

Everybody wins: servant-leadership

Patricia Katopol

It was evaluation time, again. Anne mentally flipped through her little staff list and was satisfied that everyone was doing well until she got to Jo McAllister. Jo graduated from a state school near her home and attended an online MLIS program while working in retail. Her retail experience gave her good customer service skills, but she had only been able to volunteer a few times at her local library, ending up with little library experience before graduation. It had taken her almost two years to land this position. Anne thought she was killing two birds with one stone by hiring Jo. First, let's face it, she came in at the bottom of the already low salary scale, and Anne needed to save money. Second, Jo was a first generation college student from a lower class background. Anne thought Jo would bring an understanding of this student population to her job, that she would be out front designing programs and resources for them, but that hadn't been the case. Anne sighed; more experienced librarians had applied for the job but withdrew when they learned about the salary. Anne needed Jo, not just because she could get her at an entry level salary, but because Anne truly wanted the large number of first generation students at her little rural college to have a better library experience. Jo worked hard, but was it enough? Yes, she was good with patrons, but so was everyone else. Her database skills weren't that great. She was uncomfortable with her part of collection development, unsure of her choices and always sought a second opinion. And when the other librarians lobbied for a little travel money and time off for the Association of College and Research Libraries conference, Jo volunteered to stick around and take up the slack. She didn't seem to understand how the conference could help her professionally. Anne wondered if perhaps Jo thought she would be seen as a hard worker if she skipped the conference.

Anne first thought to give Jo a below average evaluation and try to find the money for a more experienced librarian to replace her. But then she thought about it again. Jo had overcome a lot and worked hard just to get through undergrad, and while an online program for someone who wasn't already working in a library might not have been ideal, it showed Jo's dedication. It wasn't her fault she didn't know much about professional development; her program had

focused more on tools of the trade than socializing to the profession. Maybe she didn't understand why not building a network through attending conferences might not be a good career move. Maybe it was Anne's 'job' to fill in some of these blank spaces. Maybe Anne should be the one to step up and provide the guidance Jo needed – not because she was Jo's supervisor, but because Jo needed the help if she were ever to be a good librarian and simply, because Jo was a person who needed help. Anne was proud of her own history, working her way up to College Librarian, not for the status of being a manager, but because she believed that all students, no matter where they went to school, deserved the best library services and she wanted to make sure they got them. Still, there was a lot on her plate already; she easily could have let Jo continue down the path of ordinariness until she was let go, but Jo deserved better. Anne settled down to make a list of the steps Jo needed for improvement – and how they could work together to get her there.

In thinking of Jo as a whole person and not just an easily replaceable cog in the library machine, and as someone to whom Anne had responsibility both as a supervisor and as a fellow human being, Anne was engaging in what is termed *servant-leadership*, a leadership style in which the leader believes that she has a moral responsibility to those with whom she interacts, from staff, to patrons, to vendors. Servant-leaders are common in religious and nonprofit organizations, which expect their leaders to be driven by motives other than profit and power.

Robert Greenleaf developed the concept of managers as servant-leaders.¹ An executive with American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T), he became disenchanted with the rigid management styles popular at the time. As a Quaker, he sought to bring more of his philosophical beliefs about interacting with people via service rather than control, into the work environment and was at the edge of the shift in management practice from rigid and compartmentalized, to open and holistic.

If you've had a management course, you've been exposed to management history and trends over time. Early managers thought that workers were there for the organization. It was assumed that workers didn't want to work, so you had to keep after them like children and make sure they came to work on time (and dock their pay if they didn't), work as told without deviating from the routine or process, and go home. They were told they didn't have to think

because managers and executives provided the ideas and innovations. Their lives outside of the organization didn't matter. Over time, and with pioneers like Greenleaf, this perception changed so that managers became interested in having workers contribute their ideas. They realized that not only did workers have lives outside of the organization, but that those lives imbued the worker with knowledge that the organization could use. Management came to know that individual workers might need different schedules to do their best work, or that workers might actually like their work and gained self-esteem from a job well done.

Since Greenleaf's original development of his leadership theory, Larry C. Spears² has crafted ten characteristics of the servant-leader. They are:

Listening – Do you really listen or are you just waiting for your chance to make your point? Interestingly, Spears suggests that servant-leaders not only hear what was said, but what was unsaid. Can you tell when you are only getting part of the story? Is your staff afraid to be truthful with you because of your reaction - that is, do you become agitated because you substitute your internal information and don't listen to what is actually being said?

Empathy – Can you accept people as they are, even when they do things that irritate you or if they don't perform the way you expect? It's natural to want to work with a high-performing team, but can you empathize with staff for whom some tasks might not come easily? Can you still be interested in helping them to improve, or do you focus your efforts on the 'stars'?

Healing – Can you recognize when people are hurting? Do you address the situation and try to help or do you avoid dealing with people in pain because it makes you uncomfortable? Imagine working in an organization where a number of people have been laid off. Many of your friends are no longer there and your daily life has changed completely. You are sad and can barely do your job because of depression and the fact that you now have so many other tasks to do that are completely outside of your areas of expertise that you feel like a failure. You aren't the only one in this position, but no one cares, no one asks how you are or if you need help learning the new tasks. Imagine how different the atmosphere would be if staff felt someone cared about their situation and was willing to help them move through this difficult time?

