

Servant-Leader Model: Old Concept with New Application

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Servant-Leader Model: Old Concept with New Application
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If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you.¹

The concept of servant-leadership is as old as recorded history as demonstrated above in the words of Jesus. The challenge of any leader is to balance personal ambition with service. Currently, the Marine Corps does not answer this challenge in its methodology in developing leaders, nor has it implemented a specific model by which leaders can follow. The result is a leadership corps that struggles with balancing personal ambition and service. The servant-leader model should be adopted by the Marine Corps as its leadership philosophy because it provides the leader purpose and method, the key to mission accomplishment, an enduring unit vision, and genuine compassion for subordinates.

Background

The Marine Corps outlines fourteen leadership traits and eleven leadership principles from examples of historical Marine Corps heroes.² The Marine Corps then espouses a quest to find an individual leadership style

¹ John 13.14, New King James Version.

² United States Marine Corps, *Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1-0: Leading Marines* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1995), 103-105.

within the framework of these listed traits and principles.³ How does an aspiring military leader apply an academic list of leadership traits to developing a successful leadership method? Marines Corps doctrine leaves this task to the individual which is an abdication of institutional responsibility.

Furthermore, the Marine Corps leadership development philosophy provides only one-third of a commander's intent message, the end state. The preceding two-thirds of the commander's intent message (purpose and method) are absolutely essential in accomplishing this end state, yet the Marine Corps leadership philosophy has neglected to provide them. The result is a leadership corps which is left to its own devices in defining successful leadership method.

Servant-Hood Defined

The word "service" means "the occupation or condition of a servant."⁴ Although it has become increasingly rare to associate military service with the connotation of a *servant*, the definition still stands. The problem with this term is that it connotes a demeaning profession in

³ *Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1-0: Leading Marines*, forward written by General C.E. Mundy.

⁴ Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th ed., s.v. "Service".

modern society.⁵ Yet servant-hood to our country in the name of national defense is exactly what is required of military service members. It follows, then, that the philosophy of leadership in this service-oriented profession of arms must complement its most fundamental function: service.

Servant-hood is a special calling, requiring the intentional submission of the most basic human instincts, self-preservation and ambition. Marine Corps doctrine is congruent with this concept in that being a Marine is a calling not a profession.⁶ Furthermore, servant-hood places the ideals and mission of the institution above personal ambition and self-preservation.

Motive of a Servant Leader

According to Jim Collins, bestselling author of *Good to Great*, research shows that the success of his sampled organizations depended largely on the actions of servant-leaders. Collins' research revealed leaders who had a different heart or calling than that of the organization's predecessors or competitors. Collins dubbed these leaders "Level 5 Executives" and describes these leaders as builders of "enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend

⁵, Joseph A. Gattuso, and Lori Tanner, "Service Before Self," United States Naval Institute. Proceedings 127, no. 2 (2001): 56. Military Module, ProQuest (01 November 2005).

⁶ *Fleet Marine Forces Manual 1-0: Leading Marines*, 7.

of personal humility and professional will.”⁷ The research did not reveal a secret leadership formula or new and improved leadership traits. Collins says that the success of these leaders is a mystery:

...We have no solid research data that would support a credible list [of steps in becoming a Level 5 leader]. Our research exposed Level 5 as a key component inside the black box of what it takes to shift a company from good to great. Yet inside that black box is yet another black box – namely, the inner development of a person to Level 5.⁸

The composite of this “inner black box” is the heart of a servant.

A truly great leader is one who is a servant first, and this servant-hood does not originate from a meticulously followed checklist of leadership traits.⁹ Rather, the servant-leader is a great leader because his greatest satisfaction is in serving subordinates, superiors and the objectives of the institution. Robert Greenleaf, the pioneer of the modern servant-leadership philosophy for business organizations, expands on this concept: “His

⁷ Jim Collins, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 20.

⁸ Collins, 37.

⁹ Major Wagner describes servant leadership in an article for the Marine Corps Gazette: “The servant leader operates from a different center – a source of strength at odds with traditional notions of power structures and authority.”

Daniel R. Wagner, “Servant Leadership - A Vision for Inspiring the Best from our Marines,” Marine Corps Gazette 88, no. 1 (2004): 54. Military Module, ProQuest (01 November 2005).

servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was a servant first.”¹⁰

Therefore, a successful leadership philosophy is first and foremost grounded in a purpose of service. This then, is the key fundamental in achieving a servant-leader approach. Lacking the heart of a servant, a leader merely manufactures leadership ideals and constantly restrains his natural selfish instincts for self-promotion and self-preservation.

Developing the Heart of a Servant

The inner calling of a servant may be natural to some leaders, but most are inclined to competitiveness for personal promotion and preservation. Therefore, in order to adopt a servant-leader philosophy, the Marine Corps will have to develop the heart of a servant in its Marines through education.

The Marine Corps can define servant-hood for Marines at the earliest level of training as well as to seniors within the institution. The characteristics of servant-hood and self-service can be exposed, leading individuals to a personal choice between the two value sets. The goal of this training is to provide *buy-in* to the servant-leader

¹⁰ Robert K. Greenleaf, Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 7.

approach. The fact that some Marines will not accept this philosophy must be expected. The Marine Corps cannot force the heart of a servant into leaders, nor should this be the goal. Instead, the Marine Corps method of developing servant leaders should be from the inside out, winning the hearts and minds of Marines to service oriented leadership.¹¹ Therefore, the overarching principle for change will be by influence through education.

