

# SERVANT LEADERSHIP:



## THE LEADERSHIP THEORY OF ROBERT K. GREENLEAF

CAROL SMITH

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## ABSTRACT

Servant-leadership, first proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, is a theoretical framework that advocates a leader's primary motivation and role as service to others. This paper defines and explores the central tenets of servant-leadership theory, and reviews the attributes and values displayed in exemplary servant-leaders. Academic criticism and support of the theory is reviewed, and servant-leadership is evaluated in terms of transformational leadership, a related framework. Robert K. Greenleaf's life and publications are also reviewed. The paper concludes with a fictional application of servant-leadership within an information organization. Servant-leadership is found to be a theory well suited for the information services arena, but one which still requires formalization, substantiation, and further research.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS:

Leadership theories; Servant-leadership; Greenleaf, Robert K. (1904-1990).

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY

*"...The great leader is seen as servant first..." – Robert K. Greenleaf*

This short quotation, a fragment of a sentence from an essay written in 1970, captures the essence of servant-leadership theory. A simple, yet profound and powerful concept, it has spawned countless journal articles, books and multimedia productions in the 35 years since its introduction. From humble roots, servant-leadership has gained increasing interest in recent decades, and is now extensively applied in the workplace, demonstrating its potential as a practical, as well as theoretical approach to organizational management.

### Defining Servant-Leadership

The very notion of a servant as leader, or "servant-leadership" as it has come to be known, is purposefully oxymoronic and arresting in nature. The theory's originator, Robert K. Greenleaf, intentionally sought a descriptor that would give people pause for thought, and challenge any long-standing assumptions that might be held about the relationship between leaders and followers in an organization. By combining two seemingly contradictory terms, Greenleaf asks us to reconsider the very nature of leadership. Although aware of the negative historical connotations associated with the word 'servant', he felt it a necessary choice to turn established conceptions about the organizational pyramid on their head, and jump-start insight into a new view of leadership. This concern for linguistic impact is further evidenced by the Greenleaf's titling of his seminal essay as "*The Servant as Leader*", and not the inverse, "*The Leader as Servant*".

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Larry Spears, Executive Director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, succinctly defines servant-leadership as:

...A new kind of leadership model – a model which puts serving others 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 (1996, p. 33).

Each of these central tenets is explored individually below, to present a fuller picture of the servant-leadership framework.

**1. *Service to Others.*** Servant-leadership begins when a leader assumes the position of servant in their interactions with followers. Authentic, legitimate leadership arises not from the exercise of power or self-interested actions, but from a fundamental desire to first help others. Greenleaf wrote that this “simple fact is the key to [a leader’s] greatness” (1970, p. 2). A servant-leader’s primary motivation and purpose is to encourage greatness in others, while organizational success is the indirect, derived outcome of servant-leadership.

**2. *Holistic Approach to Work.*** Servant-leadership holds that “The work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work” (Greenleaf, 1996, p. 8). It challenges organizations to rethink the relationships that exist between people, organizations and society as a whole. The theory promotes a view that individuals should be encouraged to be who they are, in their professional as well as personal lives. This more personal, integrated valuation of individuals, it is theorized, ultimately benefits the long-term interests and performance of the organization.

**3. *Promoting a Sense of community.*** Greenleaf lamented the loss of community in modern society, calling it “the lost knowledge of these times” (1970, p. 28). Servant-leadership questions the institution’s ability to provide human services, and argues that only community, defined as groups of individuals that are jointly liable for each other both individually and as a unit, can perform this function. Only by establishing this sense of community among followers can an organization succeed in its objectives. Further, the theory posits that this sense of community can arise only from the actions of individual servant-leaders (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 30).

**4. *Sharing of Power in Decision-Making.*** Effective servant-leadership is best evidenced by the cultivation of servant-leadership in others. By nurturing participatory, empowering environments, and encouraging the talents of followers, the servant-leader creates a more effective, motivated workforce and ultimately a more successful organization. As phrased by Russell (2001), “Leaders enable others to act not by hoarding the power they have but by giving it away” (p. 80). The organizational structure resulting from servant-leadership has sometimes been referred to as an “inverted pyramid”, with employees, clients and other stakeholders at the top, and leader(s) at the bottom. Exemplary followers, a product of delegated decision-making, are a further example of servant-leadership’s inverse nature, “another type of leader turned inside out” (Sarkus, 1996, p. 28). Because servant-

leadership breaks away from the classic organizational pyramid and promotes flexible, delegated organizational structures, many behavioral scientists see it as a forward-looking, post-industrial paradigm for leadership (incl. Lee & Zemke, 1993; Biberman & Whitty, 1997).

