Servant-Leadership is Taking Root in Healthcare

by Nancy Larner
Program Director

"Caring for persons, the more able and less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built."
—Robert K. Greenleaf

Today the U.S. healthcare system is in a rather precarious position. It is difficult enough to keep up with all the changes occurring in healthcare, much less knowing how each new twist-and-turn will play out in our many healthcare systems. Despite these uncertainties, there are a growing number of healthcare organizations that are making great strides toward a brighter future through their growing emphasis on servant-leadership.

The Sisters of St. Joseph (SSJ) Health System, in Michigan, has been practicing servant-leadership as part of their overall systems approach for eight years now. President and CEO John Lore, Vice-President Joyce DeShano, and their many colleagues have made a conscious effort to foster and maintain a values-based culture within their organization. With over 20,000 employees and growing, the folks at the SSJ Health System realize that the best way to face the future of healthcare is through developing partnerships with people both inside and outside of their system. Servant-leadership seems to naturally facilitate this process.

In Insights on Leadership, a forthcoming book of essays edited by The Greenleaf Center's executive director, Larry Spears, John Lore contributes a chapter in which he discusses servant-leadership and the SSJ Health System. In this chapter he states that people within their organization realized some years ago that they must "build an integrated system of organizations, which is a fundamentally different challenge. Among other things, this involves bringing together people from very different backgrounds so that they can work together in a congruent, integrated system."

Lore goes on to say that the SSJ Health System's values-based approach "is a source of strength and renewal that probably gives it a competitive edge." Servant-leadership encourages the synergy that helps all involved to come up with solutions to common operational challenges in a way in which all parties can achieve the larger mission of benefitting the society in which they serve.

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Servant-Leadership at Highland Community College

by Ruth Mercedes Smith, President
Highland Community College
Freeport, Illinois

In 1996 Frank Walker, Chair of the Highland Community College Board of Trustees, and I traveled to Indiana to attend the first Leadership Institute for Higher Education, developed by the Greenleaf Center. It was a most informative and inspiring event. We arrived with personal commitments to this philosophy, but left with the energy and dedication to instill these concepts throughout our institution and ultimately into our community. We came as devotees to the teachings of Greenleaf and left as missionaries for transformation.

When we returned, we first developed a Servant-Leadership Action Plan that outlined our major activities for the 1996-97 academic year. Actions included:
- Train board on concepts.
- Circulate articles on concepts throughout the college.
- Discuss concepts with student leaders and in our Phi Theta Kappa Leadership Course.

• Discuss concepts with college cabinet and at various meetings of faculty and staff.
• Hold a board reception for student leaders and focus on servant-leaders.
• Evaluate progress on incorporation of concepts into our organizational behaviors and report to board.

The months since we began our organizational journey in servant-leadership have been exciting ones for the board chair and me as servant-leadership has become a way of being for us. It is easier to talk about it and to work with others on its meaning for our college because servant-leadership

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Pass the Salsa, Please
by Juana Bordes, President
Mestiza Multicultural Consultants

A few years ago when salsa passed ketchup as America’s favorite condiment, it was hailed as a “multicultural breakthrough.” But the best was yet to come! Corn chips are now better sellers than potato chips. They taste good, are good for you and, according to Frito-Lay, are more profitable. So everybody wins!

That’s what real diversity is about. Everybody wins. Perhaps that’s why recent studies on teams indicate that a team’s diversity contributes to increased effectiveness and creativity. This explains why cross-functional teams produce such high results.

Learning how to benefit from diversity is an ongoing process that requires pro-active steps and a personal commitment. For as Greenleaf stated, “Everything begins with the initiative of an individual.” Below are nine steps you can take to increase your ability to value differences and thus ensure that creativity and diversity are cornerstones of servant-leadership in the 21st Century.

1. “Walk the Talk.” Start with yourself first. Make a commitment to be a role model for learning how to value diversity.

2. Realize diversity is a journey we are making together. Martin Luther King said, “We may have come over on different boats, but we are in the same boat now!” So be patient and tolerant with yourself and others.

3. Be willing to listen attentively. Greenleaf reflected that the servant-leader practices the “sustained intentness of listening.” Stephen Covey observes that effective leaders: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This is key when people’s communication styles are different from your own.

4. Practice empathy as reflected in the Native American adage: “Do not judge until you have walked in their moccasins for many miles.” Greenleaf wrote, “The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects.”

