

Servant-Leadership and the Wounded Leader: Vision and challenge for educational leaders today

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Abstract

The educational leader must respond to many calls on time and talent. Servant-Leadership is a perspective of leadership that places the emphasis upon Gospel-grounded values while at the same time developing a means of achieving the tasks and duties of a highly skilled professional leader. Servant-Leadership does not ignore the wounding that failures, bad fortune, ill-timing and non-aligned expectations may engender and all leaders suffer from time to time.

This paper explores Servant-Leadership in the context of an educational leader's major roles. It is a means of integrating the tasks and role of the leader with vision and spirituality that can be energising for the educational leader, one's colleagues and the administration team. Lastly, this paper will attempt to open a discussion of the wounds of leadership and how wounded leaders can model integrity and service.

This paper integrates the author's reading, experience, reflection and attempts at practice of this exciting and growth-promoting perspective. Servant-Leadership is neither a quick-fix nor a panacea. Servant-Leadership is a holistic and values-grounded approach that seeks to energise and integrate roles and vision, practice and spirituality. We have survived organisation by objectives and utilised strategic leadership: Servant-Leadership is the missing link that allows progress towards a spirituality of leadership and the achievement of organisational goals.

Introduction

Some may already be familiar with the concept of Servant-Leadership. Servant-Leadership is founded on the writings, thoughts and practice of Robert Greenleaf (1996). Greenleaf's seminal ideas address legitimate power and authority and suggest such legitimate power is one path to greatness (Spears, 2002). Here at last may be a means of reconciling the Gospel imperatives of service and collegiality with the every day administrative power of leadership.

Like me, the reader may be familiar with the leadership literature, or at least the language of 'manage by objectives' and 'strategic leadership'. These are not wrong, and indeed have been helpful ways of understanding the business of leadership in a busy and complex domain. But these ways of understanding leadership have missed the 'heart' of leadership. They do not offer a theoretical basis for why one seeks to lead and, from a Christian perspective, offer little insight to what leadership is for the Christian – what are the foundational values and beliefs.

What is Servant-Leadership?

Servant-Leadership is best described by itself. There is an active Centre promoting Servant-Leadership which attempts to encourage discussion about leadership.

Servant-Leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Servant-leaders may or may not hold formal leadership positions. Servant-leadership encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment (The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2002aa).

What do Servant-Leaders do that is different from other types of leaders, or how might one recognise a leader who is practising Servant-Leadership?

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. He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. 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.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. 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 they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?

(The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2002aa)

Genesis of Servant-Leadership

Servant-Leadership is rooted in the thinking and practice of Robert K Greenleaf. Greenleaf (1904-1990) spent his first career in management research, development and education at AT&T. After retirement, he began a second career teaching and consulting at institutions ranging from Harvard Business School to the Ford Foundation to scores of churches and not-for-profit institutions. During the tumultuous 1960s, Greenleaf tried to understand why so many young people were in rebellion against America's institutions, especially universities. He concluded that the fault lay with the institutions: they weren't doing a good job of serving, therefore, they were doing a poor job of leading (The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2002bb).

Robert Greenleaf's ideas sound 'soft' to some people. They go against the grain of common wisdom about organizations and power. After reading his essays

and reading comments of people who knew him, his pragmatism becomes evident — he said ‘management is the study of how things get done’— as well as his great spirit. He believed that spirit was a practical thing, and that belief shone through in all of his writing (The Robert K Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, 2002bb).

Greenleaf was nourished by the Quaker spirituality. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) were founded in England in the 17th Century and soon moved to the new American colony, mainly to escape persecution. In recent times Quakers have been noted for their pacifism, work towards social harmony, general lack of priesthood, with a strong focus on God’s Spirit speaking to both the community assembled and to individuals in prayer. Quakers do have some internal theological divisions, but most are strongly influenced by a personal, not necessarily literalist, reading of the Bible. Servant-Leadership is the distilled result of Greenleaf’s personal struggle to understand and reconcile his religious commitments with the society and organisations in which he worked and led.

