



Edited by

Luk Bouckaert · Steven C. van den Heuvel

**Servant Leadership,
Social
Entrepreneurship
and the Will to Serve**
Spiritual Foundations
and Business
Applications

palgrave
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Preface

Servant Leadership, Social Entrepreneurship and the Will to Serve publishes a selection of peer-reviewed papers presented during the international academic conference on this theme, which took place in Leuven, Belgium, from May 26–28, 2018. This conference was co-organized by the European SPES Institute, the Institute for Leadership and Social Ethics (a research institute of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (ETF), Leuven) and the Damien Center, also situated in Leuven.

The idea to organize an international conference on this theme originated in the Damien Center in Leuven, which is dedicated to preserving the memory, as well as the spiritual legacy, of Father Damien. Father Damien is well known for his exceptional humanitarian work amongst the lepers in Molokai, work which took his life, as he himself got infected with leprosy. His life's work gained him international fame; he has been elected in Belgium (where he is from originally) as its greatest citizen and the Catholic Church canonized him as a saint person. Also, he has a statue in the US Capitol in Washington D.C., where he represents the State of Hawaii. Justified as these honors may be, they run the risk of mythologizing him as a person and to lose sight of what he really did. Damien is an example of a spiritual-driven social entrepreneur and servant leader who transformed a hopeless human settlement of lepers into a caring human community. Reflecting on his life, we asked the question

if we can induce from his example—as well as from many other examples of servant leadership and social entrepreneurship—a general model of entrepreneurship that can inspire people in profit, non-profit and public organizations.

Many are convinced that while “the will to serve” is praised in moral and religious contexts, it is crowded out in the real economic arena of hard competition and in the consumer’s space of ego-centric happiness. Economic theory assumes as one of its basic postulates that people always try to get a maximum of personal gain and profit from their activities (be it in terms of happiness, utility, social recognition or money). So, does the will to serve really exist or is it only a façade to hide ego-centric motivations, a mask to disguise the underlying will of power and self-interest? Or, rather, is it indeed possible to unveil a deeper spiritual resource that inspires the will to serve and frees it from egocentrism? The belief that such a spiritual resource exists in the field of economics and has to be considered as a necessary condition to transform economics into a collaborative, sustainable and social activity is a shared conviction of all the contributors to this volume. Although most of the contributions are inspired by Christian and Western philosophies, some interesting chapters explore Buddhist and Eastern spiritual resources of servant leadership and social entrepreneurship.

Servant leadership is a concept that not only concentrates on the social outcome of entrepreneurial activities but primarily on its inner motivation: serving first. Following servant leaders in their self-transformation helps us to solve the riddle of self-interest. During the process of serving, the ego-self of the servant leader is transformed into a truly relational self which gets its meaning and mission from the other. Listening to the other as the prime mover of interaction means becoming responsible *to* and *for* the other. Without this spiritual change, we will never understand why people are able to sacrifice themselves in serving others. But there is also a dark side to this inner transformation into servant leadership. It can be misused by leaders and lead to the complete loss of the personal will of followers. It can result in a slave morality. Therefore, servant leaders need discernment and self-reflection in order to be free from manipulation and illusions.

This volume consists of three parts. The *first part* of the book, entitled “Philosophical and Spiritual Foundations,” focuses on the concept “the will to serve” as such. The chapters in this part explore various dimensions. One of the criticisms of Greenleaf’s original model of servant leadership is its overemphasizing of altruism and its relative neglect of the problem of evil and destruction. To overcome the problem, we need to reflect on *whom* and *what* we are serving. Simone Weil makes a distinction between serving the Beast and serving God, and yet another chapter addresses the alternative developed by Albert Schweitzer between an over-formalistic Kantian ethic of obligation on the one hand, and a naturalistic, ethical vitalism on the other hand. Most of the authors underline the need for a broader concept of servant leadership that includes social justice and fairness on the one hand and self-love and self-reflection on the other hand.

The *second part*, entitled “Social Entrepreneurship: Serving the Common Good,” focuses on social entrepreneurship and hence on the social dimension of servant leadership. Social entrepreneurship and servant leadership are overlapping concepts. While the former is related to a specific form of entrepreneurship that prioritizes social outcome over profit-making, the latter stresses at the same time the underlying motivations of compassion, humility and selflessness. Serving the common good is what both concepts have in common and what we analyze in this part.

The *third part*, entitled “Servant Leadership in the Context of Business,” deals with problems and examples of servant leaders in the context of business and market economics. Here, the leading question is how to implement servant leadership in a competitive market environment. Rather than abstract models, this part focuses on concrete cases of entrepreneurs trying to combine profit and eco-social wellbeing, even if both motives do not always coincide. Servant leadership is based on a management agenda that changes processes and people by listening instead of controlling, by caring instead of dominating, by sharing hope instead of empowering “angst.” Serving means at the end creating a collaborative community committed to the shared purpose of a profit-making service that enhances the wellbeing of people.

