



journal of biblical  
perspectives  
in leadership

## **A Servant Leadership Model of Social Awareness Development in a Higher Education Non-Profit Setting**

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This paper examines servant leadership and how this model is utilized to develop self-awareness for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities within a higher education setting. The setting discussed is a university in the south with a total population of 43,000 students. Within this population is a select inclusive post-secondary education program of 50 students. This program focuses on the development of students in three specific areas, including academic attainment, social interaction, and career development. These areas are significant because they all add to the development of self-awareness. Servant leadership is the chosen model of self-awareness development utilized by the director and all staff members. Further, adjunctive elements, including empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, are utilized to provide support and hope.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Non-Profit, University, Inclusion

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According to Think College (2023), an inclusive community of inclusion affiliated with the University of Boston at Massachusetts, there are 323 Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (IPSE) programs across the United States. These programs are established to educate those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and provide them with a college experience that they may not have previously been able to gain. Within these programs is the development in several areas, including academic attainment, social enrichment, and career development, all while fostering and developing self-awareness. The purpose of this paper is to discuss an IPSE program in the state of Georgia utilizing the lens of servant leadership as a mechanism for fostering self-awareness.

### **Inclusive Post Secondary Education**

Rothstein (2015) discusses the development of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibited discrimination of individuals with disabilities in higher education institutions that accepted federal funding. In 1975, federally funded special education programs were introduced into the educational landscape. As a result of special education being introduced, Section 504 was actually enforced beginning in 1979. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act became law and protected individuals further from discrimination (Rothstein, 2015). In response to the needs of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities leaving high school, colleges have worked to provide services and career development to these individuals, hence the development of IPSE programs.

The state of Georgia has nine IPSE programs (Think College, 2023). Of these programs, the oldest and largest is at Kennesaw State University, located just north of Atlanta (KSU, 2023). Kennesaw State University is a state-supported, two-campus university that provides services to more than 43,000 students. Kennesaw State University's program is referred to as the Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth or the Academy for short. The Academy first opened in 200 with a total of three students and, since that time, has grown to fifty students and more than 140 graduates. In total, there are 150 students who participate in IPSE programs throughout the state of Georgia.

The Academy offers two certificate programs; the first is the Academic Social and Career Enrichment program. This program is followed by an Advanced Leadership and Career Development Program, which allows students to hone in specific career interests. The second certificate program is by invitation based upon successful completion of the first program. Admission requirements to both programs include a reading level of the third grade and higher, no severe behavioral concerns, an individualized education plan (IEP) from high school, and a high school diploma. Additionally, a psychological exam dated at least twenty-four months from the date of the application must be submitted along with a final high school transcript.

### **The Academy as Non-Profit**

The Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth is part of the University of Georgia System and, as a part of this system, is considered to be a non-profit. Further, the Academy is delineated in that it does not receive funding from the state except for

the director's salary but instead is reliant upon a matriculation fee that is charged to each student that pays for the salaries of the staff members, including instructors, an educational program specialist, four program advisors, and a program coordinator. The program also has an Executive Director whose administrative stipend is supported by the program. In addition to a matriculation fee, the program also receives support from grants, including support from the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Home Depot. As a result of their non-profit status, the Academy is not responsible for paying sales taxes.

## The Focus

Many students within the Academy have been marginalized in school. Through hearing personal stories and reflections, these students comment on being bullied, harassed, and made fun of for being different and for not being what might be considered "typical" students. In response to this, the Academy has four main focus areas. They are viewed as three pillars and one overarching theme. The pillars include academic achievement, social integration, and career development. Inclusive of all of these pillars is the theme of self-awareness (figure 1). Self-awareness as an overarching theme allows for the development and refinement of the individual pillars throughout the program.

All three pillars are considered to be of equal importance. Academic achievement refers to an increase in academic attainment, such as an increased reading level and enhanced academic knowledge. This is achieved by each student participating in three Academy courses taught each term and through participation in an audit course within the traditional university setting. Additionally, students are enrolled in a continuing education certificate program to increase academic ability in an area that includes customer service, technology, multimedia, professional writing, or a culinary course.

Social integration is developed through participation in regularly scheduled programs held by the academy. Students are also required to participate in either a group on campus or to attend any of a number of social events, including sporting events. For students who experience some social anxiety, the type of programming and the expectations might be altered to make them personally gratifying. One of the best aspects of this pillar is that for many of the students who are enrolled in our program, this opportunity to be a part of the university represents the first time that many students have experienced meaningful friendships.

