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Servant Leadership in International Education

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The objective of "Servant Leadership in International Education" is to explore goodness of fit between Servant Leadership models, stemming primarily from the business and corporate communities (including such organizations as Southwest Airlines), and the service environments of International Education. The article will define the elements of Servant Leadership in its review of the key literature (for example Robert Greenleaf, Barbara Kellerman, John Maxwell, James MacGregor Burns, James Kouzes and Barry Posner, John Gardner, Peter Senge, Warren Bennis, and Margaret Wheatley). The article will define the service areas of International Education, and show strong goodness of fit between the elements of servant leadership and international education. Also, a discussion of cultural challenge-areas will be included.

I. The Servant Leader

I am not really working, thinks the man who is in harmony, who sees the truth. For in seeing or hearing, smelling or touching, in eating or walking, or sleeping, or breathing, in talking or grasping or relaxing, and even in closing his eyes he remembers: "It is the servants of my soul that are working." (Mascaro, 1962, p. 28)

As the 21st century unfolds, interest in leadership (in its definitions, its contexts, its various components, its challenges, and its efficacy as fields of study and training) continues to burgeon. Academic and professional literature related to leadership is growing exponentially, and much of this literature documents a sea-change in attitudes and expectations regarding leadership. Interest in the classic leadership pyramid continues to wane, and in its place is a growing interest
in more flattened organizational models where leaders take action *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in leading teams as well as individuals (Greenleaf, 1977). Moreover, leadership is no longer seen as an innate characteristic, but rather a set of skills which can be taught; thus the *Great Man* theory of leadership (the pyramid's foundation) is also passing away (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). With the flattened organization model there have emerged leadership theories which are very far removed from command-and-control models of the past. These new leadership models extol the importance of shared values, the efficacy of leadership which is compassion-based, the artistic elements of leadership, and the importance of relationship-building in leadership. All suggest an increasing interest in the individual, for example, her professional, personal, and intellectual growth, as of key importance to the effective modern leader. Primarily in the contexts of the corporate and business communities, servant leadership has emerged from these employee-centered and client-centered models, and has been embraced by such disparate organizations as Southwest Airlines and Valencia Community College in Orlando as an effective framework for the guidance of complex organizations and well-educated and highly skilled personnel.

In many people's minds, this presents a paradox: how can a leader who is in charge of and responsible for an organization or team, be a "servant" to the organization or team? Doesn't a servant in essence connote the dregs of the organizational food chain? This is perhaps accurate only if the traditional hierarchical leadership model is present and effective, a model which represents top-down leadership, and which Henry Ford and other captains of industry of the 20th century would recognize as their own. However, the top-down, hierarchical model is clearly outmoded and ineffective in many modern organizations (Senge, 1990). Furthermore, the perceived paradox is a misapprehension of corporations and institutions which have become what Peter Senge has termed "learning organizations" requiring leaders to focus on the needs of highly trained and experienced employees. His writings posit that:

The new view of leadership in learning organizations centers on subtler and more important tasks. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexities, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning (Senge, p. 340)

This is strongly resonant with the leadership environments currently present in higher education, the zenith of learning organizations.

Colleges and universities are also service providers in the highest sense, and provision is made for the delivery not only of specific subject matter, but also of a spectrum of services designed to assist tertiary students related to their lives as
members of the academic community. A key service-delivery area of university life is captured under the various rubrics of international education. As of the first decade of the 21st century, virtually every university in the United States has begun aggressively marketing study abroad programs, recruiting foreign students (or planning to do so), and developing research and teaching linkages with institutions abroad. The United States is not alone in these global activities as countries around the world continue to strengthen their competitive edges in capturing a share of the international higher education market worldwide, estimated to be a multi-billion dollar industry (IIE, 2007). The foundations of this national and international flurry of activity are laid upon a key concept: international education is a hallmark of learning in modern universities requiring highly specialized and experienced leadership. Specifically, current models of servant leadership demonstrate goodness of fit in key areas of the administration of international education programs in colleges and universities in the United States including leading the technical areas of work (immigration, study abroad systems, and memoranda of understanding), leading staff members and unit teams, leading as representatives of our institutions, and in leadership which touches on key aspects of citizen diplomacy.

