

Ethics of the Successful Workplace

Recognizing, Understanding, and Cultivating Servant Leadership in the Management of Information Technology

“This essay is one of the best on servant leadership I’ve read in a long time. It is also one of the first that specifically addresses the topic of servant leadership and information technology.”

-- Larry C. Spears, CEO and President, The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership
<http://www.greenleaf.org>

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*Quantum Network Design*SM



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Abstract

This paper proposes servant leadership as a practical strategy for optimizing organizational productivity. By both exposition and example, it describes the basic tenets of servant leadership. In a review of the psychological underpinnings of unproductive behavior, it shows how servant leadership can help break unproductive work habits. Finally, it suggests methods by which servant leadership can be cultivated.

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About the Author

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1. The Cycle of Truth and Trust

Several years ago, while waiting my turn as a speaker at a computer system vendor's sales meeting, I listened from offstage as the assembled group, a mix of about a hundred sales and technical support professionals, grumbled in open session about what they believed were organizational impediments to their jobs. They criticized the high turnover in their company's upper management, they griped about how their managers routinely failed to clarify and support their field mission, and they exchanged rumors of upcoming organizational changes. For more than an hour, they gossiped. They gossiped, in fact, right through the planned break, even into the first ten or fifteen minutes of my scheduled presentation.

Theirs was the kind of sullen exchange to which I and, I'm sure, most of us have become inured over the course of our careers. After all, when we gather in groups, we tend to complain about our bosses, bemoan the problems we share, and maybe fret a bit about future layoffs. This talk rarely influences events, of course. Still, I suppose, such abreactive banter makes us feel good in the present moment. Ordinarily, I would have ignored it all and proceeded as planned with my presentation. For some reason, though, the familiar intramural scuttlebutt strangely irritated me on that particular afternoon, and something different and quite unplanned happened.

Thinking back, there was nothing remarkable about the venue or my particular meeting room, just the usual box-shaped, bright, commodious space, front-facing chairs arranged in uneven rows, all focused on a long speaker's table at one end. Still, if not the setting, the moment was to become a special one for me. As I took my place by the overhead projector, presentation materials under my arm, my audience mustered into their seats and gradually quieted down. I set my prepared notes and slides down on the table. I would get to them later. To start with on that day, I grabbed two blank transparencies and a marker pen and switched on the projector.

"I couldn't help overhearing everyone as I stood there in the corner waiting to speak," I started. "I'd like to take a few minutes of your time before my presentation to say something to you, to *tell* you something important." I had little idea what I was about to say, but I was very certain about what I was feeling. More instinctively than deliberately, I began to draw a traditional "org chart" – a big box at the top, smaller boxes below, and so on – arranged in the familiar corporate hierarchy.

"Here is the company you work for," I said as I finished drawing very little boxes at the bottom. "Up here," I said, pointing to the lone square on top, "sits the big boss, the CEO." I looked up and noticed that everyone had become quiet and still – unusual for an after-lunch presentation during a long day of seminars, especially at a sales meeting. Everyone was listening, perhaps joined with me in wondering what I'd say next. I was a little nervous that, speaking extemporaneously, I'd fail to make my point – or, worse, discover in front of everyone that I had no real point to make.

“Below that,” I continued, looking down as I wrote on the transparency, “in the part of the chart where you live and work, is your senior VP, and some VPs underneath, then managers, your supervisor, and on and on – all the people you’ve been complaining about for the last hour.” As I spoke, I scribbled the names of the people who actually held those positions into the corresponding boxes, working downward from the top. Many were in the room with us. “Finally, way down here at the bottom, we come to you, this little box. Your job seems awfully small and unimportant in the grand scheme of things, doesn’t it? Well, it isn’t. Give me a minute more, and I’ll show you why it’s actually the most important box on this whole chart.”

I pulled the transparency off the projector and tossed it into the air to my right. As it fluttered to the floor, I said “In reality, for all their lofty titles and job descriptions, not a single one of the people in the boxes above yours matters.”

I grabbed the second blank transparency, slapped it down on the projector, and uncapped my pen. “No matter where you work as an IT professional,” I said, “whether you stay here, move on to another company, or maybe start your own company some day, here’s the only ‘org chart’ you’ll ever need.”

I sketched a large square at the top of the transparency. “This,” I said, “is your customer. Each of you in this room has a different one. Many of you have more than one. But at any given moment in your professional life,” I said, “this is the person who trusts you with his or her problems. This person depends on you, on your skills, on your experience, to help them overcome those problems. This,” I said, tapping loudly at the box, “is your *real* boss.”

I drew another equally large box underneath and connected it with a vertical line to the one above. “And this”, I said, pointing to that second box, “is You.” I capped the pen and looked up. I could see that everyone was listening to me. “You’re one of the first people, sometimes the only person from this company that the customer sees.”

