

# Servant Leadership

An Ideal for  
Nonprofit  
Organizations



Do you have what it takes to be a servant-leader? Where's the best place to begin?

By Archie B. Carroll

**S**ervant leadership is an increasingly popular management model. Can these two roles — servant and leader — be fused in one person — a nonprofit manager? Let's take a closer look.

## Who Is the Servant-Leader?

Servant leadership is based on the idea of serving others — clients, employees, customers, or the community — as the first priority. The modern era of servant leadership is marked by the works of Robert K. Greenleaf, known as

**“One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears.”**

the father of this movement.

According to Greenleaf, servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.” Next, a conscious choice brings one to “aspire to lead.” The model manifests itself in the leader's care to make sure that others' needs are served.

Leaders have two responsibilities: “concern for tasks” and “concern for people.” Servant — leaders are more centered on people than tasks.

In his 1977 book, *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf credits Jesus of Nazareth for teaching the importance of leaders having a servant's heart. Jesus said that “anyone wanting to be a leader among you must be your servant.”

Though inspired by the teachings and life of Jesus, Greenleaf crystallized his idea of servant

leadership after reading Hermann Hesse's short novel *Journey to the East* (1956). In Hesse's story, a group takes a mythical journey. The central figure, Leo, accompanies the party as the "servant" who does the menial chores, but who also sustains the group with his spirit and song. Leo is a person with astonishing presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and their journey is abandoned. They can't make it without their servant, Leo.

The story's narrator, one of the party, finds Leo after some years of wandering. The narrator is taken into the Order that sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known as "servant," was in reality the ostensible head of the Order, its guiding spirit — a great and noble "leader." The point Greenleaf took from this story was that great leaders are seen as servants first, and this is the key to their greatness. Leo was actually the leader all the time, but he was servant first because that was his deep internal character.

The servant-leader begins by wanting to serve and then comes forward with the desire to lead. This kind of person is distinctively different from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of a desire for power or money. Of course, the servant-first and the leader-first are two extreme types, and there are a number of shadings between these two models. However, they define a useful range for thinking about leadership.

### What Are the Keys to Servant Leadership?

It's one thing to speak of the aspiration to serve others. But how does this translate into practice? What characteristics should a non-profit manager, board member, or volunteer display to be a servant-leader?

Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, has deliberated on Greenleaf's writings and culled 10 characteristics that are essential for servant-leaders:

## Servant-leaders are more centered on people than tasks.

**1. Listening:** Though leaders traditionally have been known for their decision-making and communication skills, they must also focus on careful listening to understand people. As the late Dean Rusk, former Secretary of State, once observed, "One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears — by listening to them."

**2. Empathy:** According to Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, empathy is the ability to understand people's emotional makeup. Effective leaders are empathetic, always seeking to relate to others.

**3. Healing:** Servant-leaders understand the part they play in transforming and regenerating

organizations. Often this places them in the role of healer to people, groups, and organizations.

**4. Persuasion:** Servant-leaders rely on convincing rather than coercing people to accomplish things.

**5. Awareness:** Servant-leaders are keenly aware of what's going on with people. Awareness of others begins with self-awareness. Goleman holds that the hallmarks of self-awareness are self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, and a self-deprecating sense of humor.

**6. Foresight:** Their ability to anticipate outcomes helps servant-leaders understand experiences from the past, assess the present, and look into the future to foresee the likely results of a decision. Leaders with this characteristic are perceptive, anticipative, and proactive.

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## Servant-leaders rely on convincing rather than coercing people.

**7. Conceptualization:** Servant-leaders see the larger picture. They think beyond the moment and see interrelationships among parts. This skill is what enables leaders to engage in strategic thinking. As you move up in the organization, conceptual skills become more important while technical skills become less so.

**8. Commitment to Growth:** Servant-leaders are nurturing. They believe people have an immense capacity for learning and growing. They're committed to the personal, spiritual, and professional growth of those within their sphere of influence. Confirming the importance of growth, James Baillie once noted that "to grow and know what one is growing towards" is an important source of strength and confidence in life.

**9. Stewardship:** Everyone is responsible for being a good steward within an organization, according to Greenleaf. Those who exercise stewardship hold their organizations in trust for the greater good of society. Peter Block, author of *Stewardship: Putting Service Ahead of Self-Interest* reasons that the word "stewardship" should replace "leadership" because it focuses on the next generation and unbuckles us from the language of control and compliance embedded in some definitions of leadership.

**10. Focus on Community:** Building community is an important task of servant-leaders. Developing an organizational culture built on joint interest is vital.

### How Can You Apply Servant Leadership?

Spears identifies six areas in which you can practice servant leadership:

#### 1. Adopt servant leadership

as part of your organization's philosophy. Let the idea of the leader as servant undergird your organization's mission and vision.

**2. Incorporate servant leadership into board education.** Many of Greenleaf's writings focus on the roles of nonprofit boards. His essay, "Trustees as Servants," encourages board members to ask themselves two penetrating questions: "Whom do you serve?" and "For what purpose?" These are key questions driving any organization's sense of mission and strategy.

**3. Integrate servant-leadership concepts into community leadership organizations.** The Center for Servant Leadership in Columbus, Georgia, for example, is creating a community that serves others. It does so through three programs: Servant-Leadership Development, which sponsors retreats, conferences, and training events; Hands on Columbus, which facilitates, coordinates, and evaluates civic involvement and community services; and Asset Builders of Columbus, a group of servant-leaders committed to helping young people build successful futures.

## "Stewardship" should replace "leadership."

**4. Use servant leadership in experiential education or "learning by doing."** Increasingly, educators are writing about the links between the servant-leader concept and experiential learning under a concept called "service learning." (See Bowman in "References".)

**5. Offer servant leadership courses as part of management education and training.** Many books, articles, films, and other resources have been developed for this use. A symposium on servant learning is held every year in Indianapolis.

**6. Apply servant-leadership concepts in personal-growth programs.** Servant leadership is tied to the ideas of M. Scott Peck, Ann McGee-Cooper, and others concerned with the growth of human spirit and potential. As individuals

seek to get in touch with themselves and with God, servant-leadership ideas become a useful theme for spirituality in the workplace. In this connection, Greenleaf argued that your task as a servant-leader is to withdraw and orient yourself, sort out the more important from the less important, and "attend to the more important." Can there be a better way to summarize the excellent fit between servant leadership and the challenges of the nonprofit manager? ■

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