Seeing Servant Leadership through the Lens of Design

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Design is an emerging discipline with a rich service tradition. Designers work in various domains to serve clients in the realization of desired outcomes, whether tangible, conceptual or social in nature. As such, design is a metaphor for what leaders do. This paper explores similarities and differences between current understandings of servant leadership and design. Characteristics of the design process, the nature of designer-client relationships; determination of client interests, needs, and wants; and design intention are examined. The author proposes several lines of inquiry for exploring how leadership-as-design may further inform servant leadership studies.

Design, the “conception and realization of new things” (Cross, 1982), is an apt metaphor for the work leaders do. Working alone and, more often, collaboratively with other leaders and followers, leaders help bring about a preferred future, a new organizational reality, a desired state of affairs. Such work is creative, resulting in outcomes that, although similar to what may have been realized before, are at the very least unique within a specific context. Designers do this work on behalf of and in service to others, who are generally called ‘clients.’ Design, then, is the integration of service and creativity: the designer produces something new, but does so with an applied focus.

This paper explores the design process leaders may employ - with particular focus on the service dimension of design. Similarities of leadership to design as process are noted. The paper seeks to understand how the leader-as-designer identifies what outcomes are needed and by whom. Of special interest are the relationship between designer and client(s) and the need to design with a view to a larger system.

We begin by examining salient aspects of design process and noting parallel activities performed by leaders, as described in the leadership literature. As they are relevant, correlates to our understanding of servant leadership will be called out and discussed. Implications for the study of servant leadership are highlighted and future lines of inquiry are suggested.

Understanding Design as Process
Design is an activity or process combining creativity and service: creativity - through either innovation or fitting together existing elements in a new way, and service - identifying and fulfilling needs, wants and desires of a client or client group. The study of design is an emerging discipline (Margolin, 1989; Buchanan & Margolin,
that focuses on the commonalities among fields as diverse as architecture, software engineering, urban planning, organization design, interior design, information design, and a multitude of product-related technologies. In its broadest sense, design is concerned with nothing less than the transformation of the world and the reordering of human social relationships (Dilnot, 1982).

One may also view design as a lifelong arena for “practice” (Schön, 1983; cf. Cross, 2001 and Doloughan, 2002) – requiring intentional focus, learning, development, application, reflection, and conscious improvement over time. Leaders who adopt a design perspective readily identify with the concept of practice, long ago applied to the work of managers (Drucker, 1954; cf. Zahra, 2003). Framing design as practice recognizes the interactive and iterative pattern of designers acting in the world, changing the world, being changed by the world, and experiencing change in themselves through the process of changing the world.

**Epistemic Roots of Design**

Cross (1982), in distinguishing ways designers work and come to know from the ways of scientists and artists, describes design as a “third way of knowing.” For purposes of comparison, he describes three distinct cultures: Scientists study phenomena in the natural world; use methods of controlled experiment, classification, and analysis; and value objectivity, rationality, neutrality and a concern for ‘truth.’ People in the arts and humanities study phenomena of human experience; use analogy, metaphor, criticism, and evaluation; and value subjectivity, imagination, commitment, and a concern for ‘justice.’ Designers, in contradistinction, study the man-made world; employ modeling, pattern-formation, and synthesis; and value practicality, ingenuity, empathy, and a concern for ‘appropriateness’ (221-222).

Rather than setting design apart from other epistemologies and the academic traditions derived from them, we may also see design as “the integrator of the arts and sciences” (Pugh, 1982, 93). According to Dilnot (1982), design is an integrative, “multi-dimensional activity characterized precisely by its ability to synthesize heterogeneous criteria from a number of different orders (technical, economic, humanistic, etc)” (144). He continues:

> If we are to ask: what is the unique cognitive-epistemological significance of design, we must locate it in three areas: first, in the area of cognitive modelling and all that involves (which opens up the possibility of exploring ‘imagination’ in new ways); second, in the self reflective yet operative orientation of design thinking (the interaction of thought and the world); and third, in the quality of synthesis. This last issues a challenge to the dominant western-analytical logos as it does to the conventional ways in which we split up and separate both the elements of discourse – norms, values, facts, etc – and their interaction with other levels of information. Design is significant socially, in that it models synthesis, and materially embodies it, and acts as a model of synthesis in the wider sense. (145)