“You report directly to your customer. When you do a good thing on his or her behalf, your customer repays you, in fact rewards you, with their approval and gratitude. In time, even if you occasionally do a wrong thing, your customer will understand and forgive, provided you face your mistake honestly and work effectively to correct it.” My nerves settled a little as I saw that my point was finding a home in at least a few of their minds. “When you’re true to your customer’s goals, your customer responds by trusting you.”

“In support of your relationship with your customer, one of trust returned for truth, everyone else in your organization,” I said, “really reports to *you*.” I started drawing little connected boxes below the two large boxes on the transparency, arranged in an upside-down hierarchy. “Your supervisor, your manager, your vice presidents and your senior VP, all the way down to the CEO,” I said as I scribbled box after box until I reached the bottom of the slide.

“All those people who you just spent more than an hour gossiping about, complaining about,” I said, “not a single one of them matters, *except* as they support you in your mission

to your customer. Which of them is in charge today, who will replace whom tomorrow, which will be fired, which promoted,” I said, “None of that matters. All that matters is that they make products that your customer can use, and that they provide you with the resources you need to help your customer use those products to solve their problems. When they help you to be true to your customer, the trust you earn in return, in effect, becomes theirs – and that helps them to achieve *their* goals.”

After a pause, and as everyone stared silently at me, I took that last transparency off the projector and tossed it into the air to my left. Except for the rustling of the falling slide and the hum of the projector, the room was very quiet. Trust, returned for truth – did I really understand what I said?

Each of us in that room had, in our careers, our share of good days and bad. For me, the bad days each were so for assorted reasons that, over time, had become blurry in recollection. Thinking back at that moment, though, I clearly remembered that the good ones, happily for me the more numerous, all had one thing in common: the truth-trust cycle. Through crisis and triumph, on all the good days, the people I truly served repaid my service with their trust – the point, I suppose, that I tried to make by telling that story.

I then began presenting my prepared material, which described the company’s new line of storage management products. Unplanned, in the context established by my impromptu upside-down organization chart, I related fresh insights on almost every slide into the usefulness of the hardware and software in that new product line, and into the roles various members of my audience could play in matching these new products to their customers’ needs. Trying to keep the group on the day’s schedule, I finished with a hurried summary. Personally, I felt very good about my small piece of that afternoon. Had I connected with anyone?

As I packed up my notes and left the room, one of the students, someone I had never met before, approached me and asked if I had ever read a book called *Servant Leadership* by Robert K. Greenleaf. He could tell from my quizzical look that I hadn’t, so he pressed a small note, with title and author inscribed, into my hand as he shook it, then rushed out ahead of me to catch the next session. Over his shoulder, he said: “Buy it. Read it.”

2. Earning Trust through True Service: Servant Leadership

In *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf proposes that leadership is borne of willing and enthusiastic service to others. In businesses, governments, and society at large, leaders can be appointed or elected, or leadership might be inherited or usurped. In contrast, a servant-leader, in Greenleaf’s view, always begins as a servant. Over time, by serving, the servant becomes a leader in the hearts and minds not just of those who are served, but of everyone around. Leadership is, thus, earned through service to others.

The acts of service themselves, however, are not enough. Greenleaf illustrates this using a character from Hermann Hesse’s *The Journey to the East*. Hesse’s allegory describes a diverse party of adventurers on a long and arduous expedition. One of the story’s

background figures, a character called Leo, sees to the group's myriad menial chores. Among many other things, he carries the luggage, sets up the encampments, and tends to the group leader's personal needs.

As the journey progresses, it becomes obvious that Leo's role in the group goes far beyond the catalog of tasks he performs on their behalf. With his enthusiastic and joyous work ethic, he upholds the team spiritually through the many difficulties they face. Leo is their servant to his very core, and, in so being, he establishes himself, without formal declaration or election, as their leader. When, in Hesse's tale, Leo mysteriously disappears from the party before their journey is over, they dissolve as a group and abandon their trip. They just cannot go on without Leo. Some time later in the story, we learn that the meek but indispensable servant Leo is actually the supreme leader of the mysterious League that founded the journey in the first place.

Greenleaf's sublime treatment of leadership raises a dilemma for modern organizations that seek to institutionalize such behavior. It is easy for an appointed corporate manager to coerce someone into performing an act of service. Once delivered, the results of such service are usually manifest physically in some form that can be measured.

However, ordering action in service to others, then evaluating the results in purely physical terms, ignores the spiritual aspect of the process of servant leadership as Greenleaf describes it. It is in the *spirit* of the service that one finds servant leadership, not merely in its observable practice. It is in that elevated spiritual moment that a major shift in human behavior takes place, like the unexpected turn during my presentation that day: from inward to outward, static to dynamic, paralysis to action.

Thus, as has always been true of human greatness, servant leadership is colorless, odorless, and tasteless, but nonetheless very real. I wondered: if we can't see it, smell it, or taste it, then how do we recognize it? How do we encourage it?

