SELF REFLECTING ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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First Look Inward to Become a Better Leader

Leaders spend a large amount of time assessing themselves as a leader. Asking questions like; what am I doing right or wrong; how can I become better; how can I make those around me better, and how can I help my organization become better? A mark of great leaders is constant evaluation and introspection into themselves, and their leadership style because there is growth in self-reflection, learning, and self-awareness. Thompson (2000), on this subject concludes, “if you peer into the life of practically any person you deeply admire…who has made a positive difference in the world, you will find that inner work precedes outer work – inner mastery come before outer mastery” (p. 151). His point is that the key to reaching the highest potential lies in searching inward first.

With that concept in mind, and in admittance and recognition to Horsman’s (2015) conviction that “developmentally most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, are naturally in training to become servant-leaders”, it is prudent to self evaluate, introspect, and self-reflect on how to develop into a more effective servant leader (p. 2). This paper therefore will examine the author as a servant leader in training, using the attributes and characteristics of Servant Leaders as criteria. This evaluation aims to discover soft areas or problems in his leadership, and then recommend the changes required to become better. The goal is development and growth as a leader and to “become more authentic, more whole, more self-responsible” as a servant leader (Thompson, 2000, p. 152).
Recognizing Attributes of Servant Leadership

Before beginning this assessment, it is key to review the attributes of a servant leader. Above all, servant leaders are those that care about people, the success of those around them, and they care enough to assist them in reaching their highest potential, goals and aspirations, and happiness. Greenleaf (1977) begins describing attributes in *The Servant as Leader* essay noting Servant Leaders start with initiative and “their conscious choice bring[ing] one to aspire to lead” (pp. 13-15). Once accepting a leadership role, servant leaders can be accurately described through Sipe and Frick (2009) seven pillars of servant leadership (persons of character, putting people first, skilled communicator, compassionate collaborator, possessing foresight, systems thinker, leading with moral authority). With servant-leaders characteristics now reviewed, the paper can use these descriptions to assess and evaluate the author’s developmental progress in being a servant-leader-in-training.

Earning Moral Authority, Developing Moral Intelligence

The seventh pillar observed from Sipe and Frick (2009) is *Leads with moral authority* (pp. 155-178). Even though it is the last of the pillars, this assessment begins with the self-reflection question of; am I a moral and ethical leader and am I authentic in pursuing that end? No leader worth following is immoral or unethical. Do as I do, is only accomplished by building trust and confidence through leading by example, ethically and morally. Ethics that are tainted promote doubt and erodes trust, therefore a successful leader, must be disciplined and authentically true to their values to gain moral authority. Moral authority is “something one earns by following the other six pillars” and “a moral person operates out of love – love of self and others (pp. 156-157).
**Personal Assessment of Moral Authority**

Am I earning, and have I earned moral authority? I believe the answer is yes, but to what degree, and how can I improve? Currently I work at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and have been for four years, which, is a long-time for an Army officer to be in one location. The extended time has enabled me to establish relationships, and earn respect through the example I try to set. The level of respect is tough to measure, but I qualify that judgment through people consistently asking my opinion or advice, trusting me to produce a good product, and inviting me to participate in problem solving. I try and believe I am always open, honest, empathetic, and inviting for people to engage with me, and I think, that this, coupled with a disciplined hard-work ethic, and moral example (not perfect, but good), has led to me gaining trust and confidence with people I work with.

With greater self-reflection, there are circumstances I could have executed better and gained greater moral authority. Most of these things I categorize as insignificant (foul language, losing temper) but one has weighed heavy on my heart. Two months ago, a military police soldier pulled me over for speeding. He cited me for 23 MPH over. Had it been 25MPH over, he would have suspended my license, and I would have had to report to the Commander. It would not have ended well for me.

This action came from the same leader who a month early stood in front of soldiers and told them not to speed. I did not follow do as I do principle, and it resulted in risking credibility, faltering on my integrity, and losing the moral authority I thought I had gained. Mostly it felt bad, unethical, and sunk my pride. Horsman (2015) quotes Doug Lennick explaining, “integrity is authenticity. It is saying what you stand for and standing for what you say; awareness is the first step” (p. 12). This incident resulted in a
valuable lesson, which I can overcome by communicating to soldiers that I am guilty, and explaining the consequences for my actions. To be a better servant-leader, I need to be authentic to my values, morally intelligent, empathic, and allow forgiveness with others that have also faltered. I will continue to use my example as a training tool for what not to do. (pp. 13-14).

Being Ever Mindful and Always Listen

Expert leaders are also expert communicators and possess the well-practiced, mindful, empathetic skill of listening. Greenleaf (1977) believed that a servant-first leader’s “automatic response to any problem is to listen first”, as “listening builds strength in other people” (p. 17). Horsman (2015) adds that when we are listening attentively, “it is where understanding begins”. Sipe and Frick (2009) Third Pillar of Servant Leadership is being a skilled communicator that “listens earnestly and speaks effectively”. Listening and communicating are also developmental, and take practice to become highly effective.

