

DANIEL WHEELER

Foreword by Kent Keith
CEO, Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership

SERVANT
LEADERSHIP
FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION



PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

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Published by Jossey-Bass
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One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wheeler, Daniel W., date.

Servant leadership for higher education : principles and practices / Daniel W.

Wheeler. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-00890-4 (hardback); 978-1-118-18136-2 (ebk);

978-1-118-18137-9 (ebk); 978-1-118-18138-6 (ebk)

1. Universities and colleges—Administration.
2. Educational leadership.
3. Servant leadership. I. Title.

LB2341.W464 2012

378.1'11—dc23

2011039778

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD

This book opens the door into an important field—the study and practice of servant leadership in higher education administration. It provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophy, principles, and practices of servant leadership that can make a positive difference in daily administrative work on campus. It is grounded in specific values and applied to real cases.

The book is timely because change is on us, and servant leadership offers a way to achieve the kind of thoughtful, positive change that addresses real needs. Institutions of higher education are complex and difficult to govern well. Typically, three groups have opportunities for leadership in governance and administration—the board, the faculty, and the administration. If each group focuses only on its own power and prerogatives, little good is likely to occur. If instead all three groups work together to identify and address the highest-priority needs of the institution and those it serves, then authentic and lasting progress is possible. Bold plans can be developed and implemented; dreams can be fulfilled.

No one knew this better than Robert K. Greenleaf, who launched the modern servant leadership movement in 1970 with the publication of his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*. The first edition of the essay was addressed to students, faculty members, staff, and board members in institutions of higher education. It was a result of the time he spent in the late sixties teaching and consulting on college campuses.

It is easy to imagine that Greenleaf's best test of the servant leader was shaped by his extensive experience on campus. He wrote "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser,

freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" This test is exceptionally relevant to the work of educators. We gather together in our campus communities to help each other learn and grow. We focus on the growth of students, of course, but to serve them well we also need to support the growth of faculty members, staff, and board members. Our effectiveness as leaders should be measured by that growth.

Servant leadership is being taught today in the classrooms of many colleges and universities throughout the country. A number of universities grant master's degrees in servant leadership. Scholarly articles are appearing in refereed journals, and more than a hundred master's and doctoral dissertations have addressed various aspects of servant leadership. At the same time, many universities have incorporated elements of servant leadership into their community service or service learning programs. Servant leadership is alive and well in the classroom and in activities programs.

It is time for servant leadership to make a difference in university governance and administration. We badly need leaders on our campuses who are committed to fundamental values, demonstrate the importance of high ethical standards, and have the courage to raise questions about purpose, direction, and the means to each end. We need servant leaders whose decisions are grounded in the highest-priority needs of those served, not the political preferences of individuals or groups jockeying for position. We need servant leaders who know that it is not about them, but rather it is about the future of the entire campus community.

That is why Dr. Wheeler's book is so welcome. It provides ideas that will help leaders to be effective servant leaders and stay centered on service, in the midst of a dramatically changing environment.



Kent M. Keith
Chief Executive Officer
Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership

PREFACE



In 2001, I accepted a new assignment as a professor of leadership studies and was looking for a research area to investigate. Because I was a part of the land grant tradition, I thought that servant leadership with its emphasis on service was an area to explore.

In my career as first a professional and organizational development consultant and then as a developing leadership scholar, I had heard about servant leadership but had found little research-based information to support it. There was a significant and passionate group of practitioners who claimed servant leadership was the best way to lead, but most of the claims were based on testimonials from business leaders and consultants who were working with servant-oriented organizations. There was little outside evaluation or tangible evidence to support the claims. An additional complication was that there was only one servant leadership instrument that offered an organizational assessment, not an individual one, and it had some psychometric problems.

I even attended one of the servant leadership conferences sponsored by the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership to try to gain a better picture of whether this was something we should explore in our leadership work at the university. In addition to hearing many testimonials and explanations of why servant leadership was better than other forms of leadership, my most memorable moment was a conversation, or perhaps better stated a witnessing, of a young man at a reception who exclaimed that he had found a philosophy that fit him—in short, he was a believer!

As I looked more closely at the literature in this area of study, very quickly it became apparent that servant leadership was not

taken seriously by leadership scholars and was not seen as a theory of leadership that could be tested. However, a quote by Peter Senge, management professor at MIT and well-known systems thinker, stuck in my mind:

I believe the book *Servant Leadership*, and in particular the essay, “The Servant as Leader,” which starts the book off, is the most singular and useful statement on leadership that I have read in the last 20 years. Despite a virtual tidal wave of books on leadership in the last few years, there is something different about Bob Greenleaf’s essay, something both simpler and more profound. This one essay penetrates to such a depth that it resonates in us, like the overtones of a Buddhist meditation gong, calling us to quiet. Rereading the essay I found myself stopped, repeatedly, by a single sentence or phrase. For many years, I simply told people not to waste their time reading all the other managerial leadership books. “If you are really serious about the deeper territory of true leadership,” I would say, “read Greenleaf.” (Senge, 1995, pp. 217–218)

At this point, my curiosity was raised, and I decided that servant leadership was an important concept and one well worth studying. With over forty years of experience, my sense was that higher education leadership was becoming more corporate (instituting many of the business practices, some of which made sense but some that didn’t fit). I was searching for a philosophy that would preserve the best of higher education and also incorporate appropriate business practices. When I speak of the best of higher education, I am referring to the sense of community based on learning and developing together, empowerment, embracing curiosity and innovation, and making society better. Servant leadership seemed to be a good match.