### Servant-Leadership Attributes

Each of the above-listed tenets of servant-leadership can derive only from the selfless, “others-directed” motivation that resides within the leader. This foundation is distinctive to servant-leadership. According to Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko, “Typically, models of leadership do not begin with an analysis of leader motivation, and Greenleaf’s concepts in this regard are unique” (2004, p. 82). Accordingly, aspiring servant-leaders must first scrutinize their personal belief systems and reasons for aspiring to lead. Strong leader ethics, principles and values lie at the core of the theory, and are seen as being key to the long-term interests of the organization being served.

Servant-leadership, therefore, emphasizes core personal characteristics and beliefs over any specific leadership techniques. This is seen throughout the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf, from his first, seminal essay on servant-leadership to his posthumously published writings. Behavioral theorists have identified 10 major leadership characteristics, or ‘attributes’ in Greenleaf’s writings (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 146):

1. **Listening** – A critical communication tool, necessary for accurate communication and for actively demonstrating respect for others. According to Greenleaf, “Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first” (1970, p. 10)
2. **Empathy** – The ability to mentally project one’s own consciousness into that of another individual. Greenleaf wrote, “The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects” (1970, p. 12), and “Men grow taller when those who lead them empathize, and when they are accepted for who they are...” (1970, p. 14).
3. **Healing** – Greenleaf defined healing as “to make whole” (1970, p. 27). The servant-leader recognizes the shared human desire to find wholeness in one’s self, and supports it in others.
4. **Awareness** – Without awareness, “we miss leadership opportunities” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 19).
5. **Persuasion** – The effective servant-leader builds group consensus through “gentle but clear and persistent persuasion, and does not exert group compliance through position power. Greenleaf notes that “A fresh look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways (1970, pp. 3-4). Servant-leadership utilizes personal, rather than position power, to influence followers and achieve organizational objectives.

6. **Conceptualization** – The servant-leader can conceive solutions to problems that do not currently exist (Greenleaf, 1970, pp. 23-25).
7. **Foresight** – “Prescience, or foresight, is a better than average guess about *what* is going to happen *when* in the future” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 16).
8. **Stewardship** – Organizational stewards, or ‘trustees’ are concerned not only for the individual followers within the organization, but also the organization as a whole, and its impact on and relationship with all of society (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 31).
9. **Commitment to the growth of people** – A demonstrated appreciation and encouragement of others. Per Greenleaf, “The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be” (1970, p. 14).
10. **Building community** – The rise of large institutions has eroded community, the social pact that unites individuals in society. According to Greenleaf, “All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form...is for enough servant-leaders to show the way” (1970, p. 30).

Studies by behavioral scientists confirm these ten characteristics as being critical to servant-leadership (Joseph & Winston, 2005, p. 10), while extending and clarifying this list to include many more leadership attributes. Russell and Stone (2002), for example, propose a list of 20 distinctive attributes observed in servant-leaders, as derived from scholarly literature. They further categorized these 20 attributes into 9 ‘functional attributes’ and 11 ‘accompanying attributes’. Functional attributes are defined as intrinsic characteristics of servant-leaders, while accompanying attributes complement and enhance the functional attributes:

<u>Functional Attributes</u>		<u>Accompanying Attributes</u>	
1. Vision	6. Modeling	10. Communication	16. Persuasion
2. Honesty	7. Pioneering	11. Credibility	17. Listening
3. Integrity	8. Appreciation	12. Competence	18. Encouragement
4. Trust	9. Empowerment	13. Stewardship	19. Teaching
5. Service		14. Visibility	20. Delegation
		15. Influence	

Interestingly, many of the attributes described by Greenleaf have been identified as accompanying, and not functional attributes; for example, stewardship, persuasion and listening attributes are not categorized as functional attributes.

