

Servant Leadership, Stewardship and Winnie the Pooh

Wayne Stewart, February 2005

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Introduction

Thanks, a delight to be with you, and a great joy to have worked with Kelly Ernst and the CORI board over the last year and a half, one of the best experiences of my life. So nice to be back in their company.

Explanation of the title. The general topic evolved from a discussion with Jeanne Fike on the paradox implied by the term 'Servant Leadership.' Some alternative titles: *so many theories, so little time, what am I to believe.* OR *Servant leadership: not for the weak willed.* Lots of talk about servant leadership, a paradox, many reject it because it implies, they say, a master/servant relationship. Some hold stewardship a better model for the times. And then there is Winnie. Just maybe we can learn from the Pooh who suggests of his friend Rabbit "who is clever and has brain, I suppose that's why he never understands anything."

What I wish to do for the next few minutes is to explore the current thinking on leadership. I will argue that servant leadership is the right model for our work and our times. I will compare Servant Leadership to stewardship and other recent leadership prescriptions under different names, each advanced as 'the final answer' to an aspiring leader's prayer. I will suggest sources for further study of leadership, not the least of which will be the writing of AA Milne and the words of his wonderful character, my friend Winnie.

Before we start, I would like you to think about this question for a minute: "When you think of leaders, what name comes to mind first?"

A friend of mine who has studied and worked in the area of leadership for many years had by 1995 identified 350 theories of leadership (prescriptions of what makes a best leader). We hear terms like autocratic leader, transactional leader, leading from alongside, and endless variations. Not surprisingly, this creates confusion. And worse, at a time when leadership is sorely needed and clarity is critical, we don't know who to believe, which theory to follow. (think of the confusion created for your staff who might have learned one theory or approach only to see you follow another)

Role of Leader

Kouzes and Posner (1987) offer clarity on the role of leaders and I believe that they have it about right. They identify five practices common to successful leaders, who:

1. Challenge the process, refusing to accept the status quo and the “way we have always done things around here,” seeking new ways.

2. Inspire a shared vision, with the emphasis on “shared,” understanding that “the dream or vision is the force that invents the future.”

3. Enable others to act. Leaders shun the word “I” in favour of “we.” They make it possible for others to do good work, clearing the path, filling the gap, removing or mitigating the impact of hurdles along the way.

4. Model the way. Their behaviour exhibits integrity; they practice what they preach. And they encourage the heart. They empower and celebrate.

5. The role of leader is to transform, to move from the current to a better state, to look at the situation with a new mind, sometimes upside down, to shift the question from problem to opportunity. Transformation is the domain of leaders and “transformational leader” is an appropriate term. The big, important changes of the past have been initiated and led by those who were not satisfied with the status quo. George Bernard Shaw pointed out that “all progress depends on the unreasonable person.” Often reviled at the time, they become heroes and saints with the passage of time. One thing is for sure: the malcontents are not without passion for their cause.

Let’s accept this as a reasonable definition of the role of leader. Where the confusion enters is in how leaders go about conducting their role. This too is where the prescriptions come into play.

The Paradox

At this point, I would like to digress for a moment to the topic of paradox. The very term servant leader seems paradoxical and some reject it simply for that reason. Yet do we not live with paradox every day in the modern world (perhaps it was always thus). Charles Handy has even written a very popular book entitled *The Age of Paradox*. Let’s look at just a couple of paradoxes that we face every day.

How about the paradox of mechanisms designed to connect and yet we experience reduced human connection: for example, the impact of electronic communication technology: we can talk to others without ever seeing, holding, hugging.

What about our spiritual quest set against decline in religious practice and the influence of places of worship. The book shelves are full of self-help and the spiritual quest, illustrating the continued human search for meaning and connection to something real, lofty, beyond. Yet we reject those places that might help in the search.

Or Winnie, who understands and has taught us that “a fly can’t bird, but a bird can fly.”

