world is like this is that people are using the wrong model of leadership. They are using the power model.

I don't really blame them. It is the model of leadership that most people are taught. People are taught that leadership is about how to accumulate and wield power; how to make people do things; how to attack and win. It is about clever strategies, and applying pressure. It is about manipulation and coercion. It is the power model of leadership.

During the past 30 years I have had the opportunity to lead and manage in the public sector, private sector, non-profit sector, and academic sector in the United States, 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 need, 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.

The power model is not really concerned with what is right or wrong—it is concerned with acquiring and wielding power. If *pretending* to care about people is good for acquiring power, the power-seeking leader will pretend to care. The leader will promise to make life better. But once in power, the leader may do little to implement those promises. In fact the leader is likely to do just enough, and *only* just enough, to keep his or her power. Even worse, a leader may make caring statements, and then do the opposite. In fact, the leader may feel justified in making life *worse* for a lot of people, so long as he or she gains power. Power is self-justifying; power itself is the end. That is why leaders who live the power model are not very effective in meeting human needs or making life better for others. *It's not what they are trying to do.* It's not their focus. It's not what they care about. What they care about is their own power.

To accept the reality of pain and suffering in the world, and only exploit it for personal gain, is morally wrong and ignores all the higher aspirations of human beings since time immemorial— aspirations found in moral and ethical codes, as well as religious and spiritual teachings. These aspirations are made all the more urgent by the daily cries for help from those who are disadvantaged. The power model perpetuates fear, war, violence, disease, and starvation. If people continue to use the power model, we will make little progress in bringing peace or justice or prosperity to the world.

## **It Starts with the Desire to Serve**

We need to adopt a different leadership model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The model we need to adopt is the service model. This is not the dominant model, but it is an ancient model, going back thousands of years. People who live the service model today are often called servant leaders.

Well, then—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 launched the modern servant leadership movement in 1970 with the publication of his essay, *The Servant as Leader*. 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 leadership is not about acquiring power, it is about making a difference. 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. And there are other tools, often more important.

### **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 inspire, they manage, they communicate, and so forth. What sets servant leaders apart from other leaders is that they are focused on others, not just themselves, and they are motivated to make life better for others, not just 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 are the most important needs we should be addressing? If we address this need, are we going to harm anyone, or leave anyone out? If so, can we reduce the harm, and include people? What decision would be most consistent with the mission and values and goals of my organization? Those are different kinds of questions. They are not about the person who is making the decision, they are questions about the organization and the people it serves.

If you ask different 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 other people the things that they need.

### **The desire to serve**

Greenleaf said that servant leadership begins with the desire to serve. This is a major ethical decision point. Are we using people, or serving them? If we are serving them, we are treating them ethically. If we are using them, we are not.

But are there a lot of people who want to serve, or is that an idealized or romanticized notion of human beings? Are we being unrealistic? In my own life and experience, I have seen plenty of people who wish to serve. I believe that serving others is a fundamental, universal human value. It is emphasized in the teachings of the world's great religions, as well as statements by many respected thinkers and leaders. There is no question that for thousands of years, serving others has been highly valued by people all over the world. I think that the desire to serve, and the importance of service, are part of the human condition. Serving others is a satisfying and ethical way to live. Personally, I think that serving others is not just one more thing to do, it is what life is about. It is why we are here. It is what we are called to do.

### **Key Practices of Servant Leaders**

Assuming that many people want to serve, can servant-leaders succeed? Can they be effective? Can they be competitive in the marketplace?

Fortunately, 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 our Greenleaf conferences. The simple fact is that servant leadership works. I like to talk about the seven key practices of servant leaders. Those seven key practices are: self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching and mentoring, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight.

### *Self-Awareness*

The 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. We need to be aware of how our actions impact others, because we want the impact to be positive. People are always watching. The leader is always on stage. Servant leaders know that their moods are contagious, and people are always watching to see what their mood happens to be. A servant leader who projects a positive mood helps produce enthusiasm and cooperation among team members, which in turn produce success for the team.

It is hard to see ourselves as others see us. What we learn about ourselves often depends on reflection—taking the time to think about how we behave, and why, and when, and consider whether there are other, better, more appropriate, more effective, more thoughtful ways to behave. Servant-leaders often take a walk, or listen to music, or do whatever they need to do to get some quiet time to reflect.

### *Listening*

The next key practice is listening. 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.

