



## Beyond Self-Obsession, Servant-Leaders Serve First

By Tony V. Zampella, December 12, 2017

A brief examination of headlines in business, government, and education reveals a focus on leadership that seems to intensify with each passing year. Over the last two decades, I've reviewed leadership theories, models, and styles, such as situational, functional, adaptive, generative, authentic, collective, collaborative, transformational, and authoritarian, to name a few.

Many of these offer valuable insights for our current Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) times. And it is possible to combine some of these models to develop an effective leadership profile or portfolio, to produce results and manage change. But the more I study, teach, and practice, the more I return to **Servant Leadership** as a natural model for inspiring humans to achieve together.

## Inquiry into Servant Leadership

Servant leadership may be the most potent, personal, and public of all the models, as it has a deep history and embraces the full range of the human condition. There are passages related to servant leadership in the fifth-century *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao-Tzu, who wrote,

*"The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware . . . The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words. When his task is accomplished and things have been completed, all the people say, 'We ourselves have achieved it!'"*

In modern history, servant-leaders such as **Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa**, and the **Dalai Lama** have led some of our most lasting movements without any formal role or authority.

## The Meaning of Servant Leadership

Our modern-day use of the term *servant leadership* was coined by Robert Greenleaf, who worked for 38 years at AT&T as Director of Management Development. He developed the world's first corporate assessment center and was the first to promote women and Blacks to non-menial positions, even bringing in famous theologians and psychologists to speak about the wider implications of corporate decisions.

Greenleaf longed to move beyond the power-centered authoritarian leadership style so prominent in the US, and in 1964 he took an early retirement to found the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (first called the "Center for Applied Ethics").

In his 1970 essay (and published book) titled *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf asserted the need for a new kind of leadership model—one that puts serving others, including employees, customers, and community, as the number-one priority. His central definition of servant leadership involves a "calling," as follows:

*"It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead."*

The test for this leadership is whether "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 they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?"

Servant-leaders also serve a higher purpose or commitment, which cultivates trust among others to learn and grow together toward fulfilling that commitment.

## Ten Key Precepts of Servant Leadership

After carefully considering Greenleaf's original writings, Larry Spears (1998), former CEO of the Greenleaf Center, expanded the original ten precepts. I've also revised these based on my research into developing servant-leaders and developing servant leadership.

1. **Listening:** Traditionally, leaders have been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. Servant-leaders develop a deep commitment to listening intently and openly to others. They seek to identify and clarify the will or commitment of a group. They seek to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's inner voice by tuning into one's body/senses, mental states, and intuition/will.
2. **Empathy:** Servant-leaders strive to understand and empathize with others. One must assume the good intentions of co-workers and not reject them as people, even when forced to reject their behavior or performance.

3. **Healing:** Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant leadership is the potential for healing oneself—becoming comfortable and whole with oneself—and cultivating, from compassion and humility, an environment that promotes the well-being of others.
4. **Awareness:** General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Making a commitment to foster awareness can be scary—you never know what you may discover! As Greenleaf (1977/2000) observed, “Awareness is not a giver of solace — it’s just the opposite. It disturbs. Servant-leaders are not seekers of solace. They have their own inner security.” These leaders discover, engage and embrace the very blind spots that become the source of new learning to expand their capacity to lead and serve.
5. **Persuasion/Encouragement:** Servant-leaders rely on persuading others, rather than positional authority, when making decisions. They seek to enroll or encourage others in a commitment, rather than coerce compliance. This difference between commitment and compliance offers a clear distinction between traditional leadership models and that of a servant-leader.
6. **Conceptualization/Imagination:** Servant-leaders (1977/2000) seek to nurture their ability to “dream great dreams.” They have the ability to look at a problem (or an organization) from a conceptualizing perspective, requiring them to think beyond day-to-day realities and problems to view possibilities. This requires a delicate balance between a future to conceptualize and the urgency of the day-to-day focus.
7. **Foresight/Perspective:** Foresight enables servant-leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision in the future. These leaders place current items in the proper perspective to gauge priorities. They are also deeply rooted in the intuitive mind that views human potential as what’s possible in the future.
8. **Stewardship/Commitment:** Robert Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staff, managers, and directors serve as trustees, taking custody of their institutions for the greater good of society. Servant-leaders are committed to something bigger than themselves and enroll others into that commitment, as highlighted in Peter Block’s (1993) book, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self Interest*.
9. **Commitment to Personal Mastery:** Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, they are deeply committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each and every individual within the organization.
10. **Developing Community:** Servant-leaders are aware that the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives has changed our perceptions and caused a sense of loss. They seek to identify a means for developing community—as teachers, stewards, and designers—among those who work within a given institution.