After reading Greenleaf's book, I thought back to the upside-down organization chart I presented at that sales meeting. I realized why that student responded to me by recommending Greenleaf's book. I recalled the power of the moment when I connected, sincerely, with him and the others in the room on this subject. I'd explained that, by truly serving one's customer, the customer would reciprocate with their trust. As that bond of trust in exchange for truth grew, others (their colleagues and managers) would recognize it (as they respected it, benefited from it), then follow and support it. I had given a modest impromptu course in servant leadership before I ever consciously knew what it was.

So, how does one recognize servant leadership? I can tell you from my sales meeting encounter many years ago, and many similar experiences since: you will feel it when you do it, you will know it when you see it. With practice, I believe you can learn to encourage and cultivate it in others, but only when you come to understand that it cannot be injected into or coerced upon your peers and subordinates. It grows from the bottom up. As it does, it radiates and spreads to others from the inside outward.

These ideas, to many, will seem idealistic and insubstantial. Readers of Greenleaf's earlier work on servant leadership undoubtedly pressed him on this point, asking for concrete guidance on the measurement of its operational benefits. In a later edition¹, Greenleaf addresses them obliquely:

The difference [between those who first choose service rather than leadership] 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 he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?²

Still, modern managers, particularly in a metrics-driven industry such as Information Technology, will impatiently drive to the bottom line: how can servant leadership improve an organization's productivity and enhance the quality of its collective efforts? Can servant leadership be induced reliably in others? Can it be channeled toward the achievement of concrete goals? Humanity, morality, ethics – the virtues of servant leadership require patient cultivation. Unfortunately, pressed for time in our work, too many of us abandon the effort to follow what we believe will be “safer”, that is to say more profitable, rituals. After all, what has servant leadership to do with profit?

In fact, in addition to their natural enthusiasm for working with others, servant-leaders typically exhibit a strong inner sense of direction, a bias for action, a creative approach to solving problems, and a passion for completing their assigned tasks. With an investment of time and a change in attitude, smart managers can ignite servant leadership within, and thereby greatly energize, their organizations.

Thus, Greenleaf's ideas, put into practice, can help us in very tangible ways; but, before turning to his moralistic prescription for practical success, let us first consider the hard behavioral science of collective human failure.

3. The Science of Unproductive Behavior

In psychological research conducted decades ago by Deutsch and Krauss³ and since replicated under a variety of experimental conditions, pairs of subjects participated in a simple electronic trucking game. The subjects were asked to imagine that they were running one of two trucking companies (the Acme and Bolt companies), with the goal of moving a truck from one point to another in the shortest possible time. For each player, the trucks were identical. Each also had his or her own starting point and destination, which were connected by a long and convoluted, but unobstructed, highway. The Acme players started their truck on the left side of the game's course, concurrently as Bolt started from the right.

The game's roadmap (see Figure), which appeared as a video screen across which both participants could move their trucks in real time as they played, also offered a single, much shorter path that either could use. It was a one-lane road, and because the two companies' objectives lay in opposite directions, the player's trucks would meet head to head on it. If

both trucks entered this road at the same time, neither could proceed. One could back up and take the longer path to their goal instead, but this would allow the other's truck to use the shortcut to reach their destination in much less time.

To start each experimental trial, the researcher gave the participants verbal instructions that were carefully crafted to explain only the overall object and rules of the game, without suggesting in any way how the game should be played. During play, other than observing each other's behavior on the video screen, the participants had no means of communicating.