### **Role of Values in Servant-Leadership**

The above attributes describe the outward, manifested characteristics of a servant-leader’s leadership behavior. Theorists argue that these attributes grow out of the inner values and beliefs of individual leaders, and that personal values like fairness and integrity are “the

independent variables that actuate servant leader behavior” (Russell, 2001, p. 79). Thus, values lie at the core of any leadership philosophy – they shape the characteristics of leaders, which in turn impact their activities and decision-making behavior. Behavioral scientists have proposed, but not yet empirically proven, that the value systems held by servant-leaders are unique, and distinguish them from other types of leaders and leadership theories (Russell, 2001, p. 76).

As previously noted, a leader’s motivation is viewed as another critical distinction between servant-leadership and other management theories. Researchers suggest that motivation to lead also arises from an individual’s core belief system (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002, p. 61). In the case of servant-leadership, a leader’s motivation derives from a core, egalitarian belief that they are no better than those whom they lead.

A leader’s personal values are known to have great impact on the resulting culture and performance of an organization. Russell (2001) notes, “Organizational cultures consolidate the shared beliefs, assumptions, goals and values of their members” (p. 78). In particular, senior leaders infuse their personal values throughout an organization through the process of modeling (demonstrated, observable actions). Leaders who exhibit their values through deeds, as well as words will instill those values over time into the organizational culture; this in turn initiates organizational change. Thus, a leader’s personal values can be seen as a major source of influence for bringing about change.

Given the importance of values, researchers have begun to examine the belief systems of practicing servant-leaders, and are exploring whether identified values correlate positively with the theoretical outcomes of servant-leadership, like organizational success. Russell (2001) has examined the question from a non-empirical perspective, and calls for further research into the value systems of servant-leaders. In a recent study, Joseph and Winston (2005) were able to positively correlate honesty, integrity, benevolence and other leader values to the attribute of leader and organizational trust, and organizational effectiveness. Additional studies, however, are needed.

### **Theory Criticism**

Like other disciplines in the social sciences, modern study of organizational behavior employs the scientific method, and requires empirical validation. Leadership theories must be translated into functional models. These models serve as the basis for forming hypotheses that can then be tested and verified (or disproved). Only validated models can be used reliably to describe, predict and recommend leader behavior in applied settings. Servant-leadership has come under some fire for remaining grounded in philosophical theory, and for lacking empirical substantiation. Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2003) call the theory “systematically undefined and lacking in empirical support”, while Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) note that the “current literature is filled with anecdotal evidence” and that “empirical research is critically needed” (p. 63). Russell and Stone’s (2002) effort to develop a rudimentary model of servant-leadership is an important step forward, but rigorous academic research on servant leadership remains “in its infancy” (Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2003, p. 358).



Others criticize servant leadership from a social perspective, identifying it as either anti-feminist or religious in nature. In a recent paper, Eicher-Catt (2005) argues that the values attributed to servant-leadership are gender biased, and accuses the theory of perpetuating “a theology of leadership that upholds androcentric patriarchal norms” and “insidiously perpetuates a long-standing masculine-feminine, master-slave political economy” (p. 17). Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko (2004) warn that “some authors have attempted to couch servant leadership in spiritual and moral terms” (p. 82). Such concerns seem borne out by some of the academic literature, including Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) and McCormick (1994). Other authors are careful to distinguish between religion and spirituality, but still express concern about servant-leadership’s potential for conflicting with the spiritual orientations of individual followers (Lee & Zemke, p. 3).

On the pragmatic front, some researchers question the practicality and applicability of the theory to real-world scenarios. They question whether the collectivist aspirations of servant-leadership are compatible with today’s emphasis on individual effort and performance (Lloyd, p. 31). Others argue the theory is unrealistic in that it “ignores accountability and the underlying fundamental aggression of people in the workplace”, and fails to consider differing levels of competence among individuals (Lee & Zemke, 1993, p. 3).

### **Theory Support**

Academic researchers that advocate servant-leadership rarely address theory effectiveness from an empirical standpoint. Instead, they almost uniformly focus on the individual, organizational and societal needs that can be filled by adherence to the theory’s profound spiritual and moral underpinnings.