The grid below highlights three leadership paradigms found in today’s organizations. View this grid as developmental; each successive paradigm grows beyond and expands to include the skills and insights of the previous paradigm.

PARADIGM	MINDSET/PHILOSOPHY	CHALLENGES	OUTCOME
<b>Conventional Expert</b>	<b>Empirical:</b> trusts objective knowledge, evidence, and facts.	Outmoded data and knowledge limits forecasts. Copes with <b>loss of certainty.</b>	Leverages knowledge and evidence to influence others; seeks conventional strategies, and outcomes.
<b>Change Agent</b>	<b>Experiential:</b> trusts applied knowledge from experiences to guide methods, and develop best practices.	Outmoded methods, and practices. Copes with <b>loss of performance.</b>	Leverages Emotional Intelligence to generate and empower action, and inspire values and vision.
<b>Servant-Leader</b>	<b>Existential:</b> embraces blind spots as source of wisdom, perception, and awareness, finding resolve in the unknown.	Outmoded beliefs, assumptions, and views. Copes with <b>loss of identity.</b>	Leverages wisdom of self and others to clarify perceptions, expand awareness. Embodies deep listening from compassion to serve others.

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## The Challenge of Servant Leadership

Several thinkers have further developed the concepts and challenges of a servant model of leadership. Steven Covey’s (1990) notion of *principle-centered leadership* encouraged a set of “lived” principles to transcend personality, calling leaders to move beyond ego and act from a larger purpose.

Researcher James Collins stumbled upon *Level 5 Leadership* through an inquiry that accidentally revealed what was required for companies to go from good to great. He discovered a stage of leadership development with a rare combination of humility and will—a personal leadership quality that Collins admitted he was unable to explain.

Researcher Otto Scharmer (2003) and his team at MIT have devoted their careers to exploring our blind spots, considering them sources of innate wisdom and learning that expand leadership and connect us to our authentic self. Scharmer’s (2009) *Theory U* model invites us to let go of the obstacles that prevent us from integrating our open mind, open heart and open will to access our full potential. Discovering, engaging, and embracing our blind spots may be the most challenging part of surrendering to our most authentic self to serve out of selflessness.

In his 2013 paper at Harvard Business School, Jim Heskett asked the question, “Why Isn’t ‘Servant Leadership’ More Prevalent?” He received such a vast and mixed response

to the question that he was left to wonder whether servant leadership was an oxymoron. Here are some of the comments he received:

*“Those who serve (vs. use power or buy) their way to influence leave a huge legacy to those around them.”*

*“A majority of leaders as agents of principals see themselves as maniacally focused on getting short term results ...”*

*“... the organizational model is not geared to move the ‘servant’ person to the top.”*

*“Where do you go to learn how to lead this way?”*

## The Paradox of the Servant-Leader

Lao-Tzu captures the paradox of servant-leaders: “The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware . . .” The leader described in this age-old wisdom mirrors Collins’ leader, possessing both humility and will.