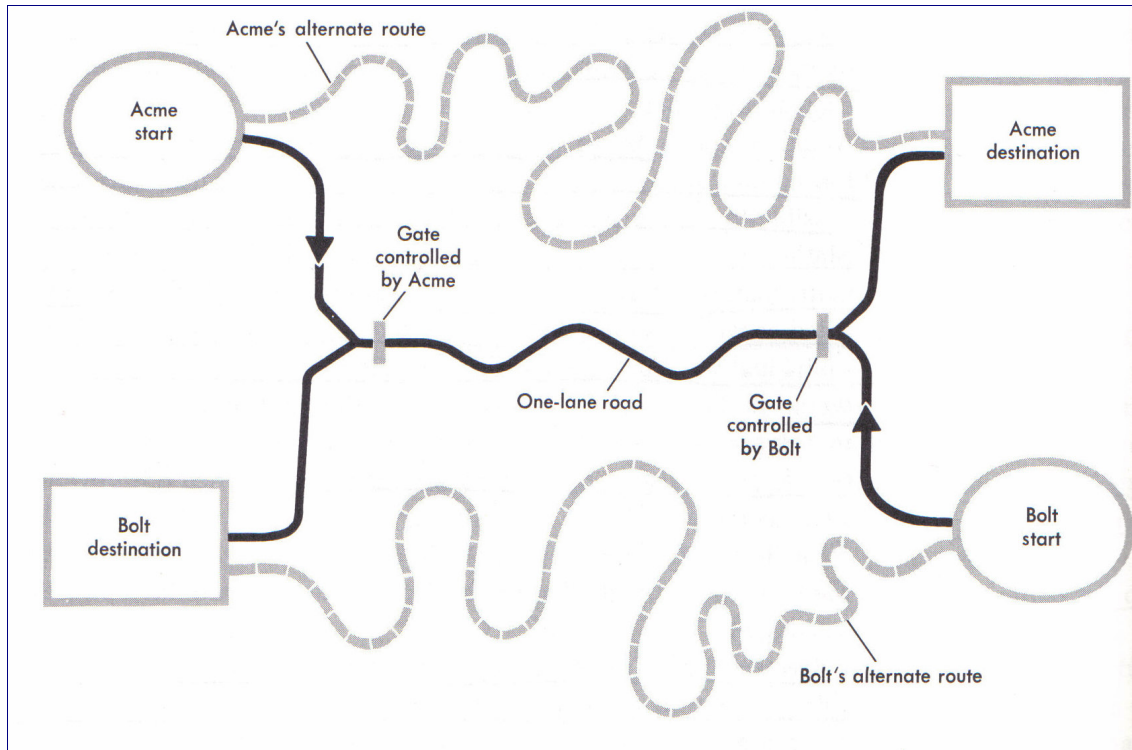


Figure.
Deutsch and Krauss Trucking Game

Clearly, the optimal strategy for both players would be to cooperate by alternating travel along the one-lane shortcut. In practice, however, the participants rarely followed that plan. Instead, in trial after trial, the subjects quickly became adversaries and fought over the use of the shortcut, wasting time nosing their trucks stubbornly against each other. When, eventually, one player reluctantly surrendered and backed up to let the other pass, the “winning” subject rarely reciprocated in turn. Most games degenerated into a head-to-head stalemate along the shortcut and overall traffic ground to a halt – the least productive of all potential outcomes.

In a variation of the experimental game, the researchers gave both sides a “threat”: an electronic barrier that each player could impose along the one-lane shortcut, which, when erected, closed it to all traffic. In this round of experiments, players quickly learned to use their barriers as an outlet for the aggressive side of their competitive instincts. In trial after

trial, they erected their barriers early in the game to deny all access to the shortcut, including their own, leaving both players with only their respective private roads to travel. With the shortcut thus taken out of play, traffic flowed, but over the longest available routes and, therefore, at its least efficient pace.

The Deutsch and Krauss research concludes that, lacking guidance to the contrary and unable to communicate with each other, people will instinctively seek personal advantage rather than mutual benefit. They will behave competitively, even aggressively, rather than cooperatively. They will exploit opportunities to inhibit the progress of their “opponents”, even if their own goals suffer as a result. Consequently, overall performance will suffer.

4. Positive Effects of Constructive Communication

By varying the conditions of their experiment, Deutsch and Krauss showed that constructive communication, between the experimenter and the participants and among the subjects themselves, dramatically ameliorated their subjects’ performance.

To begin with, the experimenters wrote three different sets of initial instructions – different experimental treatments, in effect, for three groups of participants. The subjects in group 1 were told that they should find ways to cooperate with each other to earn the most points for both players overall. Participants in the second group were told to earn as many points as possible for themselves without worrying about the other player. The group 3 subjects were told to earn as many points for themselves as they could and, as often as possible, to try to prevent the other player from earning any points at all.

In addition, to test the effect of communication among the game’s players, the researchers further divided each of these three sets of subjects into two additional groups: the first group of players was not permitted to communicate with each other at all; the second group’s participants were encouraged to communicate as much as possible as they played. The behavior of the research subjects in these six experimental groups was subsequently observed and scored to be either cooperative (facilitating) or competitive (inhibiting).

Not surprisingly, participants who were told by the experimenter to cooperate at the start of the experiment consequently did so with much greater frequency. Also, in stark contrast with trials that prohibited inter-player communication, subjects who were encouraged to communicate with each other during play typically facilitated rather than inhibited each other’s performance.

When they were instructed to work together and encouraged to communicate with each other, one player’s overture to cooperate was almost always met with a reciprocal cooperative rather than a competitive move. In this fertile environment, mutually nurtured progress took root and flourished – everyone “won”. Constructive communication, between colleagues and with supervisors, breeds altruism. Altruism promotes collective progress.

5. The Psychopathology of IT Management Problems

I cite the Deutsch and Krauss experiment because I believe that Information Technology, very much like the Acme and Bolt trucking companies in their research, is a “game” of proxies and symbols. Rather than concrete objects, IT professionals work almost entirely in abstractions: lines of code or code objects, client and server computer systems, networking infrastructure, help-desk support tickets, etc. Further, much of Information Technology – writing software, building systems, diagnosing and resolving technical problems – is naturally practiced in the singular. Even when they work in so-called “open” office settings, IT professionals do so most often individually rather than collectively, rarely communicating with their peers on the subject of their work.