### *Changing the pyramid*

Listening can be 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. 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 chief 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 chief that his newest idea is a bad one. 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 is a team at the top. You need a team of senior leaders who are committed to each other and the mission of the organization, and who will bring information from many sources and put it on the table so it can be debated and tested. The chief is still the chief, with the authority to make the final decisions, but now the chief can make better decisions. The chief is better connected with the rest of the organization and the customers it serves.

### *Developing your colleagues*

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.”

The TDIndustries is a specialty construction and air conditioning company in Dallas, Texas. The company’s “Mission Statement” is built on Greenleaf’s ethic. The statement says: “We are committed to providing outstanding career opportunities by exceeding our customers’ expectations through continuous aggressive improvement.” So the mission is to provide outstanding career opportunities. The company exists for its people. To be successful, of course, the company needs to make its customers happy, so they need to exceed their customers’ expectations. To do that, they need to continually improve. To do that, they keep training and developing their people, so they continue to grow, and have outstanding career opportunities. It all comes full circle, and it is all about the people. The worker is as important as the work.

### *Coaching not controlling*

The next key practice is coaching, not controlling. We know that organizations need rules and regulations and procedures. But controlling people, micro-managing them, does not bring out their best. Servant leaders bring out the best in people by engaging, inspiring, coaching, and mentoring them.

In his book, *The Servant Leader*, James Autry said:

1. Leadership is not about controlling people; it’s about caring for people and being a useful resource for people.
2. Leadership is not about being boss; it’s about being present for people and building a community at work.
3. Leadership is not about holding on to territory; it’s about letting go of ego, bringing your spirit to work, being your best and most authentic self.
4. Leadership is less concerned with pep talks and more concerned with creating a place in which people can do good work, can find meaning in their work, and can bring their spirits to work.

Servant-leaders focus on inspiring, engaging, coaching, and mentoring.



### *Unleashing the energy and intelligence of others*

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 intelligence. You could call this “empowerment.” I am not especially comfortable with that word, because it implies that empowerment is about giving power to others. I believe that each of us already has power. The question is whether or not we are allowed to use it. I see empowerment as *allowing people to use their energy and intelligence*. 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.

### *Foresight*

The seventh key practice is foresight. Robert Greenleaf said that foresight is the central ethic of leadership. He said that “prescience, or 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.

## **The Meaningful Life of Servant Leadership**

Let me review what I have said so far. Servant leadership is ethical, because it is about serving people, not using people. The importance of service is recognized around the world, and there are people who are willing to serve. As they emerge into leadership positions, there are key practices available to them that can make them effective and make their organizations successful.

All of this seems promising. But I have noted that servant leadership is not the dominant model of leadership in our culture. In fact, we could say it is counter-cultural. So what motivates people to be servant-leaders? What sustains them in their work? My answer is that servant leadership is a meaningful way to live and lead. It is the meaning that sustains the servant-leader.

There are at least three benefits to finding meaning in life and at work: (1)

intrinsic motivation, (2) good mental health, and (3) deep happiness. I'd like to talk about each of these three benefits.

### *Meaning as an intrinsic motivator*

First, meaning is an intrinsic motivator. People who are intrinsically motivated are more productive, more innovative, more committed, and less likely to feel stress or burn out, than those who are extrinsically motivated.

As you know, extrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by something other than the work or activity, while intrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by the work or activity itself. For example, in school, a student who studies to get a good grade in order to get money from Dad or Mom, is *extrinsically* motivated. A student who studies because he or she is interested in learning, and enjoys learning, is *intrinsically* motivated. We are intrinsically motivated when we do things because we want to, not because we have to. We are intrinsically motivated when we do something because it is fun or good or the right thing to do, or it is meaningful and fulfilling.

Going back at least as far as the industrial revolution, extrinsic rewards have been heavily emphasized in the work place. Extrinsic rewards are wages, benefits, bonuses, and working conditions, as well as negative threats such as punishment or dismissal. Extrinsic rewards will always be important. We need to earn money to take care of ourselves and our families. But people want more than that, and need more than that, if they are to be productive, innovative, committed, and less likely to burn out. They need to be intrinsically motivated, and meaning is an intrinsic motivator.

