

Critical Analysis of Robert K. Greenleaf's Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness

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Abstract

This critical essay provides an in-depth critical analysis of Robert K. Greenleaf's book entitled *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. The reader is introduced to Greenleaf's perspective, insight, and vivid analysis on the meaning of not only what it means to be an effective leader, but ultimately a "Servant Leader" and how the servant leader yields the most innovative, creative, and transformative results within professional, educational and a vast range of other community organizations within modern day society. More specifically, this essay illuminates key ideas on Greenleaf's theory and perspective of leadership, characteristics of the servant leader, as well as listening skills and empathy of the servant leader. Ultimately, this essay strongly illuminates Greenleaf's unique vision of a leader who creates a "we" centered environment within their organization, as well as inspires a seamless community of professionals working "together" to complete a common goal.

Keywords: Servant, Leader, Greenleaf, Organization, Community, Institution

When one thinks of the word "leader," many descriptive terms and images begin to surface such as powerful, authoritative, dominating, inspirational, and many other distinctive characteristics that conventionally separate a particular individual from others that are characterized as followers. We as professionals and members of the community must begin to acknowledge that an effective leader is one who refrains from "otherizing" his or her followers, but rather, openly embraces the diverse ideas, cultures, and differences of others. Robert K. Greenleaf introduces the dynamic concept of the "servant leader." We learn that a true leader within an organization is one who extends his or her power beyond the persona of the self and collaboratively bridges the gap between their self and others through teamwork.

1. Greenleaf's Theory and Perspectives on Leadership

Greenleaf presents the paradigm of critical theory in the sense that he presents a firm charge against deficient leadership and advocates for change. Blake and Masschellein (2007) states, "Critical Theory views society from the position of the 'injured' and the 'vulnerable' [. . .] Critical Theory offers to Western thought the challenge of making real our humanity and of striving continuously for a better world" (p. 39). This is the type of change that Greenleaf advocates for; a change from the leader to the "servant leader" who will prioritize our needs, listen to our thoughts and ideas, and produce an innovative, productive community within a given organization. Moreover, we are only inclined to respond to servant leaders who clearly exhibit a passionate desire to lead and connect to their followers. Frequently, we as professional members of society make poor choices as to whose leadership style to follow due to the vast abundance of ineffective leaders who dominate organizations across America. In regard to effective leadership, organizations, and change, Greenleaf (2002) asserts that in order for significant change to occur within poorly functioning organizations, we as individuals within the community must initiate the change by getting actively involved within the ill functioning institution:

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We are becoming a nation that is dominated by large institutions – churches, businesses, governments, labor unions, universities – and these big institutions are not serving us well [. . .] Nothing of substance will happen unless there are people inside these institutions who are able to (and want to) lead them into better performance for the public good. (p.15)

In this passage, Greenleaf exhibits how the only effective method of transforming an organization led by an incompetent leader is to become an involved change agent. He is illuminating how mere criticism and complaining about poor leadership only maintains current weaknesses, rather than eliminating them. For an organization to experience growth and development on multiple levels, it must possess a servant leader with a passionate commitment to make change within the heart of the organization, and extend this change into the surrounding community. Greenleaf is illuminating Bolman and Deal's *Political Frame* here in regard to strongly advocating for action oriented change agents and initiating a strong realignment of powerful leadership. Developing an action-oriented sense of change within organizations will create a more tangible, visual image of leaders exercising and redistributing power, and forming unions within the particular organization and throughout the community.

The lack of action-based leadership within an organization is a political impediment to change that Greenleaf is acknowledging. Leaders who simply voice complaints regarding changes that need to be made within organizations and the community, but fail to “physically” initiate the necessary steps to implement the desired changes is ultimately equal to a politician who presents inspirational rhetoric to the public rather than action to support the rhetoric. Moreover, Bolman and Deal's (2008) *Political Frame* is illuminated here: “The job of a leader is to recognize major constituencies, develop ties to their leadership, and manage conflict as productively as possible. Above all, leaders need to build a power base and use power carefully” (p.333). Bolman and Deal are aligning with Greenleaf's theory on action-based leadership. For a leader to develop strong connections within their organization there must be a consistent display of collaborative action and negotiation among all parties. The “we” rather than the “me” must be in force in an effort to produce the most effective level of conflict resolution.