II. Origins and Attributes

The most valuable public servant, like the true patriot, is one who gives a higher loyalty to his country's ideals than to its current policy and who therefore is willing to criticize as well as to comply. (Fulbright, 1966, p. 29).

Despite the plethora of leadership how-to's on the market which posit thousands of opinions on the subject, there is surprisingly strong consensus regarding the definition of leadership. What has dramatically changed over time is the context of leadership (Figure 1).
Fig. 1: Leadership Origins and Contextual Change: A Progression

The Alpha Male & Tribal Leadership

COMMAND AND CONTROL LEADERSHIP

Military leaders, kings, chiefs, governors

WORLD EVENTS:
- WAR
- HEALTH CRISIS
- ECONOMIC BOOM AND BUST

Key Social Issues:
- Equal Opportunity
- Gender Equality

The Rule of the MBA:
TQM: Total Quality Management, Re-Engineering, Down-Sizing

Extensive-heavy industrialization; mass production; Henry Ford; the films of Fritz Lang; the theories of F.W. Taylor and Abraham Maslow

The Captains of Industry and Robber Barons:
The Economics theory of John Maynard Keynes v. the writings of Karl Marx

Non-Authoritarian
- Non-Hierarchical
- Flattened
- Organizational Model

PRIMUS INTER PARES:
First Among Equals

Silicon Valley...the Learning Organization, and Situational Leadership...the writings of Ken Blanchard, and Peter Senge.

Changing Leadership Context

GLOBALIZATION

Servant Leadership
Aka: The New Leadership, Collegial Leadership, Compassionate Leadership, etc...the writings of Greenleaf, Maxwell, Hunter, Bennis, Kouzes & Pozner, Senge, Goleman, Peters & Waterman.
Leadership has been defined as "the process of persuasion or example by which an individual induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers" (Gardner, 1990, p.1), and as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations of both leaders and followers" (Burns, p.19). Historically, the influencing of behavior has often been manifested in coercive leadership, the dark side of command-and-control leadership. Imperial and militaristic leadership models are classics of command-and-control authority over followers. It is not absolutely necessary in these models that followers think or take initiative; what is primarily important is obedience and discipline. Greenleaf said, "Some coercive power is overt and brutal. Some is covert and subtly manipulative. The former is open and acknowledged; the latter is insidious and hard to detect. Most of us are more coerced than we know" (p. 55-56). In the latter part of the 19th century, Frederick W. Taylor applied "scientific management" techniques to the command-and-control industrial workforce which was subsequently characterized by efficient and highly competitive mass production via the assembly line.

Because discreet aspects of production were analyzed scientifically in order to increase efficiency, the training of workers became more complex in keeping with the increasing complexity of production. However, the workers/followers were still in essence commanded and controlled by leaders operating in a classic pyramidal organization: CEO (or boss) on top, followed by managers, associate managers, assistant managers, and finally proletariats providing the lowest foundation. In influential writings of the 20th century, leadership began to be described as situational (Hersey and Blanchard, p. 150) and "transactional" (Burns, p. 257); however, the focus continued to be on the hierarchical leader, even if "self-actualized" (Burns, p. 117). This leadership model, though still existing in the military and in some corporations, began to spring leaks in the final quarter of the 20th century when corporations such as International Business Machines (IBM) began to realize that old-fashioned leadership models were becoming increasingly ineffective in dealing with well-educated followers.

