

Quaker Life
July/August 2003

Servant-Leadership and Quakers

By Larry C. Spears

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. 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?

Robert K. Greenleaf
The Servant as Leader

It is unusual for a Friend to become better known outside of Quaker circles than within, but such is the case with Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the term "servant-leadership" in 1970 and then wrote extensively about it until his death in 1990.

Today, our desire for caring leadership takes place in a world increasingly glutted with information and yet starved for wisdom. While Robert K. Greenleaf's writings were based on organizational life in a different era, he succeeded in articulating a belief that resonates more clearly with each passing year. In so doing, Greenleaf transcended the old arena of leadership techniques and has helped to move our thinking toward true leadership wisdom.

The servant-leader concept continues to grow in its influence and impact. In fact, we are witnessing an unparalleled explosion of interest and practice of servant-leadership in the past decade. In many ways, the times are only now beginning to catch up with Robert Greenleaf's visionary call to servant-leadership.

Servant-leadership, now in its fourth decade as a specific leadership and service concept, continues to create a quiet revolution in workplaces around the world where traditional, autocratic and hierarchical modes of leadership are yielding to a different model — one based on teamwork and community, one that seeks to involve others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior and one attempting to enhance the personal growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions. This emerging approach to leadership and service is called servant-leadership.

The words servant and leader are usually thought of as being opposites. When two opposites are brought together in a creative and meaningful way, a paradox emerges. And so the words servant and leader have been brought together to create the paradoxical idea of servant-leadership. The basic idea of servant-leadership is both logical and intuitive. Since the time of the industrial

revolution, managers have tended to view people as objects and institutions have considered workers as cogs within a mechanical model. In the past few decades, we have witnessed a shift in that long-held view.

The Servant-as-Leader Idea

No one in the past 30 years has had a more profound impact on thinking about leadership than Robert Greenleaf. If we sought an objective measure of the quality of leadership available to society, there would be none better than the number of people reading and studying Robert Greenleaf's writings.

Peter M. Senge
The Fifth Discipline

The term servant-leadership was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990), entitled "The Servant as Leader." Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, Greenleaf spent most of his organizational life in the field of management research, development and education at AT&T. Following a 40-year career at AT&T, Greenleaf enjoyed a second career that lasted another 25 years, during which time he served as an influential consultant to a number of major institutions, including Ohio University, MIT, the Ford Foundation, the Mead Corporation, the American Foundation for Management Research and Lilly Endowment Inc. In 1964, Greenleaf established the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985 and is now headquartered in Indianapolis.

The idea of the servant as leader came partly out of Greenleaf's half century of experience in working to shape large institutions. However, the event that crystallized Greenleaf's thinking came in the 1960s, when he read Hermann Hesse's short novel Journey to the East — an account of a mythical journey by a group of people on a spiritual quest. Greenleaf concluded that the central meaning of it was that a great leader is first experienced as a servant to others and this simple fact is central to his or her greatness. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. This insight further reinforced Greenleaf's own observations of the qualities that seemed to be present within leaders who were both effective and caring.

In 1970, at the age of 66, Greenleaf published "The Servant as Leader," the first of a dozen essays and books on servant-leadership. Since that time, more than a half-million copies of his books and essays have been sold worldwide. Slowly but surely, Greenleaf's servant-leadership writings have made a deep, lasting impression on leaders, educators and many others who are concerned with issues of leadership, management, service and personal growth.

What Is Servant-Leadership?

Despite all the buzz about modern leadership techniques, no one knows better than Greenleaf what really matters.

Working Woman magazine

In all of his works, Greenleaf was an advocate for a better kind of leadership model, one that puts serving others — including employees, customers and community — as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting 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 a 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 difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant — first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. 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?"

It is important to stress that servant-leadership is not a quick-fix approach. Nor is it something that can be quickly instilled within an institution. At its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work — in essence, a way of being — that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society.

In an article titled, "Pluralistic Reflections on Servant-Leadership," Juana Bordas wrote: "Many women, minorities and people of color have long traditions of servant-leadership in their cultures. Servant-leadership has very old roots in many of the indigenous cultures. Cultures that were holistic, cooperative, communal, intuitive and spiritual. These cultures centered on being guardians of the future and respecting the ancestors who walked before." The startling paradox of the term servant-leadership often serves to prompt new insights.

Women leaders and authors are now writing and speaking about servant-leadership as a 21st century leadership philosophy that is most appropriate for both women and men to embrace. Patsy Sampson, former president of Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, is one such person. In an essay on women and servant-leadership she writes: "So-called (service-oriented) feminine characteristics are exactly those which are consonant with the very best qualities of servant-leadership."

Prophetic Voices

The work of Robert Greenleaf grows more important every day, for at the heart of his work is a spirit of hope for the wide range of institutions about which many people feel increasingly hopeless.

Parker J. Palmer

One important aspect of the Religious Society of Friends is the nurturance of seekers. The very origins of Friends has much to do with the fact that 17th-century English seekers were already present and listening when the prophetic visionary leadership of George Fox spoke to their hearts. Out of that union of seekers and prophet grew the powerful historic tradition we have today.

Robert K. Greenleaf was, himself, a seeker when he discovered Quakerism at the age of thirty. A former member of Monadnock (New Hampshire) Meeting and Kendal (Pennsylvania) Meeting, Greenleaf's pioneering work in developing servant-leaders continues to have a growing impact upon Friends and other seekers who believe in the linking nature of spiritual meaning through service to others.

Greenleaf addressed modern-day seekers in this way when he wrote: "There is a theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all of the time." Greenleaf continues to speak to all of us with power and clarity through his encouraging challenge to each of us to be both servant and leader.

Life is full of curious and meaningful paradoxes. Servant-leadership is one such paradox that has slowly but surely gained hundreds of thousands of adherents over the past quarter century. The seeds that have been planted have begun to sprout in many institutions, as well as in the hearts of many who long to improve the human condition. Servant-leadership is providing a framework from which many thousands of known and unknown individuals are helping to improve how we treat those who do the work within our many institutions. Servant-leadership truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development, and for the creation of better, more caring institutions.

[Larry C. Spears is President and CEO of The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership and the editor-author of a dozen books and numerous articles.]