Exercising Servant Leadership

By Olivier Serrat

Servant leadership is now in the vocabulary of enlightened leadership. It is a practical, altruistic philosophy that supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead, as a way of expanding service to individuals and organizations. The sense of civil community that it advocates and engenders can facilitate and smooth successful and principled change.

Preamble

On 1–3 July 1863, more than 158,000 soldiers fought near the market town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in what proved to be a turning point of the American Civil War (1861–1865). On 19 November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated the battlefield as a national cemetery. He gave the Gettysburg Address, one of the most quoted speeches in the history of the United States, in 10 sentences and about 2 minutes. Its last words—... *government of the people, by the people, for the people,* ...—have come to define democracy to many.

Background

Ancient schools of thought about great men[1] and more recent (sometimes overlapping) explanations form an ever-growing literature on leadership.[2] In modern times, three broad categories have encompassed related theories: approaches have explored the traits (1940s–1950s) then behaviors or styles (1950s–1960s) of successful leaders; examined the contextual nature of leadership and the role of followers (1960s–1970s); and investigated what interactions of traits, behaviors, and situations (as well as group facilitation) might allow people to transact or transform for excellence (1980s).[3] At the risk of simplifying,

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[1] The great man theory (associated with Thomas Carlyle) became popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, with numerous histories of Roman emperors and charismatic leaders such as Napoleon, Gandhi, Winston Churchill, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, among others. It assumed that the capacity for leadership is inherent—that great leaders are exceptional people, born with innate qualities, destined to lead, and certainly not made. Trait explanations stemmed from it.

[2] Early studies of leadership, preoccupied with power and influence, date back to Sun Tzu, Plato, and Niccolò Machiavelli. In spite of this, leadership only became a focus of academic studies in the last 60 years—particularly more so in the last 20 years.

[3] The problem with leadership theory is that even though no school of thought is completely defensible many explanations offer interesting insights. (None would have achieved prominence if it had no face validity.) However, they are neither comprehensive nor well-tested. Yet, most make arguments that hold true on occasion—the difficulty is that we do not know which are valid in what circumstances.

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notwithstanding a few notable exceptions,[4] these perspectives have been hierarchical, linear, male, Newtonian, pragmatic, and, above all, concerned with the leader as an individual.[5]

Leadership and the Challenge of Change[6]

Theory and practice are inexorably intertwined: to understand developments in leadership theory is to fathom the nature of leadership itself. Leadership is difficult because, quintessentially, it must often focus on the challenge of change.[7] Change that is transformational defies easy solutions: it involves value-laden issues; it tests strongly held loyalties; it surfaces deep-seated conflicts. But people do not resist change per se; rather, they refuse to accept the losses that it may cause them to incur. To exercise leadership is to invite people to make adaptive change (as distinct from technical change that concerned parties address daily)—for this they must learn new ways and discard old habits against the promise of an uncertain outcome. The process is intrinsically disruptive and therefore induces disequilibrium and stress.

In a globalizing world of organizations, pressures to change will only increase over the next decades. Given the complexity of the subject, new explanations of leadership are bound to arise and should influence how future leaders behave. Since much of leadership is about change, and the problems that leadership endeavors to address lie with people themselves, those in positions of authority are more often than not apt to collude and shy away from challenges. (Authority is a contract for services: for that reason, people in positions of authority are [paradoxically] rarely authorized to exercise transformational leadership, whatever the job description may advertise.) It follows that *leadership of the people, by the people, for the people* could conduce change better, coaxing them to clarify what is vital and what is not.

