

**Servant Leadership in Higher Education:
Issues and Concerns**

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Good evening! Thank you for this opportunity to talk about servant leadership in higher education. I will say a few words, and then I look forward to your questions and comments.

The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership is named for Robert K. Greenleaf, who founded the Center in 1964. Greenleaf was born and raised in Indiana, and worked for AT&T for 38 years, from 1926 to 1964. Toward the end of his career, he was the Director of Management Research for AT&T, which was at the time one of the largest corporations in the world. It was his job to figure out how to educate and train leaders and managers of the company to be as effective as possible. He concluded that the most effective leaders and managers were not in it for themselves—they were not in it for power and wealth. The most effective leaders were focused on serving others.

It should not surprise us that Greenleaf cared deeply about universities—how students grow, and how universities are governed to support their growth. While still at AT&T, he began lecturing at Harvard and MIT. After he retired, he was a consultant for the Sloan School of Management at MIT; a consultant on continuing education for Dartmouth; a consultant for Prescott College in Arizona; an Executive in Residence for the School of Business at Fresno State College; and a professor of business ethics at the University of Virginia.

When Greenleaf retired in 1964, the student revolution on campus was just getting underway. Greenleaf understood the questioning of authority, and the anti-establishment sentiments of many students. When his first collection of essays was published many years later, it was titled “Servant Leadership,” with a subtitle: “A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness.” Greenleaf argued that the use of power is only legitimate when it is used not for oneself, but to serve

others. Or to put it another way, the use of power is legitimate when you use it to serve the people who gave you the power in the first place.

Greenleaf had a special interest in undergraduate education. The first major project of the Center he founded in 1964, which was then known as the Center for Applied Ethics, was a two-year project to work with about a dozen universities and their undergraduates. The goals of the project were fulfilled when Greenleaf was hired by Ohio University in Athens to develop a program to nurture university students with exceptional potential. The students who were chosen to be Ohio Fellows were given an unusual amount of freedom compared with other programs during the late sixties. Students could choose their courses, they were placed in summer internships with top decision-makers in many fields, they traveled around the world meeting people they wanted to meet, and they were given the opportunity to meet privately with speakers who came to campus. Those speakers included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, anthropologist Margaret Mead, Ford executive Lee Iacocca, historian Arnold Toynbee, religious historian Huston Smith, and U.S. Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson.

It was at Ohio University that Ken Blanchard met Robert Greenleaf, and joined Greenleaf and the Ohio Fellows for a weekend. It had a big impact on Blanchard, who has continued to write and speak on servant leadership ever since—a period of more than 40 years.

In 1970, Greenleaf published his classic essay, “The Servant as Leader,” in which he coined the phrases “servant-leader” and “servant leadership.” This essay, often called “the orange book,” has impacted hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people over the last 35 years.

This is how he defined servant leadership in that essay:

The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The

best test, and 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?

I find Greenleaf's definition exceptionally relevant to the work of educators. Do those served grow as persons? That seems to me to be a wonderful goal, not only in terms of the students we serve, but also in terms of our colleagues on the faculty and staff. We want to help people learn and grow.

Greenleaf was worried about what he called "the leadership crisis." In a short essay with that title that he published in 1978, he argued that there was no precedent for the leadership crisis, because the dominance of major institutions was a new phenomenon, and those institutions needed leaders. He argued that colleges and universities were not preparing young people to lead. He noted that in the 1970s there were many on campuses who were against leadership, because they were concerned about the misuse of power by leaders. Greenleaf said that there are three kinds of power—coercive power, manipulative power, and persuasion. By persuasion, he meant a process that did not involve coercion or manipulation. For persuasive power to be effective, the institution must have a great dream. He said:

...Institutions function better when the idea, the dream, is to the fore, and the person, the leader, is seen as the servant of the idea. It is not 'I,' the ultimate leader, that is moving this institution to greatness; it is the dream, the great idea...It is the idea that unites people in the common effort, not the charisma of the leader. It is the communicated faith of the leader in the dream that enlists dedicated support needed to move people toward accomplishment of the dream... Persuasion, as an art of leadership, is tenable because of the persuasive power in the dream itself.

