

Quotes in black from *Servant Leadership* by Robert K. Greenleaf, Paulist Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8091-2527-7

Comments in green added by Michael Ayers to serve as glue / transition material; italics are as in the original; underlining added by Ayers for ease of reading.

I'm quite out of practice at speaking in public, especially in these last years since I died in 1990. And I'm quite old. So I'll go kind of slowly. If you have a question, please stop me to pose your question. I was born in 1904 and attended college after high school. So it must have been in about 1926 that I was in my senior year.

As late as the last half of my senior year in college I was without a clear vocational aim. I knew that, on graduation, I would work at something, but I was not much concerned about what it would be. In due course, I assured myself, I would give that important matter some attention. The only certainty was that I wanted no more formal education. I would settle for a bachelor's degree. . . .

One day, in the course of a rambling lecture, my old professor made a statement along these lines: "There is a new problem in our country. 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. I hope that all of you will be concerned about this. Now you can do as I do, stand outside and criticize, bring pressure if you can, write and argue about it. All of this may do some good. But 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. Some of you ought to make careers inside these big institutions and become a force for good – from the inside." (p 1 - 2)

So I joined AT&T, at that time the largest corporation on earth. And I stayed for some forty years, starting out putting telephone poles in the ground (because that was part of the practice of getting new-hires integrated into the culture) and ending in about 1964 as Director of Management Research. Oddly

enough, each of the positions I held over the course of 40 years at AT&T did not exist before I held them – except for one position I held for four years.

When I left, I started a non-profit which I called The Center for Applied Ethics. Its name was subsequently changed to the Robert Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership. Let me tell you how that came about. Near the end of my career, I came upon a book by Herman Hesse called Journey to the East. In it, a band of pilgrims were on a journey along with a servant name Leo. Things went along well, with Leo making the arrangements for lodging and food, handling the baggage and so forth. Then one morning Leo was gone. And things kind of fell apart. There was bickering and finger-pointing and acrimony. The pilgrimage was quickly abandoned. Some years later one of the pilgrims came across Leo, who was found to be a person of great renown and a teacher. It seems that Leo, as the nominal servant had in fact been the leader of the pilgrimage.

The servant, the leader. I adopted that phrase to describe my philosophy of leadership. And I brought that philosophy to my joint-appointment to the Harvard and MIT business schools, and later teaching positions at Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia.

In this story, Leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was servant first. (p 8)

*I want to suggest to you that A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. *Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants.* To the extent that this principle prevails in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant-led. (p 10)*

An institution consists of a band of people who have come together to work toward some common goal. What about that goal? As long as one is leading, one always has a goal. It may be a goal arrived at by group consensus, or the leader, acting on inspiration, may simply have said, 'Let's go this way.' But the leader always knows what it is and can articulate it for any who are unsure. By

clearly stating and restating the goal the leader gives certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty in achieving it for themselves.

The word *goal* is used here in the special sense of the overarching purpose, the big dream, the visionary concept, the ultimate consummation which one approaches but never really achieves. It is something presently out of reach; it is something to strive for, to move toward, or become. It is so stated that it excites the imagination and challenges people to work for something they can be proud of as they move toward it. . . .

Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring it to reality; but the dream must be there first. (p 15 - 16)

So the dream offers a challenge. As we strive to meet that challenge, we'll have to be in communication with one another. We have to stay in touch. I suggest that we can best stay in touch through engaging in dialog. During dialog, you may talk while others listen. You may listen while others talk. Sometimes, however, no one will talk. I grew up in a Quaker environment where silence was part of our tradition. One must not be afraid of a little silence. Some find silence awkward or oppressive, but a relaxed approach to dialogue will include the welcoming of some silence. It is often a devastating question to ask oneself – but it is sometimes important to ask it – ‘In saying what I have in mind will I really improve on the silence?’ (p 17)

During that silence, I can reflect on what I've heard, and thought, and felt. The ability to withdraw and reorient oneself, if only for a moment, presumes that one has learned the art of systematic neglect, to sort out the more important from the less important – and the important from the urgent – and attend to the more important, even though there may be penalties and censure for the neglect of something else. (p 19)