5. Be open to other points of view. Just like Aretha Franklin sang, “Show me a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” Follow the Golden Rule and show others the respect you would like. Respect goes a long way in promoting understanding.

6. Educate yourself about key differences in others. Find a diversity mentor and ask him or her to share information, resources, cultural/ethnic activities that will broaden your understanding and perspective.

7. Encourage collaboration. Ensure that diverse people and perspectives are represented in meetings, community initiatives and projects. In order to support people to become “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants,” they must be given the opportunity to participate and contribute as valued partners.

8. Express appreciation. ¡Muchas gracias! Many cultures place a high value on politeness, “thank-you’s,” cooperation and gratitude. As noted in Zapp, The Lightning of Empowerment, sharing praise, approval, encouragement and support are also good management practices. Serving by its nature acknowledges people’s positive strengths while practicing “unqualified acceptance.”

9. Work towards synthesis, not sameness. Everyone of us is a “one of a kind design” Valuing diversity does not mean we all become the same. Synthesis occurs when the best each one has to offer is integrated into the final product.

Just as Greenleaf observed that great things are accomplished “one action at a time.” Paso a Paso is a Hispanic saying that means “take it one step at a time.” So choose one of these steps and bring Greenleaf’s spirit of “adventurous creative achievement” to the process.
Recent Commentary by Larry Spears

In 1970, retired AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf published an essay entitled The Servant as Leader, in which he coined the term, servant-leadership. Since that time, this modest, 32-page essay has captured the imagination of hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide. In bringing together the words servant and leader, Greenleaf tapped into a deep current of intuitive believers who know that the very best leadership emerges from a strong desire to serve and help others. Today, servant-leadership has become a foundational value for many people and institutions who are seeking to create more caring environments."


Bruce Lloyd: “In many ways it is not difficult to believe the basic idea of servant-leadership is both logical and sensible. One question which must be asked is why servant-leadership is not more widely, and instantly, accepted by everyone?”

Larry Spears: “Social history plays a big part in the answer to that question. One hundred and fifty years of the industrial revolution has generated immense pressure to view people as objects or pawns; institutions have traditionally considered people mostly as cogs within a machine. These views produced a mindset which dominated the way in which we viewed the relationship between people and their work. Only within the last 15-20 years have we begun to see a shift away from this perspective and toward servant-leadership. The traditional approach was dominated by the concept that I am the boss and it is my job to tell you what to do and it is your job to do it. Today there is a much greater recognition of the need for a team-oriented approach to leadership. I believe we are now in the midst of a sea change over how we view the interrelationships between management, leadership and service to one another. The writings of Robert Greenleaf on the subject of servant-leadership got this movement started.”


“There are many different ways in which servant-leadership is having a growing influence on society. These include its use as an institutional philosophy and model; its role as the basis for what has come to be called trustee education; its deepening role within many community leadership programs; its use in various kinds of educational courses and corporate training initiatives; its synergistic compatibility to related concepts such as systems thinking and continuous quality improvement; and, its central role as a values base for the service-learning movement in education, which has brought together servant-leadership and experiential learning in an exciting combination that is having a real impact on young people.”

—from a talk given at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, March, 1997

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.”


“Servant-leadership, now in its third decade as a specific leadership concept, continues to create a quiet revolution in workplaces around the world.”


Who is the Servant-Leader?

The servant-leader is servant first. . . . 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, and difficult to administer, 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?”

—from The Servant as Leader by Robert K. Greenleaf

The Greenleaf Center’s Mission

“The Center’s mission is to fundamentally improve the caring and quality of all institutions through a new approach to leadership, structure, and decision-making. 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.”

The Greenleaf Center’s Goals

1. To help deepen an understanding of the original ideas of Robert K. Greenleaf and the principles of servant-leadership, via the preservation and promotion of his writings.
2. To nurture colleagues and institutions by providing a focal point, and opportunities to share thoughts and ideas on servant-leadership.
3. To produce and publish new resources by others on servant-leadership.
4. To connect servant-leaders in a network of learning.

Originally founded in 1964 as the Center for Applied Ethics, Inc., the Center was renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985. The Center is an international, not-for-profit institution headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana.
Servant-Leader Books in Review

Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations


Reviewed by Jeff McCollum

(From time to time reviews of books pertaining to servant-leadership are included in The Servant Leader. This review is written by Jeff McCollum, a member of the Greenleaf Center's board of trustees. Jeff is director of Organization Development for Warner-Lambert, a consumer health products manufacturer.)