It is interesting to note that in 1977, an IBM executive, Robert K. Greenleaf, penned what has become the classic volume on a new leadership model which he called servant leadership. There was to be no more command-and-control, and in its topsy-turvy place, the leader was at the service of those led:

A fresh critical 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. A new moral principle is emerging, which
holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led. (Greenleaf, p. 23-24)

In recent years, servant leadership has developed a large number of apologists, including such popular business writers as Stephen Covey, John Maxwell, and Max DePree. From these writings have emerged common attributes of servant leadership:

- **Leaders Last.** In this flattening of the organizational chart, the servant leader places the well-being of her employees, those led, ahead of her own well-being. There is no longer a boss in the traditional sense, and no longer a place for the hierarchical organizational chart since the servant leader has become "first among equals" and in essence a principal rather than captain. This is not without innate challenge to the servant leader. There is a virtual urban legend which centers on Quincy Jones' orchestration of the hit song "We Are the World" involving a gaggle of pop music celebrities from Michael Jackson to Bruce Springsteen. Jones required the superstars to "leave their egos at the door." This is illustrative of the challenge of humility faced by leaders who relinquish the role of boss for the role of servant.

- **Authenticity.** Servant leadership posits the development of the "true self." Warren Bennis writes, "Until you make your life your own, you’re walking around in borrowed clothes. Leaders, whatever their field, are made up as much of their experiences as their skills, like everyone else. Unlike everyone else, they use their experience rather than being used by it" (2003, p.62). It is important to note that self-inquiry, the search for the true self of the leader, "must lead to shrewd, persuasive, and self-confident action if it is to be an effective tool" (Badaracco, 1998, p.96). *Esse Quam Videri*, the state motto of North Carolina, captures the attribute of authenticity perfectly: "to be rather than to seem;" trust in the leader's ability is built upon the leader's authenticity.
• **Integrity and Character.** Servant leadership models insist that it does matter what you do, and that consistency in professional and personal life should be reflective of the leader's honesty, transparency, compassion, and diligence, and in short, reflective of the leader's nurturing and supportive spirit. Many current writers on leadership emphasize the importance of character, some even to the point of stressing that "leadership is about character [and] is a continuously evolving thing. The process of becoming a leader is much the same as becoming an integrated human being" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p.5). Integrity requires a match between what the leader says, and what the leader does. The servant leader models integrity, strength of character, shared values, and confidence in her vision for the organization; she remembers that "followers do not trust leaders whose character they know to be flawed, and they will not continue following them" (Maxwell, 1999, p.5).

• **Values and Vision.** The servant leader is able intuitively to determine and to articulate the values of the organization in such a way as to focus the energies of the followers and guide the organization to a specified and agreed-upon goal. Moreover, leaders must "translate their personal values into calculated action" to be effective (Badaracco, 1998, p.91). A servant leader's vision enables the importance of the organization's work to be fully embraced by followers since they understand it clearly: what the work's importance has been, what it is at present, and what it will be in the future. A servant leader's vision, a "commanding and convincing idea about where and how collegiate organizations should be moving to the future" (Bogue, 1994, p.33), also includes the establishing of organizational direction and intention, "dreams of what could be," and the accepting of these by willing followers. Moreover, servant leaders focus on inspiring and maintaining a "shared vision [which gazes] across the horizon of time, imagining the attractive opportunities that are in store when they and their constituents arrive at a distant destination" (Kouzes & Posner, p.15).

• **Communication.** With no hidden agendas, the servant leader is committed to open and clear communication and sharing of information. Such communication is vital to followers and to the organization at large since for it to flourish, for "a system to remain alive, for the universe to keep growing, information must be continually generated...we need, therefore, to develop new approaches to information – not management but encouragement, not control but genesis" (Wheatley, p.96-97). Honesty and openness in communication are seen as key in servant leadership; in essence, "a governing ideal for effective leadership is that
of candor, of honesty and forthrightness in presenting the truth...telling the truth with compassion recognizes that we may encounter moments when withholding the truth is appropriate behavior. There is a fine line, however, between behavior that is protective and behavior that will deprive our colleagues of an opportunity to grow and take responsibility for their lives" (Bogue, 1994, pp. 56 and 60). Servant leaders must not assume that civil discourse is naturally present in the academy, and should take action to model behavior related to communicating civilly, clearly, and professionally at all times.

