

# **Servant-leadership in Organizational Life**

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To ensure organizational success and a truly collaborative environment, social service organizations must be prepared to build and maintain trust with all stakeholders, both internally and externally. It is widely accepted that trust is earned slowly over time, as a result of consistent behaviour, rooted in a genuine concern for the well being of others.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed many examples where the issue of trust has been foremost in the eyes of the general public. Whether it was the Enron Business Scandal; the indictment of Martha Stewart for security fraud and obstruction of justice; or closer to home, the 'Sponsorship Scandal,' where individuals questioned the trustworthiness of our public institutions. Social service organizations are not immune. There have also been a number of high profile cases, particularly in the field of child welfare, where the media, the general public, and government officials, have questioned the ability of Children's Aid Societies to adequately protect and care for vulnerable children.

John Maxwell (John Maxwell, *Leadership: Promises for Every Day*, J. Countryman, a division of Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 2003, page101), contends that, leaders who erode the solid ground of trustworthy leadership usually exhibit one or more of the following signs:

1. Fail to address glaring character weaknesses
2. Count on deception to safeguard themselves
3. Act impulsively
4. Are overcome by an area of weakness
5. Misuse their natural God-given gifts.

It is imperative for service providers, to use negative publicity as an opportunity for real change. When agency relationships, both internally and externally are based on trust, there is a greater likelihood of remaining true to values, vision and mission statements.

While social service organizations have a long history of providing support to those less fortunate in society, they need to come to grips with the fact that trust in their organizations has gradually eroded over time.

Most individuals, who agree to serve as trustees on the Boards of Directors in not-for-profit organizations, do so out of a genuine caring for others, who unfortunately are often less fortunate. These trustees, who are the stewards of the "greater community good," want to see their actions result in improved social conditions for the less fortunate.

Unfortunately, for the majority of those in positions of governance and senior leadership, a fixation on the ongoing financial viability of their respective organizations has become the primary concern.

If the social service field is committed to enhancing the capacity of staff to adapt to the ever-changing environment, it is prudent to examine how these organizations, perhaps more from a governance, leadership, or cultural perspective, influence the focus taken by staff.

Understanding the culture within their organizations is essential if leaders within the social service field are going to deal with change and innovation. In order to create a successful cultural change, leaders will need to shift their mind-sets and perceptions and those of their employees, so that new organizational reality and identification can be achieved.

As many social service organizations in North America are going through a period of transformation/evolution, it is imperative that those individuals in primary leadership roles, move to a more holistic approach and consider adopting strategies that encompass the key philosophical characteristics based on the concepts inherent in the principles espoused by Robert Greenleaf, the first person to coin the phrase servant-leadership. It is interesting to note, that people like Warren Bennis, Ken Blanchard, Peter Block, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, Scott Peck, Peter Senge, Marg Wheatley and John Carver, to name but a few, have been influenced by Greenleaf's thinking.

In the fall of 2004, the Board of Directors of the Children's aid Society of the Districts of Sudbury and Manitoulin, a mandated child welfare agency, passed a motion to adopt the philosophy of servant-leadership throughout its organization. In the spring of 2005, this journey began for the Board and staff.

### **Background on servant-leadership**

Robert Greenleaf's objective for his many books and essays on servant-leadership "was to stimulate thought and action for building a better, more caring society."<sup>1</sup>

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.

After reading this book, Greenleaf concluded that its central meaning was that a great leader is first experienced as a servant to others, and this simple fact is

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<sup>1</sup> Spears, Larry. "Tracing the Past, Present, and Future of Servant-Leadership." In Larry Spears and Michele Lawrence (EDS), *Focus on Leadership, Servant Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002. p. 3.

central to his or her greatness. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others.<sup>2</sup>

In all of his published works Greenleaf discusses the need for a new style and model of leadership that “identifies serving others—including employees, customers, and community as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, building a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making.”<sup>3</sup>

Servant-Leadership is defined further defined by Greenleaf in this way.

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?<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that the following principles are not a specific set of techniques, but rather a set of behaviours, beliefs and attitudes. When practiced with a sense of integrity, reflection, and passion, positive results will occur at all levels of an organization.

