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What is Servant Leadership?

In 1970, at the age of 66, Robert Greenleaf published *The Servant as Leader* (1977), the first of a dozen essays and books on servant-leadership. Greenleaf spent the majority of his organizational life in the field of management, research, development, and education at American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T). His job at AT&T was to study how the best leaders emerged in an organization and in that role he studied the best and most successful organizations. After a half century of working with large organizations and teaching at a variety of colleges and universities about business management, Greenleaf distilled his observations in a series of essays and books on the theme of "The servant as leader" and then established a Center dedicated to servant leadership.¹

At the time, his essays and books were uniquely different from the majority of organizational texts for none spoke of leadership as serving. Rather, organization texts spoke of effective management. No texts ever focused on leadership as service.

¹ The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership is located in Westfield, Indiana, and can be found at: <http://www.greenleaf.org/>

In all of these works, Greenleaf described the need for a new kind of leadership model - a model which puts serving others as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promotes a sense of community and the sharing of power in decision making.

Who is a servant-leader? Greenleaf said that the servant-leader is one who is servant first. In *The Servant as Leader* he wrote: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 352).

Greenleaf was very clear in his discussion of a servant leader and how he developed the concept of servant leadership. Greenleaf, a prolific reader of leadership and of literature in general, borrowed from the work of numerous writers who also had a visionary perspective about the role of serving through leadership.

First and probably most importantly, Greenleaf was inspired by the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament. St. Paul described a servant as "an under rowers or the actual Greek word of *huperetes* (Fourth Chapter of 1 Corinthians)² In St. Paul's period of Roman dominance, galley ships

² The actual word used by St. Paul is *huperetes*, the under-rower. It derives its meaning from the military life of the Roman empire, notably the warships, the war galleys of the Romans, which as we're told in that ancient world had a low deck just a foot or so above the water, and there were the seats of the rowers, the slaves, who were for the most part

were propelled by galley slaves who were under rowers who kept the galleys moving. St. Paul envisioned a servant leader as one who is “equal” to all of the workers, all of the individuals within the organization. A servant leader is not about the followers but is one of them. A servant in the galley “under” rows for the good of all. A servant leader is one who serves first, rather than wanting power, influence, fame, or wealth.³

Greenleaf was also highly influenced by the writings of Max Dupree and Abraham Heschel. Max DuPree, (1989) author of "Leadership is an Art" and "Leadership Jazz," was also the CEO/Chairman of the Herman Miller Corp., a Fortune 500 company. His formulations for leadership are simple and to the point. "Leadership is concerned with intimacy, intimacy with the substance of the work and with the people you serve," DuPree (p. 5) writes. "Leaders are concerned with substance, not artifice." Dupree stated that, "The first job of a leader is to define reality, last to say thank you and, in between, to be a debtor and a servant."-- *Max DuPree*

Greenleaf also mentioned throughout his work the writings of Abraham Herschel, probably one of the 20th century's great theologians. Greenleaf was drawn to Herschel's work, "*Who is man*" (1965, p.12) in which Herschel clearly outlines how a true servant sees another person, "Our way of seeing a person is different from our way of seeing a thing. A

chained to their seats <http://ldolphin.org/underrowers.html>. The translation reads "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," which in the Ancient Greek is: Outwv hmav logizesqw (5737) anqrwpov wv uphretav Xristou kai oikonomouv musthriwn

<http://www.searchgodsword.org/isb/bible.cgi?query=1co+4:1&translation=nas&ot=bhs&nt=na&sr=1>

³ R.K. Greenleaf (2002). *Servant Leadership*. Paulist Press.

thing we perceive a person we meet." *Who is man* is learned, lucid and drew Greenleaf into the knowledge that the authentic life should be authentically lived as a leader and as a follower.