I called my organization The Center for Applied Ethics. Let me expand just briefly on ethics and particularly the application of ethics in the exercise of leadership. The failure (or refusal) of a leader to foresee may be viewed as an ethical failure, because a serious

ethical compromise today (when the usual judgment on ethical inadequacy is made) is sometimes the result of a failure to make the effort at an earlier date to foresee today's events and take the right actions when there was freedom for initiative to act. . . . Foresight is the 'lead' that the leader has. Once leaders lose this lead and events start to force their hand, 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 26)

So we have our society, and we have our institutions, and we have our leaders ... and then we have the other members of the institutions. This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal, not always competent, sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (p 49)

... 'regenerative forces' implies that things change. An organization is a kind of a paradox, you see. For optimal performance, a large institution needs administration for order and consistency, and leadership so as to mitigate the effects of administration on initiative and creativity and to build team effort to give these qualities extraordinary encouragement. (p 60)

Not administration or leadership, but administration and leadership. And here's another paradox ... The prime force for achievement through service in any large institution is a senior administrative group with optimal balance between operators and conceptualizers. . . .

In a large institution the council of equals with a *primus inter pares ... that's Latin for 'first among equals' ...* serves best when it is predominantly conceptual. *Whoever in the council has the greatest team-building ability should be primus*, even though someone else may have a higher-

sounding formal title. . . . The achievement of such optimal balance is hindered by a stubborn fact: *whereas conceptualizers generally recognize the need for operators, the reverse is often not the case.* (p 66 - 67)

More importantly, I firmly believe that A top leadership team of equals with a *primus* in our major institutions will grow more leaders faster than any other course available to us. Leaders are not trained. They are competent people to begin with, and they can be given a vision and a context of values. Beyond that they need only opportunity and encouragement to grow. (p 89)

Now, whose job is it to create the next generation of leaders? If they can't be trained, but rather are competent people who need only to be encouraged, what does that mean? Do we choose only the most highly competent? Ordinarily we think of competence as a linear 'good' – out to infinity. Not so! A critical disability that goes with expanding competence is the inability (or unwillingness) to examine the assumptions by which one operates. (p 105)

We are a nation rich in resources. But I fear that When the historians of some future age try to sort out the artifacts of our present times, one of the questions they may ask is: How could we have supported the vast aggregate of society-building institutions – churches, schools, foundations – and allowed them so studiously to avoid the one service that would have assured a great and long durable future for our particular civilization, i.e., *preparing those of the young who are capable of it for responsible roles as servants?* . . . Preparing the young for responsible roles as servants is neither expensive nor difficult to do, but it is not now the focus of much explicit effort. (p 122)

It seems not to be the work of our churches or schools or foundations. Nor of our businesses. Businesses, and especially large businesses as my old professor pointed out, have been with us since the beginning of the 1900's. Businesses despite their crassness, occasional corruption, and unloveliness, *must be loved* if they are to serve us better. They are

much too large a presence in the lives of all of us to have them in our midst and not serve us better.

But how, one may ask, can one love this abstraction called the corporation? One doesn't! One loves *only the people* who are gathered to render the service for which the corporation is enfranchised. *The people are the institution!* (p 136)

When the business manager who is fully committed to this ethic is asked, 'What are you in business for?' the answer may be: *'I am in the business of growing people – people who are stronger, healthier, more autonomous, more self-reliant, more competent. Incidentally, we also make and sell at a profit things that people want to buy so we can pay for all this. We play that game hard and well and we are successful by the usual standards, but that is really incidental.'* (p 147)

... The business of growing people who understand that leaders are servants. Growing people who are learning people, who are continually students. Part of the ambiguity that students need to learn to deal with in the course of their preparation to serve and be served by the present society is that it is a high form of art to ask the right questions. But it is also unrealistic to expect that someone else has answer for them. . . . One must accept that only by venturing into uncertainty with faith that if one is adequately prepared to deal with the ambiguity, *in the situation*, the answer to the questions will come. The certainty one needs to face the demanding situations of life does not lie in having answers neatly catalogued in advance of the experience. That, in fact, is a formula for failure . . . (p 188 - 189)

Thank you for your kind attention. Perhaps you have a question for an old man ... ?

Greenleaf's test:

"The best test, and the most 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, not be further deprived?"