Subordination to Mission

In a brief for company-grade officers, Major General Jones (USMC retired) expressed concern about the motives of the officer corps in the area of personal ambition and leadership. He stated that, "Success in the Marine Corps does not equate to the accomplishment of the rank of general officer."¹² The overriding desire for personal promotion in a leader will distract from making objective mission decisions. Leaders are required to make decisions

¹¹ This cannot be accomplished by an outside agency such as a professional leadership consultant. Robert Greenleaf believes that the only way to affect an organization for lasting change is by getting on the *inside*: "...Nothing of substance will happen unless there are people inside these institutions who are able to (and want to) lead them into better performance for the public good. Some of you ought to make careers inside these big institutions and become a force for good - from the inside (Greenleaf, 2)." This *inside* approach links lasting organizational change to leadership responsibility. Pawning such an immense project off on some other agency is irresponsible. The Marine Corps has to *desire* the change in leadership philosophy and therefore instill this vision for change within itself.

¹² Major General Jones, Thomas S., USMC (retired), Leadership and Family, 23 August 2005, guest lecture, (23 October 2005).

based on the requirements of the mission problem and which make the best use of the unit's resources. The leadership answer to this challenge is subordination to mission.

The servant-leader does not compromise essential mission action in pursuit of selfish goals. The leader must be willing to subordinate his own ambition, or, if necessary, his career, in order to accomplish his unit's purpose. Furthermore, the servant-leader uses the unit's resources (material and people) responsibly and economically, and remains focused on accomplishing the mission.

Key to Decentralized Control

The Marine Corps concept of decentralized control can be greatly improved by a servant-leader approach.¹³ The key element in decentralized control provided by the servant-leader is trust. This trust is in reciprocating flow as it moves up the chain of command as well as down. Major Wagner writes:

The servant leadership model asserts that only the leader who has proven his value as a trusted steward of his Marines will inspire them to seek the common good of all above self-interest, to perfect their combat skills and unit capabilities in battle, and to decentralize authority and execution to adapt more effectively to the rapid pace of change in combat.¹⁴

¹³ United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 6: Command and Control* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1996), 47.

¹⁴ Wagner.

By exemplifying subordination to mission, the servant-leader challenges subordinates to make responsible decisions with unit assets based on a servant mind set. Subordinate leaders can now be trusted to make responsible decisions without the direct influence of the commander, just as the subordinates can trust their unit leader to make unselfish and responsible decisions (a.k.a. decentralized control).

Unit Problem Solving

Compared to ambition fueled autocrats, servant-leaders enjoy vast success in unit performance. Servant-leaders achieve greater unit performance because they take an objective view toward organizational success and challenges. These leaders credit unit success to their subordinates and accept responsibility for unit problems or failure.¹⁵ Because servant leaders are not concerned with personal ego or accolades, they can take a more objective approach to increasing unit performance. Servant-leaders also tend to take personal responsibility for unit problems and quickly find solutions rather than waste effort in hiding mistakes and shortcomings.

¹⁵ Collins, 36.

Enduring Unit Vision through Mentorship

The servant-leader concept facilitates the key to sustained unit performance, an enduring vision. Servant-leaders make organizational decisions that benefit the unit long after their own tenure ends. Autocrats, however, abuse their temporary tenure in command by making leadership decisions that benefit themselves and rarely invest time in mentoring subordinates. Collins recognizes this as a key trait of his Level 5 Executives: "...Ambition first and foremost for the company and concern for *its* success rather than for one's own riches and personal renown."¹⁶

Servant-leaders facilitate enduring organizational success through mentorship. Servant-leaders dedicate personal time to subordinate leaders to communicate unit vision and provide methodology for its execution. These subordinate leaders then pass on this communicated method and vision to their subordinates, and this process continues for several organizational generations. The servant leader has now provided the means for accomplishment of the vision long after he is gone.

¹⁶ Collins, 26.

Servant Leadership as a Proselytizing Ploy

It may be argued that the servant-leader concept is a distinctly Christian philosophy, and that the promotion of it is not intended to improve military leadership. Some will argue that this concept is a *wolf in sheep's clothing* in that the real intent is to press a particular faith system on a diverse military. However, in the name of objectivity, the Bible should be included as a leadership resource as it offers tremendous insight into servant-leadership. Jesus was a leader who was a servant first and He mentored this approach to His disciples:

...Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.¹⁷

Servant Leaders Distract Themselves in Serving

Subordinates

It may also be argued that servant-leadership promotes *over-concern* for the morale of subordinates. The Marines Corps, in fact, endorses *taking care of Marines* as its second purpose of leadership behind victory in battle. Servant-leadership promotes a responsible attitude of compassion for subordinates, not a frivolous approach of

¹⁷ Matt. 20.26-28 New Kings James Version.

securing happiness. Leaders who pursue the latter do so for popularity.

The servant-leader focuses on mission accomplishment; his approach to care and mentorship of subordinates is consistent with this priority. The authentic servant puts forth the appropriate amount of effort in congruence with the objectives of the unit and the development of the individual. Furthermore, the truly compassionate leader is not afraid of ruffling feathers in the name of honesty. The servant leader discerns the appropriate method of care from a heart of service and not a vain pursuit of popularity.

Conclusion

All leaders are submissive, either to their own selfish ambitions or to the service of their country, Corps and Marines. Current Marine Corps leadership philosophy does not provide the purpose or methodology to choose the latter. However, the servant-leader model answers this challenge by providing the leader with the heart of a servant. With the purpose of a servant established, the leader will naturally be inclined to servant-hood and thereby find the key to mission accomplishment, enduring unit vision and genuine compassion for subordinates. Therefore, the Marine Corps should adopt and promote the

servant-leader approach to leadership. "Life's not about living with a rigid set of laws, but living in harmony with a servant heart."¹⁸

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¹⁸ Ken Blanchard, Bill Hybels, and Phil Hodges, Leadership by the Book: Tools to Transform your Workplace (New York: WaterBrook Press, 1999), 45.

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