For most, leadership is still identified with a position or role—or a personality, or trait that often demands the spotlight—not as a higher purpose, mindset, or commitment to something bigger than oneself. But the best leaders are invisible, operating in the liminal space where paradoxes exist. As Peter Senge and Fred Kofman (1990) stated in their classic paper on learning organizations:

*Developing leadership capacities in diverse people takes time. It is risky. Many resist the initiative because they lack confidence or shirk responsibility. Finding the great hero is much easier. It can produce quicker results . . . a familiar and comfortable path. Over time, people become more and more dependent on the hero leader . . . They come to expect that a great leader will save the day . . . As a myth of the hero leader fades, a new myth of teams and communities that can lead themselves emerges.*

In his classic text, *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge (1990) suggests that it takes servant-leaders to cultivate learning organizations, pointing to a shared commitment and personal mastery for developing this mindset.

## Growing Applications of Servant Leadership

Peter Senge reinforces the power of servant-leaders:

*“Servant leadership offers a unique mix of idealism and pragmatism. At one level, the concept is an ideal, appealing to deeply held beliefs in the dignity and self-worth.... But it is also highly practical. It has been proven again and again in military campaigns that the only leader whom soldiers will reliably follow— when their lives are on the line— is the one who is both competent and whom soldiers believe is committed to their well-being.”*

A 2013 *Washington Post* article, “Servant Leadership: A path to high Performance,” outlined some organizations that benefit from servant-leaders, such as Best Buy, UPS, Ritz-Carlton, Whole Foods, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, and the San Antonio Spurs, to name a few. A couple of well-known tales of servant-leaders include those of Max De Pree and Herb Kelleher.

De Pree's leadership at Herman Miller, as expressed in his 1989 book, *Leadership is an Art*, emphasized love, elegance, caring, and inclusivity as central elements of management.

Herb Kelleher at Southwestern Airlines offered an eccentric approach to caring that found all workers pulling together emotionally and financially after the 9/11 attack, as workers donated vacation days to a general pool to support workers who needed extra time to cope. This culture outlived Kelleher, who stepped down just before 9/11. Indeed, Southwest Airlines was the only major airline that didn't require a government bailout and still earned a profit in the fourth quarter of 2001.

Ken Blanchard (2012) highlighted Coach John "Cal" Calipari as he led his Kentucky Wildcats to the National Championship. His lessons introduced the roles of servant, steward, and shepherd, instilling in his players that:

- As *servants*, life is not about them but about those whom they serve;
- As *stewards*, they don't own anything—everything is on loan, and they need to nurture and support what is given to them; and
- As *shepherds*, every human being is important.

## For Leaders, Selfless Service Trumps Self-Dealing

I must admit, the events of our current presidency have inspired me to return to this area of inquiry.

It can be challenging to imagine servant-leaders, especially today as we witness a self-serving President who is focused on personal gain and preoccupied with winning at all costs. Recent actions that overlook the vulnerable, embolden the powerful, and avoid accountability fly in the face of leadership that serves first.

But perhaps it is against this global backdrop that we can appreciate another possibility—a 21<sup>st</sup>-century path of selfless service that enrolls humans into a higher purpose, while inspiring them to grow and develop.

**Anthony V. Zampella** is an educator, activist, leadership coach, writer, and researcher in the field of adult learning and leadership development. His work presents an eclectic fusion of Western business models, generative learning methods, language-action theory and contemplative practices from Eastern wisdom traditions. As an Integral theorist, Tony's interests include the works of Martin Heidegger and Ken Wilber and the practice of Zen Buddhism.

He integrates Western knowledge and Eastern practices to examine the connections between listening and learning in cultivating leadership cultures. Since 1999, Tony has worked as an academic and leadership specialist, designing leadership programs for coaches and consultants, executives and first-time CEOs, and learning and development professionals.

His firm, Zampella Group, is a pioneer in "first-person learning," which is closely related to [triple-loop learning](#), [ontological learning](#), or [transformative learning](#). Distinct from conventional third-person "empirical" learning, and second-person "experiential" learning, first-person learning involves an "existential awareness" that cultivates insight and perceptions that alter mindsets.

Tony writes a regular blog, [Learning Curve](#), for learning and development professionals, and serves on the **Editorial Board** of "[The Philosophy of Coaching, an International Journal](#)."

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