Figure: Shifting the Burden
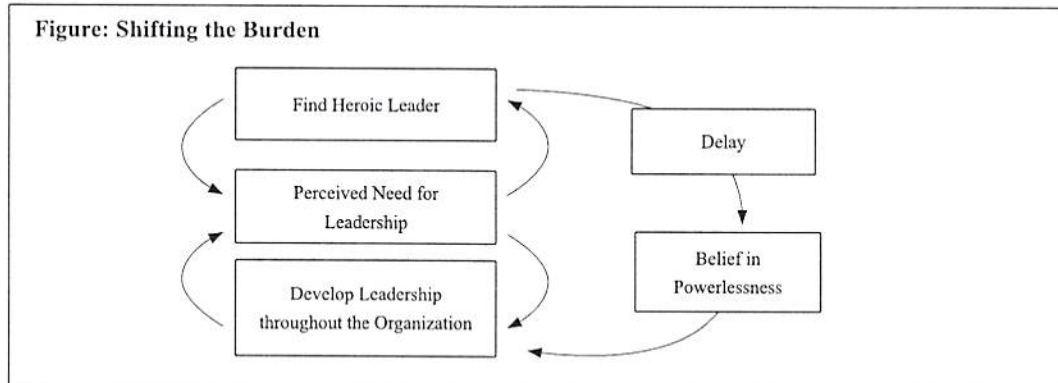
Note: According to Fred Kofman and Peter Senge, one of the reasons the great man theory appeals is that it absolves us of responsibility for developing leadership capabilities more broadly. Viewed systemically, there is a "shifting the burden" structure: a perceived need for leadership (a symptom) can be met by developing capacities throughout the organization (the fundamental solution) or by relying on a heroic leader (the symptomatic solution). Success in finding a heroic leader reinforces beliefs in the group's own powerlessness, thus making the fundamental solution more difficult.

Source: Fred Kofman and Peter Senge. 1995. Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations. In Sarita Chawla and John Renesch, eds. *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*. Productivity Press, Inc.

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[4] Philip Selznick, a political sociologist, was initially ignored by the mainstream. As long ago as 1957, he compared leadership to institutionalization, in the sense that leadership is about infusing values and clarifying purpose in an organization. See Philip Selznick. 1957. *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation*. Harper & Row. In 1978, James MacGregor Burns, a biographer, historian, and political scientist, infused his model of transformational leadership with ethical and moral dimensions, and was the first to see the need for leaders to develop a binding and mutually stimulating relationship with followers. See James MacGregor Burns. 1978. *Leadership*. Harper & Row.

[5] Changingminds.org summarizes succinctly the tenets of the main models of leadership. Available: http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/theories/leadership_theories.htm

[6] This section draws from Ronald Heifetz ad Marty Linsky. Leadership is 1 Percent Inspiration and 99 Percent Perspiration. In Joel Kurtzman, Glenn Rifkin, and Victoria Griffith. 2004. *MBA in a Book: Mastering Business with Attitude*. Three Rivers Press.

[7] It is at times of organizational strain that effective leaders can make a significant and visible impact.

The Distribution of Leadership

The idea of the leader may be misplaced, at least in complex, modern organizations. The trends in leadership theory are clear: explanations have moved from heroic leadership to leadership by power and influence, thence to the interactive nature of leadership, and of late to leadership by consent. If leaders (can be made to) exist throughout an organization, the future may witness the spread of leadership groups, not individual leaders. (Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith have written about the "following part of leading.")[8]

> The most valuable "currency" of any organization is the initiative and creativity of its members. Every leader has the solemn moral responsibility to develop these to the maximum in all his people. This is the leader's highest priority.
> —W. Edwards Deming
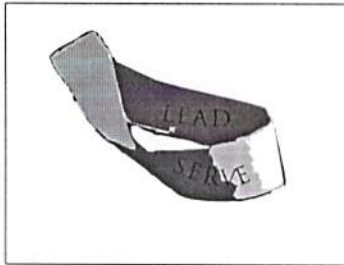
Since the 1990s, two interrelated schools of thought with foundations in humanistic psychology, philosophy, politics, social psychology, and sociology rather than management science and psychology, have received growing recognition. They promote people-oriented, or servant, leadership and offer promising notions of informal, emergent, dispersed, or distributed leadership.[9] (To some, not this writer, they are reminiscent of the transformational theory.)[10] Paraphrasing John Kotter,[11] these relatively new schools of thought may fuel the common and persistent sense of urgency, home-grown vision and strategy, cultural anchorage, ownership, broad-based empowerment of people, delegated management for immediate wins, ambient communications, and powerful guiding coalitions needed to overcome what are often massive forces of inertia. Quoting Warren Bennis: "None of us is as smart as all of us ... The Lone Ranger, the incarnation of the individual problem solver, is dead. In his place, we have a new model for creative achievement: The Great Group."[12]

Exercising Servant Leadership ...

The philosophy and practice of servant leadership was coined and defined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s.[13] The general concept is ancient, with roots in China (Lao Tzu) and India (Chanakya). Jesus of Nazareth urged his followers to be servants first, and became a messenger of a great religion. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. Servant leadership seems to touch an innate need in many and probably harks back to the beginning of time.[14]

- **Definition and Best Test.** Servant leadership is about moving people to a higher level of individual and communal self-awareness by leading people at a higher level. Its principal tenet is that it is the duty of a leader to serve followers, his or her key role being to develop, enable, and support team members, helping them fully develop their potential and deliver their best. From this perspective, in a world of organizations,

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8 See Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith. 1993. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Harvard Business School Press.