Overview of the Concept of Servant-Leadership

Simply put, Servant-Leadership is grounded in the understanding that service comes first. A leader is one who serves, and the role of leadership is to serve: firstly the people and secondly the organisation which one is privileged to lead. To serve means to put the legitimate needs and aspirations of others before one’s own needs.

For Greenleaf, the issue of appropriate leadership was one of spirit. Spirit, including the Holy Spirit, does not rely on or resort to power. Greenleaf does not suggest that educational institutions become democracies ‘some individuals know what another ought to learn, and are justified in imposing their judgement’ (Greenleaf, 19771, p.180). Nor does he suggest that the social institutions themselves need to be replaced. Instead, what is needed is the recognition community is itself part of society. This does not mean that the community need not change, but rather the changes that institutions need will result from the changes within the leaders and community rather than externally imposed changes to structures. Greenleaf counsels ‘prepare students (and staff) to serve and be served by the present society’ (Greenleaf, 19771, p.203), and surely that applies to staff and developing leaders! This theme of living fully in the present and making the most of each (God given) moment is a theme in Christian thought.

The principle tasks of Servant-Leadership can be quickly listed. These are:

- **Listening:** the foundation of Servant-Leadership. Active empathy that goes beyond personal, professional, collegial, supervisory and resource expectations.
- **Healing:** Addressing the spiritual side of leadership. Spirituality both of the leader and those who are lead.
- **Awareness:** Keeping in touch with ourselves and others.
- **Persuasion:** Beginning with the end in mind. Dialogue and consensus rather than use of power.

- Conceptualisation: Seeing the big picture.
- Foresight: Plotting the course.
- Stewardship: Being accountable and sharing control.
- Commitment to the Growth of People.
- Building Community.

(DeGraaf et al., 2001)

The list above demonstrates that Servant-Leadership marries a personal respect and priority for persons to a strong understanding that a leader must lead. And leadership is not so much having the answers to all questions, but developing ethical foresight within the community (Kim, 2002).

Servant-Leadership is finding a number of domains for action. These domains include education (Grothaus, 2004) and professional life (Pepper, 2003). Servant-Leadership is being promoted from Christian (Chewning, 2000) and well as philosophical (Whetstone, 2002) perspectives. Servant-Leadership is not without critics (Kezar, 2001) who suggest that Servant-Leadership does not adequately solve all problems.

Why Servant-Leadership?

Why is Servant-Leadership a useful way of describing leadership? I believe that this concept is most timely: for where leadership is at this moment and indeed where the Christian Church is situated within modern society.

We have worked with and through a number of perspectives of leadership. Without developing a catalogue, management by objectives and strategic leadership may have given leaders insights to the processes and skills of leadership. What is missing is the 'heart'! Servant-Leadership offers a framework of theory and practice in which one can situate one's faith-informed values, personal aspirations and spirituality. Servant-Leadership offers a scripturally grounded understanding of a common and necessary human activity without conflicting one's practice with one's beliefs and values.

Greenleaf, by introducing Servant-Leadership, has done for leadership what Hansen and Palmer have done for teaching! Hansen (1995) talks about teaching as a call, a call to which one can choose to respond and attempt to live up to the challenge. Palmer, also from the Quaker tradition, writes about the vocation of the teacher (Palmer, 1998) and the sacred sense that spirituality can bring to work (Palmer, 1990, 2000).

I introduce another element into this mix: the context of the Christian Church today. I suspect that I am not alone in struggling for some understanding of how the Church relates to our society. Notionally, I understand that the Church is composed of persons with similar weaknesses to my own. Yet the failures of the Church, and Churchmen, challenge the strident authority claimed by some of these same flawed persons. Claims of authoritative speaking, and claims for adherence or obedience to some dubiously-grounded assertions are difficult to reconcile with flawed fallibility. Servant-Leadership, as a concept and guide to practice, allows me the freedom to ground my reflections, my aspirations and judgements of what is important, what is un-arguably Christian and which taps

into the very best of the Christian traditions which inspired people beyond number to establish and support hospitals, schools, orphanages and other forms of institutional social capital.