When they *do* talk, they are routinely divided by their lack of a common technical language. Unlike most engineering disciplines, with their broadly adopted and well-understood professional systems and rules, IT practitioners typically speak in the tribal technical jargon they are taught by product vendors. Engaged in such connectionless discourse, they compete for position based on artificial, essentially trivial knowledge. They make sounds as if speaking, all the while deepening their personal isolation. As a result, only too rarely do they fully understand each other. Perhaps for fear of bruised ego, of course, they rarely admit this – to each other, or even to themselves. This is perhaps why, all too frequently, interminable and wordy IT meetings with, say, a dozen participants, ultimately peter out by dispatching everyone, exhausted and confused rather than united, in futile pursuit of a dozen crossed purposes.

Thus, in effect, using their employees as subjects, IT managers run the non-communicating versions of the Deutsch and Krauss experiments every day. Lacking instructions to the contrary, their employees, like the players in the lab, instinctively assume a counterproductive posture among their peers. Deprived of meaningful communication with their co-workers and managers, starved for understanding and true empathy in their work, it is little wonder that many IT professionals, in turn, behave like the uninformed and isolated Deutsch and Krauss lab subjects.

Granted, the complex skills and demands of professional Information Technology differ from those of the simple trucking game experiments. But are the basic principles of human motivation and action all that different?

In the real IT world, the acts of obstructionism, though covert, are no less noxious. Frustrated in professional isolation, as in our experimental setting, people raise behavioral “gates”: habitual barriers to obstruct collective progress. Suggesting what may be a common etiology, in fact, the litany of all-too-familiar IT-organizational ills closely parallels the clinical indicia of the passive-aggressive personality disorder⁴:

- passive resistance to fulfilling occupational tasks through procrastination and inefficiency;
- complaints of being misunderstood, unappreciated, and victimized by others;

- sullenness, irritability, and argumentativeness in response to expectations;
- angry and pessimistic attitudes toward a variety of events;
- unreasonable criticism and scorn toward those in authority;
- envy and resentment toward those who are more fortunate;
- self-definition as luckless in life and an inclination to whine and grumble about being jinxed;
- alternating behavior between hostile assertion of personal autonomy and dependent contrition.

The corporate data center is indeed not so far removed from the psychology lab. Most IT professionals, management and labor alike, have seen such obstructionist behavior exhibited by others. In private, many of us might even confess to this behavior in ourselves. What does this teach us about the true underlying causes of inefficiency in our ranks? What ceiling do we approach as we strive to improve our professional productivity? Perhaps, rather than in the simple counting of heads, our real productivity problem is within the heads themselves.

6. Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Prescription

In 21st Century sound bites, given Deutsch and Krauss' conclusions, the solution is speciously obvious: communicate more. Perhaps we should meet more often, or embrace conspicuously in the hallways now and then, or spend more time together outside the office? Perhaps more professional training is needed, or less? Recognizing that pointless gossip, as for example at my sales meeting, is somehow unhealthy and unproductive, what then constitutes positive and productive discourse?

There are no formulaic solutions in Greenleaf's writings. Overcoming the interpersonal communication problems that fester within the very heart of dysfunctional IT organizations demands considerable moral and intellectual effort. Greenleaf proposes a starting point⁵, but his is by no means a cookbook:

The servant-leader is servant first... [Servant Leadership] 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. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership has been established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shavings 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.

True servants behave in distinctive ways, and this behavior sends clear signals that induce others to follow. Servant leaders communicate first by doing service, next by explaining why and how. A true and ineluctable path forward, clear to all and distinct from false starts, then emerges.

Greenleaf illuminates the subtle process of servant leadership by listing the traits that distinguish the *bona fide* servant-leader:

A servant-leader *listens*. Most of us understand intuitively that listening rather than speaking is the proper first step in genuine communication. For Greenleaf, listening is an active, evaluative intellectual process. Unlike, say, tuning a radio to scan for signals, true listening calls for respecting the ideas of others and working hard to understand them. Only then can we harness diverse opinions to pursue organizational goals in a common direction. By contrast, as others are speaking, IT professionals often scan, without listening, for opportunities to overpower the group, to superimpose their own ideas, to “own” the meeting’s lone, surviving, dominant idea. Servant-leaders instead seek opportunities to integrate the ideas of others, in part with their own, but always behind achieving the common good. The only power greater than a single workable idea is that of several proceeding in harmony in a single direction.

Servant-leaders use their power ethically, through persuasion rather than coercion. Akin to listening, persuasion demands patience and effort. Greenleaf recognizes that management edicts occupy a righteous place in any organization. However, when rendered, he prescribes that they must clearly promote the good of the community rather than the parochial agenda of their source. Further, to earn the support of others, they must be seen clearly as such. In Greenleaf’s writings, edicts and directives are a last resort, subordinate in value and effect to the task of persuading others to follow.