- **Team Building.** The flattening of organizational charts initiated by servant leaders essentially turns workers/followers into a team rather than a mere staff. The willingness to delegate authority, and the constant nurturing of relationships and human connections is powerfully strengthening to the team; “the stronger the relationship and connection between individuals, the more likely the follower will want to help the leader” (Maxwell, 1998, p.102). Trust is the foundation of team-building, and as leadership consultant Richard McGourty writes:

  A leader who presents himself to others as a servant over time generates a depth of trust with his/her colleagues; and that foundation of trust is the critical and enduring aspect of leadership. It endures, for example, even through periods of crisis when the leader may be required to act without consultation and may take positions which are hard for others to understand. servant Leadership works best as a foundational value which facilitates whatever brand of leadership and followership are called for by the situation (2007, p.1).

The servant leader gains trust from the team by giving trust, by refusing to micro-manage, by allowing team members to be creative and to risk making errors in a safe and supportive work environment. “Teams provide multiple perspectives on how to meet a need or reach a goal, thus devising several alternatives for each situation. Individual insight is seldom as broad and deep as a group’s when it takes on a problem... teamwork is birthed when [a team member] concentrates on the “we” instead of “me” (Maxwell, 2001, p.6). Team-building at its most effective will include two important factors: mentoring and storytelling, leads to what Warren Bennis has described as the “Pygmalion Effect.” He wrote, “Leaders expect the best of the people around them. Leaders know that the people around them change and grow. If you expect great things, your associates will give them to you. At the same time, leaders are
realistic about expectations. Their motto is: stretch, don’t strain” (Bennis, 2003, p.192). Storytelling is the passing along of the organizational narrative, “the overarching explanation of why they do what they do, how the organization needs to evolve, and how that evolution is part of something larger” (Senge, 1990, p. 346).

In summation, these attributes are common to the effective learning organization, and the contemporary team comprised of well-educated workers/followers of high expertise. Moreover, the advent of such organizations has changed the context of leadership, setting the stage for the work of the servant leader who must master the context of his leadership (Bennis, 2003, p.6).

III. The Context of International Education

...from the very back of the hall, a soft voice said: “The President is ready to pass judgment himself.” The sound of this soft voice shook me strangely. Right from the depths of the room, from the remote horizons of the archives, came a man. His walk was light and peaceful, his robe sparkled with gold. He came nearer amid the silence of the assembly, and I recognized his walk, I recognized his movements, and finally I recognized his face. It was Leo. I was deeply intrigued and moved in anticipation of the judgment which I was humbly prepared to accept, whether it would now bring punishment or grace. I was no less deeply moved and amazed that it was Leo, the former porter and servant, who now stood at the head of the whole League and was ready to pass judgment on me (Hesse, 1956, p. 98).

The context of international education centers around one key concept: the bringing together the peoples of the world to engage them with Americans in an academic endeavor, with the express additional expectation that issues of learning, culture, economics, politics, religion, society, and family-life be “exchanged” between foreign and domestic students. In the United States, an institution of higher education is judged and its prestige strengthened, in part, by the degree to which this key concept is effectively carried out. It follows that it is of the utmost importance that American students and faculty members continue to be exposed to the peoples of the world so that traditional American isolation/insulation from the world can be countered. Then American citizens can be better engaged with world issues, American students can be better prepared for their professional and personal futures in a world defined by globalization, and foreign students and scholars can have the opportunity for open, safe, and civil
discourse with other foreign nationals from countries which may be at odds with their home countries. These are classic rationales for international education easily traceable to the Cold War and still influential, but there are more mundane (and nonetheless tremendously potent) reasons for the institutional pursuit of international education, not the least of which is the favorable financial impact which such programs have on American institutions and their communities. For example, approximately 64,000 foreign students and their families injected 1.75 billion U.S. dollars into the economy of the state of New York in one year (NAFSA, 2005-06).