I believe that leaders must learn to live with paradox and then help those they would lead to do so also. So, the argument from paradox as a reason to reject a theory holds little sway in my mind.

To Servant Leadership.

Introduction and development of the concept is attributed to Robert Greenleaf (died 1990) and I commend further exploration of his thought to each of us. see: www.greenleaf.org (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership)

Servant leadership is really all about the attitude the leader brings to the work. Servant leaders do all those things that Kouzes and Posner suggest but they do them with a certain specific style and disposition that differentiates their approach from that of others.

From the Greenleaf web site, we read “the servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to want to lead.” Think about that. Does it make sense? Your natural inclination is to serve. You look around and see lots of needs. You make a conscious choice to lead. Do you have any other option? Think about it. Take it away with you and think about it again...

Greenleaf goes on to say, “The best test of servant leader is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more likely themselves to become servants (to follow the model)? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit?”

I contend that these are the questions that we automatically ask ourselves (or should) as leaders in the voluntary sector and that we must seek to be servant leaders, one and all. As we lead transformation, we do it as servants: to the cause, to our employees, to the people we serve, to community and society. I see no other model of leadership that fits the voluntary sector and those of us who purport to a leadership role in the sector ought to consider it seriously.

Another writer on servant Leadership is James Autry and suggests 5 Ways of Being (2001). see James Autry, *The Servant Leader*, Prima Publishing, 2001. These are:

1. Be authentic: be yourself (my advice, know and be yourself), basis of integrity, in turn the basis of trust
2. Be vulnerable: willing and able to put yourself out there, warts and all
3. Be accepting: of the ideas, concerns of others as valid (even if not the best or brightest)
4. Be present: having your whole self there when needed, no distractions (eg listening)
5. Be useful: of service to those you are leading and serving

Greenleaf adds to our understanding by identifying ten characteristics of servant leaders:

1. Listening: intently to others.
2. Empathy: even in the face of unacceptable behaviour or performance
3. Healing: of one’s self and our relationships with others
4. Awareness: especially of self
5. Persuasion: rather than reliance on positional power and authority
6. Conceptualization: continual learning in the skill; thinking beyond, able to see the whole while others see only parts. Here again, Winnie is helpful. Piglet explains Winnie’s innate conceptual ability. Pooh hasn’t much brain but he never comes to any harm. He

does silly things and they turn out right. Winnie provides an example of the importance of thinking conceptually; he points out that if Bears were bees, they'd build their nests (and store their honey) at the bottom of trees.

7. Foresight: ability to see outcomes, obvious and unintended

8. Stewardship: holding something in trust for another

9. Commitment to the growth of people: as intrinsically valuable beyond their contribution

10. Building community: within the workplace, modeling the way.

The foundation for a role as servant leader is self awareness. We simply cannot serve others in the way that Greenleaf intended unless we have a solid understanding of our self. How can we empathize with others if we are not sufficiently self aware to first empathize with our self? How can we promote growth in others unless we are growing our self?

We cannot care about something that we do not know. I believe that our feeling of self assurance is adversely affected by a lack of knowing self and I wonder what this lack of self awareness suggests about the leadership model we are following. About our integrity?

To instill trust, we must exhibit integrity; our actions and decision processes must be consistent over time. To act out of a lack of integrity creates confusion and ultimately inaction; the result is the exact opposite of empowerment. It is better that we act as autocrat all the time than to act as servant in one situation, autocrat in another. But it is always better to act as servant all the time.

Servant leaders I have known experience joy in serving. They talk of being blessed and have a deep feeling of responsibility to give back for what they have received. And they never stop serving; I've never once heard them say that they have done their part and it is now time for someone else to take over. Greenleaf again offers an explanation and a challenge to servant leaders. "The troubles of the world are not so much the result of the acts of evil people as of the fact that good people do so poorly... we must each ultimately ask the searching question... did I do well enough? And continue to ask it even though the world is dazzled by our accomplishments... I see no alternative but to lay the burden on those who are already carrying more than their share." This is a difficult lesson in light of recent world events but food for thought nonetheless.