As many of you know, dramatic testimony on that point came from Viktor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who was a prisoner in a Nazi labor camp in World War II. His story is a painful story of suffering and death. Prisoners had to work hard each day, with little food, clothing, sleep, or medicine in an environment of constant brutality and fear. Frankl observed that prisoners who still had a reason to live, were the ones who were most likely to survive. From this experience, he developed his theory of *logotherapy*, or meaning therapy, in which a patient is "confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life." Frankl believed that "striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man."

### *Meaning and mental health*

A second benefit of finding meaning is that those who are intrinsically motivated have better mental health. Edward L. Deci wrote a book titled, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self Motivation*. The book reports on a study 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.

Notice that the extrinsic goals are about what one *has*. The intrinsic goals are about who one *is*. The research showed that people who were heavily focused on extrinsic rewards had poor mental health, while those who were focused on intrinsic rewards had good mental health—more vitality, higher-self esteem, and a greater sense of well being.

### *Meaning and Deep Happiness*

Finally, let's look at deep happiness. I believe that each of us can be and should be 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.

Seeking deep happiness is not selfish. I am not suggesting that you try to be happy *instead* of others or *at the expense* of others. I am suggesting that you should be deeply happy so that you will be at your best, and will be able to help others to be deeply happy and at their best, as well. When we experience deep happiness we are more loving, more giving, more patient, more enthusiastic. We become a gift to others. So we should be deeply happy for their sake as well as ours.

There is no question that meaning and purpose are keys to being deeply happy. There is lots of research, and we learn this through our own experience. So—if you want to be deeply happy, the most fundamental question is not: Am I a success or a failure? The most fundamental question is not: Is my life hard or easy? The most fundamental question is not: Do people appreciate me? The most fundamental question is: Is my life meaningful? *Is my life meaningful?* If you can answer yes to that question, you can be deeply happy.

## **Four Universal Sources of Meaning**

If meaning is so important, where do people find it? If I had to pick just a few sources of meaning, I would pick four. These are four principles or ideas that I think can be found in most of the world's great religions and the teachings of many spiritual leaders, and are things that we learn as we grow and experience life. You won't be surprised. Here they are: One, love people. Two, help people. Three, live ethically. Four, don't be too attached to material things.

I think there is probably a causal relationship here, because I think that when you love people, you want to help them. And if you are loving people and helping people, you want to treat them right—you want to be ethical in the way you behave. And if you are loving and helping people and treating them right, you are probably more focused on people, and not too attached to material things.

## **The Paradoxical Commandments**

One of the best things about personal meaning is that you can always find it, no matter what. That is the message of the Paradoxical Commandments that I wrote for student leaders when I was in college back in the 1960s.

The sixties in the United States were a provocative time of conflict and confrontation—as well as hope and idealism—on many college campuses. What disturbed me the most was seeing so many idealistic young people go out into the world to bring about change, and then come back, much too soon, disappointed or even embittered because the change they sought did not occur, or people didn't seem to appreciate what they were trying to do.

I had two messages for them. First of all, you really have to love people, because love is one of the only motivations that is strong enough to keep you with the people, and with the process, until change is finally achieved. Second, I told them that if they went out and did what they thought was right and good and true, they would get a lot of meaning and satisfaction. If people appreciated them, that was fine, but if they didn't, they were still okay. If they had the meaning, they didn't have to have the glory.

Well, in 1968 I wrote a booklet for them, a kind of leadership manual. In that booklet, I wrote 149 words that I called "The Paradoxical Commandments." This 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.

And finally:

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.

### **Where the Paradoxical Commandments Traveled**

As I mentioned, I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments in 1968, when I was 19 years old, a college sophomore. They were part of a book I wrote for high school student leaders. About 25,000 or 30,000 copies were sold between 1968 and the mid-seventies.

I went on with my life, traveled and studied, and finally settled down, got married, started a job, and started a family. Twenty-five years went by, and I didn't know what was happening to the Paradoxical Commandments. I know now that what was happening is that people were lifting the Paradoxical Commandments out of that little student council booklet and putting them up on their walls, and their refrigerator doors, and passing them to friends. They traveled all over the world. It is estimated that, as of today, millions of people have used the Paradoxical Commandments.

Servant leaders understand the Paradoxical Commandments. They choose to do what is meaningful, no matter what. The meaning is theirs whether they get applause, indifference, or even a negative response as a result of their efforts. It is the meaning that keeps them going. It is the meaning that gives them intrinsic motivation, good mental health, and deep happiness.

