

What Robert Greenleaf Called Us to Do

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Robert Greenleaf launched the modern servant leadership movement with the publication of his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, in 1970. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have read his essays. His 1977 collection of essays and speeches, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, ranks high on the Amazon.com list of all books being sold today. There are many organizations around the world, including five Greenleaf Centers, that are promoting the awareness, understanding, and practice of servant leadership as first defined by Greenleaf. Thousands of students at colleges and universities study Greenleaf's writings in their leadership courses. Scholars have become interested, and are studying the impacts of servant leadership in the workplace.

So what was Greenleaf up to? What were his goals in his writing and teaching? What did he call us to do? The answer is fairly simple: He called us to transform major institutions so that they truly *serve*. Those servant-institutions can build a better society, one that is more just and more loving, with greater creative opportunities for its people.

The rise of the modern corporation

The modern corporation as we know it today has existed for only one hundred fifty years. The rise of corporations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a major new phenomenon in American life. Things were changing, and not necessarily for the better.

As a student at Carleton College in the 1920s, Greenleaf took a course from Dr. Oscar Helming, Chairman of the Economics Department. Helming said something that changed Greenleaf's life. Greenleaf later recalled:

One day, in the course of a rambling lecture, he made a statement like this: 'We are becoming a nation of large institutions... Everything is getting big—government, churches, businesses, labor unions, universities—and none of these big institutions are serving well, either the people whom they are set up to serve or the people who staff them to render the service... These institutions can be bludgeoned, coerced, threatened from the outside. But they can only

be changed from the inside by somebody who knows how to do it *and who wants to do it*. Some of you folks ought to make your careers inside these institutions and become the ones who respond to the idea that they could do better.’¹

Greenleaf decided to take Dr. Helming’s advice. “The major focus of my adult life,” he wrote years later, “may best be described as *a student of organization, how things get done*—particularly in large institutions.”²

In 1926 Greenleaf joined AT&T. In terms of achieving change within a large institution, it was an excellent choice. During the thirty-eight years that Greenleaf worked for the company, it was either the largest or one of the largest corporations in the world, with more than a million employees. Greenleaf became involved in teaching and training, and eventually became the Director of Management Research for the company. In that role, he created programs to help senior company officials become better people and better leaders.

Greenleaf’s credo

Greenleaf understood the historical shift toward large institutions and the resulting challenges for society. The opening paragraph of his essay, *The Institution as Servant*, is often referred to as his “credo” because it succinctly stated Greenleaf’s understanding of the problem and his recommended solution. He wrote:

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.³

He continued by saying: “Unless the quality of large institutions can be raised, not much can be done to improve the total society.”⁴

The goal, then, is to raise the capacity to serve and the performance as servant of existing major institutions. That can be accomplished by new regenerative forces operating within them. Who or what would those new regenerative forces be?

Greenleaf said that the new regenerative forces operating within major institutions could be initiated by servant-leaders. He was especially interested in the impact that servant-leaders could have as board members.

Greenleaf's major works

Greenleaf's major works on servant leadership were *The Servant as Leader*, an essay first published in 1970 and then revised and republished in 1973; *The Institution as Servant*, an essay published in 1972; *Trustees as Servants*, an essay published in 1974; and *Teacher as Servant*, a book-length parable published in 1979. Then in 1980, ten years after he started writing about servant leadership, he published another essay, *Servant: Retrospect and Prospect*. These five works unfold in a logical way.

Greenleaf began with the need for servant-leaders. In his first essay, *The Servant as Leader*, he defined the servant-leader, provided the best test of servant leadership, and described the characteristics of servant-leaders. He told the story of Leo from Herman Hesse's book, *Journey to the East*, and called us to serve and lead.

Greenleaf also told the stories of three historical figures who changed the worlds in which they lived. John Woolman, an American Quaker, used gentle persuasion to convince Quakers to give up their slaves in eighteenth century America. Thomas Jefferson turned down leadership opportunities during the American Revolutionary War in order to return to his home state and write statutes that were enacted and shaped the future of Virginia as well as the new nation. Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig was a Danish theologian and poet who championed Danish Folk High Schools that transformed his country during the nineteenth century. Each in his own way was a servant-leader, building a better society.

In his second essay, *The Institution as Servant*, Greenleaf wrote that "not much will change until the *builders of institutions*, those who have competence and strength, begin to move."⁵ He introduced the important role of board members in leading the institution toward distinction as servant. He discussed organizational structures, and argued for a team or "council of equals" instead of a single chief at the top of the organizational pyramid. He described the difference between conceptual and operating talent, and discussed the challenges of large businesses, universities, and growing edge churches.

Greenleaf mentioned boards in *The Servant as Leader*, expanded his discussion of their importance in *The Institution as Servant*, and then devoted

his third essay entirely to their role. Why? Because Greenleaf believed that board members could be the prime movers in institutional regeneration. In his own lifetime, he had seen three great American institutions become exceptional servants, and then decline when board leadership declined. He knew that board members could, and did, make a difference in the performance of their organizations.