From a career development perspective, students beginning in their second semester of the program are required to participate in a job internship. Our program has approximately 40 partnerships on campus that provide job training and skills. Some of the favorite sites include the bicycle shop, public safety, the Dean's Office, and working in athletics with the baseball and volleyball teams. All of the students are evaluated each term and receive constructive feedback to enhance their performance in future jobs. Many of the students remain in their positions for the complete academic year. Additionally, several of the internships are paid by the employing department, and there is the possibility that some students might be paid through federal work-study dollars.

## History of Greenleaf's Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a theory proposed by Greenleaf (1977), which established a view of leadership that shifts the standard model of leadership away from a top-down pyramid, where the leader is served by the follower, to an inverse model where the follower is served by the leader, forming a first-amongst-equals approach to leadership. The model was developed by Greenleaf up until his death in 1990 and helped to develop a system of leadership that could help better communities. Greenleaf himself created a test to see if a leader was a servant-leader: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" This test allows for a metric to be used in order to better understand the quality of a leader from a Servant Leader perspective. It should also be highlighted that the metric's central focus is on that of the community and the help that can be provided to it through the actions of a servant leader.

Greenleaf (1977) outlined and developed the leadership theory by first establishing how the idea came about. Greenleaf describes coming to the idea of Servant Leadership after having read the book *Journey to the East*, in which he found the story of the lowly servant Leo, who was revealed to have been the head of the Order the whole time. Greenleaf saw Leo as a man who was a servant first and a leader second, a servant who had leadership placed on him, which could, in theory, be removed, but one could not remove servanthood, as it was who they truly are. In this way, a leader must be an individual who is first a servant and aspires to become a leader, not a person who is a leader first who becomes a servant. Greenleaf granted there are shades that will exist between these two extremes, but ultimately, the difference will come down to whether the person has the interest of others in mind first or is simply helping others in order to meet their own ends.

The virtues of servant leadership can be summarized as "humility, integrity, accountability, gratitude, empathy, and a desire to serve a higher purpose beyond their own selves..." (Stahel et al., 2022, p. 1) If a leader possesses these traits, they are able to help bring others up by helping them better understand and like themselves, and in doing so, the leader can be changed as well. Greenleaf (1977) contrasted these abilities with more negative traits, such as coerciveness and manipulation, arguing that ultimately, there is no simple way to know those who are truly servant-leaders and those who are not, and instead, we must look to characters like Leo to highlight the traits for us in an exaggerated way so that we can compare it to the world around us in order to better understand.

## Effectiveness of Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership is just one theory in an ocean of theories regarding leadership (Hiebert & Klatt, 2001). A study was conducted comparing Servant Leadership (Washington et al. 2014) to other forms of leadership theories. It found that

while having differences and similarities to other theories, as would be expected, Servant Leadership had a great number of similarities to the transformational leadership model (Burns 1978). They argue that both views were alike to the point of being almost unable to be told apart. This belief is something argued against by Stone et al. (2004), who argued that the primary difference between servant leadership and other positive leadership styles is that of a focus on the enhancement of the employee over that of the personal interest of the one leading, a feeling echoed by Fatima et al. (2021). A study conducted by Schneider and George (2011) found that within surveyed clubs who were asked whether their leadership followed the servant leadership or transformation leadership model, the indication of those who followed the Servant Leadership model correlated with higher satisfaction, commitment, and intention to stay.

### **Criticisms of Servant Leadership**

One aspect seemed to Washington et al. (2014) to differentiate Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership, that being the belief that Servant Leadership was ill-defined, and thus multiple authors took away from it something different. Yet, one could make the argument that it is this lack of definition that allows for a greater area of movement within the development of new models. Within a study done by South Africa's North-West University (Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020), a hypothetical model was proposed that could be utilized to help students within Theology focusing on Biblical principles and ideas while also aligning at its core with the theory proposed by Greenleaf (1977). Such a model can exist because of the room created by the lack of structure. In this way, the lack of definition may not be a weakness but instead a strength, allowing for the theory to be molded to meet the individual needs of the group or institution rather than forcing the institution into a set mold.

As well, Alvesson and Einola (2019) levy several issues with servant leadership and similar styles of leadership, arguing such leadership styles as simply a ticking clock to the failure of the organization. Alvesson and Einola argue that servant leadership is not based on any sense of reality but instead on an idealistic view of leadership. This view extends to the belief that servant leadership and similar leadership styles go against the natural order of leadership, as a leader is not meant to serve others and that one should be aware of one's "place" on the social ladder.

