

Motivated to serve and then lead.

ON BECOMING A SERVANT LEADER

Seven myths and seven paradoxes of Christian leadership.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IS a paradoxical concept that is as old as Lao Tzu and Jesus and as new as Dorothy Day and Desmond Tutu. In a world desperately in need of new leaders and fresh models of leadership, now is a good time to examine the myths and paradoxes of what Christians mean by “servant leadership.”

The key to unleashing transformative social change is developing leaders who will transform systems. Leaders transform themselves, people around them, organizations they lead, and, ultimately, communities they serve. Servant leaders foster servant churches, which become change agents for their neighborhoods and beyond.

Servant leadership may seem paradoxical to some, but that is precisely what we would expect from a leadership style modeled by Jesus. When management educator Robert Greenleaf coined the phrase in the 1970s, he intentionally selected a paradoxical term because it epitomized the paradoxical nature of the teachings and example of Jesus, who used parables to teach wisdom and who demonstrated the ultimate irony with his life and resurrection. Unfortunately, some self-proclaimed proponents of servant leadership now are equating it with everything from visionary leadership to effective time management.

Servant leaders are motivated first to serve and then to lead. The servant leader wants to serve rather than be served (Mark 10:45). The servant leader is more interested in giving than receiving (Matthew 5:40-42). The servant leader is a steward who wants to give back to God, family, and community.

Non-servant leaders, on the other hand, or “pedestal leaders,” tend to command people and control what they do. These leaders have little interest in listening to the needs, interests, or ideas of others. They might call themselves “public servants,” but they act as if they

are interested in serving only themselves. They lack the humility to understand that leaders need people as much as people need leaders.

The paradoxical nature of servant leadership can be viewed through the beatitudes. After Jesus assembled his disciples, his leaders-in-training, he delivered his Sermon on the Mount, which included his philosophy of leadership. The eight beatitudes are particularly instructive for leaders: They are to be humble and meek, sorrowful for their shortcomings, passionate about social justice, merciful, compassionate, pure of heart, peaceful, and courageous in the face of adversity (Matthew 5:3-12).

In the same way that the beatitudes and parables of Jesus reveal a sense of paradox, servant leadership is full of paradox. Let’s look at seven myths and seven paradoxes of servant leadership.

1 MYTH: Servant leadership is soft. When business consultant and author Jim Collins was presenting the leadership style of his “good to great” companies, he wanted to describe them as servant leaders. But his research team convinced him that this term was too soft.

PARADOX: Servant leadership is neither hard nor soft. There is nothing soft about dealing with complex human interaction and organizational chaos. Once the servant decides to lead, all that we know about leadership comes into play. Servant leaders address adaptive challenges, resolve conflict collaboratively, enhance communication, invite people to participate, build synergistic teams, plan strategically, and develop the leadership potential in others. Each of these can take years of practice to hone the necessary skills.

On the other hand, the concept of servant leadership is not hard to understand. Like Jesus, the servant leader nurtures a kind and gentle heart that guides decisions

and actions. Servant leaders put the welfare of others ahead of their own (Matthew 7:12).

2 MYTH: Servant leaders cannot hold positions of authority. Powerful positions are often pursued through personal connections, political deals, or family heritage instead of personal character, people skills, and clarity of vision.

PARADOX: Servant leadership is not a position, but people in positions can be servant leaders. Servant leadership is relational, not positional. It can emerge from anyone, anywhere. The servant leader is interested in coaching, mentoring, facilitating, and developing members into leaders.

Servant leaders ask people to make sacrifices that are countercultural, and thus begin to change the culture.

This can be done with or without a position of authority. Surprisingly, servant leaders rotate between the roles of leadership, management, and followership.

Leadership is about serving people as Jesus did. Leaders are appointed to serve, not to rule. Leadership can emerge from anyone who is driven by a sense of mission and a commitment to serve the group. While the positional leaders of Jesus' time "lord[ed] it over them," he asserted to his disciples: "Not so with you" (Mark 10:35-45).