Similarly, *a servant-leader seeks consensus in group decisions.* Greenleaf believes implicitly in the concept of the knowable Common Good, and in the innate wisdom of every sufficiently informed person to see it. In any group setting, particularly perhaps within Information Technology, there will be those who will persist in their own contrarian’s beliefs, regardless of the information they are tendered. An appeal to authority is the easy solution in such cases – and the wrong one. Paradoxically, the shortest path to changing the attitudes of others is to show willingness, even eagerness, to change one’s own.

Servant leadership calls for foresight in practice. Indeed, Greenleaf decries the lack of foresight in a leader as a serious ethical failure rather than a merely practical one.

A servant-leader uses open language, and avoids the terminology of the closed worlds of narrow disciplines or cult beliefs.

*The servant-leader practices acceptance and empathy:*⁶

The servant-leader always empathizes, always accepts the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person’s effort or performance as good enough.

It is part of the enigma of human nature that the typical person – immature, stubborn, inept, lazy – is capable of great dedication and heroism *if* he is wisely led. Many otherwise able people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people, who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.

Conceptualizing is the prime talent of servant leadership. A servant leader has the ability to visualize, beyond verbalize, an organization’s just objectives, as a whole within the perspective of past, present, and future. The clear expression of such conceptual vision offers compelling persuasive evidence to everyone that, for the good of all, they should follow the servant-leader.

Greenleaf contrasts this skill with the tactics of what he calls “the operator” – the person who marshals the organization’s responses to its day-to-day challenges. Greenleaf points out that an organization needs both, and recognizes that it is the operator who usually earns the recognition and promotion. But “the conceptualizers,” he says, “usually emerge when an organization makes a strong push for distinction.”⁷

Servant-leaders nurture community. Servant-leaders seek collective opportunities to achieve the common good, making sure that all share fairly in the fruits of the accomplishment. Rather than offering it a home, servant-leaders deflect credit to others.

Finally, *a servant-leader chooses to lead.* Indeed, the “enemy”, as Greenleaf puts it⁸, is “Not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the ‘system’. Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries.... The enemy is strong natural servants who have the potential to lead but do not lead, or who choose to follow a non-servant.”

7. Recognizing the Small Triumphs

Greenleaf brings us back to the powerful cycle of truth and trust. True service to the needs of others earns trust in return. Manifest often as little victories in the smallest of places, servant leadership can, when encouraged, spread – or, overlooked and misunderstood, whither and die.

I once visited a typical IT helpdesk, meeting there with several first-level responders to users’ technical problems. My official purpose was to investigate the effectiveness of a problem-tracking system they had recently installed. We began by discussing the new system, but, before long, I found myself listening as most of the technicians droned on among themselves, in their supervisor’s presence, complaining about this and that, griping about various people and events within their own organization and the company at large.

The phone rang frequently as they prattled on, largely oblivious to it. Always, I noticed, the same person rushed to answer. I listened to her as she spoke with her clients, working her way through the familiar steps of understanding and fixing their reported problems. Within a few minutes, each call ended successfully, after which she moved on to the next. Always,

I noticed, she diligently used the new tracking system to create an electronic ticket for the reported problems, against which she later meticulously logged the sundry associated events: symptoms described, actions taken, and, eventually, case closed.

I was struck by the way she handled a particular call that day, a report of a new problem phoned in by an agitated user who, as it happens, was a mid-level corporate executive. I listened as they tried a few maneuvers together over the phone, but the problem stubbornly persisted. She put her client on hold and politely asked her colleagues at the help desk if they had any suggestions. Little assistance was offered as they continued gossiping, so she turned back to her client's call and offered to come down to his office to investigate the matter in person. I excused myself from the group discussion and followed her.

She entered the client's large office with a disarming smile. Obviously, the executive inside had many important matters on his mind, and this problem with his computer was making him very angry. It took a while, but she finally caught the busy man's eye as he fussed about his desk. She asked what was wrong, and listened as he railed on and on less about the problem than the adverse effect it was having on his schedule. Reassuringly, she said "Let's take care of that right now." She stood next to him behind his desk and asked him to show her. Obviously agitated and maybe a little embarrassed, he fingered the keyboard nervously. Sensing that he was uncomfortable as well as pressed for time, the technician tried to connect with him personally, to calm him. She asked him about his family, gesturing to a photo of his wife and children. He recited their names, the grades they were in, the sports they played, all in the span of a few seconds – as he became a different, more relaxed person. She smiled and told him how lucky he was to have such a great family, after which she promptly steered the conversation back by apologizing for the problem and asking him again to show it to her. This time, he settled easily into the task of reproducing it while she and I watched.