As practiced in the United States, international education has its genesis concurrent with the Cold War, and in many ways it can be seen as the homeland security doppelganger of post-war strategic nuclear deterrence, an educational echo of the Marshall Plan vying for the hearts and minds of nations abroad. Senator William Fulbright is most often cited as the braintrust behind the modern concept of international educational exchange as seen from the standpoint of government, with obvious objectives related to the spreading of the gospels of democracy, free-market enterprise, transparency of government, and rule of law. Fulbright's vision has been remarkably effective in bringing people of the world together in a common educational enterprise, to the benefit of both American society and societies abroad. Moreover, globalization has been fueled in large measure by the free spread of ideas and information which is at the heart of international education. International education in the environments of higher education, especially as it relates to the fundamental elements of services provided to students, to faculty members, and to the institutions, is primarily a service profession which has the following key elements: study abroad, international student and scholar services, intensive English programs, international admissions, policy development, institutional linkages/memoranda of understanding, protocol and program design.

Study abroad refers to the systems and processes by which students (domestic and foreign) study, usually temporarily, at site locations abroad. Such programs are of varying lengths, for example an academic year, a semester, or a summer; but increasingly study abroad programs are adjusting to meet the specific academic needs of students, for example, as "imbedded" programs which are included in a specific academic course and designed as short-term experiences. During the first decade of the 21st century, universities and colleges in the United States have been systematically ramping up study abroad participation.

International student and scholar services refer to the variety of specialized services, many required by federal regulation, which are made institutionally available to foreign students and visiting foreign faculty. While it is typically
true that the lion’s share of these services are related to the intricacies of federal immigration regulations governing the presence of foreign students and scholars in the United States (for example, the federally mandated Student and Exchange Visitor Information System program and its upcoming iteration, the SEVIS II program), services might also include special programs such as international orientation, non-resident tax seminars, immigration seminars, cultural meetings and programs, and sessions directly related to adjustment to life in the United States and on-campus.

Intensive English programs are concerned with the delivery of English language coursework and training to international students, often in anticipation of matriculation at a university or college.

International admission is typically responsible for the complexities of recruitment abroad, and the admission of international students to the institution.

Policy development, institutional linkages/memoranda of understanding, protocol, and program design are often undertaken by high level administrators of the institution (for example a dean, associate provost, or associate vice president). These functions are critical to the institution’s outreach abroad, to the linking of the institution to counterparts overseas, to the development of proper protocols for hosting special international visitors to campus, and to strategic planning regarding the international affairs of the institution.

IV. Goodness of Fit

This is the simplest way of saying that proper management of the work lives of human beings, of the way in which they earn their livings, can improve them and improve the world and in this sense be a utopian revolutionary technique (Maslow, p.1).

Servant leadership has become a viable and popular model for modern businesses, corporations, and institutions of higher education. In particular, the model has natural resonance with many aspects of the service environment of higher education which highly esteems civil discourse, open communication, a democratic community of colleagues, teamwork, common values rooted in educational pursuits, and the formation of character and integrity which strengthen students’ abilities to function as participating citizens of the United States and the world. Specifically, a subset of the higher education service environment is international education which shows goodness-of-fit with servant leadership models as exemplified in the following ways:
Leading as a servant in the technical areas of the work

These may be related to immigration processes and procedures, study abroad administration, admissions, and the development of memoranda of understanding. These technical areas are of critical importance to the institutions and to the students and faculty members served by them; in fact, the technical areas of the profession are a large part of the context of international education as it is practiced in the United States. Mastery of the contexts of international education (technical, institutional, and cultural) is of key importance, and commonly employs mentoring, a key aspect of servant leadership, as an instructional tool. Clear and open communication is also essential in the mentoring of workers/followers, as is the fostering of teams to engage in particular technical tasks which require lucid and concise communication. In addition, integrity is required in the technical environments of international education since federal and state laws, institutional policies, and departmental guidelines are omnipresent and professional actions require exactitude, honesty, accuracy, and transparency.