Consciousness about power creates the divide which separates servant-leadership and servant-leaders from other philosophies and practitioners. Robert Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership carries the subtitle “a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness.” In Real Power, Janet Hagberg extends the metaphor of the journey and constructs a model of leader development, rooted in contemporary organizational life, from which students of organizations, leadership, power and Greenleaf will draw insights.

According to Hagberg, leadership evolves through six distinct stages defined by our relationship with power. The first three, all externally oriented, are powerlessness, power by association and power of symbols. Those who are organizationally powerless are easily manipulated and can feel trapped. With improvements in skills and self-esteem, they grow into a sort of apprenticeship during which they gain power by associating with the organizationally powerful and learning from their example. With self-confidence, they begin to accumulate the symbols of organizational power—control, achievement, expertise—for themselves. Most organizations value and, therefore, are led by Stage 3 leaders. In articulating the more evolved stages, Hagberg argues for a significant change in how our organizations are led.

Some form of personal crisis is required to trigger the movement from Stage 3, power by symbols, to Stage 4, power by reflection, Stage 5, power by purpose, and Stage 6, power by gestalt. The crisis shifts our orientation from the external, the organizational ladder, to the inner journey. It produces a reflective, “whole” person, one able to exercise “true leadership”, who integrates the ability to work the system with beliefs and actions that express personal “work” through the organization. Leadership comes from the inside out.

Leaders at Stages 4-6 are qualitatively different than those at Stages 1-3. Leaders at Stages 4-6 have personal power, “the extent to which one is able to link the outer capacity for action with the inner capacity for reflection.” Stage 4, precipitated by personal crisis, is a period of intense questioning and searching. Movement to Stage 5 requires a loss of ego which yields to a self-accepting, spiritual leader who works from personal life purpose to influence and shape her world. Stage 5 can generate a deep understanding of the universe with all of its attendant paradox. That understanding precipitates Stage 6 where people, able to see things whole, operate on a level of complete self-surrender and service. They are very rare in large, bureaucratic organizations. And, if they are there at all, they are probably inconspicuous in the way that Leo was inconspicuous to his fellow travelers in Hesse’s Journey to the East. Applying Hagberg’s model in retrospect to my 30+ years in large organizations, I conclude that those whom I have met who are working at Stage 6 have been powerless in the traditional organizational sense.

Hagberg’s ideas resonate with others who have written about leadership. James MacGregor Burns’ distinction between transactional and transformational leadership is mirrored in Stages 1-3 and 4-6 respectively. She cites Greenleaf, Parker Palmer, Max DePree and Peter Vaill in support of her arguments. Her distinction between Stages 1-3 and Stages 4-6 seems to parallel Peter Block’s efforts to distinguish “self interest” from “stewardship.” She, like Block and Greenleaf, points to the importance of dealing with our shadow side in becoming self-accepting and personally powerful.

Hagberg integrates observations about gender throughout Real Power. She argues for androgynous leadership and spends a considerable amount of time discussing the developmental paths and risks that confront men and women who seek to grow through the six stages. She starts with the statement that Stages 1 and 2 require behaviors most commonly associated with female socialization and that Stage 3 requires behaviors associated with male socialization. Most organizations value and reward Stage 3. Whereas men move toward Stage 3 almost by default, women must learn to “play the game.” Men can get stuck because they don’t realize it’s a game. Women can get stuck by becoming “honorary men.”

In either case, without the reflectivity and integrity required in Stage 4, neither will progress. In Hagberg’s view Stage 4 also puts emphasis on masculine behaviors. Stages 5 and 6 are more closely associated with the feminine. The person who reaches the upper levels of development has honored the feminine and masculine that co-exist in each of us.

Placed in historical context, Hagberg’s model points the way toward the kind of leadership that is required as we develop the organizational capacity required for success in a global economy which puts a premium on human capital and organic metaphors rather than financial capital and machine metaphors. Stages 4-6 are the province of servant-leaders and theirs is the journey of the soul.

What Others Say

“What Greenleaf has to say seems remarkably on target for those of us seeking ways to involve people in a common vision leading to results of a lasting nature.”