Linkages to current leadership constructs are palpable. Visioning – a *sine qua non* of leadership – is cognitive modeling, as are problem solving and planning. Recent approaches emphasizing positive change (such as future searches and appreciative inquiry) exalt the use of creativity and imagination. The ways in which leaders think about the world and their role as agents of change in it can be seen in the early recognition of leaders’ role in managing meaning and managing self (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; and Pava, 2003), while others have noted the self reflective and ‘mindful’ qualities of good leadership (cf. Dickman & Stanford-Blair, 2002).

‘Quality of synthesis’ is not a category employed by students of leadership, yet it easily could be and arguably should be. Are not leadership failures ultimately about the inability to make disparate elements of a system come together in an appropriate manner and to achieve desired results? Personal derailers and ethical lapses are indicated when followers and other constituents reject and distance themselves from leaders, their ideas, and their actions – representing a failure to identify and cohere with the change system. Effective leadership both models and embodies not merely adaptation to new elements in the environment, but their integration into and synthesis with a newly-created reality.
Design Outcomes

Just as Rost distinguishes leadership process from its content (1991, 153ff.), we may also hold the product of design work (its ‘content’) as distinct from the creative and relational processes by which its outcomes are obtained. In the material realm, one may easily understand design outcome as equal to a tangible product realized. Outcomes of a design process may also be conceptual in nature, such as a computer program, instructional module, or a plan. Usually it is not hard to make tangible the outcomes of such a design process because of the outcomes’ functional nature: a training program enables people to perform in a new way, a budget enables quantification of needed resources, software accomplishes specific tasks, etc.

In the arena of leading (designing) social change, however, outcomes are more nebulous. Some outcomes, without much further effort, may be operationalized in functional terms. For example, the design of an organization’s structure could result in newly defined relationships, altered organizational boundaries, or changed patterns of behavior, interaction, and resource allocation. The ‘appropriateness’ of its design could be assessed by various measures of efficiency and effectiveness. The success of an ERP implementation – which, although having a heavy technological component is a socio-technical intervention – is assessed by functional, economic and social measures. Leaders who are tasked with accomplishing an organizational downsizing, acquisition, or merger integration are designing social change. The outcomes of their efforts are similarly measured and evaluated by the multiple stakeholders of the organization.

The kinds of social outcomes that leaders help realize vary widely. In addition to the above examples, other possibilities for design outcomes include: designing an organization’s culture (e.g., to be more inclusive or entrepreneurial); designing an effective meeting (e.g., a planning session, retreat, or conference); designing a process by which a program or service will be evaluated; designing a tool, survey or other instrument (i.e., for assessment or research) and designing a process by which to administer it; designing change in oneself (e.g., altering habits or acquiring skills); and designing new forms of social relationships (e.g., new communication patterns within families, better teaming skills at work, the resolution of disputes, and the reduction of oppression of one people group by another). Two further examples: teachers may intentionally design a learning community in the classroom (Roth, 1997), while the work of a national ministry of literacy education may frame the outcome of its efforts to be the design of a multicultural society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

‘Design’ as the result or product of any of the above-described design activities refers to the ‘content’ of the design process. Blueprints for preferred futures, patterns for successful relationships, and snapshots of social triumphs are all worthy of consideration in the pursuit of greater leader and designer effectiveness. The focus in the remainder of this paper, however, is on design as process. How do designers frame the work of design? How do they apply knowledge and exercise judgment in realizing design outcomes? How do they engage with clients to serve client needs, wants, and interests? Insofar as these questions relate to servant leadership, we are more concerned with the leadership process and its service quality that we are with attributes of the servant leader (cf. Russell & Stone, 2002).3

Process Outcomes

In today’s industrialized and specialized world of work, designers of material products rarely produce the objects they design. Leaders, on the other hand, seldom have the luxury of handing off their designs for social or organizational change to someone else to be implemented. In the days when large companies had sizable planning staffs, the leaders’ work was implementation. Today, with the realization that planning for is largely ineffective over and against planning with, leaders more resemble craft artisans in the ways they approach change purposefully: they plan for desired outcomes, summon available and necessary elements (e.g., to orchestrate stakeholder participation), fit the process to environmental conditions, and midwife the outcome into reality. At this point, it is important to emphasize the presence of design activity in all these phases: in the planning, summoning, fitting, and birthing – leaders practice the conception and realization of new things. Design is not one phase of leading; design envelopes leadership.

