

From the book *So Many Leaders, So Little Leadership*  
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## CHAPTER FOUR: SERVANT LEADERS

In the last chapter, I outlined several key personal beliefs about leadership that have made their way into my leadership philosophy. They include

1. Leaders are born *and* made
2. Leadership requires a lot of hard work
3. Effective leaders, if they are truly effective, are surrounded by good people
4. Good leaders need to recognize and reward the good people around them
5. Leaders are servants.

Let's look more closely at the fifth one: servant leaders. A number of years ago I read Max DePree's book, *Leadership Is an Art*. It remains today one of my favorite books on leadership. In that book, DePree makes one simple statement about leadership that I have quoted and meditated on in many settings:

**The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.<sup>i</sup>**

That summary is profound and I have found it to be true in my own leadership opportunities again and again.

On the front end, I must define the borders and parameters for those following me. That includes defining the job, its financial objectives, why it is being done, how it fits into the overall picture, and who will do it. At the end, I must say "thank you." And I try to say it with words *and* cash. But in between those two "bookends," I'm indebted

to those who are doing the work and I must serve them in whatever way necessary so that they can do their job. It's so simple, yet so hard to do!

I find the issue of service one of the hardest concepts for leaders to grasp. Let's make it more personal—I find it the hardest! For help with this, I've turned to the Bible for both perspective and assistance.

As I do, let me say that I'm impressed with how many management and leadership experts quote from the Bible. Their search for wisdom always seems to lead them there. Yet when I go to conferences and ask them for their church affiliation, many want to let me know right away that they are not “church people.” I find it sad that their search for wisdom has led them to the source of wisdom, yet has not affected their personal lives.

I have no such dilemma. I'm a “church people” through and through. For me, the Bible isn't *a* source of truth. It's *the* source of truth and I've found it always to be accurate, especially when it talks about humanity and the issues of life. Enough said. Now back to the issue of service.

In Luke 22, I find a fascinating story about service. Jesus is gathered in the upper room with His disciples for what is now known as the Last Supper.

Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them' and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? It is not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:24-27).

This isn't the first time that Jesus had this discussion about service with His followers. But even now, as He prepared for His death, He found it necessary to go over

it one more time because they were arguing over who had the most significant ministry. He then went on to practice what He preached by giving His life for those same followers.

Service isn't easy, but it's what leaders must do if their leadership is to be complete. It requires humility and a firm grasp on purpose and values. Leaders who serve followers have found the way to prevent power from corrupting their leadership. They've also found a way to keep from manipulating and controlling followers. It's through the simple practice and mentality of service.

Robert Greenleaf wrote,

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons, do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?<sup>ii</sup>

The major objection to leaders being servants is generally rooted in something that sounds like this: "I'm not working for people; they are working for me. I won't and can't have employees telling me (leadership) what to do." This reveals a faulty understanding of servant leadership and a bit of insecurity as well.

To clarify this misconception, I turn to Ken Blanchard, well-known author of One-Minute management fame. He explains concerning traditional leadership,

Most organizations are typically pyramidal in nature. Who is at the top of the organization? The chief executive officer, the chairman, the board of directors. Who is at the bottom? All the employees—the people who do the work. . . . The paradox is that the pyramid needs to be right side up or upside down depending on the task or role.

It's absolutely essential that the pyramid stay upright when it comes to vision, mission, values, and setting major goals. Moses did not go up on the mountain with a committee. People look to leaders for direction, so the traditional hierarchy isn't bad for this aspect of leadership.

Most organizations and managers get in trouble in the implementation phase of the leadership process. The traditional pyramid is kept alive and well. When that happens, who do people think they work for? The person above them. The minute you think you work for the person above you for implementation, you are assuming that person—your boss—is *responsible* and your job is being *responsive* to that boss and to his or her whims or wishes. As a result, all the energy in the organization is moving up the hierarchy, away from customers and the frontline folks who are closest to the action<sup>iii</sup>

Blanchard's remedy is to turn the pyramid upside down for the implementation. He further explains, "That creates a very different environment for implementation. If you work for your people, what is the purpose of being a manager? *To help them accomplish their goals.* Your job is to help them win."<sup>iv</sup>

So leaders must serve the organization by setting the direction and then serve the employees and customers by equipping everyone that can help the organization accomplish its mission. This fits in perfectly with what Max DePree wrote. First, leaders define reality for the organization—that includes the vision, mission and goals. When it's all over, the leader says "Thank you," because the leader is the caretaker for the organization. In between, *everything* is service—making sure the staff, volunteers and customers have everything *they* need so the organization prospers.

When I traveled with the music team of Worship International, I had numerous opportunities to put this into practice. I determined where we would go, picked the team members, worked out the budget, and made sure all the details were covered (I did this with the help and input of a lot of people). When we got to the concert site, I put on my servant's hat. I made airport runs, picked up the bottled water and air cargo, and did whatever needed to be done to make sure the event was a success.

On Saturday night, I personally handed out the paychecks (I always had them ready beforehand) and said thanks for a job well done. I then took everybody back to the airport to catch a plane home. I still try to take the same role in whatever project I find myself leading.

If you want to do some more study and reading on servant-leaders, then I highly recommend any of Robert Greenleaf's works, specifically:

- *On Becoming a Servant Leader*
- *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership*
- *The Power of Servant Leadership*
- *Insights on Leadership*

All of the above books are edited by Larry C. Spears, who serves as the director for

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The Greenleaf Center has annual conferences and training seminars, a resource catalog that contains the books mentioned above, and other programs to help us all understand the implications and strategies of servant leaders.

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<sup>i</sup> Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1989), page 11.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), page 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Larry C. Spear, editor, *Insights on Leadership* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998), page 23.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., page 25.