My colleague and I decided that one of the first requirements was to develop an instrument to measure servant leadership on an individual level so that it would be possible to compare studies that to this point were primarily descriptive and anecdotal. We went back to the writings of Robert Greenleaf, generally acknowledged to be the father of servant leadership, to describe the essential attributes he formulated. Our intent was to use his terms and meanings to develop a scale that would capture the essence of servant leadership. After extensive testing with a leadership panel of experts and field work with practitioners, we developed the Servant Leadership Questionnaire (SLQ). We developed a self-rating form as well as another rater version. It was published in 2006 and the requests for use, particularly in doctoral dissertations, have been immense. Since 2006 in the leadership literature, servant leadership has become well represented. Two other scales have been described—again representing an indication of the interest.

When I began my initial investigation of who was using servant leadership, I expected the best examples to be in nonprofits because it seemed as though the philosophy would most appropriately fit with their goals and approach to the world. However, to my surprise the most highly visible examples were in the business world—TD Industries (a mechanical construction company in the Fort Worth–Dallas area), Southwest Airlines, Synovus Financial Services, and Duncan Aviation. Many, like Synovus and Duncan, were family owned and provided not only high-quality customer service and employee empowerment but also extensive involvement in the community. For example, Duncan Aviation, whose employees are extensively involved in the Lincoln, Nebraska, community, only receives 4 percent of their business (high-end airplane refurbishing) from the Lincoln area. Yet they are committed to serving and making the community better through their employees' service. Many of these businesses have been committed to servant leadership for ten to fifteen years and are often identified as one of the one hundred best companies for people to work in.

As you are aware, businesses do not stay with any philosophy unless it benefits their bottom line. As the president of Duncan Aviation was quoted as saying, “If we take care of our employees, they’ll take care of the customers and we’ll make money” (Piersol, 2007).

The more I studied servant leadership, the more I thought it was a philosophy and way of leading that might fit with higher education. I began to ask questions about its use and effectiveness. Where are the institutions committed to servant leadership? Is the philosophy incorporated across whole institutions? Are there pockets of activity in particular segments of higher education? Is it even appropriate for higher education? Who are the visible servant leaders? What are the results from using the servant leadership approach? These questions were running through my mind when I decided to focus on a book to frame and describe what might be useful to those already using servant leadership and to those considering it.

There is still much more to know and explore. We would benefit from more case studies of higher education servant leaders and controlled studies of the results of the work of servant leaders. No doubt more will be available as studies using the SLQ are published and more comparison studies are completed. So far studies suggest servant leaders generate engagement, trust, hope, and employee satisfaction. From what we now know, it is clear that servant leadership has great promise for higher education with its emphasis on service, people, and the greater societal good.

Focus of the Book

The book is intended primarily for administrators at all levels of higher education. You’ll see examples from all levels of administration, including presidents, vice-chancellors, deans, and chairs. My hope is that whatever your position, the examples provide illustrations of important aspects of servant leadership that you can apply.

When I use the term *servant leadership* I am using Robert Greenleaf’s definition, which begins with the desire to serve and

sees leadership as a part of that service. Another way to think of servant leadership is to see service as a prerequisite to leading. Because I see servant organizations as full of leaders, both formal and informal, I tend to use the terms *associates* and *colleagues* more than *followers* to describe coworkers. The leadership I describe goes beyond the single leader with a group of followers. The focus is on empowering people to lead and follow depending on their assignments and skills. The central message I want to convey is that we are all on a critical mission to serve the highest-priority needs of those we serve—this book is about what it takes to accomplish this task.

What Supports the Book?

The book is based on my own research, interviews with ten servant leaders, the research of others, forty years of work in higher education institutions with a range of consulting experience within and outside the academy, three years as a department head, teaching undergraduate and graduate classes that involve servant leadership, site visits to private and nonprofit organizations that practice servant leadership, and supervising doctoral students involved in the research of servant leadership. This book combines experience, thought, and academic study to make the case for servant leadership in higher education. It is not intended to be comprehensive of all the research literature, although that literature does inform the principles and practices suggested.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized into fifteen chapters. The Introduction describes my attempt to find servant leaders in higher education and leaders to interview. Chapter One identifies a number of leadership styles that are commonplace in our institutions and makes the case for why they are not sustainable and require some different ways of

leading. In Chapter Two servant leadership is introduced by recognizing some cornerstones and research that illuminate its promise. Cornerstones include a call to serve, authenticity, humility, moral courage, and healing one's own emotional state. Chapter Three introduces ten principles that servant leaders can use as guidelines in their practice. The principles are based on values that provide a compass for leaders. Chapters Four through Thirteen focus on each of the ten principles and providing background, examples, and strategies. Chapter Fourteen suggests some ways that servant leaders can renew and take care of themselves. Chapter Fifteen addresses some myths about servant leadership that prevent some leaders from considering the practice. The Epilogue wraps up the book.