This paper is arguing that 'mission' does not adequately encapsulate the leader's role and Servant-Leadership more fully describes the diversity of role, responsibilities and tasks that are the principal's position. Certainly the term Servant-Leadership makes apparent the commitment which each leader must bring to their role in the Christian context.

There is a rich, developing literature on Servant-Leadership. The American website [www.servant-leadership.org] contains many links including texts discussing Servant-Leadership. Even collaborative work finds a sympathetic theoretical framework in Servant-Leadership (Walls, 2000).

Gospel identity

The other reason I prefer the Servant-Leadership understanding is that it directly confronts my experiences of work with my theological understanding of Jesus. While I might like to retreat to a sense that the Jesus of the Gospel is remote and outside my experience, Servant-Leadership challenges one to identify who Jesus is and, not how Jesus would lead this community, but as one who seeks to follow Jesus, how do I intend to lead while being faithful to Jesus' and my shared values?

Central to my understanding of Jesus is the Cross. I cannot speak of Jesus without confronting the Cross, in his life and in mine. What does this have to do with leadership? [I wonder if anyone who leads a Christian institution today needs any explanation of the Cross?] Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski write of the 'Wounded Leader' (2002). While they recognise that all of us carry wounds or limitations into our daily roles, their focus is on the wounds suffered as leaders, in the process of leading. Although the work of Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski is based on conversations with American school leaders, mostly in public schools, it is possible that Christian leaders may share such wounding experiences.

I believe that Servant-Leadership aptly complements the language of education with which many are familiar. There are a number of readily accessible texts for those interested in further reading. Greenleaf's own works (Frick & Spears, 1996; Greenleaf, 2002, 2004) are an excellent first reference point. Other helpful sources include a range of texts on leadership within the Servant-Leadership philosophy (Fousert, 2000; Matusak, 1997; Moxley, 2000; Specht, 2003; Turner, 2000).

Servant-Leadership is best understood as a spirituality. I would like to encourage leaders to engage with Servant-Leadership as a spirituality that brings job and mission, faith and context, daily tasks and hopeful aspirations together in a manner which is grounded in Scripture and the realities of working-practice, and large enough to encompass the heart of what we do in leadership. Servant-Leadership is also big enough to accommodate and reflect

upon the language of mission and the vocation of the educator in today's world.

The Wounded Leader

Disappointments come with life. When speaking of the 'Wounded Leader' we are not referring to those disappointments, be they large or small, which are set-backs to programs or obstacles to progress. The wounds we speak of are those to one's core and heart.

What is endangered, then, is what is evoked most fundamentally by the work of leadership: a person's integrity, identity, fallibility, and spirit. (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p.17).

Hence, the wounds we discuss here are not trivial or small. They are the ones that hurt. They eat away at our self-image, they erode our construction of ourselves and our effectiveness in the role we find precious. This role is precious because it means a lot to the leader: the educational leader is not there for the money or prestige, but because of wanting to make a difference, believing 'that I can make a difference', that my gifts add significantly to the welfare of the people with whom I work. These wounds call all that into question, shake the self-image, and threaten personal integrity.

Why is this Area one of Silence?

There are at least two reasons why there is silence regarding the wounds of leadership. The first reason is that most of the texts prefer to imagine that if all the skills are in place, all the 'ducks are in a line' then it works! Standard leadership texts generally speak about how to get it right. The educational leadership texts, at least those I am familiar with, are silent about those times and circumstances when problems, disappointments and wounds occur despite the best intentions of all participants. Wounds are seen as symptomatic of dysfunction and the leader, or maybe those who are led, not reading the situation correctly. It is self-evident that lack of judgement and ill-advised decisions lead to problems. We have all experienced that! Yet, the lived experience of many leaders is that even when it all looks correct and 'the duck are in line', tears still result. In other words, such wounds can result when well-meaning people disagree.

