Growing to Greatness through Servant Leadership
By Dr. Kent M. Keith

Growing people and helping them to perform at high levels is a key strategy for long-term success. When employees grow, their productive capacity increases. When their productive capacity increases, the capacity of the organization increases—it can do things better, or it can do things it was not able to do before. That means that the organization can better serve its customers, and is therefore more likely to succeed. It is thus a win for the employee who grows, the organization that increases its capacity, and the customer who is better served.

This is the idea behind servant leadership. Servant leadership is a philosophy based on the value of service that considers the growth of employees to be a fundamental priority.

The Modern Servant Leadership Movement

The idea that leaders should focus on serving others is an idea that goes back at least two thousand years. However, the modern servant leadership movement was launched forty years ago by an American businessman named Robert K. Greenleaf.

Robert Greenleaf lived from 1904 to 1990. He worked for AT&T, which was then one of the largest corporations in the world. He started digging holes for telephone poles, but found that what he enjoyed was teaching, training his fellow employees, and evaluating the potential of managers. Eventually, he became the Director of Management Research at AT&T, which meant that it was his job to educate and train the leaders and managers of one of the world's largest corporations to be as effective as possible. Based on his thirty-eight years of experience, Greenleaf concluded that the most effective leaders were not in it for their own power and wealth. The most effective leaders were focused on serving others—their colleagues, their customers, and their communities.

Before retiring from AT&T in 1964, Greenleaf was invited by Dr. Douglas McGregor to teach a course at MIT. McGregor had just published his influential book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, in which he described Theory X and Theory Y. According to Theory X, people don't want to work or be responsible, and will only perform when threatened with punishment. Theory Y assumes that people are willing to work and be responsible, but in modern

industrial life, their potential is not fully utilized. Greenleaf took the next logical step. If people are willing to work and be responsible, but their potential is not being utilized, why don't we help them grow so they can fulfil their potential and contribute to the organization at their highest possible level?

In 1970, Greenleaf published his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader,* in which he coined the words "servant-leader" and "servant leadership." This is the essay that launched the modern servant leadership movement. During the past forty years the essay has been read by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. His first collection of essays, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, was published in 1977. It is still being widely read today.

Greenleaf made it clear that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve. Then, when one sees the opportunity to serve by leading, one steps up and becomes a servant-leader. Servant leadership is therefore not about being servile or submissive. It is about making a difference by identifying and meeting the needs of others.

The Best Test: Do Those Served Grow?

Greenleaf said that the best test of the servant-leader is this: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" Thus, Greenleaf measured the effectiveness of servant-leaders by their ability to help others to grow.

Greenleaf recognized that organizations work in different sectors and provide different products and services. However, he believed that *the fundamental business of the organization is to grow its people*. That's how each organization can be most successful.

Scholars suggest that there are at least four elements that are unique to servant leadership when compared with other ideas or theories of leadership:

- The focus on serving followers for their own good, as well as the good of the organization. Servant-leaders form long-term relationships with followers, encouraging their growth so that they may reach their fullest potential.
- The moral element. Servant-leaders serve people instead of using people. They establish a climate in which people can raise and address moral issues.

- Concern for all stakeholders, including employees, customers, business partners, shareholders, creditors, and communities, including those who are least privileged.
- Self-reflection, as a counter to the leader's hubris. This is about humility. Servant-leaders know that it is not about them, it is about meeting the needs of others.

The ultimate goal of servant leadership, as described by Greenleaf, is to make the world a better place. That will happen if servant-leaders help their organizations to become servant-institutions. By focusing on serving their employees, customers, and communities, servant-institutions can improve the quality of our lives. Our societies will become more just, caring, prosperous, and sustainable.

Key Practices of Servant Leaders

There are practical things that servant-leaders do that help them to be effective and get results. Here are seven key practices:

1. *Self-Awareness*. Each of us is the instrument through which we lead. If we want to be effective servant-leaders, we need to be aware of who we are and how we impact others.