—Max DePree, author, Leadership is an Art
Highland Community College  
(Continued from page 1)  

truly helps all of us to build a better society, both internally and externally,  
for the future.

Much has happened during these past months since the Institute. Some things have taken longer than we  
expected, while others have happened with little effort. Our major accomplishments to this point include:

• The discussion by the board of the concepts and applications to our college.

• The preparation of a board servant-leadership philosophy statement which will soon be reviewed and, we hope,  
  adopted by our trustees.

• The discussion by various groups on campus of the concepts and, I believe,  
a commitment by many to adhere to those principles in our daily lives.

• The discussion by students, especially in the leadership class which I  
  help to teach, of the concepts and a paper written by each student on his or  
  her servant-leadership philosophy and how it is applied on a daily basis.

• The preparation for the student and  
  the faculty/staff recognition receptions.

In addition, an exciting new program is being developed which will  
allow us to bring together high school students from across the college  
district to learn about and apply servant-leader concepts. They will  
work together on a community project that will have a positive impact across  
our four county-area. It is our hope to  

develop this into a model that can be adopted by other colleges in the future.

In closing, it is important to know that Highland Community College  
does not view Greenleaf’s philosophy as another passing fad to adopt because it  
sounds nifty, only to discard it when another idea comes along. Rather we,  
by having a board philosophy, are committed to incorporating the  
servant-leadership concepts into our ongoing interactions with each other  
and our community. We have taken a few steps forward but believe that this  
is a lifelong journey. It is our hope that we will be able to model this type of  
behavior for other boards and organizations. Perhaps, over time, many  
community organizations will adopt and practice servant-leadership.

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SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS A WAY OF BEING  
June 12-14, 1997 • Ann Arbor, Michigan

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Healthcare

(Continued from page 1)

Bill Bottem, Chairman of the Townsend & Bottem Family of Companies, has also had a long association as a board member and former board chair for the St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The St. Joseph Mercy Hospital operates under the umbrella of the St. Joseph Mercy Health System and is run, in part, by the Sisters of Mercy.

When asked how St. Joe’s Hospital employs the values of servant-leadership in their organization, Bill replied: “The whole hospital staff is servant-leadership. The Sisters of Mercy have leavened the whole loaf by keeping everyone reminded of these values.” He believes that successful healthcare institutions are built on servant-leaders, and that success is ultimately dependent upon the teamwork and collaboration of board members, administrators, nurses, doctors, staff members, associates and others.

A less traditional example of a healthcare organization is the Human Service Alliance (HSA). Located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the Human Service Alliance is an all-volunteer hospice which began in 1986 when a group of about 15 volunteers wanted to come up with a way to provide 24-hour care for people who were dying. It was important to provide this care in a homey, nurturing atmosphere.

Four services are provided by HSA. The Center for the Care of the Terminally Ill takes care of patients with a life expectancy of 3-6 months. The Respite Care Project for Families With Developmentally Disabled Children is a family support service which helps families who have a child with a developmental disability such as autism or cerebral palsy. The Health & Wellness Project is designed to help people overcome chronic pain or health problems that have lingered over long periods of time. The Mediation (Dispute Resolution) Project helps people resolve conflicts cooperatively, quickly, and as an alternative to the court system. HSA illustrates how an all-volunteer organization founded on servant-leadership principles can truly flourish.

We are provided with three promising examples of what the future of healthcare may look like through the generative efforts of the Sisters of St. Joseph Health System, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital and the Human Service Alliance. We would like to hear from other healthcare organizations currently utilizing servant-leadership. Please share your stories with us.

NEW LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE FOR HEALTHCARE

Healthcare is one arena of human work that draws leaders who are already natural servants. Healthcare leaders are likely to be individuals who consciously open the doors of their hearts and minds to let service and healing flow out as awareness and knowledge flow in. For those individuals we are offering a very special Leadership Institute for Healthcare. This Institute will focus on further developing the leadership component of servant-leadership, in order to help strengthen healthcare leaders at their core, and enable them to maintain their own relations-centered principles in spite of turbulent changes around them and their institution.

The Greenleaf Center’s new Leadership Institute for Healthcare is specifically designed for healthcare leaders in decisionmaking positions, and would include healthcare system administrators, department heads, managers/owners, faculty, and individual physicians.

Please mark these dates on your calendar: October 22-24, 1997. To receive more information about the Leadership Institute for Healthcare, please fill out and send in this form.

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