The second reason is more obvious. The wounds of leadership go to our heart; they threaten our identity and spirit. Admitting such vulnerability, at times even to oneself, is not easy and not without risk! Who wants to talk about those times when one feels most vulnerable?

What are the Wounds of Leadership?

The wounds of leadership are usually revealed in narrative rather than a quick summary. Space precludes such narratives here, so a few terse thumb-nail sketches must suffice. Some samples include;

Great Expectations: a leader's life can be determined by role expectation. Such a life may need to endure betrayal of the leader, thwarted ambition, and deceit. Problems around complying with a legal matter and pleasing a board who want to circumvent the legal requirement.

Fragile Power: power and fear of helplessness can be potent central forces that drive many leaders. Trying to divert a senior student from breaking the law and confronting one's lack of power to eradicate student violence and bullying.

Branded: A Principal needs to improve state-mandated test scores, but at what price are set the efforts of the principal and teachers in a school in a poor area when scores do not rise fast enough?

When the Bubble Bursts: Coming into a new community with great enthusiasm and energy to find a faculty locked into division, negativity and self-destructive antagonism. How does one accept vulnerability and trust one's intuition?

Trapped in a Cocoon: a new leader faced with the dilemma of either remaining true to personal beliefs or else changing to gain the trust of 'co-workers'. Can perceived strength be a weakness?

The Trial: a leader believes she is selfless, self-sufficient and tough. These very qualities prevent her from listening to her own needs. Can a wound be concealed even within a success?

Dancing on the Skillet: a leader who seems to be on top of the game and then the board changes, to reveal that the new board sees things differently and he is on the edge of crashing. How does one cope with the tension between a strong desire to keep a beloved position and the demands to please others clash with leadership style and values?

(Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, pp.36-37)

Responses to these Leadership Wounds

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski write of three typical responses to the wounds of leadership in the narratives that have been shared with them. The three themes or typical responses are: Restitution, Chaos and Quest.

The overtones of the Parsifal myth, the Fisher King, are strong in this understanding of the leadership narrative. The image is of a wound which seems cannot heal, yet it must be healed for life to contain meaning. And essentially, like many journey stories, it is a tale about finding home, often in the sense of returning to a familiar place and seeing it anew for the first time.

There are three different responses to the wounds of leadership. While the particulars will differ with each person and narrative's circumstances, the general themes can become clear.

Restitution

The restitution story has a narrative which acknowledges that changes have occurred, and harm suffered. That said, the story is a bit of: 'yesterday I was healthy, today I am sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy, or at least healthier,

again'. In other words, the problem can be resolved, if not perfectly at least such that normal operations can resume and life can carry on. Such a narrative recognises the disruption and pain of the wound, but the wound will be protected, covered and healed.

Chaos

The chaos narrative is the story of un-resolved pain. Such difficult-to-hear stories tell of abandonment, loss, failure, disaster. Chaos stories are marked by what is not heard: there is a lack of coherence or purpose, and the future is unclear. While good may come from chaos, by their very nature chaos stories express little hint of such good which remains beyond the experience of the narrator.

Quest

The stories of quest are different from chaos stories. Quest stories, while not denying the pain and confusion, have the sense that the narrator is taking control, or at least can see steps to take in order to exert some control. Control may be partial, it may neither fix the 'problem' nor may it achieve a 'right balance' but there are steps in place to achieve a balance which the narrator can live with. Such quest stories may involve dramatic personal change, including resignation and choosing a very different job, or be more internal such that the person faces their own pain and wound. The theme of the quest story is that in the depths of every wound we have survived is the strength we need to live and go on.

What does it mean for Christian Leaders?