The chapters also end with three learning tools:

- **Points to Consider** highlight a number of the central points in the chapters.
- **Developmental Aspects to Explore** provide a number of questions to think about the ideas and principles presented.
- **Strategies to Develop** identify ways that are helpful in using the concepts and principles presented.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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In writing this book, I am indebted to many people, including my colleagues Jay Barbuto and Leverne Barrett, who originally encouraged me to investigate servant leadership. Again I am grateful to Jay for suggesting and collaborating on the development of a measure of servant leadership. To the many graduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication, who discussed and studied servant leadership, and the undergraduates in our leadership classes, who have studied many aspects of leadership—you have helped refine our work. To my longtime colleague Alan Seagren, who has been a partner in studies of department chairs for more than thirty years and who practices many of the principles of servant leadership, I am always learning something. To my many colleagues who have suggested possibilities, I do appreciate your thoughts and interest. To those in my workshops who have challenged my thinking about servant leadership, you have been most helpful.

I am indebted to Kent Keith, director of the Greenleaf Center, who helped identify servant leaders in higher education and encouraged me to pursue writing this book. To Kent Crookston, who allowed me to use some of his data from an extensive chair study, it made a difference in describing practice. To executive editor Sheryl Fullerton of Jossey-Bass, who encouraged me to write this book and who has put up with fits and starts, a thank-you is in order. To the many people at Jossey-Bass, particularly Megan Scribner and Joanne Clapp Fullagar, who played a role in developing and publishing this book, you have been most helpful.

To Cindy DeRyke, who has helped me immeasurably with the manuscript format and editing, thank you so much. To my wife, Diana, who has encouraged my devoting the time to the book, I appreciate your continuing love and support. To the various servant leaders who were willing to talk with me and provide examples of my suggested servant leadership principles, you have made a difference in the book and in the organizations where you work. For those who are acting like servant leaders and may not know it, thank you for making a difference in people's lives and the organizations that serve them. Finally, my thanks to my leadership colleagues, who continue to investigate servant leadership and provide further evidence that it can improve leadership in higher education.

Introduction

When I first began this book, I thought it would be an easy task to identify servant leaders in higher education. I was already familiar with a number of servant leaders in business and nonprofits so I thought there would be a parallel in higher education. I also thought I could contact a network of professionals (administrators and faculty members) from across the country who have years of experience in a range of institutions and are quite familiar with what is going on nationally—and just watch the names roll in.

After sending out my request to this network I was surprised that I received little response. Then gradually I began to hear that “I can’t think of anyone” or “you know the field better than I do” or “everyone in this business is a servant leader.” In short, it was a fishing trip with a few bites but almost no catches!

The thought crossed my mind that this must be a similar experience to what Jim Collins (2001b) described in his quest to find Level 5 leaders, those who moved their companies from good to great. In his search he heard about luck and contributions of others rather than a focus on the leader’s activities, which is described in the following passage:

The emphasis on luck turns out to be a part of a broader pattern that we have come to call “the window and mirror.” Level 5 leaders, inherently humble, look out the window to apportion credit—even undue credit—to factors outside themselves. If they can’t find a specific person or event to give credit to, they credit good luck. At the same time, they look in the mirror to assign responsibility, never citing bad luck or external factors when things go poorly. Conversely, the comparison executives [in their studies] frequently looked out the window for factors to blame but preened in the mirror to credit them when things went well. (pp. 34–35)

Returning to my search I continued to wonder why so few servant leaders were identified. Are they too humble to suggest they are servant leaders? Do they think they only represent certain aspects of servant leadership so they wouldn’t be as bold as to suggest they are one? Or a related aspect could be that they feel like a lone wolf with no others in the institution so it’s better not to make themselves highly profiled with a philosophy that is not well known and would be subject to intense scrutiny.

It did become apparent after talking with some of the leaders that they didn’t want to describe themselves as servant leaders. They gave a number of reasons for this: (1) they don’t understand the concept well enough and so are uncomfortable being described as a servant leader; (2) they don’t want to be put in any “leadership box” that may limit their flexibility (in their mind being a servant leader suggests you must respond in a particular manner or have a particular set of techniques); (3) these leaders tend to be eclectic, picking ideas and practices from whatever philosophy or theory fits their needs and personality; (4) they may have a sense that servant leadership is too religious or faith based; (5) they don’t like the term *servant*, which to them implies they are subservient (I have particularly heard that from people who felt oppressed in