How do I become a Servant Leader? A practitioner's approach to Servant Leadership development

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Introduction

Robert K Greenleaf, who authored the seminal work on Servant Leadership, was inspired by Herman Hess's "Journey to the East" story. Servant Leadership is considered different from other forms of leadership owing to its primary focus on the *need to serve*, which drives the need to lead (Greenleaf, 2003). Eva *et al.*, argues that in other forms of leadership the *need to lead* is the primary motivation. Another crucial aspect of Servant Leadership is its emphasis on serving the follower's needs and eventually empowering them. As a follower's well-being is of utmost importance for a Servant Leader, often such leaders ignore their own needs in the process (Greenleaf, 2003).

Servant Leadership has become quite popular among researchers and practitioners on account of several positive outcomes including workplace behavior attitudes, leader-related & performance-related outcomes (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Sendjaya *et al.* (2008) discuss how this follower-centric leadership style solves many workplace problems like toxic emotions, abuse of power, alienation at the workplace, and work-life balance. Even though much research has explored the outcomes of Servant Leadership, there is scant exploration of the antecedents (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Hence, one can argue that practitioners are unable to train employees in Servant Leadership behaviors. This article focuses on the development of Servant Leadership.

Developing the ten characteristics of Servant Leadership

Spears (2002), introduced the ten characteristics of Servant Leadership based on Greenleaf's writings. The following section discusses these ten characteristics and how one can develop these characteristics for someone who aspires to be a Servant Leader, which is the contribution of this article.

Listening: A Servant Leader grows by listening to others intently with frequent reflections (inner voice) of his or her own. Greenleaf posits that a non-servant who strives to become a servant can do so by the strenuous practice of *listening*, with the intent of helping the leaders to understand and subsequently fulfil the needs of the followers.

Empathy: Servant Leaders are known to accept and empathize with their followers. Acceptance requires an understanding that people may not be perfect, and as leaders, they can reject follower's performance but not the follower. It seems easy to lead followers who are close to perfection. However, the wisdom of a Servant Leader helps in leading imperfect followers. Such acceptance helps the leader to empathize with the followers.

To develop empathy, an inquisitive nature, a conscious focus on one's reflections of a follower's feelings and awareness of their external cues of feelings are essential (Goleman et al., 2017).

Healing: At times, teams consist of individuals who have been hurt emotionally and have broken spirits. Servant Leaders identify such individuals and heal them by being empathetic listeners and helping them be the best version of themselves. Since a Servant Leader's innate need is to serve others, this healing process is mutual for the followers and the leader. One can develop this characteristic by making a conscious effort to encourage and provide emotional support.

Awareness: Servant Leaders are high on self-awareness which enables them to be calm in stressful situations, consequently enabling them to provide creative solutions in the face of challenges. It equips them with confidence in the face of uncertainty. Leaders can develop awareness by listening to others, self-reflection, connecting what one believes to what one does and being open to feedback and learning.

Persuasion: Servant Leaders uses persuasion rather than coercion during decision making. They are skillful in building consensus through persuasion. Greenleaf noted that such persuasive behavior helps followers use their intuitive sense about the correctness of an action or belief (Greenleaf, 2003).

Conceptualization: Servant Leaders strive to "dream great dreams". They have a vision for their followers. They find the sweet spot between routine operations and strategic thinking. Someone who strives to be a Servant Leader must understand this balance between the routine and the futuristic. Such leaders help followers fulfil their needs by focusing on the vision based on the follower's well-being.

Foresight: Foresight enables Servant Leaders to comprehend possible outcomes of a scenario. Leaders learn from their past experiences and evaluate their present, which helps them foresee the likely result of different situations. Unlike other characteristics, foresight can be challenging to learn. However, one can certainly improve it by being aware of surroundings and relying on past experiences. The ability to reflect, absorb and learn contributes to foresight.

Stewardship: Stewardship is a crucial tenet of Servant Leadership. Greenleaf emphasizes how CEOs, managers, and employees in the organization play crucial roles by taking care of the organization's progress and serving others for the greater good of society.
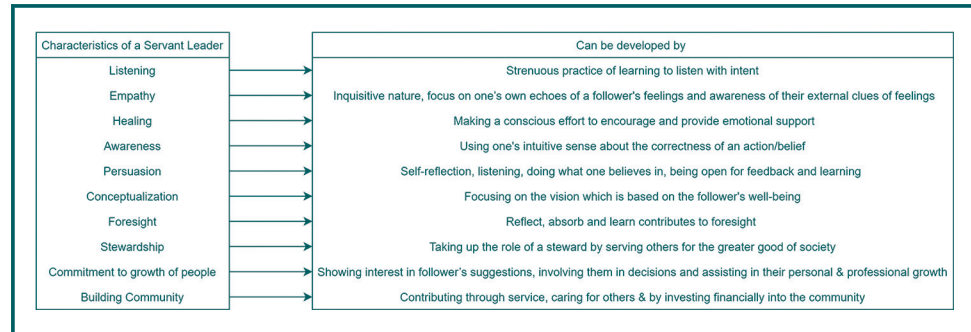
The first step in being a Servant Leader is to don the role of a steward responsible for "holding the organization in trust for another." One should be ready to serve because they are intrinsically motivated to do so and not because of any obligation.

Commitment to the growth of people: According to Greenleaf (2003), evidence of Servant Leadership is visible when followers are noticeably freer, healthier, wiser, autonomous and more likely to become Servant Leaders themselves. Such leaders consider it their responsibility to see that their followers are growing under their guidance. They do this by nurturing the followers' professional, personal and spiritual growth. Leaders can do this by involving followers in decision making, showing genuine interest in follower's suggestions and ideas, assisting them in their personal and professional growth.

Building Community: Greenleaf compares institutions where liability is limited for those who are serving others. On the other hand, "a community is a face-to-face group in which liability of each for the other and all for one is unlimited, or as close to it as it is possible to get"(Greenleaf, 2003, p. 52). This happens because of the warmth and love that individuals have for each other in these communities.

Leaders can trigger such emotions and behavior by contributing through service in the community, caring for others in the community or by investing financially into the community through resources (Hesselbein et al., 1998) (Figure 1).

Characteristics of a Servant Leader	Can be developed by
Listening	Strenuous practice of learning to listen with intent
Empathy	Inquisitive nature, focus on one's own echoes of a follower's feelings and awareness of their external clues of feelings
Healing	Making a conscious effort to encourage and provide emotional support
Awareness	Using one's intuitive sense about the correctness of an action/belief
Persuasion	Self-reflection, listening, doing what one believes in, being open for feedback and learning
Conceptualization	Focusing on the vision which is based on the follower's well-being
Foresight	Reflect, absorb and learn contributes to foresight
Stewardship	Taking up the role of a steward by serving others for the greater good of society
Commitment to growth of people	Showing interest in follower's suggestions, involving them in decisions and assisting in their personal & professional growth
Building Community	Contributing through service, caring for others & by investing financially into the community

Conclusion: This paper stresses how one can develop specific characteristics of Servant Leadership by clarifying and specifying the model of Servant Leadership proposed and developed by Larry C. Spears based on Greenleaf's seminal work. Identifying and exploring antecedents is imperative for Servant Leadership development; hence future research should focus on empirical studies that explore behavioral and attitudinal variables such as workplace spirituality, motivation-to-serve, motivation-to-lead etc. Practitioners can use these antecedents in training Servant Leadership. It is expected that this article will be helpful for practitioners and managers from the perspective of developing Servant Leadership in organizations.

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