1. Central Insights and Characteristics of the Servant Leader

Upon thoroughly analyzing the concepts and perspectives of Greenleaf, three major central insights were highlighted that creatively mold the servant leader into an idealistic change agent within an organization, and are realistically grounded in organizations that comprise our everyday life experience. These insights are concerning the listening, empathy, and community building skills of the servant leader. Greenleaf (2002) focuses on servant leadership in business, education foundations, and church organizations throughout his text and holistically asserts how the above three characteristics must accompany an individual if effective servant leadership is to be executed: Criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation, it is sterile. In a time of crisis, like the leadership crisis we are now in, 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. (p. 25)

Greenleaf enlightens us to the realization of how a true servant leader with a quest to restore a broken organization is one who refrains from acting too quickly to dire situations. He is one who closely listens to the creative, innovative ideas of the people who comprise a given organization combined with the unique, diverse ideas of the community (the insightful artists) of a given society. Greenleaf is illuminating Bolman and Deal's *Structural* and *Human Resource* frames here in the sense that he is suggesting that the leader within an organization follow a slower paced, rational sequence of action when responding to a problem. By responding too quickly to a given situation, rationality of choice can become compromised and unfavorable results will be produced. In regard to human resource, Greenleaf is asserting the integral nature of the people's perspective, insight, and contribution to a given project in an effort to produce holistic results, which represents the diverse knowledge of the people. This is a sound example of the “we” dominating over the “me” of an organization.

2. Description and Prescription

The concepts of descriptive and prescriptive appear to be fused inaccurately in the above passage. Greenleaf is describing the mental framework of an overly ambitious leader and the consequences of this mentality, which is failure to acknowledge the artistic voice of the people, but he fails to clearly prescribe a set of directions for effectively balancing analysis and the creative voice of the people that comprise communities. Greenleaf's argument would have been stronger if he had described more in-depth how the artist's voice can equally fit into prompt decision-making and prescribed an adequate method of implementing the artistic aspect.

Moreover, Greenleaf's argument here appears to be "culturally skewed" in the sense that his tone of language here seems to paint a very sinister image of people's innate inclination to respond promptly to a community crisis. As a humane culture of professionals, we possess a natural instinct to seek the assistance of professional data and other reliable resources to rectify a negative situation. The quest for perfection is not necessarily a negative if a solid balance of initiative, logic, and a mutual merging of servant leadership with the people's voice is applied to the situation.

3. Listening Skills of the Servant Leader

As presented throughout the book concerning the characteristics of servant leadership, a servant leader is one who is openly willing to embrace knowledge by "listening" to the diverse views and ideas of others in an effort to gain new perspectives. Greenleaf (2002) states, "Listening as I use it here, is not just keeping still, or even remembering what is said. Listening is an attitude, an attitude toward other people and what they are trying to express [. . .] It is openness to communicate [. . .] openness to hear the prophetic voices that are trying to speak to us all of the time" (p. 313). Through listening to others, a servant leader can inherit a unique, transformative level of knowledge, which will transcend an organization to an immeasurable level of performance. Frequently, many insightful answers surround us, but are ignored due to an enlarged ego and a refusal to accept anyone other than ourselves as the vessel of knowledge. Wheatley (2002) states, "New voices revive our energy, and oftentimes help us discover solutions to problems that seem unsolvable [. . .] Open the gates and bring in new people" (p. 55). This passage illustrates how Wheatley and Greenleaf are in rhetorical harmony in regard to the transformative power of strong listening skills. New perceptions from others cannot only add a very creative, insightful spark to a conversation, but can also aid in materializing the answers to complex problems that tend to destroy the nucleus of an organization. Moreover, many of us are afraid to embrace new perceptions and ideas of others due to fear of an undesirable outcome. Wheatley (1994) states, "We become so fearful of change because it uses up valuable energy and leaves us only with entropy. Staying put or keeping in balance are our means of defense against the eroding forces of nature" (p. 77). Wheatley is illustrating here how many within society tend to view change as "the other" and are more inclined to choose an established, stationary system or level of action over possibility of failure. What we must realize here is that embracing new perspectives of others and taking risks leads to a creative level of change and the most innovative level of growth within organizations and communities. Failure of a certain task or goal should create strength and initiative for an optimal level of future performance.

