

Key characteristics of **SERVANT LEADERS**

Empirical evidence is needed to verify whether servant leadership is applicable in the corporate world.



Mostafa Sayyadi

The concept of leadership highly manifested itself in ancient extended families that constructed clans as the central ingredient of cities such as Rome. The role of leadership was considerably centralized, and membership in the clans was highly demanding in order to be successful in the social institutions. Today, the question remains, can leaders be made or do they have to be born

leaders to be successful?

Before attempting to answer this question, let us agree that leaders can be made and that being a born leader may be an additional attribute of leadership. In an attempt to make leaders effective, various leadership styles and models exist. Many executives are familiar with the servant leadership model developed by Robert Greenleaf and this article is not about measuring aptitude or defining this leadership model. It is about getting the information needed to be successful in the right hands of executives worldwide.

Robert Greenleaf first wrote an essay that later became his book title, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. He introduced the term 'servant leadership' into the business literature for the first time and caused some controversy in the corporate boardroom while adding some value among the religious clergy.

Greenleaf was not only a scholar – servant leadership came out of his work experiences at organizations such as MIT and the influence of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. Greenleaf largely gained his insights through the central character of 'Leo', who becomes a servant leader and speaks about the Law of Service: He who wishes to live long must serve, but he who wishes to rule does not live long. Greenleaf recognized the main message of this story, and concluded that

"the central meaning of it was that a great leader has experience as a servant to others, and he felt that this fact is central to his or her greatness. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others."

Servant leaders are those who turn the organizational chart upside down, putting the customers at the top. For instance, Greenleaf argues that the great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his or her greatness. The advantages of the servant leadership model are its altruism, simplicity and self-awareness. It emphasizes the moral sense of concern for others, reducing the complexity engendered by putting personal desires in conflict with

those of followers. Servant leadership can be clearly seen as rooted in the clerical leadership perspective of Christ's leadership when Greenleaf says that the words "service," "to serve" and "servant" occur over 1,300 times in the revised version of the St. James Bible. The servant leadership model highlights Jesus as an ultimate example of a servant leader, and suggests applying the leadership insights that Jesus gives us within organizations. According to the model, only service to others is the pathway to real significance. Scholars that normally are associated with the servant leadership model concentrate on the characteristics of a servant leader, and recommend ten fundamental characteristics:

1. Listening;
2. Empathy;
3. Healing;
4. Awareness;
5. Persuasion;
6. Conceptualization;
7. Foresight;
8. Stewardship;
9. Commitment to the growth of people; and
10. Building community.

The servant leadership model has not, however, evaded the criticism of scholars that normally are associated with leadership models and theories. Greenleaf acknowledges some criticisms about servant leadership, and posits that:

"In a time of crisis, like the leadership crisis we are now in today, if too many potential builders are taken in by a complete absorption with dissecting the wrong and by a zeal for instant perfection, then the movement so many of us want to see will be set back. The danger, perhaps, is to hear the analyst too much and artist too little."

This model has been challenged for a lack of adequate empirical studies to substantiate its academic rigor and is often shelved as a learning tool as opposed to a leadership application. An example of this scholarly debate is that servant leadership is systematically undefined and lacking in empirical support necessary for managerial implementation. The existing literature on servant leadership is filled with anecdotal evidence and that empirical research is critically needed to substantiate the use of it in the boardroom of large corporations. Therefore, to fill this gap, I suggest that scholars take these ideas and continue to conduct research using executives as the focal point so that academic scholarship can meet the needs of managerial implications at the higher echelons of organizations worldwide. ■

Mostafa Sayyadi is a Senior Management Consultant and Former Leadership Team Member of San Diego-based The Change Leader Consulting Inc. He is an Associate Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management, a Book Author and Business and Technology Journalist.