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Author(s): Richard F. Bowman

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# Teacher as Servant Leader

RICHARD F. BOWMAN

Servant leadership as an idea or theme has a lineage as old as the scriptures. Yet, the principles that ground servant leadership mirror a universal ethic: humility, honesty, trust, empathy, healing, community, and service. In many of today's secular and religious organizations, servant leadership has emerged as a resonant moral principle. The test of that moral principle in contemporary classrooms is Greenleaf's "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while* being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants?" (1970, 7). Servant leadership in the classroom speaks to the universal human longing to be known, to care, and to be cared for in pursuit of the common good.

In *The Serving Leader*, Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2003) detail five pragmatic principles related to functioning productively as a serving leader in contemporary educational settings. Specifically, the authors stress that becoming a serving leader begins with the natural feeling that one truly wants to serve—to serve first, lead secondly. Fundamentally, servant leadership is personal. Thus, in the ultimate sense, servant leadership is self-inflicted accountability in the service of others. Operationally, the developmental commitment of the teacher as serving leader is no longer that of controlling or managing energy in others but rather inspiring creative energy in one's students and colleagues. In practice, servant leadership in the classroom initially involves processes of inner growth followed by outer organizational effects.

Jennings and Stahl-Wert posit that educators, as serving leaders, "run to great purpose" (2003, 100). That great purpose, that pursuit of something truly significant, ultimately pulls leadership challenges into sharp focus. At Winona State University, for example, colleagues are currently conceptualizing a "New University." The pur-

pose of the New University is captured in fifty-five banners that tower above the WSU campus: "A Community of Learners Dedicated to Improving Our World." The New University seeks to catalyze the deep human yearning to make a difference by committing students, professors, administrators, and citizens to a transformational journey organized around mission and dedicated to changing lives. Moreover, the banners symbolize the shared belief that great purpose transcends self-interest by raising "the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both the leader and the led" (Kouzes and Posner 2002, 153).

In contrast, imagine a university that recruits students with documented capabilities, ripened programmatic interests, and a robust work ethic. Imagine, moreover, that the aura of the freshmen orientation for those talented recruits mirrors the title of Kumar's latest book: *You Are Therefore I Am: A Declaration of Dependence* (Gosling and Mintzberg 2003). Specifically, Kumar's title captures of the essence of a community of learners: a generosity of spirit coupled with a proclaimed sense of perceived interdependence. Imagine also that those students are in good academic standing at the end of their sophomore year of college, when they apply for admission to an academic department. Finally, imagine that a sizable percentage of those students are subsequently denied admission to that major because of limited classroom space and/or faculty resources. Would those students likely attribute their rejection to greater purpose? Or might they perhaps attribute that denial of admission to faculty or institutional self-interest? More importantly, would those students likely feel the communion of purpose and the commemoration of dreams that fuses a community of learners? (Kouzes and Posner 2002). If not, might those students then argue that communities, unlike organizations, are intended to be

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*Richard F. Bowman is a professor of educational foundations at the College of Education at Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota.*

answerable to everyone equally? In *Who Really Matters*, Art Kleiner asks the wonderfully useful companion question: "What *purpose* is this organization seeking to fulfill?" (2003, 4).

Contextually, serving leaders seek to restore sight to organizations and communities threatened by the myopia of private interest. Paradoxically, serving leaders sense that "when leadership is working, it hurts" (Lowney 2003, 288). Serving leaders sense that the process of self-inquiry enables ingenuity by deepening self-understanding. Serving leaders, moreover, persistently chronicle the deeply embedded belief that the defining elements of community are "perceived interdependence" and "generosity" (Pinchot 1998, 44). "Trouble arises," Aristotle observed, "not over inequalities of property, but inequalities of honor" (Eppler 2003, 163). Serving leaders understand that a community of learners is damaged by the "inequalities of honor" in contrived competitive admissions' policies and practices.

At a socio-political level, serving leaders "recognize and honor the legitimacy of others' interests in an effort to promote their own welfare" (Kouzes and Posner 2002, 256). In *Bowling Alone*, Harvard scholar Robert Putnam rechristens that socio-political proposition ethically: "The norm of generalized reciprocity is so fundamental to civilized life that all prominent moral codes contain some equivalent of the Golden Rule" (2000, 134).

The second of Jennings and Stahl-Wert's pragmatic principles is that the teacher as serving leader "unleashes the strengths, talents, and passions of those he or she serves" (2003, 14). The Jesuit founder, St. Ignatius Loyola, relentlessly urged his followers to open their eyes to talent and the potential to acutely change what they saw. Specifically, Ignatius Loyola's sixteenth-century practice of servant leadership strived to have "the *vision* to see each person's talent, potential, and dignity, the *courage*, *passion*, and *commitment* to unlock that potential, and the resulting *loyalty* and *mutual support* that energize and unite teams" (Lowney 2003, 170).

The teacher as servant leader functions as a trailblazer for those served by removing obstacles that stand in their path. Part of unleashing another's talents is helping individuals discover latent, unformed interests. Art, music, and science teachers are prime examples of educators whose genius lies in leading students to discover unarticulated interests. In tandem, removing obstacles that thwart students' discovery and development of their talents is another key role of the teacher as serving leader. Recently, a middle-school music educator in a rural North Dakota town aided a young migrant boy, from a family consisting of eleven brothers and sisters, to get a set of drums for his music class through an anonymous community resource. On the day that the

drum set was delivered, the surprised child's face reflected the role of the classroom teacher as serving leader: "Helping everyone else to succeed" (Jennings and Stahl-Wert 2003, 13).