Having said this, it is possible to focus on the outcomes of leadership processes as distinct from the ‘content’ of leadership, i.e., the desired changes. These content outcomes are the “real changes” reflecting the “shared purposes” that leaders and followers intend (Rost, 1991). Here, however, “process outcomes” are byproducts of the design endeavor that are realized by virtue of the way the design effort is conducted. For example, a new organizational structure can be realized using command-and-control, hierarchical, or Theory X management approaches. If, however, leaders intend certain process outcomes such as an increased level of employee
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engagement, a sense of empowerment to enact the new organization, and increased employee competence to cope with future changes, then these desired process outcomes inform and constrain the choices selected to realize the organizational change (the content outcome).

Engineers and design professionals have long realized that “the process used in design profoundly affects results” (Nadler, 1982, 127). Good leaders know this instinctively. When designing social change, it is very much the case that “process is content”; the way we do things teaches and has residual effects that enhance or diminish personal and organizational capacity and that profoundly affect existing and emerging relationships. The conditioning effect of ends on means, then, is a salient dimension of designing social change that ties directly to leader ethics and, in turn, to the ethic of servant leadership. For Greenleaf, the litmus test of servant leadership is that followers “grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (1977, 13-14). Whether this is a content outcome (intended purpose), process outcome (desirable byproduct), an ethic that guides servant leaders, or some combination of all three is, most likely, highly context-dependent.

Designer-Client Relationships

On surface examination, relationships between designers and clients bear only superficial resemblance to leader-follower relationships. To some extent at least, all share a purpose in bringing about change, a re-ordering of the world. When leaders and followers are members of the same organization, they have a certain formal relationship (like designers and clients), although the relationship may not be commercial in nature. To the extent that leaders and designers act responsibly, they concern themselves with the larger world in which their clients and followers live and into which their design outcomes must fit. Personal relationships, mutual trust and respect, and an understanding of each others’ language enhance designer-client (Bruce & Docherty, 1993) as well as leader-follower relationships.

Nelson and Stolterman (2003) note the multiplicity and fluidity of roles that surround the design process: clients, surrogate clients, customers, end users, designers, stakeholders, stockholders, producers, and decision makers. In the world of tangible product design, it is usually not difficult to identify the players, although now and then the design arrangement is disturbed by the emergence of a party whose claim on the design outcome was not initially recognized or sufficiently acknowledged. A process of re-contracting for the design effort and re-designing the particular configuration of designer-client relationships ensues. In the domain of designing social change, navigating and clarifying the murky waters of who is filling which role at what time in the design process itself represents – in holographic fashion – a design process within a larger design endeavor. The hoped-for outcomes of this mini-design process include some clarity – at least in the designer’s or design team’s mind(s) – about who has a legitimate claim on design outcomes, what outcomes are in the interests of or desired by each party, and what contribution each party may make to the design process itself.

An example may help. In automotive design, the manufacturer pays the designers and is technically the client. Yet the anticipated car model must serve the needs of a target market segment with a specific demographic and lifestyle profile (end users). Senior management (decision makers) may approve the car’s design based on its complementarity with the work of other design teams (stakeholders), and in doing so, they will strongly consider the interests of the firm’s owners (stockholders). Parts manufacturers and assembly plants (producers) have time and cost limitations on what they can actually build, so the designers are constrained by what is feasible. Because the auto will operate in a regulated environment, the downstream impacts on future generations (surrogate clients) must be factored into the design. The design agreement, when viewed as a holistic compact among all such parties, is certainly complex. We could identify and label other parties (e.g., regulators and competitors), all of whom are in a generic sense “stakeholders.” Our purpose here, however, is not to define comprehensively the design agreement but to illustrate its multi-facetedness.