9 As for all theories, their explanatory power will need to meet the five criteria set by Thomas Kuhn: (i) accurate—empirically adequate with experimentation and observation; (ii) consistent—internally consistent but also externally consistent with other theories; (iii) broad scope—a theory's consequences should extend beyond what it was initially designed to explain; (iv) simple—the simplest explanation, in line with Occam's Razor; and (v) fruitful—a theory should disclose new phenomena or new relationships among phenomena. See Thomas Kuhn. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.

10 The primary difference between the two is the focus of the leader. That of the transformational leader is directed at the organization: his or her behavior builds follower commitment toward organizational objectives. The focus of the servant-leader is on others—including fellow employees, clients, and communities: the achievement of organizational objectives is a subordinate outcome.

11 John Kotter. 1996. *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press.

12 Warren Bennis and Patricia Biederman. 1997. *Organizing Genius: The Secret of Creative Collaboration*. Perseus Books.

13 Kenneth Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Max DePree, Peter Senge, Margaret Wheatley, and others support it. To Margaret Wheatley, the belief that calls a person to be a servant-leader is the belief of who we are as a species. She thinks that if the real work is to stay together, then we are not only the best resource to move into the future: we are the only resource. We need to learn how to be together—that is the essential work of the servant-leader.

14 The emphasis on serving a higher purpose has made this model popular in the Church.

servant-leaders are considered humble stewards of their organization's resources and capabilities. In a 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf explained:

> *The servant-leader is servant first … It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions … The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.*

This is no pie in the sky: the proof of the pudding is in the eating and the test of a servant-leader is one of pragmatism based on visible outcomes. Greenleaf continued:

> *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? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?*

Importantly, neither Greenleaf's definition of a servant-leader nor its best test requires one to hold a formal leadership position. What matters is what we do in "our little corner of the world" and why we are doing it. Indeed, servant-leaders turn leadership into a territory, a field of endeavor in which people can operate—each leveraging individual abilities and capacities—to serve the mission of the organization and the people who make the organization happen. The objective, to repeat, is to enhance the growth of individuals in organizations and promote teamwork and personal involvement.

> *A new moral principle may be emerging which holds that the only authority deserving of 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 servants. To the extent that this principle prevails, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led.*
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> —Robert Greenleaf

- **Servant-Leader Attributes.** Larry Spears,[15] who served for 17 years as the head of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership,[16] identified in Greenleaf's writings 10 characteristics of servant-leaders. They are by no means exhaustive but he views them as central to the development of servant-leaders. (They are, primarily, behavioral in nature.) The attributes are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and (a concern for) building community. Unlike the models mentioned earlier, which gaze at leadership through the prism of top-down organizational hierarchies, servant leadership emphasizes collaboration, empathy, trust, and the ethical use of power.[17]
- **Caveat.** Servant leadership does not pose as an explanatory or quick-fix theory: it cannot be readily instilled in an organization. But it is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in short a way of being—that has the potential to generate positive change in its milieu: when followers see evidence that their leaders truly follow the ideals of servant leadership, they are more likely to become servants themselves.

… With Distributed Leadership

The distributed leadership approach views leadership as a social contract. It shifts the emphasis from developing leaders to developing "leaderful" organizations through concurrent, collective, and compassionate leadership with a collective responsibility for the latter. The distributed leadership theory

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[15] Larry Spears (ed.). 1998. *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Larry Spears' identification of themes can help operationalize the concept of servant leadership. A few servant leadership assessment instruments have already been formulated; since the concept continues to gain attention in practice, we can expect to see additional research in the area.

[16] Available: www.greenleaf.org/

[17] Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence is (almost uncannily) applicable to servant leadership.

- Regards leadership as a process of sense making and direction giving—this constitutes a move from individuals to relationships.
- Rejects the notion of heroic leaders and the focus on top management, and submits a less formalized model whereby leadership is dissociated from organizational hierarchies.
- Distinguishes the exercise of leadership and the exercise of authority, and treats leadership as a decentralized activity that is not, unavoidably, the sole responsibility of formally appointed leaders.
- Aims to nurture leadership capacity through the development of leadership processes and skills in others

Further Reading

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For further information

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