

## A Personal Reflection on Servant Leadership, Teaching and Society

By Bob Thomas

My personal journey with Servant Leadership began about ten years ago while I was writing a paper for a course in higher education leadership. My initial interest was to understand how leadership philosophies from the corporate community could be utilized within higher education. I learn that too often academia learned the wrong lessons from businesses, focusing on how to develop a customer mentality, TQM, and measuring the 'bottom line'. They missed the important lessons business has to offer. I found many businesses that operated with a philosophy that valued their employees, their customers, their stockholders, and all others that were deemed to be constituents. These business leaders believed that their organizations should be places of human enhancement, not just human employment. They listened and were responsive to the needs of their customers. They were profitable to ALL of their stakeholders, not just the stockholders. Examples of this breed of business leader included Max Dupree, CEO of the Herman Miller Company and Tom Chappel, the founder and CEO of Tom's of Maine. These companies were not only identified as some of the best places to work in America, but also were industry leaders in terms of profits and sales growth.

I discovered that these companies had been influenced by the writings of Robert Greenleaf and his philosophy of Servant Leadership. Greenleaf stated that the greatest leader was one that best served the needs of those entrusted to his or her care. He developed his theory based on experiences during his career as Director of Management Research for AT&T and as a consultant and teacher of leadership development. Greenleaf was primarily concerned with the organization and how it was led. He found that organizations that had leaders sincerely interested in serving others were the most effective. Robert Greenleaf also was concerned about society. He believed that the key to creating the society that we desire rests on transforming our institutions (businesses, churches, universities, governments, and foundations) into organizations that served the needs of those entrusted to their care. To accomplish this goal our institutions must embrace the philosophy of Servant Leadership.

As I continued on the path of Servant Leadership, I discovered that adopting the principles of Servant Leadership was not just for those who held power by virtue of their position. Often we look at leadership in terms of gaining power or enhancing our power base. Servant Leadership teaches us that each of us has power, and that the question that we must constantly ask ourselves is; How are we using our power. Are we serving ourselves, our needs and wants, or do we serve those entrusted to our care? Do we use our power to force others to follow our desires, or do we use our power to build influence? Using power to force others to do our will destroys relationships. We develop influence with others by seeking to serve their needs, by valuing their gifts and abilities. One of the critical ingredients is to understand that most people know when we are sincerely interested in serving them, versus pretending to serve their needs for the purpose of enhancing our own power. Thus Servant Leadership must come from the heart, from a deep desire to serve others.

Often I am asked what one needs to do to be a Servant Leader. I don't know of a "to do" list because the path towards Servant Leadership is a personal journey. It is a process of becoming rather than doing. Becoming a Servant Leader means changing how we view the world, our role in society and our relationship with others. The best test of how we judge our actions was developed by Robert Greenleaf: Do those being served (led) grow as individuals; do they become wiser, healthier, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become Servant Leaders? And if we are serving (leading) an organization the question to be answered is; Do our actions enhance the organization's capacity to serve its constituents? Notice that the emphasis is on the results of our actions. Greenleaf asks us to judge our impact based on helping others grow and enhancing the capacity of organizations to serve. Servant Leadership is a philosophy that measures results rather than activity.

### Servant Leadership and Teaching

Teaching is filled with opportunities to serve both individuals and society. The primary relationship is between the teacher and the student. However, external mandates, evaluations, committee meetings, research projects, and other academic pressures often divert our attention from our role of influencing the lives of the students in the classroom. Our influence goes beyond our lectures and teaching activities. Students can be shaped by our behavior towards them, towards other students and towards our colleagues. They are all too aware of the inconsistencies between what we teach and our actions both in and outside of the classroom. They sense if they are valued and if we are sincere about contributing to their personal growth.

In his book *Education as Judgement: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, Roland Christensen discusses the lessons he has learned during forty years of teaching at the Harvard Business School. These lessons focus on the personal relationship between the teacher and the student, the need to exhibit patience, and the concept of faith in the unlimited potential of every person. He believes that "the teacher's challenge in evaluating students is not to separate the gifted from the ordinary, but to find the gifts of the ordinary." For Christensen, teaching is a human endeavor that requires that we build community in the classroom.

Higher education has historically concentrated on developing citizens and the leaders of society. As we have moved more towards providing students with the skills and credentials for employment, we often overlook our role as servants to society. Education is a service to society. As Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." As our world becomes interconnected, our issues more complex, when our policies and actions are driven by public opinion polls, our role as servants of society becomes critical. When we help students grow in knowledge, understanding, and critical thinking, we serve not only our fellow global citizens but also those of future generations.

Imagine a world in which individuals who reflect the principles of Servant Leadership lead our institutions. Visualize a community that is filled with citizens seeking to become Servant Leaders. Dream of families where children are raised in an environment of Servant Leadership. I believe that these goals are achievable if each of us strives to reflect Servant Leadership in our actions and behavior. Vaclav Havel, The President of the Czech Republic, once said “We cannot save the world, but we can contribute to its salvation.” For me, Servant Leadership is a way to guide our actions and behavior so that we can make such a contribution.

*The Servant as Leader*, Robert K. Greenleaf, The Greenleaf Center, 1991.

*Education as Judgement: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, 1991.

*The Art Of The Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice*, Vaclav Havel, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.