Almost immediately, we saw that the executive was making procedural mistakes, incorrectly trying to use an option in a software package. With the executive's permission, the technician replaced him in his chair and walked him patiently through the correct way of using his computer. "I can understand why you thought it would work that way," she said while drawing the man's attention to the screen. "Actually," she said as she typed, "you need to use this particular feature a little differently." As he watched her, he silently recognized his mistake. Instead of calling attention to his obvious embarrassment, she moved to ease it by offering him his chair and asking him to give it a try as she watched. He did, and as their conversation continued she suggested a few other ways the man might try to use the software to achieve the same results with less effort and fewer steps. As she tutored him, he asked other questions, even reported a few unrelated problems that had been troubling him. She fixed all but one of them, opening a problem ticket in the help desk's tracking system to make sure it would later be addressed and resolved. She worked side by side with this man for, perhaps, twenty minutes, after which he thanked her effusively as she extended her hand to end the visit. Before she left, she wrote her telephone extension on an adhesive label and attached it to his computer's screen. "Call me if you experience any of these problems again," she said as she left, "and I'll take care of them for you right away."

Without missing any of the mandated steps in her help desk's procedural regimen, the technician took the time to connect with her client on a human level. She stayed on the subject of the problem he reported, only occasionally changing topics, for example to ask about his family, to make him more comfortable and earn his cooperation. She could have embarrassed him by pointing out his mistake, but she did not. She could have left when she resolved his reported problem, but she stayed instead to uncover and fix other problems he might be having, and to make sure he was completely satisfied with the service he had received.

When we returned to the help desk, she reviewed the ticket she had opened for the lone technical problem she could not resolve. She confirmed that its symptoms were expressed accurately and that all the relevant background information was included. Even though she knew the ticket would, in its turn, appear automatically for resolution by others on her team, she took the time to ask her colleagues if they had seen that particular problem before. When she found someone who had, she encouraged him to accept ownership of its ticket and get started resolving it. While he worked, she scanned the ticketing system's files for problems with similar symptoms, and found that several other users had, in fact, reported this particular difficulty over the past few days. She made contact with the assigned help desk technicians for each of these cases. She shared her observations, explained the adverse impact the problem was having, and inquired about what they had seen and with whom they had spoken about it. Before long, her obvious enthusiasm for her job and commitment to resolving the matter somehow induced them all to work together, to pool their experiences and search for the common technical threads running through their separate cases that would lead them to identifying the root cause of the problem. Within an hour, a thorny technical matter that had been mistakenly logged as numerous separate issues was resolved, and several long-standing open cases were closed as a result.

The next day, in a private meeting with the helpdesk supervisor on the subject of the reporting system, I began to relate my experiences with that technician, but the supervisor cut me short when I mentioned the technician's name. "Oh, her," he said dismissively. "She's a strange person, not easy to talk to, not much of a team player. And, she takes forever to close a service ticket."

8. Systematic Pseudo-efficiency

Nothing within the system demanded otherwise of him, so my friend the help desk supervisor remained ignorant of the small service miracle that happened under his nose during my visit. I tried repeatedly to point it out to him, but he would hear none of it. For some reason, maybe because she chose not to participate in their group gossip sessions, he had formed an intractable negative opinion about her. Perhaps with his unconscious help, the statistics reported by the new problem tracking system had reinforced and, to his mind, certified his adverse judgment of her.

The problem-tracking system, the subject of my visit to the help desk, was not at fault. In every technical respect, in fact, it worked perfectly: it tracked problems, recorded dates, times and names, and returned it all on demand in the form of variously sorted reports.

Still, as automatic systems often are, it was blind. It failed to capture the essence of the service the technician provided as she worked with her client to solve his problems: empathy, acceptance, foresight, clear human expression – all straight from Greenleaf’s inventory of a servant-leader’s traits. Later, it ignored her as she united her co-workers into an *ad hoc* service team, leading them to resolve a long-standing problem. Even though her unseen efforts that day resulted in closing several outstanding trouble tickets, the system had no way of crediting her for it. Her tactics, effective as they were, went unrecognized, and therefore stood little chance of becoming codified and institutionalized.

The system’s abstractions had, in her case, eclipsed the essential reality of the objects they represented: the clients’ problems, her actions in response. While trumpeting increased productivity, the system had actually made the organization *less* efficient.

9. The Cultivation of Servant Leadership

Cases like this show that an IT organization’s effectiveness depends largely on the aggregate power of its members’ individual actions. Therefore, one cannot ignore servant leadership, which seeks to grow and tap this power, as a candidate strategy for improving organizational performance.

On the other hand, under pressure to reduce costs, barraged constantly by technological innovation, and caught up in corporate politics, it is certainly easier for IT managers to choose to consider their people in purely reductionist terms: trouble tickets opened and closed, lines of code written or patched, computer systems inventoried and upgraded.