Personal Assessment on Listening and Mindfulness

As a servant leader in training, I must commit to be a listener first, and to develop my listening and communicating skills. I now realize that to be an effective and attentive listener, all other tasks must be re-prioritized. Failing to do so does not serve others. Horsman (2015) quotes Greenleaf as stating, “listening is basically an attitude-really wanting to understand” (p. 4). Over the past year, I have noted my inefficiencies and pledged to get better and more disciplined. No more multi-tasking or ignoring (p. 5). Be mindful and pay respect to the moment when someone is asking me to listen. Be inviting and open for others to unfold their thoughts.
By being mindful, and choosing to listen intently, I feel better and more productive which results in a greater sense of service; it is powerful. I do realize this is a deep and forever education and there is unlimited space for growth. By developing this skillset, I am realizing my internal potential and believe I am assisting others in reaching theirs.

**Promoting, Building, Relationships and Community**

The foundation of servant-leadership depends on establishing relationships and maintaining them; caring for other people. Greenleaf (1998) explains “so much of caring depends upon knowing and interacting with persons in the intimacy of propinquity” (p. 22). Leadership does not exist without relationships, and leaders do not find solutions to problems presented without involving others. Wheatley (2007) professes, “in order to counter negative organizational dynamics stimulated by stress and uncertainty, we must give full attention to the quality of relationships…The solution is each other” (p. 7).

How can a servant leader serve others, and lead without the trust and confidence of the community that surrounds them? It does take effort. Relationship building, like listening, takes considerable practice to learn and perfect, as all relationships are dynamic, and infinitely different from one personality to the next. Leaders have to learn to become successful at establishing kinship and closeness with the people they serve.

**Personal Assessment on Relationships**

Last year, I had the privilege of being the commander to four of the Army dive detachments (geographically separated), a fire fighting detachment, one Geo-spatial Engineer company, and one Headquarters company. All of these units inside my umbrella, were distinct, highly specialized, and relatively unique to the rest of the Army.
Their skillsets made them different from each other and my sense was that there was no sense of belonging or unity across the entirety of the formation. We needed to build a community, and establish relationships with everyone on this team.

I conclude that the only action that works in beginning a trusting relationship with subordinates is honoring who they are, what they do, and assisting them. It is also key to accept that it is never their responsibility to begin the relationship; it is always mine as the leader. I regularly visited the fire fighters, participated in their exercises, and took instruction from them. With the dive teams, I ran with them in the morning, traveled to visit them on deployments, and participated in diving exercises with them. One time I traveled hundreds of miles to spend a couple hours with the families of the dive team after work. I always engaged the soldiers in training and at events, listened, and asked what they did, and asked what I could do to help. These acts had a significant effect on the unit morale, cohesiveness, and sense of belonging.

I have since inherited a new job, not as commander but as deputy commander for a Brigade. As a leader by position, experience, and rank, it has taken considerable effort to forge meaningful relationships with the people that work around me. Either they are respectful, I am unapproachable, or maybe something else, but many soldiers that work in my organization simply avoid encounters with me. Why is this and how can I improve on my relationship skills to ‘build [this] community’ (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 7). I want to be a compassionate collaborator, create belongingness, and build communities as a servant leader while in this new role (Sipe & Frick, 2009, pp. 77-103). The key, Ferch et al (2015) interviewing Margaret Wheatley revealed is, “the only way to lead when you don’t have control is you lead through the power of your relationships…you’re working
together and bringing out the best in people” (p. 101). The answer still remains the same and that is by caring about people, no matter the role you are assigned. I still need to find ways to honor those that work around me and assist them in their duties. By doing so I am serving them and allowing them to reach their highest potential. “It’s the quality of this relationship that matters most” (Kouzes & Pousner, 2007, p. 24).

**Conclusion – Develop self, Develop Others.**

A servant leader in training continually looks for ways to improve and develop, knowing that with each upgrade, they are better prepared to serve the people they care most about. The commitment is life-long and forever learning but the nature of the servant leader is that they thirst for best ways to assist others. Though this assessment has identified only three pillars or characteristics which the author can improve upon, all pillars and characteristics are subject to continual growth. Larry Spears notes “at its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work – in essence, a way of being – that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society” (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 5).

This exercise has proven that looking inward reveals a great deal about a person and their qualities. The deep introspection and self-reflection has served as a tool in deepening awareness, and understanding the present moment. This awareness will serve as a check on reality and provides a path for improvements that a servant leader in training can reference on their journey to lead others by serving first. Being made aware is “a disturber and an awakener” giving leaders “an armor of confidence in facing the unknown” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 28).
References