One special work that influenced Greenleaf's thinking was the novel by Hermann Hesse (2003), *Journey to the East*, which is an example of Hesse's typical Eastern mysticism at its finest (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 21). The story is about a group of people who are traveling to a new land. Accompanying the group is their servant, Leo, who sings songs and takes care of their needs. During the journey, Leo disappears from the group. The group struggles to stay together and eventually disbands. Several years later, it is discovered that Leo (the group's servant) was really their leader and without the leader who was a servant, the group could not function as a group. It was not until years later that the group narrator finally figures out the role of Leo and the importance of his role – even though the narrator himself is not able to succeed in being a leader. And finally, inspired by Leo's character, Greenleaf realizes that the key to leadership is to serve first. Thus coupled with the inspiration and with his own 40 years of experience, he fashions his most famous essay, "The Servant as Leader", in which he outlined the basic characteristics associated with Servant Leadership. In the essay, Greenleaf identifies competencies associated with Servant Leadership, of which, of which a few are selected here to share.

1) Building Community – Servant Leadership evolves from our basic involvement with community. It is our desire to improve community that prompts us as individuals to serve institutions (i.e. business, education,

worship, government.) Greenleaf was a devout Christian and the sense of community for him was imperative to the success of any leadership role.

2) Stewardship – As a leader in an institution, we can be a (1) inside leader who handles the daily activities or (2) trustee who oversees the organization and insures that goals are met.

3) Commitment to the growth of people – Practicing Servant Leadership includes helping others become good servant leaders.

4) Healing – Servant Leaders are continuously searching for ways to bring ‘wholeness’ to our life.

5) Empathy – We must not only identify with others, but accept what others contribute. Servant leadership requires a tolerance of imperfection.

6) Listening – The natural Servant Leader responds to a problem by listening first. True listening will build strength in others.

Servant Leadership in Coaching

After reading Greenleaf's (1977) work, Dupree (1989), and Heschel (1965), as well as other writers mentioned by Heschel including Henri Nouwen (1993), Stanley Hauerwas (1981), and John Crossin (2002), we began to wonder if the principles of servant leadership could be applied to coaching. Very little is written on the concept of servant leadership as applied to coaching and less has been studied about the effect of a servant leadership philosophy on coaching. A few studies have examined servant leadership from the perspective of how coaches were perceived by their athletes to possess "servant leader" characteristics. The quality of perceived servant leadership was associated with their athletes' use of

mental skills, motivation, satisfaction and performance (Rieke, Hammermeister, & Chase, 2008) Little research, however, exists on educating and helping coaches reflect about the role of servant leadership.

At the time, we were also working with a non-profit organization, Winning with Character⁴, who had asked us specifically to develop a new model for coaching education. Could we develop a philosophic model that captures the strength of Greenleaf's original thesis and place it into a curriculum that would inspire coaches to want to be servant leaders?

For us, at the Center for ETHICS*, servant leadership could only exist if certain moral character traits were also developed and supported in the coaching model. Thus we believed to truly understand the role of servant leadership, we had to choose descriptors of a servant to match what we believe are the necessary and sufficient qualities to be leaders of character. A servant leader is one who leads for the good of all, and not for the good of self. We also believe that a true servant leader has specific traits of character that support their “under” rowing mission: (1) A servant leader has an honorable nature; they are truthful with a strong sense of knowing the right. (2) A servant leader’s mission is to serve, to help, to assist, to give, and to share. (3) A servant leader inspires others to “do the right”, and to lead honorable lives. (4) A servant leader has a plan of action, an honorable plan of action, and that plan can be understood by others. (5) A servant leader is courageous for the right and courageous to do the right.

⁴ Winningwithcharacter.org

We believed that the coaching model should follow the same simple ideal but profound vision of Robert Greenleaf, who said that,:

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27.).

Servant-leadership encourages everyone to balance leading and serving within their own lives. For people who are in leadership positions, it reminds us that our primary responsibility is in serving others. For people who are in follower positions, it encourages us to look for situational opportunities to provide leadership. The end result of this moving back and forth between leading and following is to enhance our lives as individuals, and to raise the possibilities of our many institutions.