The question remains: how does one instead proceed down the difficult path of accepting and acting on Greenleaf’s premises? While the world at large could certainly use more of them, sadly not everyone is a servant-leader. Arguably, servant-leaders are born and cannot (reliably, by following some formula) be made. The Deutsch-Krauss research demonstrated this indirectly. Cooperation and facilitation did not always result from every experiment wherein the subjects were told to work together and encouraged to communicate with each other. Likewise, notwithstanding the infertile climate of their narrowly guided and non-communicating experimental trials, mutual cooperation nonetheless sometimes spontaneously sprouted. Clearly, individual differences are at work here.

Still, provided they are officially encouraged, and given the communication tools they need, the few servant-leaders within can spark productivity throughout the IT organizations they serve. As a result, the likelihood of successfully completing projects will improve, and their actual and promised delivery dates will converge. Operating costs will go down as professional productivity is enhanced. The probability that people will work together to find the true root cause of problems, rather than merely follow the official rituals of closing a problem’s “tickets”, will increase. Put another way, servant leadership is the root cause of

true IT productivity. Over time, personal acts of servant leadership will ignite real progress toward the collective good. Reflecting their individual contributions, the overall scores reported by various IT activity tracking systems will, over time, also improve. The dog wags its tail; not the other way 'round.

The retail industry suggests a way forward for Information Technology management. Store managers use a technique called “mystery shopping”, visiting their own stores as a customer would, to audit the quality of service their employees offer. This is much more than mere surveillance, which aims to identify workers who, through rudeness or incompetence, suppress their stores’ revenue. Mystery shopping actively involves owners and managers in the day-to-day business of their stores, thus situating them to “catch employees doing things right”, to identify employee service techniques that enhance revenue. Savvy line managers highlight this behavior at their regular staff meetings, not only spurring the recognized employees to continue, but inspiring others to follow. In such meetings, tales of personal successes have far greater impact than spreadsheets of sales and profit numbers. Recognizing, rewarding, and encouraging good service promises far greater “bottom-line” benefit than merely spotting and punishing the bad.

By placing themselves in the role of the clients they support, IT managers can adapt “mystery shopping” to their purposes.

Management needs to understand the meaning of servant leadership in their organizations’ support missions, to internalize its core values: the joy of a job well done, the positive benefits of earning trust by offering true service. Accepting that servant leadership is the “Right Thing”, and not just some clever technique, managers who truly respect this quality in their subordinates’ work subsequently find it easy to recognize when they see it. Indeed, for them, true quality becomes hard to overlook.

Once they are integrated into their own work, managers must share these values with their subordinates. They must show clearly that these values are not just personal opinions, but are also the organization’s values. A servant leadership connection must be made with all employees, not just friends and favorites, on a moral and ethical as well as practical level. As an institutional value, servant leadership should become a key element in the process of advancement, from worker to management, and within management’s ranks.

Once the underlying values of servant leadership have been established, managers need to encourage their subordinates to engage in the collegial exchange of ideas, especially technical ideas, using open and clear expression rather than technical jargon. Management should reward clarity and discourage cloudiness – thus promoting cooperation by making it easier to cooperate. Quantum Network Design, a structured method that can be used to describe all network-integrated systems in both IT-specific and converged business applications, will be presented in future issues of these papers.

10. Tapping the Power of True Authority

In the scheme of things, ethical systems like servant leadership seem by design to be both elusive and real. It is perhaps intended that, when we try to analyze and manipulate such moral concepts, seeking somehow to automate them, they dissolve in our hands. Sadly, under daily pressure to produce practical results, too many of us give up our trying to discern and do the right thing. We learn to substitute symbols and, especially, numbers, any numbers, in its place. We use these numbers to compete with each other, with ourselves, to play at doing the right thing. Sometimes, maybe accidentally, certainly too infrequently, we even approximate the right thing by engaging in this game. But such stumbling about, however rigorously scientific it may look, can hardly be thought of as wise.

Effective managers, instead, keenly grasp that true authority must be earned by working, individually, in terms of genuine right and wrong, thereby charting a correct course for all. By their example, they encourage servant leadership. Further, they serve those who would serve by clearing the obstacles in their way.

Ultimately, Greenleaf plants a bold signpost before us. Always, in Greenleaf's conception, one chooses first to serve, and only then to lead. Which of us has the courage to choose this first step, to abandon the short-sighted pursuit of personal exaltation in favor of service to others? Truly, this would be someone worth following.

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Notes

¹ Don M. Frick, *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership*, page 281

² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, page 27

³ M. Deutsch and R. M. Krauss, "The Effect of Threat on Interpersonal Bargaining", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, pages 181-189.

⁴ Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder, due to controversy over its category, has been moved from Axis II personality disorders in the main text of earlier editions of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The current (fourth) edition (DSM-IV), describes the condition in Appendix B.

⁵ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, page 27

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 35

⁷ Robert K. Greenleaf, *On Becoming a Servant Leader*, page 217.

⁸ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, page 59