2. *Listening*. By listening, servant-leaders are able to identify the needs of their colleagues and customers. That puts them in a good position to *meet* those needs. When they do, their organizations are successful.

3. *Changing the Pyramid*. The traditional hierarchy—the pyramid—makes it hard to listen well. People may look up at their bosses and not out at their customers. The chief has no colleagues, only subordinates, and may not get good information or be able to test ideas. The solution is to create a team at the top.

4. *Developing Your Colleagues.* Developing colleagues includes education, training, new experiences, new responsibilities, and new jobs. Individual development plans can be used to make sure that each employee's development is supported and accomplished.

5. *Coaching, not Controlling*. A good way to develop people is through coaching and mentoring. Every organization needs

rules and regulations, but you don't bring out the best in people by focusing on control. You bring out the best in people by engaging, inspiring, coaching, and mentoring them.

6. *Unleashing the Energy and Intelligence of Others.* Once people are developed and coached, they can be unleashed to make their fullest contribution to the organization.

7. *Foresight.* If you aren't exercising foresight, you really aren't leading, you are just reacting. And if you are just reacting, you may run out of options, and start making bad decisions—including unethical ones. A failure of foresight can put an organization in a bad situation that might have been avoided.

The principles and practices of servant leadership are being implemented today in every sector—private, public, non-profit, and academic. For example, in the private sector, companies such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Toro Company, Aflac, Men's Wearhouse, Synovus Financial, Herman Miller, ServiceMasters, Marriott International, and FedEx have applied servant leadership principles in their operations.

Research on the Impacts of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf proposed servant leadership as a philosophy with key practices, not an academic theory. However, during the past few years scholars have become interested in servant leadership. Their research on the impacts of servant leadership in the workplace is still at an early stage, but the research results to date are very positive.

Studies indicate that servant-leaders are good at building and facilitating teams. Servant-leaders treat employees fairly, and employees reciprocate through organizational citizenship behaviours (discretionary behaviours that are not required of employees but help the organization to function well). It has been found that employees of servant-leaders are more helping and creative than those working with leaders who score lower on servant leadership. Servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to follower job satisfaction. Servant leadership also has a positive impact on employee commitment to the organization, job performance, and community citizenship behaviour. A recent study of the CEOs of 126 high tech companies concluded that CEO servant leadership orientation predicted subsequent favorable firm performance, measured as return on assets.

Servant Leadership around the World

There are servant leadership centers and institutes all over the world, including Greenleaf Centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Iceland, and Singapore. However, few studies have been conducted to compare the ways in which servant leadership is implemented in different countries and cultures.

Some clues regarding the universal applicability of servant leadership can be drawn from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) study that was conducted during the 1990s. It was a 62-nation, 11-year study involving 170 researchers worldwide. One of the most important questions addressed by the GLOBE research team concerned the extent to which the practices and values associated with leadership are universal.

The study led to the development of six universally shared conceptions of leadership, known most often as "culturally endorsed leadership theory dimensions." The "charismatic/value-based" dimension included self-sacrifice, integrity, and the leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and expect high performance outcomes on the basis of his or her firmly held core values. The "team orientation" dimension emphasized effective team-building and the implementation of a common purpose or goal among team members. The "self-protective" dimension included being self-centered, status conscious, a face-saver, and conflict-inducer. The "autonomous" dimension included being independent and individualistic.

All cultures saw the "charismatic/value-based" dimension and the "team orientation" dimension as contributing substantially to outstanding leadership, while the "self-protective" and "autonomous" dimensions were viewed as not contributing to outstanding leadership. It is significant that servant leadership is consistent with the views of all cultures regarding the dimensions that do—and do not—contribute to outstanding leadership.

Growing to Greatness

In a competitive world, strategies count. In the information age, with economies depending on knowledge and service industries, growing people is a key strategy for success. Servant leadership, among all leadership theories and ideas, is uniquely focused on employee growth. The future success of our organizations will depend on many factors, but one will certainly be this: the number of servant-leaders who can grow their employees and organizations to greatness.

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