## **Servant-Leaders and Change**

I started by noting some of the problems that we face throughout the world. I have argued that servant leadership is ethical, practical, and meaningful. I want to argue now that servant leadership is the right model of leadership for achieving positive change in the world.

One of the biggest obstacles to positive change is the drive to obtain the symbols of secular success. Since success is usually defined in terms of the existing culture, the desire for success leads people to conform. To challenge the status quo is to risk becoming an outcast, isolated and not eligible for the rewards the society has to offer. For that reason, people usually stick with the accepted way of doing things, even when the accepted way has become wrong or irrelevant. Following the accepted rules is the way to power, wealth, and fame, even if it is not the way to solve the world's problems.

Servant-leaders can be successful leaders of change, because they are not focused on symbols of success like power, wealth, and fame. They are focused on making a difference. They are harder to co-opt or control through extrinsic rewards. They are willing to take a stand, and speak out. If they are stripped of their symbols of success as a result of taking a stand, it's not the end of the world for them. In fact, it could be the beginning of a new world for them—the beginning of new work that brings great personal meaning and deep happiness as they find new ways to serve others.

Servant leadership is not the dominant model of leadership in most cultures. But that hasn't stopped servant-leaders from changing the world. And they have not found it necessary to tear down existing institutions. Servant-leaders know how to work with institutions, or supplement them, or bypass them and go straight to the work that needs doing. It often starts with an individual.

George Williams was a young man working in a draper's shop in London in 1844. He noticed that young men had no positive alternative to life on the streets, so he and a group of fellow drapers formed a Christian fellowship of young men who helped each other learn and grow in mind and spirit. A century and a half later, the group that he started—the YMCA—is serving 30 million men, women, and children in hundreds of programs in 130 countries.

Paul Harris gathered a few friends together in 1905 to start meeting on a

regular basis. The group grew, and focused more and more on service to others. Today, Rotary International has 1.2 million members in 32,000 clubs in more than 200 countries and geographical areas. And not only that—Rotary has played a major role in eradicating polio. Rotary International launched a polio eradication program in 1988, when polio was common throughout the world. Since then, Rotarians and their partner agencies have immunized more than two billion children in 122 countries, reducing polio from 350,000 cases in 1988 to fewer than 1,900 cases in 2002—a 99.5% reduction. It is estimated that four million children who might have contracted polio have been saved from the crippling disease. Rotarians raised more than \$600 million, and tens of thousands of Rotarians have assisted in distributing the polio vaccine.

Muhammad Yunus was an economics professor back in the 1970s in Bangladesh, teaching about the nation's long-term plans. But things were not getting better. Finally, he went out into the villages of Bangladesh, and sat down with the people, and listened, and discovered what he could do to change the relentless poverty of the country. He discovered that people needed small amounts of capital. They had no collateral, so banks would not loan money to them. But the villagers had energy, and potential, and the amounts of capital they needed were very small. Yunus made his first 42 loans, personally, which came to a total of U.S. \$27. He asked for no collateral, but the villagers paid their loans back. In fact, the repayment rate over the last 20 years has been 98% to 99%, without collateral. Muhammad Yunus has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Bangladesh through micro-credit. He and his bank, Grameen Bank, won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for their work, which has spread to other parts of the world, fueling the micro-credit revolution. Millions of lives are being changed.

It would be wonderful if all our political and business and non-profit and academic leaders were servant-leaders. It would be wonderful if the chief at the top of every organizational pyramid had a servant's heart. But we don't have to wait for that to happen. We don't have to be perched at the top of the organizational pyramid to make a difference. We just have to identify and meet needs. If our focus is not on power, but on service, then each of us can make a difference. And we may be surprised—the difference we make may turn out to be a big one.

## **Conclusion**

Let me close with these thoughts. I am certain that the power model of leadership is the wrong model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The right model is the service model. Servant leadership is ethical, practical, and meaningful. It is the best model



for bringing about positive change.

Adopting the service model will not be easy, but it is desperately important that we do so. Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has got to be different from leadership in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, or things simply will not get better. Our very survival may be at stake.

There are a lot of benefits to being a servant-leader, but one benefit is this. If you love and help others, and focus on making a difference, then at the end of your life, when you look back, you're not going to have a lot of regrets. You may not have any. You will look back on a life filled with meaning. Even more important, you will not wonder why you have lived. You'll know. *You'll know*. And that may be the greatest blessing of all.

Thank you!