3 MYTH: Servant leaders convince people to follow their vision of the future. When leaders are appointed to a new position, people expect their leader to articulate a vision for them.

PARADOX: Servant leaders create a sense of shared vision with the people they lead. The servant leaders and the people are co-creators and co-owners of that vision. This involves a multi-directional process that is primarily about listening, not speaking. The paradox of listening is that people who listen well can be very persuasive.

The essence of leadership is influence, change, and vision. Servant leaders influence people by effecting a change of heart, mind, spirit, and action. They transform organizations and communities by changing policies, structures, strategies, and culture. They facilitate a process whereby the group creates its own vision, or direction, based on the mission.

4 MYTH: Servant leaders are selfless. Some people believe that in order to truly serve others, a person

must reject self-interest so he or she can overcome selfishness.

PARADOX: The servant leader is humble, not selfless. Humility is not selflessness. It is a healthy middle space between selfishness and selflessness. Servant leaders need to be assertive about their own needs and interests while also cooperative about the needs and interests of others.

For example, when in conflict, the person who cannot express her or his own self-interest does not give the opportunity to the other party in the conflict to collaborate on those interests. Servant leadership is about being very aware of, concerned about, and collaborative on the interests of others. However,

that is not the same as having no interests at all or being selfless.

5 MYTH: Servant leaders do not get great results. Business or organization leaders can be devoted Christians who want to lead like Jesus. But as they talk about this in the workplace, they are told it would not work in the "real world."

PARADOX: Servant leaders are ambitious, but direct their ambition toward the mission, not themselves. When Jesus' 12 leadership trainees were arguing about who was the greatest among them, or when James and John asked to be on his right and his left, Jesus did not admonish his disciples for striving for greatness (Mark 9:33-35, 10:35-45). But he reminded them that leadership is not about being the most important or sitting on a pedestal, as the religious and political leaders did in the time of Jesus (Luke 22:24-27).

When the leader is intrinsically motivated by the mission, vision, and values of the organization, and by interests that are not self-serving, then others become intrinsically motivated as well. Research shows that intrinsically motivated workers get great results. The giving and serving nature of the servant leader inspires others to give freely, to serve each other, and eventually to emerge as leaders themselves. Servant leaders ask people to make sacrifices that are countercultural, and thus begin to change the culture.

6 MYTH: Servant leaders are powerless. Unbridled power is seen as an evil. Earthly power was one of the temptations of Christ in the desert. According to Lord Acton, power corrupts

and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

PARADOX: Servant leaders gain power as they serve others. Servant leadership presents many adaptive challenges that are viewed as false dichotomies, such as, for example, service vs. power, purpose vs. profit, or mission vs. money. The servant leader expands and extends the power generated by leadership by increasing service for, by, and of the people.

Power is the ability to act, a means of accomplishing a mission. For the servant leader, power is a means to generate more service for the benefit of all. Power is not an end unto itself for the leader. Power is freely given and shared instead of taken and, counterintuitively, it grows exponentially. People are thus empowered to play their roles and to do their jobs more successfully.

7 MYTH: Servant leaders "do unto others what they would have others do unto them." The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) is familiar to virtually every religious tradition and is synonymous with care and compassion for others.

PARADOX: Servant leaders practice both the "Iron Rule" and the "Golden Rule." The Golden Rule may work with strangers. But in an organizational setting, the leader listens to others and takes their needs, interests, and values into consideration before making decisions. For example, a reward that one leader might find motivating may not be the same reward that motivates another person.

Given the relational nature of leadership, the Golden Rule should be tempered by the Iron Rule, which suggests that the leader does not "do unto others" what they can do for themselves. Servant leaders delegate responsibilities to others, which includes providing support and feedback. They give credit to God and to the people they work with, rather than being the Teflon leader who deflects the blame and grabs all the credit.

The best test of servant leadership is whether the followers become servant leaders themselves—willing to make sacrifices, wanting to give back, and devoted to serving each other and their communities. For the servant leader, it is not about how many followers you lead, but how many leaders you develop. ■

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