Can we induce from all this a general model of servant and social entrepreneurship that can guide people in profit, non-profit and public organizations? It depends on what we mean by “model.” Those searching for a new algorithmic model that reconstructs entrepreneurial behavior

in a predictable and reproductive way will be disappointed. But those who understand “model” as an inspiring *example* will find in this book a lot of enriching *stories* that can stimulate deep inner motivation, contextual realism and a sense of creative imagination. As Albert Schweitzer said: “The example is not only the most important factor to teach something, it is the only factor. My life is my argument.”

As editors, we want to thank the European SPES Institute, the Institute of Leadership and Social Ethics (ILSE), the Damien Center and the Norwegian Business School (Bergen, Norway) for their financial, logistic and moral support. We like to especially mention Cees Tulp (ILSE) and Ruben Boon (Damien Center). We want to give special thanks to Prof. Dr. Laszlo Zsolnai and Jessica Harrison for their helpful guidance during the whole editing process. Yet this book is primarily the fruit of an enduring effort and commitment from all the contributors—and by “contributors,” we do not only mean the authors of the chapters but the *readers* as well. A book without readers is like a house without residents. Readers make this book what it really should be: a challenging reflection in a non-ending process of dialogue and further research.

We dedicate this book to Prof. Dr. Rita Ghesquiere who was actively engaged in the preparation of this conference but unexpectedly passed away on March 12, 2018. She was a very charming, intellectually inspiring and serving member of the European SPES Institute.

Leuven, Belgium
Leuven, Belgium

Luk Bouckaert
Steven C. van den Heuvel

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Part I

Philosophical and Spiritual Foundations



1

The Will to Serve: An Anthropological and Spiritual Foundation for Leadership

Patrick Nullens

1.1 Introduction

The will to serve is the “rock on which a good society is built” (Greenleaf 2002, p. 62), according to Robert K. Greenleaf (1904–1990), founder of the Servant-Leadership (SL) model.¹ Service precedes leadership, and what we urgently need are servant leaders in serving institutions. This “serving first” is a radical moral position, a powerful paradox which needs to penetrate different leadership roles, styles, and cultural contexts. In this sense, SL functions as a metatheory at best, or a moral corrective for other leadership models at worst.² I position myself in the latter group,

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² It has, for example, become a corrective on the organizational focus of transformational leadership. See Stone et al. (2004).

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considering SL to be a moral corrective while not excluding the wisdom of other leadership models. Good leadership is moral leadership (Ciulla 2003; Johnson 2009) and nowadays there are quite a few valid models of moral leadership of which SL is one.³ Like every other model, SL is not gospel and has its limitations,⁴ yet its daring prioritization of “the will to serve” is inspiring. This applies particularly to the present, in light of the way in which our leaders are selected and the way that institutions operate in a highly competitive market. SL is like a prophetic voice, a word of wisdom that needs to be heard.

From the outset, Greenleaf positioned his views more in the area of practical wisdom than in the domain of scholarship. SL is the result of a unique interaction between deep thinking and practical experience on the work floor. These are different approaches, and a subtle interaction between the two turned out to be fruitful. But, ultimately, his views are based on a long and broad international experience, watching and talking to able practitioners, rather than engaging with academia (Greenleaf 2002, pp. 15–17). This has to be borne in mind when reading and evaluating the ideas expressed in his book on SL that has the telling subtitle: *A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness*. It is a journey, a search for the essence of power that is morally legitimate and great or good.⁵

This essay is a conceptual reflection on the primacy of the “will to serve.” I will engage with this theme as a theological ethicist from an evangelical Protestant tradition. For this critical engagement, I use a dialogical method called “eristic theology” by the German theologian Emil

³Appreciation is also due to transformational leadership, authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, and responsible leadership theories where many elements of SL can and should be integrated. For an overview, see Northouse (2018).

⁴To raise just a few critical questions: What is the exact meaning of serving? Are we serving mainly employees or all stakeholders, and how does this conflict? What about the interests of the organization or institution itself? Is it not the case that detachment from employees is needed when making complex decisions? Even if altruism is human and important, is it the only true motive for leading? Is SL not too utopic in a highly competitive market? Does SL have sufficient empirical support? See again Stone et al. (2004).

⁵Greenleaf’s classic work is a collection of lectures and articles given over more than 20 years, often repeating the same ideas with different applications in different contexts. His seminal essay on SL was published in 1970, six years after retirement. In 1964, Greenleaf founded the Center for Applied Ethics that later became the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. See <https://www.greenleaf.org>.