The third proposition embedded in Jennings and Stahl-Wert's *The Serving Leader* (2003) deals with establishing high standards of performance for those served. Teachers as serving leaders passionately and competently teach students the "knowledge, skills, and strategies that they need to succeed" (51). Teachers teach the reading, math, and study skills, and the adaptive skills that those being served need both in the workplace and in community settings. More importantly, teachers as serving leaders "reduce their wisdom into 'how to succeed' into bite-sized packages" (52). Moreover, teachers as serving leaders model in their professional lives the skills and attitudes that they teach. That is, they function as the very leaders of character that they wish to find in the world. They also hold those being served to the same standards. Doing so creates a palpable sense of belonging within the context of community for both those being served as well as the serving leader.

The fourth basic action of the serving leader is "to address your weakness, build on your strengths" (Jennings and Stahl-Wert 2003, 102). Conventional wisdom suggests that teachers as serving leaders enhance students' performance by assisting them to identify and overcome their weaknesses. Yet, in a massive study of eighty thousand leaders across twenty-five years, Buckingham and Coffman discovered that great leaders share one common trait: They do not try to help others overcome their weaknesses. Rather, great leaders build on others' unique strengths. The real work of teachers as serving leaders, and as developmental coaches, is captured in the mantra of great leaders:

People don't change that much.

Don't waste time trying to fix what was left out.

Try to draw out what was left in.

That is hard enough. (Buckingham and Coffman 1999, 79)

However, research suggests that the productivity of teachers "has not improved, and may in fact have shrunk, in the past seventy years" (Drucker 2000, 9). Drucker argues that the recent historic shift to self-management forces two compelling questions for the teacher as serving leader: "Do you know what you are good at?" and "Do you know what you *need* to learn to get the full benefit of your strengths?" (8). Specifically, Drucker contends that "effective organizations put people in jobs in which they can do the most good. They place people—and allow people to place themselves—according to their strengths" (9). In orchestrating class projects in art, science, and music, for example, teachers as serving leaders focus on "aligning the strengths of many people" to ensure that

each student “contributes what he or she is best at” (Jennings and Stahl-Wert 2003, 101).

Finally, the fifth pragmatic principle of servant leadership advanced by Jennings and Stahl-Wert is that the serving leader puts oneself “at the bottom of the pyramid” so that one can focus on unleashing “the energy, excitement, and talents” (2003, 101–2) of those being served. For teachers as serving leaders, positioning oneself at the base of the pyramid starts with listening to the hopes of others so that one can lead by being led. An insurance salesman in New York, recalling being stuck in an elevator for a few minutes with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, exclaimed “I think that I am the most uninteresting fellow in the world and yet Mrs. Roosevelt wanted to know everything about me, as if I were her equal” (Gerber 2002, 265). For teachers as serving leaders, listening to one’s students emphasizes the point that in community the capacity to be taught is as important as the capability to teach.

In *Good to Great*, Collins discovers that exemplary leaders build enduring organizational greatness “through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (2001, 20). Moreover, Collins discovers that those leaders with the highest levels of executive capabilities “channel their ego needs away from themselves” and into the larger goal of building relationships (21). Attending to relationships is a fundamental requirement for serving leaders in diverse settings. In the context of the No Child Left Behind reform law, teachers as serving leaders downplay their positional power, while displaying a fierce resolve to hold their students accountable to high, rigorous academic standards. As a result, today’s teachers as serving leaders are a study in duality: “modest and willful, humble and fearless” (22). In short, teachers as serving leaders seize daily opportunities to make subtle differences in their students’ lives across time.

At its core, servant leadership involves creating and sustaining faculty-student relationships around a shared sense of purpose and accountability for the whole. To achieve Greenleaf’s ideals of servant leadership will require colleagues to intentionally explore—with a deep desire to help others—a collective vision of the school as servant to its students. Much like classroom stories, servant leadership forces educators out of their heads and into their hearts. To thoughtfully navigate Jennings and Stahl-Wert’s five pragmatic principles of the serving leader, educators need to recast the social

architecture of the classroom to ensure that it honors the deepest realities of human existence by promoting community, connection, interdependency, fairness, and the sharing of power in decision-making. In *Awakening the Leader Within*, leadership scholar Kevin Cashman observes that “prayer is connecting with Essence; Intuition is Essence connecting with us; Transcendence is Essence connected with Essence” (2003, 285). Aspiring serving leaders in the classroom are ultimately compelled to pause on their pilgrimage to Essence to confront a transcendent question: What might our schools accomplish if its inhabitants trusted and called on the human spirit in the service of others? (Wheatley 1998). Calling on the human spirit in the service of others reframes educators’ professional obligation to focus on the developmental needs of *all* learners. Calling on the human spirit in the service of others requires educators to understand how their own teaching styles and instructional preferences impact the learning of students with contrasting styles and preferences. And calling on the human spirit in the service of others frees teachers and students from the barrenness of a fact-driven curriculum to autonomously explore trails of personal interest.

*Key words:* educators, leadership, serving leaders

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