### **Ten Characteristics of Servant-Leadership<sup>5</sup>**

#### **1. Listening - *The Foundation of Servant-Leadership***

Listening can be understood as being totally present to another “a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and to help clarify that will.”<sup>6</sup> A servant-leader is one who takes regular time for reflection and meditation so that they can get in touch with the inner stirrings of the mind, heart and spirit. The servant-leader is one who strives to practice massive compassion for others. This compassion comes forth from inner resources that are regularly cultivated.

#### **2. Empathy - *The Capacity for Participation in Another’s Feelings or Ideas***

Empathy is the ability to accept others and recognize their unique potential and gifts. “One assumes the good intentions of coworkers and does not reject them as people, even while refusing to accept their behavior or performance.”<sup>7</sup> Empathy is the ability and willingness to feel what the other is feeling. It is our ability to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp 4-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.5.

suspend our own discomfort or racing thoughts to give time and our full presence to another.

### **3. Healing - *Addressing the Spiritual Side of Leadership***

“Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is its potential for healing oneself and others.”<sup>8</sup> In workplaces today, many people have broken spirits. They suffer emotional, psychological and spiritual hurts. “Although this is a part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come into contact with. In the **Servant as Leader** Greenleaf writes, “There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the contract between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share.”<sup>9</sup>

### **4. Awareness – *Keeping in Touch with Ourselves and Others***

The Servant-Leader works on his/her own self-awareness and stays awake to what is going on in his/her midst with people and issues. Awareness is “a disturber and an awakener.”<sup>10</sup> Greenleaf describes it as being “sharply awake and reasonably disturbed.” This characteristic deals with bringing to the surface what inside of us impacts on our own leadership stance. It is the process of taking off the blinders so we can look at the bigger picture.

### **5. Persuasion - *Using Persuasion rather than Coercion***

“Another characteristic of servant-leaders is a reliance on persuasion, rather than on one’s positional authority, in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than to coerce compliance.”<sup>11</sup> Persuasion is gentle and respectful. It is done by openly sharing our experiences and values with each other in such a way that it invites others to reflect further on their own experiences and values.

### **6. Conceptualization - *Seeing the BIG Picture***

This is the ability to think beyond day-to-day realities. It is the ability to dream big dreams. The servant-leader is not only concerned about short-term objectives but is able to think beyond and imagine the future of an organization. Boards of Directors create the future and don’t get caught in the everyday operations of the organization. The most effective servant-leader CEOs are able to be concerned about both operations and the vision for the future of the organization.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.6.

## **7. Foresight - Mapping Out the Course**

“Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future. It is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind...Foresight remains a largely unexplored area in leadership studies, but one most deserving of careful attention.”<sup>12</sup>

## **8. Stewardship - Being Accountable and Sharing Control**

“Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staff, and boards all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others.”<sup>13</sup>

## **9. Commitment to the Growth of People - Putting the Needs of Followers First**

“Servant –leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her institution. The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees. In practice, this can include (but is not limited to) concrete actions such as making available funds for personal and professional development; taking a personal interest in the ideas of and the suggestions from everyone; encouraging workers’ involvement in decision making.”<sup>14</sup>

## **10. Building Community - Working with Others to Create a Better Organization/Community**

Creating an environment, space and climate for people to grow. Experiences of community include a sense of belonging, connection, sharing, inclusivity, trust, welcoming, caring, a sense that community is fragile, but also very precious and life giving in organizations. Some of the elements that allow community to emerge are common mission, compassion, faith, openness, idealism, risk taking, generosity, absence of judgment, strong relationships, and a focus on service.

All staff and members of the Board of Directors of the CAS of the Districts of Sudbury and Manitoulin, have had occasion over the past year, to become more familiar with the above noted characteristics. In fact, every effort is being undertaken to ensure this

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.8.

philosophy is imbedded in policy and practice. All new staff and Board members receive an orientation to the philosophy of servant-leadership when they join the organization.

A number of other child welfare agencies in Ontario have expressed an interest in learning more about servant-leadership. In fact, a recent Project through the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), resulted in the publication of a Position Paper entitled, *Child Welfare in Ontario: Implementing a Collaborative Intervention Model for Child Protection Services in Ontario*, OACAS, Toronto, September 08, 2006). In this report, the concept of servant-leadership is put forth as a philosophy all child welfare agencies should consider adopting as a way of developing a more collaborative leadership style and positive agency culture.

Readers wishing further information on the implementation of the philosophy of servant-leadership in a social service organization are urged to contact the author of this article.