4. Empathy of the Servant Leader

The ability to display genuine levels of "empathy" is also an insightful discussion that Greenleaf highlights in his book in terms of essential traits for a servant leader to possess. In the chapter entitled *Servant Leadership in Education*, he presents a significant issue that exists within both the secondary and adult educational setting that is in serious need of servant leadership and is currently seen within many schools across the nation. The issue is "the assumption that some individuals know what another ought to learn, and are justified in imposing their judgment – backed up by sanctions" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 180). Bolman and Deal's human resource and *Symbolic* frames are exhibited here in the sense that Greenleaf is advocating for a more open-ended process between teachers and students in identifying academic deficiencies, and is illustrating an image for the need of teacher accountability for recognizing diversity in the classroom. Teachers should begin to empathize with students regarding diverse learning needs. For example, instructors at all levels of education tend to assume that virtual learning activities will enhance a student's education by means of educational convenience, and strengthening technological skills. Instructors must acknowledge that while some students may enjoy or even embrace a virtually enhanced classroom, many are underprepared to fully embrace it and are ultimately discouraged by the loss of the intimate connection with the instructor. Greenleaf (2002) states, "When people are of secondary school age they are old enough to understand that an assumption has been made, and that it might be wrong – and, for some individuals, that it might not be good for them" (p. 181). Greenleaf is challenging us here to acknowledge and empathize with student's individuality and to honor the reality of what is ideal for one may ultimately be a barrier to growth and development for another. Greenleaf's perspective here once again seems "culturally skewed" in the sense that he is assuming that all secondary school students possess the ability to fully comprehend the validity of an assumption made by an instructor based solely on age. For example, depending upon the cultural background of a particular student in terms of education, religion, or social experience, an international student may be very naïve in regard to determining "western" ideas of appropriate or inappropriateness in relation to their well-being. There may also be other factors such as language barriers and educational deficiencies that strongly influence comprehension of ideas or instructor motives.

5. Building Community

Building community is also an integral skill that servant leaders need to possess while leading various institutions. Greenleaf (2002) presents highly insightful points in his text regarding the importance of collaboration, respect, and growing intellectually, spiritually, and aesthetically when building a strong community within organizations:

Where community does not exist, trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain. Living in community as one's basic involvement will generate an exportable surplus of love that we may carry into our many involvements with institutions that are usually not communities: businesses, churches, governments, schools. (p. 52)

Here, Greenleaf is suggesting how an organizational atmosphere void of community oriented camaraderie, integrity, respect, and acceptance is ultimately a dark abyss where healthy, innovative growth and development become extinct. Interestingly, the elements of "descriptive" and "prescriptive" appear to be fused inaccurately in the above passage as well. Greenleaf is suggesting that institutions in the category of businesses, churches, governmental organizations, and schools are conventionally viewed as "non-community" environments. I highly disagree with Greenleaf's view on this as the above listed institutions are ultimately the cornerstones of our society and are very community oriented due to their missions, and impact on surrounding communities. Schools are communities because of the common goal of academic and professional achievement that teachers, administrators, and students possess. The church is a community due to its community outreach service, shared religious views, goals of spiritual growth, and enlightenment that members of the congregation share. Businesses and government agencies are communities due to the shared goal of effective, structured service to members of society. Greenleaf describes how an organization void of a strong sense of community is an organization that cannot facilitate a loving, productive environment, but is irresponsible and vague in his description of how he concluded that churches, businesses, schools, and government agencies are non-community environments. If such a statement were true, Greenleaf would need to clearly "prescribe" a community enhancing remedy to such institutions in an effort to resolve the crisis of lacking community.

A servant leader who builds community is a leader who creates harmony and strength, which can be transferred through people into other organizations where the sense of community is excessively weak or non-existent. Ultimately, we are the vessels that house community building skills and possess the ability to plant the seed of community building not only within one's home organization, but also in organizations throughout the community and abroad. Once the seed of community has been planted and begins to grow and develop, a unique level of "collective leadership" begins to blossom, ultimately allowing the organization to flourish at an unlimited rate of progress.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2007) cohesively aligns with Greenleaf's ideas on collective leadership within organizations in the sense that both authors assert that effective leadership is inclusive of the unique ideas and perspectives of all, rather than one dominate individual:

Collective leadership becomes possible when the members of a group, motivated by a common purpose, begin to build relationships with each other that are genuinely respectful enough to allow them to co-construct their shared purpose and work. This is about expanding from the sole perspective of "I" to include the "we." (p. 3) This passage clearly illuminates Greenleaf's ideas as to what the embodiment of a servant leader is truly comprised of. Greenleaf and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation are parallel in their view that in order to accomplish any task or resolve complex issues as a team, an organization must intellectually, professionally, socially, and aesthetically connect to each other, ultimately creating a "collective" body of leadership:

William Blake has said, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite" [. . .] Most of us move about with very narrow perception – sight, sound, smell, tactile – and we miss most of the grandeur that is in the minutest, the smallest experience. We also miss leadership opportunities.

