Reflections on the Role of Trustees as Servant-Leaders

by Larry Spears

Robert K. Greenleaf wrote extensively on the role of boards (both for-profit and non-profit) and their crucial role in helping institutions toward servant-leadership. Some years ago I spoke at a conference in which I looked at the linkage between the ideas of Bob Greenleaf and John Carver [Policy Governance Model] on the role of trustees as servant-leaders. Some of you may currently serve on organizational boards, or will do so in the future. That can be a wonderful place from which to gently nudge an organization toward servant-leadership. I thought that I would share my written remarks with you. Perhaps some of you may find yourselves in a position to further servant-leadership through your role as a board member.—Larry

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By Larry C. Spears

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) coined the term “servant-leadership” in his 1970 essay, The Servant as Leader. While he created the term, he did not invent servant-leadership. Indeed, servant-leadership has been with us for thousands of years. Servant-leadership is practiced today by people from all walks of life. Anyone can be a servant-leader. The servant-leadership movement has among its members people of many different faiths, philosophies and secular beliefs. What they all share in common is their commitment to growing as servant-leaders, and to growing organizations as servant-led institutions.

Robert Greenleaf defined the servant-leader this way:

“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 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?”

The Servant as Leader (1970/1973)

In 1970 Greenleaf wrote The Servant as Leader, privately printed 200 copies and sent them to people whom he thought might be interested in it. In 1973 he did a major revision of it, and it is the 1973 version which some recognize by its distinctive orange cover. Mostly by word of mouth, over a half-million copies of The Servant as Leader essay have been produced and sold over the past four decades. For such a modest looking publication it has had a profound impact on several generations of leaders and trustees.
Many of today’s best known leadership authors have become powerful advocates for servant-leadership, and they are involved with the Greenleaf Center as contributing authors to our books and as speakers at our conferences on servant-leadership. Among them are: John Carver, James Autry, Max DePree, Warren Bennis, Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Parker Palmer, Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley and many others.

The Institution as Servant (1972)
In 1972 Bob Greenleaf wrote The Institution as Servant in order to share his ideas on how institutions as well as individuals could become more servant-led.

Servant-leadership starts with the individual, but it has tremendous organizational applications as well. Many businesses and non-profit institutions today have embraced servant-leadership. Among the better known are: The Toro Company, ServiceMaster, The Men’s Wearhouse, Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, The Vanguard Group, Synovus Financial, TDIndustries, and Starbucks. Most if not all of these companies have also made an annual appearance on Fortune magazine’s “100 Best Places to Work” list published each January. There are many other businesses, colleges, hospitals and other kind of institutions where servant-leadership education and training is taking place, and where it is being practiced.

Trustees as Servants (1974)
In 1974 Greenleaf wrote Trustees as Servants, the third essay in his Servant series. He had begun with The Servant as Leader, addressing individuals; he then turned to institutions with The Institution as Servant; and, then to boards of trustees as the entity with the greatest power to guide institutions toward a more servant-led nature.

Trustees as Servants was written for those who were dissatisfied with their present roles, and who might venture to create a new role for themselves with a vision of greatness to guide them.

George Washington was noted for signing his letters “Your most humble and obedient servant.” Trustees as Servants is an argument in support of trustees choosing to become servant-leaders.

Some characteristics of servant-leaders and of trustees as servant-leaders are: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, building community.

Greenleaf on Trusteeship
In his essay, “Trustees as Servants,” Robert Greenleaf offers many important insights on the role of boards. Chief among them are the following:

The role of the trustee board is to stand outside of the active work of the organization. It provides institutional vision.

Trusteeship is the holding of a charter of public trust for an institution.
The major trustee functions are:

To set the goals, to define the obligation and the general concept of the institution, and to approve plans for reaching goals.

To appoint the top administrative officers, to design the top administrative structure, to design and assign the duties of individuals in that group, and to act so as to motivate administrators and professionals.

To assess, at appropriate times, the performance of the institution.

To take appropriate action based on the above assessment.

Servant Leadership and Policy Governance in Tandem

In 1998 John Carver addressed the Greenleaf Center’s International Conference on the theme of “The Unique Double Servant Leadership Role of the Board Chairperson,” and where he said the following—

"Allow me to position Policy Governance with respect to Greenleaf’s work. Peter Senge has observed that 'recent books on leadership have been about what leaders do and how they operate.' ‘By contrast, Greenleaf,’ Senge says, ‘invites people to consider a domain of leadership grounded in a state of being, not doing.’ The choice of servant leadership, he explains, is ‘not something you do, but an expression of your being.’ Policy Governance is an operational definition (in its scientific meaning) of leadership in a specific setting—that of the governing body. In some ways, the difference Senge points out is like that between philosophy and strategy, or between basic research and technology. If the judgment of history is kind, the Policy Governance model may merit being seen as a technology of servant leadership. At any rate, it is a carefully crafted prescription for how boards can operate—boards that are committed to being servant-leaders." [John Carver]

I believe that John Carver is right on target: Servant leadership is a philosophy of being; and, The Policy Governance Model is a great technology of servant leadership.

Trustees who have a servant’s heart can benefit through the understanding and practice of the Policy Governance Model. Likewise, practitioners of the Policy Governance Model may attain the truest expression of it by seeking to live as servant-leaders.

The Policy Governance model was created by Dr. John Carver, who, like Robert K. Greenleaf before him, is a revolutionary of the very best kind. The Policy Governance model has provided the means for many trustees to live out Greenleaf’s challenge to boards to act as both servant and leader.

I believe the time has come to increasingly raise awareness and practices by boards of both servant leadership and the Policy Governance Model in tandem with one another,
rather than as separate ideas. In so doing, we may yet succeed in transforming the hearts and minds of individuals, institutions, and society.