

Servant Leadership and Cooperation

BY JOEL KOPISCHKE

“SERVANT AND LEADER. Can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels of status or calling? If so, can that person live and be productive in the real world of the present? My sense of the present leads me to say yes to both questions.”

— Robert Greenleaf, in his revised edition of “The Servant as Leader,” 1991.

Cooperatives are formed to serve the needs of their member-owners. The board of directors is empowered to guide and oversee the co-op, serving the member-owners as a steward of the organization. Most co-ops also look to serve more than just their member-owners and to have a positive impact on their community, economy, environment, and broader cooperative community. With this mindset to serve embedded in our institutions, it seems only natural that when we look for values to guide our leadership, many of us have found the philosophy and principles of servant leadership to be a great fit for our boards and management.

Other approaches to leadership certainly exist and work well for different situations. Participatory approaches may not be appropriate for battlefield-type scenarios; but boards almost never face the same type of urgency—there are no literal fires to put out—and governance is applied with a longer view and a slower pace. As such, the circumstances of board work also lend themselves well to servant leadership.

Servant leadership history and qualities

The concept of servant leadership seems to go back as far as we have written records, with passages relating to the idea appearing in the Tao Te Ching, the New Testament, and the teachings of Islam. Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term “servant-leader” in a 1970 essay entitled “The Servant As Leader,” and the modern servant leadership movement was born.

Greenleaf placed at the center of his leadership paradigm neither skills, techniques, nor steps to success. Rather, he said, “The servant-leader is servant *first*... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. (This person) is sharply different from the person who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive



ILLUSTRATION BY MELECK DAVIS

or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are the shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature” (p. 15, italics in original).

Greenleaf identified intention as the first necessary ingredient. However, anyone who’s ever had a small child who was determined to “help” with some chore knows that a desire to serve alone will not get a person all the way to “leader.” What other qualities are needed? How do we become effective Servant-Leaders?

Larry Spears, as president and CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, in his paper, “On Character and Servant Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders,” described these characteristics:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Healing
- Awareness
- Persuasion
- Conceptualization
- Foresight
- Stewardship
- Commitment to the growth of people
- Building community

As someone who has lived and breathed servant leadership, I think Spears’ familiarity and insight on the topic may be unparalleled, so this list—while not exhaustive—seems like the best place to start.

10 characteristics

Listening: Few would argue that a great leader can be a poor communicator, but more common leadership models seem to emphasize only one half of the communication equation—talking. Instead, Greenleaf opined, “Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much.” Stephen R. Covey in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* wrote, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” I believe the greatest leaders model the behavior they wish to see in their “followers,” and if a leader wants the team to listen, the leader should show the way. Board chairs and general managers should take the time to listen to their teams, and that includes listening to each other as part of the leadership team of the cooperative. And of course, boards must listen to the owners.

Empathy: A leader cannot empathize without understanding; cannot understand without listening. Listening is a great first characteristic that leads to greater understanding and empathy. With empathy, a leader can accept and recognize people for their special and unique spirits, distinguishing between the individual and the individual’s behavior. Empathy helps leaders realize accountability and address unacceptable behavior, without rejecting the person. Acknowledging that we all have strengths and weaknesses, we all have our blind spots, and we all make mistakes allows a leader to move to a place of helping one who fails. General managers and board chairs can employ empathy when disciplining directors or staff, moving beyond punishment to a more holistic approach that

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addresses behavior while being cognizant and respectful of the person's struggle.

Healing: Related to empathy, Spears wrote about the human condition, that most people have emotional hurts and parts of our spirit that are "broken." Having these "wounds" is a natural consequence of life, and healing is a part of human growth and development. Servant leaders see that in their leadership role, they have a unique opportunity to facilitate healing in those with whom they come in contact. Healing one's self and one's relationships can be transformational, unlocking vast potential. Servant leaders understand that healed (and healing) individuals have more to contribute, and they work to facilitate that healing. In addition to the individual healing that board chairs and general managers can do for themselves and can assist in those around them, sometimes our cooperatives have histories fraught with conflict and wounds that continue to affect our organizations. Boards can heal amongst themselves, and the organizational leaders can work to bring healing to our owners, staff, and cooperatives.

Awareness: To heal one's self, a leader has to be aware of her own wounds. Additionally, awareness of one's wounds helps a leader to separate out an emotional reaction and to filter his communication so that the important parts can continue to flow, even if that wound is reopened. Additionally, a leader needs to be aware of impact vs. intention. Our empathy tells us that others have wounds that need healing, so leaders need to be sure that not only is their intention good, but their impact as well. Further self-awareness allows leaders to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and to utilize other resources as necessary. Board chairs and general managers must have great awareness, of both self and others. Boards need to cultivate a collective awareness of how group process affects individuals and an awareness of the impact of how the group interacts with the general manager.

Persuasion: This characteristic may be the least understood or most confusing—persuasion is not coercion, and it is certainly not compliance through authoritarian rule. Persuasion is a combination of advocacy and building alignment or consensus. We can communicate our position and its strengths and make a strong case for its acceptance, then build alignment among our team, and reach consensus. Persuasion is not devious or slippery, with undue use of influence or authority; it is a healthy and inclusive way to reach multilateral agreements. Board chairs and general managers can use persuasion with significant initiatives to create champions of a cause or plan. Boards need to use persuasion when educating owners

on matters of import, especially issues that come before the membership for a vote, such as changes to bylaws. When we tell our co-op story in a compelling way, we are helping persuade others to join us.