### **Servant Leadership and the Community**

Greenleaf (1977) established at the beginning of his second article, "The Institution as Servant," "This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built." This belief that society is bettered by servanthood makes up the central tenant of Greenleaf's view, which is that it cannot be simply individuals that achieve this goal, but institutions as well, as servant leadership is not simply a quick fix but instead a long-term, transformational approach (Ferch et al., 2015). Rather than leading from the top down, institutions must lead in a way that prioritizes the employees and not the leaders. By implementing the model correctly, one is able to help improve the lives of those they serve and, thus, the community as well. Ruíz et al. (2010) argue that the Servant

Leadership model is useful in aiding business both from an ethical level as well as from a financial level.

The issue is not so much that bad people act but instead that good people do nothing (Greenleaf, 1977). This same issue exists within organizations as well. Most organizations exist to serve those at the top, yet not nearly as many exist to serve those at the bottom. Servant leaders see themselves as stewards of an organization (van Dierendonck, 2011), and as such, still wish to see the company succeed but do desire to gain success at the cost of the development of those they serve, as well a servant leader may define such success differently than others in their field (Mizzell & Huizing, 2018).

### **Biblical Understanding of Servant Leadership**

When one examines leadership from a Christlike perspective, one can see a great deal of overlap between the leadership demonstrated by Christ and that of servant leadership. Within John 13:1-17, we see Christ washing the feet of His disciples. The role of washing the feet of guests was one normally done by the servants of the household, yet Christ, despite being both their teacher and God incarnate, takes on the role of a servant and washes their feet. The need for serving others is taken further as he tells his disciples, "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 also should do just as I have done to you." (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, John 13:14-15). Also, Christ spoke of the need to treat others as we wish to be treated (Matt. 7:12, Luke 6:31) and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31), something Christ demonstrated through His desire to serve others, such as his showing love and support to the Samaritan at the well (John 4:5-30). Christ-like servant leadership is a recognition that "We love because he first loved us" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, 1 John 4:19) and that we must be willing to serve others because He served us (Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45).

### **Spears's Model of Servant Leadership**

As discussed prior, within servant leadership, there exist many different models, each highlighting and developing in areas that their creators felt were most important and effective. One popular model is that of the Spears model. Spears served as the president and CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, going on to create the Spears Center for Servant Leadership. The Spears model aimed to find the core beliefs within the original writings of Greenleaf and to bring those ideas to the forefront in a concise way. The Spears model breaks servant leadership down into ten characteristics a servant leader needs to have.

### **Listening**

A leader must have strong communication and decision-making skills, something that is true of servant leaders as well. Servant leaders, though, must be able to take this a step further and listen to the thoughts and beliefs of others (Spears, 2004). A servant

leader must be able to hear the will of others within the organization and clarify that will. In listening to others, the leader can hear not only what is said but what goes unsaid as well. Listening to others and reflecting on what has been heard is essential to being a servant leader (Spears, 2004).

### **Empathy**

A servant leader must desire to empathize and understand others. Each person is unique and special in their own way, and people need to be able to be recognized and accepted for these aspects (Spears, 2004). Even when a person's actions cannot be accepted, a servant leader must be able to assume the good intentions of those they work with, not reject them as people. In order to succeed as a servant leader, one must be able to be an empathetic listener (Spears, 2004).

### **Healing**

One of the aspects of servant leadership that can be a great strength is the ability to heal oneself and one's relationships with others. This ability to heal relationships can be a great force in integration and transformation. Being hurt is a part of life, but a servant leader holds the ability to help those who have been hurt to help them be made whole again. Both the servant leader and the ones they lead desire to achieve wholeness within themselves, something both parties can share (Spears, 2004).

### **Awareness**

A servant leader should have both general and self-awareness, as these elements can be a great strength to them. As well awareness can also be of benefit involving aspects of ethics and values. Through being aware of aspects both general and of the self, a leader can see things from a more holistic view. Servant leaders must be observant of what is wrong to know what needs to be addressed and corrected, not simply desiring to see what is right (Spears, 2004).

### **Persuasion**

A servant leaders should lead through persuasion, convincing others of their ideas rather than the authority they have through their position coercing those they lead. In this way, servant leadership can demonstrate a strong distinction between itself and autocratic leadership. A servant leader can form a consensus within the group rather than forcing the compliance of others (Spears, 2004).

### **Conceptualization**

A servant leader needs to be able to pierce the value of the day-to-day reality, viewing a problem from a conceptual perspective that views the issue on a greater level. Many managers struggle with this, needing practice and discipline. A servant leader must be able to walk a fine line between conceptual dreams and the day-to-day focuses of the organization (Spears, 2004).