Our first project in 2002 was to examine the possibilities of affecting change toward servant leadership by developing first a curriculum focused on the qualities of servant leadership. Second, we developed an assessment tool that measured qualities necessary to be a servant leader. At the time, we were working with a large United States University football team. The coach had asked us to write curriculum focused on servant leadership that their coaches could teach. When we did such, we wanted to assess the effectiveness of our curriculum. We developed a four year curriculum for the university team in which we worked to educate the players about the importance of character in relation to servant leadership. The curriculum begins with examination of self, self as a follower, self as

an emerging leader, and finally self as a servant leader. The university team found the curriculum to be effective but we wanted to know if the curriculum did affect change in leadership ability. To do so, meant some sort of measurement to capture the essence of servant leadership. After deliberation and study of the current tools available at that time, we decided to develop our own instrument: the SBB Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory (Stoll, Breitbach, & Beller, 2003).⁵

The SBB Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory (SBB Servant) was developed, using a theoretical construct based on Greenleaf (2002) and St. Paul's usage of the word, *huperetes*, to examine individual's perceptions of others in relationship to servant leadership qualities (Stoll, Beller, Breitbach, 2003). The SBB Servant was designed to assess individual and peer evaluated moral values associated with character driven servant leadership. Participants read and answered 50 statements about: honorable nature, serving others, inspiration to others, a plan of action, and courage. Their answers were evaluated based on a five point Likert Scale from Most Like Me to Not Like Me. The Inventory was divided into two parts: (1) The SBB SELF Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory, and (2) The SBB PEER Servant Leadership Judgment Inventory. The two parts were used as a teaching and coaching tool to help young people develop into leaders. Each individual was to take the SELF inventory, and then the group was to rate each other with the PEER inventory. The data from the self inventory was then compared with that

⁵ SBB was shortened for the last names of the primary authors, Stoll, Breitbach, and Beller.

of the peer group evaluation. The coach then used the information from the inventories to help athletes understand what values the athlete needed to work on in order to more fully develop servant leader qualities.

Initial pilot studies were conducted on male and female athletes prior to measuring the University football team, with Cronbach alphas ranging on each subscale from .78 to .84 (Stoll, Beller, Breitbach, 2004). While theoretically an individual cannot consider him or herself a servant leader, it was of interest to examine how an individual perceived themselves relative to these servant leader qualities and then compare those views to how others viewed them. From this process an individual can then learn how others perceive them and thus potentially grow in their servant leader qualities.

Next we studied 27 of the male Division I football players. Each athlete gave informed consent and then completed the SBB Servant. Over a period of a week, each athlete then completed the SBB Peer Servant on the other 26 athletes. To examine how athletes perceived themselves in relation to how others viewed them a series of correlations analyses were run. Additionally, a coach was asked to evaluate the athletes relative to the servant leader qualities. Interestingly, the athletes whom a coach viewed as servant leaders were found to score high on the SBB Peer Servant qualities by their peers. These athletes also appeared to have a strong sense of who they were relative to these servant leader qualities. However, those athletes whom the coach felt did not demonstrate strong servant leader qualities were also viewed by their peers as having lower servant leader qualities. Interestingly, these particular athletes perceived

themselves as having high levels of servant leader qualities. Thus, in a preliminary study the instrument appeared to have the ability to help differentiate athlete's perceptions of themselves relative to how others view them in their servant leader qualities.

This preliminary study with the university team pushed us forward to affect change in the servant leadership literature and to also take the next giant step, to actually work with coaches on developing servant leadership traits. Our initial studies with athletes and servant leadership education told us that our curriculum appeared to work and our instruments appeared to also work in measuring peer perception of leadership.

What are the Results of a Servant Leadership Education Program for Coaches?

Because most coaches are not available to take classes at a university or college, we were challenged to develop education that could be delivered online. We had experience working with athletes and we had experience in developing curriculum and instruments, we now needed to actually develop an educational program that could be accessed by many coaches.