In particular, the literature suggests that the theory’s emphasis on leadership motivation addresses the inherent weaknesses that reside in people. These weaknesses include an individual’s potential for error of judgment, the excess of pride and self-interested actions that can occur in persons holding high-level positions, and the “unhealthy subordinate relationships” that can occur between leader and follower in traditional hierarchical institutions. Researchers point to recent corporate scandals as examples of the organizational dangers of self-serving leadership. A leader that operates from a desire to first serve others avoids these power traps by building consensus, follower empowerment and a sense of egalitarianism in the workplace. As Lee and Zemke (1993) state, “The [servant]-leader’s belief system says he or she is no better than those who are led” (p. 86). Even researchers who identify an erosion of personal influence in the modern workplace see a need for servant leadership. Russell (2001) notes, “Position power is eroding in many organizations; therefore, leaders must derive their influence from values” (p. 77).

Servant-leadership is also praised for its emphasis on a “wholistic” approach to the individual worker, one that addresses his or her spiritual as well as economic needs. Lee and Zemke (1993), for example, point to the instabilities of today’s work environment. Layoffs, plant closings, corporate scandals and increased competitive pressures have all contributed to a heightened uncertainty and stress in the workforce. There is a growing need for psychological security and stability, and a sense of moral and ethical grounding. Researchers cite a “growing preoccupation among individuals with the spiritual side of life” (Lee & Zemke, 1993), and a need for follower empowerment and personal development. Servant-



leadership is described as a new paradigm that meets these needs, because corporate culture is most influenced by the beliefs, values and actions of its leader. An inspirational, spiritually strong leader, it is argued, is the most direct route to a spiritually satisfying (and therefore more productive) workplace.

Greenleaf's theory was developed in the 1960's and 1970's, but is today finding new proponents who see it as a theory for its time, one that provides an ideal and necessary alternative to the traditional, hierarchical paradigms of the industrial past. King (1994) observes that business "timescales are being dramatically compressed...with business conditions changing every 18 to 36 months" (p. 7). As organizations convert from large, bureaucratic structures to smaller, more flexible units that can better respond to today's competitive environment, a new management paradigm is required. Servant-leadership, with its emphasis on employee empowerment, teamwork and flatter organizational structures is seen as an ideal fit.

### Theory Comparisons

Servant-leadership is most often compared with transformational leadership, a theory introduced in 1978 by James MacGregor Burns, and later extended by Bernard M. Bass (1985). Like servant-leadership, transformational leadership has become a popular leadership model in recent years because of its emphasis on extraordinary leader characteristics and its humanistic valuation of followers. Some behavioral scientists have contend that transformational and servant-leadership theories are both rooted in the charismatic leadership framework developed by Max Weber in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko, 2004). Indeed, both theories share the charismatic leadership model's focus on leadership qualities and behavior.

Transformational and servant-leadership, however, are not the equivalents of each other, nor is one an instance of the other (Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2003). Instead, they are complementary frameworks that share a focus on the individual, both in terms of appreciation of followers and of emphasis on leadership characteristics, but differ significantly in leader motivation, organizational objectives, measures of success, resulting cultures, and contextual appropriateness.

Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko (2004) posit that "the leader's motivation for behaving is a critical distinction between the two theories" (p. 85). Where the transformational leader is ultimately motivated by the need to achieve organizational goals, the servant-leader is ultimately motivated by the need to support the self-actualization of followers. In transformational leadership, the personal development and empowerment of followers is approached as a *means* for achieving the organizational goal; in servant-leadership, it *is* the goal.

As a result, servant-leadership places a greater emphasis on people over production, and transformational leadership places a greater emphasis on the reverse. This results in different measures of success for the two theoretical frameworks. In transformational leadership, achievement of organizational objectives serve as direct benchmarks, while in servant-leadership, follower happiness is the hallmark of success. Achievement of organizational

objectives, according to servant-leadership theorists, is the indirect but inevitable, outcome of a satisfied workforce.

The differing emphases of the two theories also lead to very different cultural environments, according to Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko (2004). Transformational leadership's combined emphasis on performance and inspiration fosters an "empowered dynamic culture", while servant-leadership's emphasis on shared leadership and healthy follower relationships creates a "spiritual generative culture" (p. 86). Both cultures are markedly different, suggesting the two leadership styles may differ in contextual appropriateness. Stable, evolving environments such as those found in the non-profit and community service sectors may be more appropriate to servant-leadership, while competitive organizations needing constant, revolutionary innovation may be better suited to transformational leadership (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004, p. 87). Spears (1996), appears to agree that servant-leadership is best suited for the public service sector; all of his six proposed areas of servant-leadership application involve non-profit or educational institutions (pp. 34-35).