(Greenleaf, 2002, p. 41)

Greenleaf interestingly quotes the Eighteenth-Century poet William Blake in an effort to illuminate how we as a community frequently limit our knowledge, growth, and development as a result of our unwillingness to embrace the new insights and perceptions of others.

Bolman and Deal's symbolic frame is also illustrated here in the sense that he uses the phrase "doors of perception" to create the mental visual image of openness which symbolizes diverse levels of thinking. By opening our "doors of perception," we enable our intellect to transcend to a "sublime" level of knowledge, creativity, and diversity. Moreover, the "we" of any organization is also its "lifeworld" and "center:"

In families, schools, and other social organizations there is a center and a periphery. When social organizations are functioning properly, the lifeworld occupies the center position. A good way to visualize this relationship is to recall the old adage "form should follow function or function will follow form." (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 6)

Sergiovanni enlightens us here to the dangers of losing sight of the value of creative connectedness within and organization and how proper, effective functioning depends on this strong connection. He is also echoing the Eighteenth-Century poet William Blake in this passage with his assertion of how when one makes decisions in "response" to system policies rather than "about" them, leadership is lost and the lifeworld of the organization becomes "second in command." We are closing our "doors of perception" and ultimately conforming to the established regulations of the system.

6. Ethical Issues in Organizations

Greenleaf presents a significant and common example of corrupt and unethical leadership in businesses that personally connects to my own experience as a leader and member of an organization. Greenleaf discusses the lack of professionalism and the predominance of corruption that plagues various businesses across the U.S. He discusses how the overall culture of business organizations is to advance professionally by means of manipulation and deceit. Servant leadership within the business world is characterized as weakness and a prescription for failure. Greenleaf (2002) states, "There has emerged from this ferment the expectation, held by many, that a manipulation – free society is a possibility – a 'leaderless' society that is governed by a continuing consensus with full participation and with every motive behind every action fully exposed" (p. 150).

Greenleaf is illuminating here how high ethics, integrity, and respect are essentially dirty words within the business world, and a leader void of these traits is ultimately viewed as no leader at all. He is also asserting how many business organizations exist with the view that unethical behavior is the ultimate pathway to success.

This perspective on corrupt business organizations interestingly mirrors my experience as a supervisor at Wal-Mart Stores Inc. On a daily basis, I witnessed a select group of employees receiving special acknowledgement, promotions, extended vacation days and other privileges regardless of their poor attendance, poor customer service skills, and inability to work as a team player. These special privileges were the result of these employees performing special, non-job related favors for members of the upper management team. As Greenleaf discusses in the text, upper management advanced the careers of others by means of favoritism, dishonesty, and lack of integrity, which ultimately creates a very corrupt business environment. Upper management failed to exercise servant leadership traits, which are integrity, fairness, and equality. They chose to manipulate hourly employees into believing that certain individuals were more exemplary in their job performance than they actually were:

The leader's power comes from talent, caring, sensitivity, and service rather than position or force. Greenleaf concludes that followers "will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants" (1973, p. 4). He adds, "The servant leader makes sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served." (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 361)

In this passage, Bolman and Deal unite with Greenleaf in acknowledging the noble nature of the servant leader, which is to teach ethics, integrity, promote growth and development, and most significantly, ignite a metamorphosis of collaborative knowledge and anti-suppression within an organization.

7. Conclusion

The presence of a servant leader is the integral lifeline necessary for effective leadership on all levels. Without servant leadership, the "we" of the organization becomes extinct, ultimately eliminating the growth and development of a strong sense of community within the organization. Greenleaf's dominate message in this text is that a leader who suppresses the ideas of others is ultimately not a servant leader, but a "cancer" that deteriorates all possibilities for equality, progress, and change within an organization.

Moreover, a central idea that Greenleaf presents is that a leader who fails to utilize “foresight” in regard to potential problematic situations is a form of unethical behavior. Greenleaf (2002) states, “Foresight is the ‘lead’ that the leader has. Once leaders lose this lead and events start to force their hands, they are leaders in name only. They are not leading but are reacting to immediate events, and they probably will not long be leaders” (p. 40). Here, Greenleaf is asserting how a true leader, a servant leader is one who is able to take a pro-active approach to leadership rather than conventionally reacting to problems or situations. Whether the servant leader is in a business, educational, church, or governmental organization, foresight is the aesthetic window within the mind of the servant leader that enables him to visualize unique perspectives. Foresight combined with a “we” oriented community ultimately yields the highest, most innovative, and most valuable forms of leadership.

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