In 2007, we first developed a 10 lesson online coaching education program to help inspire and improve a coach's thinking about servant leadership. One of our student- colleagues,, David Brunner, gave us some thoughtful direction on the content of our lessons. He argued for ten specific lessons: 1) What is leadership? 2) What are the styles of leadership in coaching? 3) What is your Mission as a Coach? 4) Love, 5) Commitment,

6) Responsibility, 7) Respect, 8) Humility, 9) Patience, and 10) Empathy, Compassion and Leadership. In 2008, another student/colleague, Peter VanMullem added an additional lesson, number 11, Integrity and Sportsmanship. We anticipated that completion of the educational online program would take approximately 30 hours of clock time. In each lesson, a participant reads a variety of information on the lesson topic, views video through *YouTube*, answers five multiple choice questions, and does a reflective assessment of their reasoning about servant leadership and the values posted in the lesson.

The multiple choice questions are unique, for if a participant chooses an answer that is not correct or not the best choice, the reader is linked back to start again, read more information, do more reflection, before choosing an answer again. Thus, the multiple choice questions inspire and force reflection about their choices.

The assessment tool asks a series of questions about the lesson and the coaches' responses including a reflective piece on each lesson.

The 2007 preliminary study appeared successful and a good foundation to increase the size and scope of the project. . In 2008, we conducted an additional preliminary study of this program lead by Mr.VanMullem.

What is so important about Mr.VanMullem's study using our Servant Leadership Online Education Program is that usually education and social science researchers are often limited to a sample of self-selected volunteers and/or intact groups. Thus, major limitations in research design exist and the ability to generalize those results to the greater population occurs.

Because of these limitations, many argue that educational or social science research is limited in its ability to draw causation from the independent to dependent variable to the extent that studies in the hard sciences can accomplish.

However, our 2008 study is an exception to much of the typical design flaws of social science and educational research. Mr. VanMullem first sent out a general solicitation to coaches to participate in the study. From this call he received responses from 37 individuals who were interested in participating, many of whom were currently coaching in their seasons. Once these individuals were identified, he sorted them by sport affiliation (in order to ensure equivalency across sports in each group) and then assigned numbers to each. They were then randomly assigned to either intervention or controls groups. All participants were active coaches and participants in a coaching character education program within their governing organization.

The online intervention was then administered to the treatment group. Thus, there existed a modified pretest, posttest, randomized groups design. To ensure that randomization truly occurred, an independent t-test was run on initial Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI) scores - a valid and reliable instrument to measure moral reasoning Cronbach Alpha at .88 - and Core Values Recognition Test (CVTRT), - a recognition test developed to measure the governing organization's character education program - finding no significant differences between groups at the study initiation. The intervention had a strong theoretical construct based in cognitive moral development as well as the philosophical theories

underlying servant. The control group received only the governing organization's character education program. All participants were pre and post tested with the HBVCI (moral reasoning) and the CVTRT (NAIA recognition test). It was hypothesized that the sport governing character education program would have limited impact on participant's ability to recognize values of respect, responsibility, and integrity, as their program had little to no theoretical construct and did not follow best practices related to the pedagogical practices of cognitive moral reasoning.

As one would expect, the intervention group significantly increased in their cognitive moral reasoning (HBVCI) from pre to posttest with the control group decreasing in their scores. With the CVTRT, the intervention group had identical scores from pre to posttest, while the control group decreased. Servant leadership has at its core values of respect, responsibility, and fairness, values that the governing organization program claims to teach and profess. One would think that the intervention group, because they spent much time in critical thinking about these values relative to personal and professional practice (Servant Leadership) and had gone through the governing organization character program as well, that their scores on the CVTRT would also increase. They did not, which supported the premise that a strong theoretically based educational pedagogy is necessary in order for individuals to improve their critical moral reasoning about the relevant moral issues they face.

Conclusion

Interpretation of the statistical findings of these preliminary studies gives us hope that servant leadership education for coaches can be a powerful force in helping coaches be servant leaders. Our goal is that our involvement in sport servant leadership will continue the tradition of Robert Greenleaf and that athletes coached by servant leader coaches meet the Greenleaf test: "do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27).

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About Us

The Center for ETHICS* at the University of Idaho offers study, intervention, outreach, consultation, and leadership in developing and advancing the theory, knowledge and understanding of character education including moral and ethical reasoning, moral development, ethical leadership, and ethical application. The Center's mission is in believing and teaching the tradition of competitive integrity to inspire leaders of character.