Leading our staff and institution as a servant

Especially in putting the needs of individual workers/followers ahead of the needs of the leader, in divesting power over employees (i.e., leading with a light touch), in the flattening of organizational structure which requires the servant leader, in her role as first among equals, to serve as the essential undergirding of the staff, the team, the individual in a new service model (see Figure II), and in the directing of resources to staff members first so that creative work can be accomplished uninterrupted and in an unthreatening environment.

Fig. 2: Servant Leadership Undergirding
It is important to remember that international education is fundamentally about service: to the people of the world, to the United States, to the institution, and to the students and faculty members who rely on the expertise of professionals in the field. In this regard, goodness-of-fit with the servant leadership model is fundamentally at the core of international education. There is also a primary good fit related to the key vision of international education which involves the fostering of peaceful coexistence through international understanding and cooperation; this involves the human interest, the personal investment, and the ego-deflation which is so much a part of servant leadership. Related to authenticity is the vision that international educators can, through personal integrity and excellence in their vocation, demonstrate to foreign nationals a true image of the American untainted by stereotypes often of our own making, cultural bias, and political friction. The servant leadership model fits well with the deep values of international education. For example, in the deep appreciation of language and culture, the interest in the individual, the dedication to, and belief in the efficacy of, a professional field which is deeply service-oriented, and the strongly held value of world peace and equal prosperity for the peoples of the world. These values go far in protecting the integrity of clients, of the units, and the institution.

Leading as a servant in citizen diplomacy

Citizen diplomacy can be defined as the concept that the individual has the right, even the responsibility, to help shape U.S. foreign relations "one handshake at a time." Citizen diplomats can be students, teachers, athletes, artists, business people, humanitarians, adventurers, or tourists. They are motivated by a responsibility to engage with the rest of the world in a meaningful, mutually beneficial dialogue (U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy, 2007). This hits close to home in international education. For example, neither an international student nor an international faculty member will ever forget the kindness shown by an international educator who takes the time to visit their sick child in the hospital. Does this seem like a small thing? Hardly. In the context of international education, kindness and professional courtesy shown to foreign nationals has far-reaching impact related to the future interactions of their home countries and the United States. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell has written,

People-to-people diplomacy, created through international education and exchanges, is critical to our national interests. Americans who study abroad expand their global perspective and become more internationally engaged. Foreign students
and individuals who participate in citizen exchanges return home with a greater knowledge of our democratic institutions, and America's enduring value (Powell, 2003, p. 1).

Citizen diplomacy in action leads to ties of understanding and even affection which resonate far beyond the individuals, out into the community, the nation, and the world. There is more goodness of fit here, in that servant leaders model compassionate behavior and the value of citizen diplomacy to their workers/followers, and therefore to their foreign clients. Moreover, servant leaders work to instill this behavior in their workers/followers via mentoring. During an era when Americans are often poorly viewed and mistrusted by neighbors abroad, the pursuits of authenticity, integrity, and stability of character in international educators could hardly have more importance, and as we have seen, these pursuits are common attributes of the servant leadership model.

V. Challenges and Opportunities

People don't change much.
Don't waste your time trying to put in what was left out.
Try to draw out what was left in.
That is hard enough.
(Buckingham & Coffman, 1999, p.57)

I once had the opportunity to discuss the concept of servant leadership with an older graduate student from Saudi Arabia who was studying for the doctorate in educational media. He very politely listened and occasionally nodded as I reviewed the basic elements of this leadership style. When I paused to give him a chance to air his thoughts, he did not respond at once. After a moment, he said, "I will never be what you call a Servant Leader. A servant is a person who shines my shoes." This illustrates succinctly that there can be strong cultural biases associated with servant leadership. The very word, servant, often comes with a great deal of baggage. The definition itself takes up nearly a full page in the Oxford English Dictionary, and is replete with various etymologies which would link the word to feudalism; to indentured servitude answerable to a master or mistress, and to slavery. It is no small thing that many of the word’s connotations are fundamentally negative. This negativity can be ameliorated, however, and so a few examples bear mentioning regarding servant leadership and cultural perception:

Almost all of the current literature on servant leadership stems from a cultural understanding of "servant" which is strongly Western. In this cultural
context, the servant can be seen as a strongly positive attribute to the leadership of society, as in the “public servant” or more broadly, a person in service to society and the common good. Martin Luther King, Jr. can be seen as an essential example in this regard.