This paper is built around four ideas. These ideas are:

- Servant-Leadership is a spirituality that has grown from a Christian tradition in the world of work
- Servant-Leadership has a growing base of organisations and leaders who are committed, in our post Enron, HIH, September 11th and 'war to eradicate weapons of mass destruction' world to the ethical, person-focused ideal of leadership
- Even the best of leaders suffer wounds due to their mistakes, the mistakes of others, and the sad fact that this world of ours is conflicted and confused
- Christian leaders are not spared these same issues, and by virtue of their mission and ideals are even more exposed to the pain of leadership wounds.

If these ideas come anywhere near to the lived experience of Christian leaders, then leaders need a spirituality that taps into these experiences. Such a spirituality must not only help explain experiences and enable leaders to cope with and through the experiences of wounding. Servant-Leadership offers the potential to nourish and sustain the leader, to integrate the leader's experiences, feelings, thinking, theology and personal aspiration for mission into a spirituality that relates to the real world of work and endeavours to give meaning even to the experiences of pain.

What does it say about us?

A helpful question to understand the importance of the wound may be this simple reflection: **Why am I wounded?**

Our wounds communicate our needs, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and doubts. At the same time, our wounds speak of our growth margins, the tender places of new flesh, our youthful un-hardened aspirations. Our wounds also speak of the call to new life and new commitment, and the possibilities that exist for our new choices. Such wounds may become growth points, but only when I allow myself to grow.

What does it say about Leadership?

I suspect that this analysis leads to four very strong conclusions, that leaders need to be pro-active in terms of self-care and self-nourishment. How might these ends be met?

- Learn to trust the unattended areas of your leadership — especially your feelings
- Listen honestly and deeply for the questions that are feared or left out of your work life altogether
- Find friends to talk to whom you really trust and who are honest enough to tell you the truth as they hear it
- Cultivate a spirituality of Servant-Leadership

What would we choose it to say?

‘A good school must learn to bend itself around the strengths and vulnerabilities of its leaders, must nourish itself in the ground it is planted’ a retiree of fifty years in education is reputed to have said. What an extraordinary challenge for the school community and leaders to face! This reflection has the insight that the act of leadership is bound in communication, and that this communication is two-way between leadership and community.

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski invite reflection on these characteristics of a school leader, who can say privately and to the school community:

I am genuinely interested in learning things, which helps others in their attempts to learn.

I move, sometimes awkwardly, toward understanding the leadership position I am in and the responsibilities with which I have been entrusted by others.

I may make mistakes, and I may be inconsistent at times.

I can talk about my leadership with others.

I have complicated and sometimes contradictory feelings about power and sharing it.

I value and respect the dignity of others, yet when I'm fearful I sometimes forget it.

I try to remain aware of what I need and what others need from my leadership at any particular time.

I can focus more on challenges at hand rather than expending my energy proving I am something I am not.

I can use more of my knowledge, skills, and creative imagination in framing and solving problems than in defending myself.

I can freely change and grow in a leadership position because I am not bound by rigid concepts of what I have been, am now, or ought to be.

By my own openness and honesty with myself, I can bring out these same qualities in others (with acknowledgement to Carl Rogers).

(Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, pp.127-128)

Conclusion

This article has argued that Servant-Leadership establishes a conceptual basis for an authentic and useful spirituality for modern times. More importantly, the 'fit' between Servant-Leadership and the role of the Christian leader is apposite and helpful towards developing a lived integration of duties, responsibilities, mission and vocation.

Using the lens of Servant-Leadership, this article has attempted to explore the wounding that leaders often experience. The wounds are the problems that most directly attack the self-confidence and integrity of the leader, rather than mere set-backs and errors. Such wounds can be crippling and life-threatening, or such wounds can also be a call to new life. The cusp or decision point that determines the effect of such wounds is not necessarily related to the wound itself but to the leader's ability to resource a response. It is in this task of responding that Servant-Leadership spirituality can be powerful.

Lastly, the article attempts to set some indicators which a leader may use in charting individual discernment of growth as a leader whose values and practices are person-centred and grounded in their lived Christian experience.

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