## **Foresight**

Through foresight, a servant leader can understand the lessons of the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences that decisions may have in the future. Foresight comes from an intuitive mind. Foresight remains an overall largely unexplored area of leadership, and yet it is also an essential one deserving great attention (Spears, 2004).

## **Stewardship**

A servant leader must first and foremost commit to serving the needs of others. All members of an organization, from the CEO to the staff, as well as the trustees, all play a role in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society, and in holding the trust of others to serve this greater good, they practice stewardship. Also, stewardship emphasizes persuasion and openness rather than control (Spears, 2004).

## **Commitment to the Growth of People**

A servant leader believes in the intrinsic value that all people have beyond that of just the tangible contributions they bring as workers. Because of this value, servant leaders believe in helping every person within their institution to grow to their full potential. Servant leader bears the responsibility of doing everything within their power to nurture the growth of their employees (Spears, 2004).

## **Building Community**

Servant leaders see the shift that has occurred from local communities to large institutions as the main shaper of human lives and feel the loss that this has brought. Because of this loss, servant leaders aim to build communities within their institution, believing that those within a business or other institution can build a true community within. Through the actions of many servant leaders creating these communities, the loss that has occurred can be rebuilt (Spears, 2004).

These characteristics, though, are not an exhaustive list, and there exist many other views on what elements make a servant leader. For example, Patterson (2003) proposed a model of servant leadership with only seven elements, with some overlap to the Spears model, but also some elements like Agapao love—a love for moral wisdom—which are not present in the model presented by Spears; yet despite these differences, the central belief in serving and building up others is retained in both models.

## **Servant Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations and Higher Education**

Nonprofit organizations possess many unique challenges, such as donations and volunteer work, lower salaries, the need to focus on mission over profit, limited resources, and the need to compete with other sectors for effective leadership. Yet despite these differences, many nonprofits are expected to be more productive by behaving and operating in a way that is more akin to a business (Allen et al., 2018). Servant leadership can be an effective tool of leadership within the nonprofit sector as it



itself is a paradigm shift on the standards of leadership many expect. Servant leadership can be effective within the nonprofit sector due to its promotion of community and its desire to help better those within the organization (Aboramadan et al., 2022).

Yet it must be noted that servant leadership with nonprofits can be somewhat of a double-edged sword. While servant leaders desire to help others within the organization grow to their full potential by supporting them, this may cause a dependency on those being led when the leader's support is absent. This could then lead to issues within the organization if its members struggle with dependency. This is not to say that the issue makes servant leadership a poor choice, but instead that it may come with some issues that must be considered prior to its adoption (Palumbo, 2016).

Within the university setting, servant leadership has been found to increase overall workplace happiness as well as psychological capital (Saeed & Tatlah, 2022). Servant leadership has also been shown to help in higher education due to its ability to help increase overall worker engagement. Due to these reasons, it can be an important step to help expand servant leadership within higher education (Aboramadan et al., 2020).

It should be noted that despite the connection one may assume between servant leadership and nonprofit organizations as well as universities, both areas possess few studies regarding its use, especially regarding American universities. This lack of research is noted to help draw attention to the deficit with the hope that it can continue to be filled. What research has been done has helped demonstrate, as discussed above, that servant leadership can be an important aspect of both fields, yet it must be acknowledged that more data will help to understand the degree of the effect it will have.

## **Servant Leadership and the Academy**

The Executive Director of the Academy believes wholeheartedly that all of the services provided to the students of the Academy by the staff is a servant leadership opportunity. Staff who work for the Academy have been hand-selected and are empathetic, caring, and, above all, kind people who, through their actions, provide services. Each of those working at the Academy would not ask anything from another that they would not do themselves. There is a strong commitment to people and the building of a community through empathy and compassion. Additionally, unconditional positive regard and acceptance are modeled, as well as genuineness for each person. Through these elements, students feel supported and valued and have the opportunity to enhance their self-awareness. In interviewing a staff member as part of the process of writing this paper the commitment to servant leadership is apparent.

## **Conclusion**

Servant leadership allows for positive change in not only the lives of those within the organization but also the lives of the communities that the organization serves. This is true of Kennesaw State University's program, which is referred to as the Academy for Inclusive Learning and Social Growth, as with servant leadership, members of the community who are often marginalized are provided a chance to succeed that they may not normally be granted. While there is a deficit regarding the use of servant leadership within non-profits and, in particular, American universities, the Academy presents an example of an Inclusive Post-Secondary Education that has made a great impact on its community with servant leadership. Servant leadership has allowed for the growth of those within the academy by creating a community. As Greenleaf described, "Where there is no community, trust, respect, ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain." (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 40).

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