However, even in Western culture, “servant” can be perceived negatively by women and minorities who have struggled for enhanced societal status and against subservient roles over a long period of time and against great resistance.

A cultural and perceptual paradox is present whenever servant leadership is practiced. This stems from deeply rooted human beliefs in command-and-control, even in light of direct evidence that such leadership is outmoded, isolating, and “insular” in modern organizations. Barbara Kellerman writes,

Insular leaders establish boundaries between themselves and their followers on one side, and everyone else on the other. To insular leaders, human rights in general are less important than the rights, and even the needs and wants, of their specific constituencies. To a degree this is simply human nature. My group - my family, my tribe, my country - competes with your group for scarce resources, and it comes first in every other way as well. Still, leaders could decide differently. They could decide to promote inter-group relations characterized by collaboration and cooperation rather than by competition and conflict. In today’s small world, the idea of what constitutes the common good is different from what it was before. It is more inclusive. No longer can we make a distinction between self-interest and the common interest (2004, pp. 169-170).

Nonetheless, questions lurk. A king, general, chief executive officer, or university administrator as servant? How can this be, when the very name of servant leadership seems to be an oxymoron; when the two words impact each other like matter and anti-matter, when command-and-control connotes strength, and servant leadership implies weakness? In a response that typifies the literature, James Autry writes that “servant leaders embrace paradox; they know they have to be nurturing and caring and supportive to the greatest extent possible, and they have to get the work done (2001, p.128).

Furthermore, it is important to be aware that this culturally western understanding can come into direct conflict with that of other cultures who conceive of the servant in a demeaning or negative way. In fact, most cultures (to some degree, even our own) include such biases which run the gamut from the “untouchables” in the old Indian caste system, to uneducated cadre from the
countryside in China, to homeless squeegee workers in an American metropolis, to a child permanently bound to family not her own in Haiti; to a trans-gendered teenager trapped in sex slavery in Thailand, to a shoe-shiner in Saudi Arabia.

Nonetheless, the concept of a leader who serves in modesty and humility (attributes often associated with the servant) is not without precedence around the world. For example, one need only recall the young Siddhartha Gautama, subsequently referred to as the Buddha or Enlightened One, or Francesco Bernardone (later St. Francis of Assisi, in imitation of the servant king as described in Isaiah and the Synoptic Gospels), both of whom were from wealthy families and born into leadership roles, but both of whom attained their greatest leadership triumphs as servants of the common good. In the 20th century, the quintessential servant leaders would include the Mahatma Gandhi, humbling himself in the midst of his greatest leadership success in India, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, the revered American civil rights leader and Baptist minister, and Mother Teresa, amid the dead and dying of Calcutta.

Therefore, it is important to be diligent and aware of the sensitivity which can exist in a word, and to make sure that appropriate explanations and definitions are given to the team regarding the nature of servant leadership. Also, proper processing time is very wise regarding any concern that the team might have toward this new leadership model. This may mean that the servant leader will need to work hard to help the team understand its new identity as servants for the common good. As Margaret Wheatley points out,

People need to be connected to the fundamental identity of the organization or community. Who are we? Who do we aspire to become? And people need to be connected to new information. What else do we need to know? Where is this information to be found? And people need to be able to reach past traditional boundaries and develop relationships with people anywhere in the system (1999, p. 146).

The servant leader answers these questions with a new, and positive definition of the word servant: the professional who serves the community for the common good, who builds relationships with the community and within the team, and who is willing to embrace the paradox that the most effective leaders are those who serve. This must be clearly communicated to avoid cultural misunderstanding. Servant leadership has powerful resonance in the business of international education, and can be a key tool related to successful leadership in the field. The leader must, in all cases, carefully define the context and the tool.
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