Greenleaf thought that the best hope for the preparation of young leaders at universities would come from individual faculty members who would devote themselves to that purpose. He described such a faculty member in a parable that he wrote titled *Teacher as Servant*, published in 1979. It is not about classroom teaching, but about creating an environment for students who are committed to service. That environment was called Jefferson House, a residence for students who learned and grew through initiating and conducting service projects, as well as participating in internships.

Greenleaf was intensely interested in the role of boards of trustees or boards of directors. He wrote at a time when very little attention was given to boards—the focus was all on the Presidents or CEOs or administrators. He believed that boards should lead, not just rubberstamp the decisions of administrators. One part of the parable, *The Teacher as Servant*, is devoted to the role of university trustees. The narrative voice in the parable is a student who writes for the student newspaper. He accepts the assignment of investigating the governance of the university. Not surprisingly, knowing Greenleaf's views on the topic, the student reporter concludes that the trustees were not doing their jobs and didn't know how. Instead of publishing articles in the newspaper, he and other students from Jefferson House begin a long-term project of helping the trustees to find their most effective role. Years later, after he has graduated and started his career, the former student himself is invited to become a trustee.

In summary, Robert Greenleaf cared about universities, and their role in preparing young people for future leadership. He called upon universities to have great dreams, and urged leaders to serve those dreams, uniting their campus communities and supporters in building toward the future.

So what is happening on campuses today? A lot is happening, and the Greenleaf Center knows only a portion of it. We estimate that 50 to 100 universities teach servant leadership in the classroom, as part or all of a class on leadership. A number of universities, like Gonzaga and Viterbo, grant Master's Degrees in servant leadership. We have established the Greenleaf Scholars Program, which provides modest grants of \$2,500 to several doctoral students or new post-docs each year who are committed to conducting research on servant leadership.

We believe that at least as many universities have incorporated elements of servant leadership into their community service or service learning programs. I do not know enough about these programs. My impression is that there has been a shift from community service to service learning to servant leadership. My simplistic understanding is that a community service project would be something like getting a group of students to go clean up a park on Saturday. That's a good thing in and of itself. However, if the students are then asked to reflect on their experience, and share their ideas with other students, they would be entering the realm of service learning. My own view is that it doesn't become servant leadership until the students themselves have to identify the needs of their campus or surrounding community, and then organize people and resources to meet those

needs. That is what students were required to do in Greenleaf's fabled Jefferson House. It requires taking the initiative and exercising leadership.

A number of universities have implemented various versions of a Jefferson House on their campuses. Butler University in Indianapolis had one for a number of years. Indiana State University has a floor of a dormitory that is their Lincoln Learning Community, structured very much like Greenleaf's Jefferson House. And there are a few others.

We know nearly nothing about what is happening regarding servant leadership in university governance. The only example or case study that I know of is my own, from my own experience.

I was the president of Chaminade University of Honolulu from 1989 to 1995, a very difficult period in the university's history. I was invited to become president when the university was about to lose accreditation and go bankrupt. I believe that servant leadership was a key to our survival during that time. The board and the faculty each thought they were in charge, and the administration was caught in the middle. There was no way we were going to resolve the issue of power. The only way forward was to focus on the needs of our university and its students—to be servant-leaders, not power-oriented leaders. We couldn't afford to be arguing across the table from each other—we had to be on the same side of the table, shoulder to shoulder, facing the problems and opportunities together. It was a traumatic situation that lasted for four years, but we were able to restore accreditation and figure out how to generate an operating surplus. I am certain that the university would have died if we had focused on power instead of service. If I had had any doubts about the importance of servant leadership when I joined the university, I had no doubts when I left six years later. Servant leadership was crucial.

The Greenleaf Center's most important contribution to the promotion of servant leadership on campus is our annual conference, which we call the Leadership Institute for Educators, or LIFE. We usually have between 60 and 80 faculty, staff, and administration leaders from around the country who come to the one-day conference to share their journeys as they teach servant leadership in and outside the classroom, and through their residential programs. We are excited about growing this conference into a two-day conference in 2011.

Let me open it up, now, for questions and comments...