Conceptualization: This requires the ability to dream and to be visionary. Spears says that a key role of boards of trustees or directors is to provide the visionary concept for the organization. Indeed, articulating the strategic direction of the cooperative is a unique role for the board to play. Of all the things a board could do, this might be the place where boards have the most impact on the organization. Spears advocated that boards be primarily conceptual in their perspective and orientation. Boards need to leverage their unique position and think beyond the day-to-day and broaden their perspective, providing their unique and vital contribution of strategic leadership through conceptualization.

Foresight: It is daunting to think that part of the leader's job is to essentially be a fortune-teller, but it is a natural extension from conceptualization. Using our wisdom and imagination, we can cultivate the ability to predict likely outcomes from certain scenarios or decisions. We take our experience and lessons learned from the past—our individual expertise and our institutional knowledge pool—and we combine that with what we know about our current realities, and we begin to develop the ability to intuit likely consequences of our actions.

Greenleaf identified foresight as the central ethic of servant leadership, saying, "prescience, or foresight, is a better-than-average guess about what is going to happen, when, in the future." He said that foresight is the "lead" that the leader has. Without foresight, a leader is not leading—he or she is only reacting. And a leader who is only reacting to events may run out of options, get boxed in, and start making bad decisions, including unethical ones. That is why Greenleaf said that foresight is the central ethic of leadership. "A failure of foresight can put an organization in a bad situation that might have been avoided." (p. 57) Additionally, a failure of foresight will put an organization in a position where it can not take advantage of opportunities that arise because it failed to see them coming and therefore did not prepare.

In order to build foresight, leaders must build insight. And insight is only gained through learning and reflecting. If this is done intentionally, the insights gained, and thus the

potential for foresight, are accentuated. This is why intentionally learning about the internal and external worlds of our cooperatives is paramount. It is critical that boards invest their time, money and energy in this work. General managers (GMs) must be able to anticipate what might happen at the organizational level, board chairs must be able to expect what could occur at the board level, and boards must be able to foresee possible issues that will arise with the organization's governance in order to properly fulfill its role as steward.

Stewardship: This might be the most obvious for cooperative boards, as their legal role is as fiduciary, trustee, and steward of the co-op. As mentioned at the outset, a commitment to serving the needs of others is at the core of our boards and servant leadership. Every part of our cooperatives—boards, GMs, managers, staff, and owners—can see themselves as stewards and act as trustees, doing what's best for the organization. In turn, the co-op can take on the role as a steward of their community. Having this tenet as a thriving principle running through the organization can have dramatic impacts and ties with the idea of persuasion. General managers and board chairs should act in the best interests of their team, and help them understand through persuasion what is in their best interests and why. The board has the same responsibility to educate and persuade the owners, so that it is transparent how the board and the co-op act in their best interest. Some organizations (such as Wheatsville Food Co-op) even re-orient their whole management team to think of the staff as the primary customer; it's management's job to help the staff succeed in serving our owners and other shoppers.

Commitment to the growth of people: Good leaders want everyone in their organization to get better—they want them to heal, unleashing their potential and nurturing the personal and professional growth of employees, colleagues, and team members. Delegation is one way people grow—the person delegating needs not just to understand something but to be able to teach it, and people with new responsibilities have to step out of their comfort zones in order to take on fresh challenges. Providing people with the resources, support, and encouragement to grow helps them help the leader, the team, the co-op, and the community. General managers can utilize empowering strategies such as open book management; board chairs can include directors in agenda planning or have individual directors lead and facilitate different parts of meetings; and boards can be sure to budget enough resources to provide for training opportunities for its directors.

Building community: A somewhat foreign ►

◀ concept in “business as usual” corporations, this characteristic speaks to the heart of what co-ops do. As Brett Fairbairn says, cooperatives are both enterprises and associations—the enterprise is the business we engage in, and the association is the people, the connections, and the community. The concept can be broadened to include building a sense of community amongst any group that lives, works, or interacts with each other. Board chairs and general managers can help to foster the sense of community on their teams, the board can engage amongst themselves, and the board and general manager can also engage the owners to build a sense of fellowship. Community is perhaps the biggest asset a cooperative has.

Beyond the 10 characteristics

These qualities provide a great foundation for servant leadership, but there are certainly additional traits that would be useful for leaders to utilize in serving—integrity, humility, intelligence, passion, a sense of humor, and more. It’s exciting to imagine all the wonderful qualities that each of us can apply in our own unique way as we choose to serve and take up the mantle of leadership.

As cooperatives continue to strive to create a better world, a top-down scheme is contrary to our desired goals of empowering local communities. Servant leadership provides an approach and a framework that can help us serve our teams, help our teams serve our co-ops, help our co-ops serve our communities, and help our communities serve the world today so that we can indeed manifest the tomorrow we strive for.

How can you use the characteristics of servant leadership in your life to serve those around you, especially your cooperative board? How can your board use the characteristics to better serve the co-op? How can our GM and other managers apply these principles to enhance their teams? How can our co-op be a better servant leader to our member-owners and our community? Just imagine if every director, manager, and member-owner was able to better embody just one of these characteristics, how that focus and influx of better service to others would take our boards, co-ops, and communities to the next level and make all of our lives better. That’s the potential that co-ops and servant leadership have and the future that I want to see. If we each make that commitment, I’ll meet you there. ■

Thanks to Art Sherwood, the Cooperative Board Leadership Development (CBLD) team, and everyone who has attended the CBLD Leadership Training for helping me learn more about servant leadership and allowing me to borrow some of their eloquence. This article clearly draws heavily from the works of Larry Spears and Robert Greenleaf, and we are all indebted to their work and wisdom.

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Let's do it together.