## ROBERT K. GREENLEAF

*"Teacher, Philosopher • Servant-Leader • Potentially a good plumber •  
Ruined by a sophisticated education."*

*- Self-authored epitaph of Robert Greenleaf*

### Roots of Servant-Leadership – A Brief Biography

Robert Keifner Greenleaf, the author of servant leadership, was born in 1904, in Terre Haute, IN. He was raised in a household committed to both strong personal ethics and community involvement. His father, George Greenleaf, was actively involved in community and business affairs, serving on the local school board and city council, and active in union politics. George was a blue-collar worker as well as an educator, a machinist and mechanic at the local Rose Polytechnic Institute who rose to become head of the institute's educational machine shops. In Robert Greenleaf's father, we can see the roots of Greenleaf's philosophy – a strong identification with average, working people, a belief that leadership resides in all of us, and that a true leader is one who serves first.

Robert Greenleaf displayed early aspirations to leadership, becoming president of his Wiley High School senior class in 1922. After graduating from Minnesota's Carleton College in 1926, Greenleaf immediately went to work for AT&T at their New York headquarters. At the time, AT&T was the world's largest corporation. In 1934 at the age of 30, Greenleaf discovered Quakerism, a religion that influenced his already developing thoughts on the nature of service and authentic leadership.

Greenleaf remained at AT&T for 38 years, eventually becoming the company's director of management research, development and education. His responsibilities included the

identification and training of promising managers, an activity that developed his growing recognition that the best leaders are driven by team interests self-interests, and display a shared set of ethical characteristics. Retiring in 1964, he founded the Center for Applied Ethics (now the 'Robert K. Greenleaf Center') to promote research and public understanding of leadership excellence. He embarked on a second career as a management consultant and lecturer, advising such clients as the Ford Foundation and the Lilly Endowment, and teaching at M.I.T., Harvard and Duke Universities.

### **Publication of *The Servant as Leader***

Greenleaf's interactions with university students during the social upheaval of the 1960's led him to explore what they were reading. His encounter with a short German novel written in 1932 led to a dramatic coalescing of Greenleaf's thinking and the birth of servant-leadership. The story and its impact is best described by Greenleaf himself:

The idea of *The Servant as Leader* came out of reading Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*. In this story we see a band of men on a mythical journey, probably Hesse's own journey. The central figure of the story is Leo who accompanies the party as the *servant* who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They cannot make it without the servant Leo. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering finds Leo and is taken into the Order that has sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had first known as *servant*, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble *leader* (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 1).

Greenleaf immediately recognized the fundamental message of the novel; that "the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 2). True leadership emerges out of a deep-seated desire to first help others. He began to write, publishing his emerging thoughts on servant-leadership in a privately published essay in 1970, entitled *The Servant as Leader*. Only 200 copies were printed initially; these he privately distributed to friends and key leaders of the day. Positive response led to increasingly larger reprint orders for the essay. To date, more than half a million copies have been distributed worldwide, translated into multiple languages. Although not his first or last publication, this 35-page treatise written at the age of 66 remains his most influential.

### **Other Publications**

*The Servant as Leader* was followed by two additional publications, *The Institution as Servant* (1972) and *Trustees as Servants* (1974). These essays expanded his original vision of servant-leadership to include leadership as an organizational as well as individual model. *Advices to Servants*, a collection of nine essays on servant-leadership in various organizational environments, was published in 1975. In *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (1977), Greenleaf explored the nature, use (and abuse) of power. Additional publications followed, including *Servant, Leader and Follower* (1978), *Teacher as Servant: A Parable* (1979), *The Servant as Religious Leader* (1982) and others.

Publication of Greenleaf's many writings continued after his death in 1990, in the form of two essay collections. The first posthumous collection, *On Becoming a Servant-Leader* (1996), includes writings on such issues as leadership strength, power ethics and organizational attributes, and also includes *Leadership and the Individual* (the Greenleaf's last major essay before writing *The Servant as Leader*. This essay was originally presented as a series of five lectures at Dartmouth College in 1969, and discusses leadership qualities, leadership strategies and what he termed 'The Crisis of Leadership' in modern society. The second collection, entitled *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership* (1996), focuses on the role of servant-leadership in religious organizations but contains ideas that can be extrapolated to many institutional settings.