Many, who have studied leadership over time, including Bennis, Covey, DePree and others, have come to see servant leadership as the "emerging leadership paradigm for the 21st century." Some see it as the essence of leadership, all you need to know, while others suggest that it has the potential to redefine "business as an arena of caring and not a mere instrument for producing profit." Lofty ambitions for certain, suggesting that we ought to at least explore and try to understand the concept, at best to apply it in our own leadership roles.

Let's look at three recent models that are offered as alternatives, two of which seem to answer the master/servant complaint, providing an out for those who are uncomfortable with paradox.

Stewardship:

1. Stewardship is generally defined as "holding something in trust for another." While it is an important concept (and we wish everyone might be a good steward), it is not a leadership concept (my opinion is shared by no less than Peter Block who wrote, in 1993, the definitive book on *Stewardship* for leaders/managers. Block differentiates between stewardship and leadership, promoting stewardship as "an alternative to leadership.")
2. Most people will have a notion of stewardship (as implying 'holding a trust'- those who have been brought up in one of the Abrahamic religions will have some feel for the concept).
3. If Block is right, stewardship has little to do with leadership. Instead, it is about accountability, democracy and service, decidedly not about leadership.
4. Helping people become good stewards is not necessarily going to enhance their leadership abilities (or even their understanding of what the term means).

Collins, *Good to Great* (2001): With his Level 5 leadership, suggests: Build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. This is not what the researchers expected. The key is being humility. Secretan, *Inspire*, (2004): In Higher Ground Leadership, suggests: we should love one another and tell the truth. Service is the *raison d'être* of the HG Leader. When we serve others, we inspire them. Both, while promoting a new concept, appear to draw from Greenleaf and so confirm the contention of others who hold to the primacy of Servant Leadership.

Listen to what Collins says about Humility: channels ambition into the organization, not the self; sets up successors for even greater success in the next generation. Secretan is even clearer, admitting simply "the Higher Ground Leader is a servant leader.

Some still might hold that 'servant leaders' must, by their nature, be weak when confronted by conflict or incompetence. "We must live with that employee who cannot do the job, for we are his servant." A servant leader will balance the needs of the individual against the collective needs and goals and will act to put people where they can contribute, often more quickly than his autocratic counterpart. Winnie reinforces the importance of concentrating our efforts in areas where we do well. While he would like to jump like a kangaroo, "some can and some can't."

Now, let's look at those leaders you identified a few minutes ago. Which ones might be classified as servant leaders? Which would you rather be associated with?

Self Awareness: the first critical step to Servant Leadership and **spirituality by another name** (from Bennis forward, a common element in leadership thinking).

The search for self is a search for personal values that underpin our behaviour. As we deepen the search, we find not only our own values but also the common links to the values of others. Self confidence and integrity grows with self awareness. We get to a point where we are comfortable in sharing our innermost thoughts and concerns with others. In the process, we deepen our understanding and our skill in other areas that are important to our ability to serve, including our conceptual skill.

Greenleaf credits Albert Camus with an “unrelenting demand that each of us confront the exacting terms of our own existence.” Surely that is what self awareness is all about. And here lies the connection to spirituality, which is really just a search for our essence, a search for the inner spirit (some call it “soul”).

Before I go on, a word or two to increase your comfort level with the topic (I can just feel some teeth grinding out there).

Most of us will agree to the importance of spirit in the workplace. We like to work in a place full of spirit and many of us will reject one that lacks it.

And yet some of us will shy away when the discussion turns to our own spirituality. The role of the institutional place of religious practice (church, synagogue, mosque, temple) in turning people away from this search for spirit and self is unfortunate. Many people have had such a bad experience in their early life that they just stay away from these places altogether. As a consequence, they also shy away from anything that suggests spiritual practice, holding perhaps that this might draw them back into a practice that they have happily rejected.