Another way to understand Greenleaf's focus on boards would be to ask: Where is there the most leverage for transforming our institutions so that they will truly serve? As a matter of law, that leverage is at the board level. Boards are legally responsible for their organizations. All authority for the management of the institution is in their hands. Board members (Greenleaf called them "trustees") should therefore truly lead and add value to the organization.

In *Trustees as Servants*, Greenleaf noted that corporations are created by the government for the public good, so board members hold the charter of public trust for the institution. He described the respective functions of the board and the administration, and argued that board judgments are not lay judgments. While being committed to the organization, board members have the benefit of a degree of detachment from day-to-day operations. They have their own backgrounds, expertise, and sources of information. They can hold the institution's vision and ultimate purpose in sharp focus, even in trying times. Greenleaf urged trustees to be pro-active in helping their organizations become servant-institutions that care about everyone the organization touches.

Preparing and nurturing servant-leaders

But where are servant-leaders going to come from? After retiring from AT&T in 1964, Greenleaf spent a lot of time on college and university campuses, teaching and serving as a consultant. In his essay, *The Leadership Crisis*, which he published in 1978, Greenleaf expressed his disappointment in how little was being done at universities to prepare students to serve and lead. He argued that there was no precedent for the leadership crisis, because the dominance of major institutions was a new phenomenon. He was concerned that colleges and universities were not preparing young people to lead these new institutions.

Greenleaf concluded 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 his fourth work on servant leadership, a parable that he titled *Teacher as Servant*, published in 1979. It is not about classroom teaching, but about a residence on campus for students who are committed to serving others. The residence was

called Jefferson House. The students at Jefferson House initiated service projects, undertook internships, and discussed the messages of visiting speakers. In addition to describing Jefferson House, the parable addressed issues of organizational leadership and the role of trustees in the governance of the university.

In addition to universities, Greenleaf hoped that churches would become a nurturing force, because “the dynamics of leadership—the vision, the values, and the staying power—are essentially religious concerns.”⁶ He saw the potential for churches to “build leadership strength in those persons who have the opportunity to lead in other institutions, and give them constant support.”⁷ University faculty and churches, then, could mentor and nurture the servant-leaders that are so badly needed to lead our institutions.

In *Servant: Retrospect and Prospect*, Greenleaf looked back on the ten years since his first essay was published. He reaffirmed the key role of trustees. He wrote:

I have come to believe that a serious lack of vision is a malady of almost epidemic proportions among the whole gamut of institutions that I know quite intimately—churches, schools, businesses, philanthropies... If there is to be a constant infusion of vision that all viable institutions need, whatever their missions, the most likely source of those visions is their trustees who are involved enough to know, yet detached enough from managerial concern, that their imaginations are relatively unimpaired.⁸

Greenleaf believed that “we have not yet come to grips with the *institutional revolution* that came hard on the heels of the industrial revolution, and that we confront a worldwide crisis of institutional leadership.”⁹ He was hopeful that servant-leaders would be developed and would transform their institutions, as described in his parable, *Teacher as Servant*. He wrote:

This is an interesting thesis... (1) We know how to increase the proportion of young people who, at maturity, are disposed to be servants; and (2) we know how to transform contemporary institutions so that they will be substantially more serving to all who are touched by them. What is needed, this thesis holds, is a vision that will lift the sights of those who know and release their will to act constructively.¹⁰

As for developing servant-leaders, he argued that preparing them should start no later than secondary school—earlier if possible. Young people need to learn how to stand against the corrupting influences of power and competition and succeed by putting people first. As for transforming institutions, he saw a

role for seminaries to provide the vision for churches, and for foundations to provide the vision for universities.

Greenleaf said that “the prospect for the servant idea rests almost entirely, I believe, on some among *us investing the energy and taking the risks to inspire with a vision.*”¹¹ It will depend on teachers, broadly defined as “anybody who can reach young people who have the potential to be servants and prepare them to be servant leaders.”¹² Teachers will catch the vision, building hope, helping young people to understand and cope with present reality, and encouraging them to lead as a servant.

What did Greenleaf call us to do? He called us to become servant-leaders, working at all levels to transform our organizations into servant-institutions. There are special opportunities to bring about change as board members, leading our institutions to serve with distinction. Greenleaf also called us to become teachers, guiding the young so that they will become servant-leaders. We need to nurture and train those who follow us to become servants, so they too will lead institutions that truly serve.

Many have responded to Greenleaf’s call—and are still responding. An important reason is that Greenleaf’s message is not outdated. It is in fact more urgent. The impact of large institutions is far greater today than when Greenleaf penned his essays. The need to change those institutions from the inside is even more critical than before. Greenleaf’s insights and advice are still very relevant as we strive to build a better society in our own day and in the days to come. He articulated worthy goals that we have not yet accomplished. He is still out front, leading the way.

Notes

¹ Don M. Frick, *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004), 76.

² “Servant: Retrospect and Prospect,” in Spears, Larry C., ed., *The Power of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1998), 19.

³ “The Institution as Servant,” in Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 49.

⁴ *Id.*, 50.

⁵ *Id.*, 55.

⁶ *Id.*, 81.

⁷ *Id.*, 82.

⁸ “Servant: Retrospect and Prospect,” 18.

⁹ *Id.*, 21.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 25.

¹¹ *Id.*, 55.

¹² *Id.*