Servant-leadership has also been treated in numerous third-party books, as interest and practice of the theory has grown. Notable recent publications include *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader* (Hunter, 2004) and *Practicing Servant Leadership: Succeeding through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness* (Spears & Lawrence, eds., 2004). The former is a guide to implementing servant-leadership principles in one's work and personal life, and the latter is a collection of essays by leaders who have attempted to integrate servant-leadership in the organizations they serve.

## THEORY APPLICATION

Servant-leadership has been extensively applied in the workplace, demonstrating its potential as a practical as well as theoretical approach to organizational management. The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, based in Indianapolis, IN, is a non-profit organization dedicated to the education, research and promotion of the principles of servant-leadership. Center members include between 33-50% of *Fortune* magazine's '100 Best Companies to Work for in America' (Arkin, 2004, p. 31). In 2000, three of the top five companies in *Fortune's* list were companies that claimed to be practitioners of servant-leadership (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002, p. 62). Companies that practice servant-leadership include Starbucks Coffee Company, Southwest Airlines, and many of the nation's top universities.

Still, the theory's focus on a leader's inner values over external technique renders it difficult for companies to deploy on a practical level. As Russell (2001) notes, "Overall, servant leadership succeeds or fails on the personal values of the people who employ it" (p. 81). The question, then, is how can an organization "operationalize" servant-leadership theory? Can servant-leadership even be taught?

To demonstrate servant-leadership's potential for real-world application, the following section presents an organizational scenario in which the principles of servant-leadership are markedly absent, and subsequently introduced. The scenario is based in part upon factual circumstances, but has been fictionalized to protect individual identities and present a fuller illustration of servant-leadership in practice.

## Scenario

The Information Technology Resource Center (ITRC) is a Montana state university think tank, whose mission is to keep the university at the forefront of emerging information technology. They also develop multimedia products and services for educational institutions, as well as private and state enterprises. The ITRC has received a Montana Department of Transportation grant to develop interactive information kiosks, to educate the public about the nation's upcoming Lewis & Clark Bicentennial.

The ITRC director placed a programmer in charge of the project, and the endeavor has suffered greatly under his leadership, both in terms of kiosk development and team morale. Although the team included three capable, creative multimedia experts with enthusiasm for the task, the programmer imposed a highly directive leadership style on the group. He failed to delegate authority, asked for team input only when assured that opinions would match his own, and his opinion prevailed even in creative areas that were not his expertise or strength. Given the capabilities and willingness of the team, the programmer's leadership style was highly inappropriate. The programmer's top-down, autocratic approach to management led to interpersonal conflicts, a demoralized team, substandard work and project delays. The programmer was fired when the director overheard him engaging inappropriately with the group.

## Enter the Aspiring Servant-Leader

"Andy", previously a manager of another media development team on campus, was brought in to replace the programmer. Having just completed an organizational management course, Andy was keen to try out his new knowledge about effective leadership. In particular, he felt the precepts of the servant-leadership theory would be particularly appropriate to the situation. He knew that many behavioral scientists had identified servant-leadership as being well suited to community service-oriented or educational organizations, like the ITRC. The strong values system espoused by servant-leadership also appealed to him, and he spent a good deal of time preparing for his new responsibilities by first **examining his own belief systems**, and his **motivations for aspiring to leadership**.

Andy began by calling a team meeting. He openly acknowledged that problems that existed with the project, and asked for the team's help in understanding the current challenges (**listening; empathy**). The team was at first silent, afraid to communicate their true thoughts, but Andy was **aware** of this fact. Through quiet, non-judgmental feedback, he was slowly able to encourage open communication among the group members. By allowing the group to air their grievances, Andy acknowledged them as **holistic individuals**, and encouraged the **healing** process to begin.

To move the project to a more positive plane, and to support the **growth of individuals**, he concluded the meeting by asking each team member to meet with him individually, so that he could learn more about their individual strengths, skills and interests. The team was initially suspicious of this one-on-one strategy, but Andy was consistently positive and supportive with each individual. After learning their areas of expertise, and thoughts on where they could best serve the project, Andy concluded each conversation by asking the

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team member to consider how he, the leader, might best support and **serve** their efforts on the project. Afterwards, the team members compared notes about their individual meetings with the new project manager, and concluded that he seemed like a fair, forward-thinking leader. Andy had begun to build **trust**.