There is a difference between institutional practice and spirituality and it is critical that we recapture the latter for we cannot understand our true self except at the level of spirit. It matters not your cultural background for each culture on this planet that has survived the ages has a form of spiritual practice that leads to a deeper understanding of self and the meaning of life. Without that level of understanding, one can neither be adequately self aware nor have sufficient self confidence to be fully servant. We may play at the boundaries but we will not be all we can be for others without first being all we can be for our self.

Dr Grant MacEwan, whose early life with a dominant and highly religious mother led him away from the church forever, was nonetheless one of the most spiritual people I have ever met. Full of the spirit until the end of his days, he was always willing to entertain a discussion on the topic.

Arnold Toynbee, an astute observer of the human condition, said as his life’s end was near, that the purpose of human life is “loving, understanding and creating,” and that the greatest of these is love for it is “the desire that takes one out of oneself.. makes (one) give (oneself) to other people, to the world, to the spiritual presence lying behind the universe.” We cannot love others if we do not first love our self. We cannot love anything

we do not understand. We can understand our self through spiritual practice, through deepening our search for the spirit.

Many of the leaders we hold up as heroes have had an obvious connection to spiritual practice. People such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Ghandi come to mind from the last century. We admire these people and understand their connection to matters of the spirit and yet we often avoid following their path. Why is that? Is it from fear it will lead us inexorably back to something we have rejected? Are we afraid that we will discover something about our self that we do not like, that we would prefer remain in the dark recesses of our inner self?

We must take another look. We must turn the quest from a problem to an opportunity, from fear to the possibility of great joy. We must become servant leaders, ever evolving on the leadership path on which we have embarked. To do so, we must embrace the spiritual process as part of our growth to self awareness, as a necessary step on the road to service. The hopes of so many depend on our ability to become fully that of which we are capable.

Finally, we will only be truly happy when we discover who we really are and begin to live it. We can only lead successfully in the longer term as servants. Reflect on the model of J L S who refused to accept a role as just one of the flock. He discovered who he really was; he learned to fly higher than anyone else, and then he turned to helping others grow as he had done.

Ponder the options. Think of yourself as a disciple of Machiavelli. Would you be happy operating in that mode? Surely you would be continually looking over your shoulder for another Machiavellian. And what are you modeling for those who come behind, your staff, your children? Lest you think I have suggested the black of Machiavelli as contrast to the white of Servant Leadership, try another leadership model and analyse the results, using both your reason and your emotion.

Give it a try, have patience for some may wonder what has happened as your leadership style shifts. You will experience fits and starts. Relax a bit if things don't go according to plan. Like Rabbit, you will discover "there are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn't count."

I have applied servant leadership in a great variety of settings and roles, as senior manager in the private sector, as ED in the non profit sector, as volunteer board member, as mentor and as coach. (Let me say just a word about mentoring; a good mentor both challenges and supports. One without the other produces no good outcome.)

Servant Leadership is the only model that serves oneself as it serves others, that contributes to your own growth as it adds to the growth of others, the only model that works in all settings. I commend it to you, study the concept, apply it, analyse the results, dialogue with other practitioners. You will do yourself and all those with whom you come in contact a great service.

Closing

In closing, I want to leave you with a few questions for times of quiet contemplation as you go from here. These might help in your search for self and your work as servant leader.

First, what are your core values, those things which you are not prepared to compromise, the hills on which you would die?

Second, do these seem to support an attitude of servant? If not, what's going on? And finally, does your daily behaviour, particularly the way you treat others, confirm your values? What would someone say about your integrity? Would they see you as a person of solid values whose life and actions portrays consistency with those?

Thank you for the honor of addressing the group and for the important service that you provide. Please accept my very best wishes for a long and successful career and life as servant leader.

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