Awareness – Aware leaders see situations and events from a holistic perspective. They are self-aware, know who they are, and as Greenleaf said, “Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity”³ When I taught management, I included readings and self-assessments to help students know themselves better. It’s a poor manager who seeks to influence the actions of other people without knowing him or herself well first.

Persuasion – Greenleaf’s Quakerism led him to favor persuasion over authority when it came to working with others. Servant-leadership does not seek to coerce behaviors, but to agree to them via consensus. Certainly there are times when, as manager, you have to use your authority to get things done, but I will ask whether you have to use authority as much as you do. Are there other ways of talking to staff, of including their input in decision-making, that would make them eager to do the work because they feel like they are an integral part of the organization?

Conceptualization – This one can be difficult. Many managers spend their days putting out fires. They are so mired in doing what has to be done now, that they don’t plan for the future or do environmental scans to see how the world is changing around them right now. For example, Anne is so overwhelmed by the daily demands of her job and focusing on first generation English-speaking students, that she hasn’t noticed the increased enrollments of students for whom English is a second language. She has to start ‘dreaming’ of what her library of the future can look like. Servant-leaders handle the current tasks while dreaming about what can be.

Foresight – Spears suggests that foresight, the ability to see what might happen in the future given particular courses of action, stems from an intuitive mind, a characteristic that probably can’t be taught, but with which the servant-leader is born. I think that foresight also comes from expertise. If you’ve been through certain experiences before, if you understand peoples’ personalities, if you know the work, you can use this information to inform decision-making because you know that, given certain inputs, you will generally get foreseeable outcomes.

Stewardship - We think of stewards as trustworthy people who take care of something or someone on behalf of another. Servant-leaders see their role as taking care of the

organization so that it benefits society. One way of taking care is to form relationships with employees.

To start building relationships with employees, it may be necessary to see them in a different light, perhaps as volunteers. They are not just people who work at your command. They decided to work with you, in your organization. Because they agree with the organization's goals and working towards those goals provides them with status, a sense of self-worth, and self-esteem, they are willing to work with you. The relationship is less of a contract and more resembles a covenant. They are less constrained by the often rigid rules and roles of the contractual relationship – rules and roles that can prohibit the worker and the organization from innovating and acting in ways that benefit the worker and the community in which the organization is located. Robert Palestini, in commenting on leaders and their interactions with employees, wrote, "Covenantal relationships on the other hand induce freedom, not paralysis. Our goal as leaders is to encourage a covenantal relationship of love, warmth, and personal chemistry among our employee volunteers. Shared ideals, shared goals, shared respect, a sense of quality, a sense of advocacy, a sense of caring; these are the basis of an organization's covenant with its employees."⁴

Commitment to the growth of people – Thinking again about how workers were historically viewed as automatons whose purpose was to serve the organization, modern organizations, to their credit, often try to show that they value their employees by providing everything from continuing education, generous leave and child care programs, to wellness programs. Managers often believe that people leave because they want more money, but that isn't always the case. Employees who feel they aren't heard, that they have no power, that they are belittled, or set up for failure due to lack of resources or training, or simply aren't thanked for the work they do, are more likely to leave.

Finally, servant-leaders are ***community builders***. I am a firm believer in the power of a motivated individual. My stepfather's people came to the United States from a small island in the Caribbean and he went from mowing median strips on Florida highways to being a lawyer. He was a great role model for what a determined individual can accomplish. But as much as we might think of ourselves as individuals in charge of our own destinies, we are all part of multiple communities that support us in our endeavors through life – from

neighborhoods, to religious congregations, to communities of those who share political or health concerns. Good managers, managers with a servant-leader perspective, make themselves aware of the makeup and needs of their communities.

Depending upon the challenges you and your organization face, you may find it worthwhile to focus on two or three of the characteristics of a servant-leader. Perhaps you need to think more about your relationship with the surrounding community. For example, considering the rural location and limited resources of the local public library, maybe Anne could find a way to make more of the college's library resources available to residents of the surrounding communities. Maybe you need to make a bigger commitment to helping staff grow, to providing challenging and high profile work to more of your staff, not just to the people you like. It does no good to complain that you have to do all of the difficult work if there are no opportunities for staff to challenge themselves and to grow as professionals. Perhaps your conceptualization could use work. Developing conceptualization might be the most difficult for managers because it takes something you have so little of – time. It is not a waste of time to contemplate the different direction in which you could take your organization. It is not a waste of time to have staff retreats where everyone in the department (not just upper level staff and not just the librarians) has the opportunity to provide input on the organization's future.

Servant-leadership is particularly suited for library managers as there is an accepted premise in the field that people who go into the information professions often do so because they have a sense of service to society. A natural progression is to use the elements of servant-leadership as tools to help managers in information organizations conceptualize staff as persons to whom service is owed as well.

References

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