Andy considered what he learned from each team member, and called the group together the next day. In the meeting, he communicated his admiration for the team's capabilities, and his philosophy that his role as leader should be to **serve, support and facilitate** the team in their quest for success. His primary role and motivation was to provide the resources they needed to achieve success. He unveiled a proposal for **delegating responsibility** according to individual areas of expertise, and asked for feedback as to whether the plan best met each individual's desires and strengths. The team proposed a couple of changes, and the plan was jointly approved. The team responded positively to this first **sharing of power in decision-making**. Andy was careful to clarify that delegation was not an **abdication of his accountability** as a leader; rather, it was a way to **empower** team members to make the best decisions about how to achieve their collective goals. He assured them that he would work closely with them to support their activities. In doing so, Andy fostered an atmosphere of **participatory, non-hierarchical leadership**, and further promoted group **trust**.

Andy concluded the meeting by communicating his emerging **vision** for the group's efforts. He **conceptualized** the key role that the information kiosks would play in the upcoming bicentennial celebrations, and what future endeavors the Lewis & Clark project might lead to for the group. By communicating this **foresight**, he inspired the group to accept him as a servant-leader, and **persuaded** them to follow his **vision**.

These early, corrective efforts began to pay off. Team morale improved, communication channels opened up, and the kiosk interface rapidly improved under delegated, supported decision-making. Team members independently put in extra hours each week to move the project back on schedule. Andy's steady leadership behavior solidified the team's motivation and will to succeed. He displayed consistent **honesty** and **integrity** in all interactions with followers, and expressed his **appreciation of others** at every appropriate opportunity. He influenced the team not by coercion, but through **visible** personal example (**modeling**). He knew that his own demonstrated behavior would prove the best foundation for influential leadership, and the best way to instill **organizational values**. He demonstrated his personal dedication to the project through his own deeds, thereby raising his **credibility** and creating a principled **culture of participation**.

To promote the growing sense of **community among the team**, Andy began to host the team's weekly meetings over lunch at local cafes, or on the university green in fair weather. Andy also emphasized the project's responsibilities to the **larger community**, by holding regular testing sessions with members of the public. The team began to develop a sense of their **organizational values** and began to also see **themselves as servants first**.

Andy utilized the trust capital he had built up with the group to lead them to new achievements. He proposed some cutting-edge multimedia features they could strive to incorporate into the project, and initiated the process. He challenged the established mode of doing things, and in doing so, led the team to become innovators. This **pioneering**

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behavior involves some risks, but is also the hallmark that distinguishes managers from leaders (Russell & Stone, 2002, p. 150).

After six months, the information kiosks were completed on time and installed in various public locations along the route of Lewis & Clark's journey through present-day Montana. The project was viewed as a success, and led to additional contracts with state and federal institutions. Team members went on to lead some of these projects themselves, which Andy viewed as the greatest sign of his success. By **servicing as a leader** himself, he encouraged **servant-leadership** in others.

## CONCLUSION

The above scenario demonstrates that servant leadership can be “operationalized”, and is well suited for application in the information services arena. Information organizations are frequently not-for-profit, volunteer or educational institutions that operate in fairly stable external environments. They also attract leaders and followers who are particularly attracted to opportunities for personal growth, consensus building atmospheres and community service (Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko, 2004, p. 89). Such opportunities are at the heart of servant-leadership, making it an excellent framework for managing the information organization.

Servant-leadership is not necessarily a recent theory. Although first proposed in 1970, some trace its origins back to the human relations movement of the 1950's (Biberman & Whitty, p. 134), and others recognize its principles as having been practiced worldwide for over 2,000 years (Joseph & Winston, 2005, p. 9). Still, the theory remains in its infancy in terms of modern behavioral sciences. Servant-leadership lacks a formal, confirmed framework, and has not yet been empirically linked to organizational performance. Many areas of concern remain to be explored and answered, including the question of whether servant-leaders can be formally trained. As the theory's popularity continues to grow, these and other issues must be addressed.

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