Brunner (1889–1966). The term *eristic* derives from the Greek *erizein*, which means “to wrangle,” “to debate,” or “to agree and disagree.” In this method, theological anthropology forms the main point of connection, or starting point [Anknüpfungspunkt] (Brunner 1981, pp. 171–193).⁶

The outline of my argument is the following. First, I give a short introduction to the foundations of SL according to Greenleaf. Second, I point out that the willingness to serve as an indispensable qualification to lead is a valid theological position. Third, after having set this basic framework, I will engage from the perspective of theological anthropology whereby I expose SL’s overconfidence in altruism. Finally, I address the spiritual dimension of SL, yet largely neglected by later more evidence based SL models.

1.2 “Serving First,” the Key to Greatness

Servant Leadership: Practical Wisdom and a Journey

During his earlier studies as an engineer, Greenleaf had become interested in larger institutions and their potential to become forces for the common good. He believed that this much-needed ethical change could only happen through the way in which these institutions were led (Greenleaf 2002, p. 16). This is partly why Greenleaf opted to work in a large business context, since companies were at the frontier of society. For 40 years he worked at AT&T, at the time the world’s largest telephone and cable television company. When he joined the company in the 1920s, more people were employed by AT&T than by any other business in the world: more than a million people (Greenleaf 2002, p. 16). It is noteworthy that the origins of the SL movement are in commercial business and not, as one might expect, in the softer nonprofit sector.

The inspiration and narrative paradigm of Greenleaf’s work was provided by Herman Hesse’s novel *Journey to the East* (1932) and its main character Leo. It is a story about a group called “the league,” which goes on a pilgrimage. Leo takes care of the luggage, cooks the meals, does the

⁶See further McGrath (2014, pp. 66–74).

cleaning, and serves in all kinds of practical ways. One day Leo disappears and, as a result, the group disperses and the pilgrimage becomes a failure. In desperation, the narrator, a member of the group, starts to look for Leo in the desert. When he finally finds him, he discovers that Leo is actually the leader of the mystical order that sponsored their pilgrimage. This humble servant was the guiding spirit, the noble leader of the whole enterprise. It is remarkable that through the device of a simple narrative a whole paradigm on leadership and authority emerges. The simple fact that the leader was at first a servant became the key to his greatness (Greenleaf 2002, p. 21).⁷

Serving First

SL can be categorized as an ethical leadership theory, which means that morality is not just an a posteriori corrective concept or a set of deontological boundaries but is central to leadership itself. SL is boldly altruistic, as it puts the needs of the follower(s) before the needs of the leader(s). It starts from a natural desire to serve and, only secondly, a conscious choice to lead. This order is crucial for the theory. SL is more an attitude or a lifestyle than a model. Servant leaders can be spotted by the fact that the people around them grow as persons and become servants themselves (Trompenaars and Voerman 2009). Terms such as civility, community, trust, and even love characterize the working relationship between leader and follower.

Greenleaf does not offer us all the characteristics of SL neatly in bullet point format. However, the ten attributes listed by Larry Spears (1998) are commonly used as a summary, even though they partially overlap sometimes: (1) listening, (2) empathy, (3) healing, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptualization, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship, (9)

⁷Greenleaf had a contrasting experience, seeing AT&T as a very hierarchical organization and noticing that its success was actually brought about by the loyalty of the employees whose job involved customer contact. It was then that Greenleaf realized that the central role of the AT&T leadership should be to provide support for their own employees, or to serve their employees much as Leo had done in his *Journey to the East*.

commitment to growth of people, and (10) building community. To these “humility” can be added, which is mentioned in other surveys.⁸

Greenleaf was as much interested in “followership” as in leadership. He complains that insufficient attention is given to the topic of followership in general education, and as a consequence, leadership is accorded to the wrong people. Another consequence of this lack of education is that “the outlook for better leadership in our leadership-poor society is not encouraging” (Greenleaf 2002, p. 18). What is actually needed is a culture shift. Yet, Greenleaf (2002, pp. 23–24) is hopeful and can observe a change:

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 as servants.*

The Legacy of SL

Greenleaf’s SL model has been around for almost 50 years and continues to be discussed in leadership textbooks as a valid model (Hackman and Johnson 2009; Northouse 2018), even though the empirical research is limited (Van Dierendonck 2011; Parris and Peachey 2013). This altruistic model has also earned its place as a respected management model within the world of corporate businesses and large organizations. An important reason for renowned companies such as Starbucks, Herman Miller, Service Master Company, Southwest Airlines, and AT&T choosing to implement many aspects of SL is that it delivers durable profits while creating a congenial workplace. The SL model is widely taught in colleges, business schools, and universities. SL is combined with many different aspects of leadership. For example, there is an important link

⁸ See, for example, Dennis and Bocarnea (2005); Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011); Van Dierendonck (2011).