In designing and leading social change, identifying and engaging various stakeholder groups in the design effort is seldom a neat and tidy process (cf. Hubbell, 2004). Are stockholders in publicly-traded corporations the primary client to be served when entertaining major organizational changes? Often they are, but organizational decision makers are increasingly recognizing as valid claims voiced on behalf of employees and the environment as well – if talk of a “triple bottom line” is at all taken seriously (cf. Norman & MacDonald, 2004). We may understand the native American maxim to consider the impacts of one’s actions down to the
seventh generation as a formal way of giving voice to future inhabitants of the earth (in the role of surrogate clients). Intended outcomes of organizational changes impact customer and/or end user groups as well as the organization’s owners or funders. But what about social movements? Were African Americans ‘clients’ being served by the civil rights leaders of the 1960s, who perhaps are quintessentially referred to as servant leaders (cf. Graham, 1991). Jean Monnet, another contemporary figure noted for his servant leadership (Gardner & Laskin, 1995; Birkenmeier, Carson & Carson, 2003), apparently had “a unified Europe” as his client – an entity which did not materially come into existence until twenty years after his death!

At this point we may be tempted to conclude that design is a metaphor that does not suit well situations where designing and leading social change are called for. Yet difficulties in clarifying roles and relationships in a collaborative design effort as suggested above do not excuse leaders from making the attempt to understand whom they serve, what the expressed or unexpressed desires of those others are, and how best to serve them. A preferred conclusion is that leaders are precisely the people who need to be highly skilled in the discipline of design (and well-advanced in owning and articulating their leadership design practice) and that the first arena in which leaders must practice their design skills is in creating meaningful engagement among multiple parties around anticipated change. The degree to which such engagement can be explicit will depend upon cultural and contextual factors; this too is a design consideration.

Designers in Service to Clients
In unfolding their understanding of the service tradition in design, Nelson and Stolterman characterize the relationship among designers and other involved parties:

Service is a full partnership between those being served and a design team, working in a conspiracy (i.e., a breathing together). This configuration forms a tensional, but collaborative, social system. Formal and informal agreements, or contracts, govern such design conspiracies. (2003, 65)

Elsewhere they distinguish designer-client relationships from hierarchical and even egalitarian relationships that are focused on finding solutions to problems. “Instead, design is an inclusive activity, consisting of a composition of formalized roles that center on the idea of service” (59). Unlike change agents who draw from the scientific tradition to ‘engineer’ solutions to problems, designers exercise judgment to converge towards ‘a single best option’ in real situations where information is always incomplete (67). Further, to create and maintain such a symbiotic relationship among designers and all their constituents, designers need empathy,

... the ability to stand in someone else’s place while standing on your own. These empathetic states of alignment are then given direction through the emerging understanding of desiderata - an understanding that occurs during the process of serving. ... [A] designer needs to be able to form intentional service contracts with constituents – i.e., members of a whole. Design contracting is therefore not so much about agreements and exchanges between people, as among people. (68)

Here, we note three parallels to observations others have made about relationships between and among servant leaders and their followers. First, the importance of empathy, or as Russell & Stone present it, ‘appreciation of others’ (2002). Second, although leader-follower relationships are probably less formalized than designer-client relationships, April (1999), citing both Greenleaf (1977) and Burns (1978), observes that servant leadership is, “fundamentally, a moral contract between leaders and followers to bring out the best in each other for the good of the whole” (“Implications for Leaders,” final paragraph). And third, both design and servant leadership de-emphasize hierarchy in favor of an egalitarian relationship.

Discovering Client Desiderata
We may learn about design as process by observing and drawing parallels from the work of those who design physical objects - for example, architects and automobile designers, or those who design conceptual products, such as software engineers and instructional designers. We note first that designers serve a client or client group in order to bring into being something that did not exist before - for example, a home or office building, a new model car, software code that fulfills a specific purpose, or an employee training program. The designer draws upon prior experience and knowledge gained in the design of like products designed in similar contexts in the past. What is unique about a particular design challenge is the newness of the situation at hand, special
circumstances or constraints, a different starting point, different available materials and resources, and specific client requirements. The designer must exercise and apply creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness in order to fulfill the client's wishes or 'desiderata' (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003). Design, then, is an exercise in bounded creativity. The designer has limited time and resources, imperfect tools, and ultimately an incomplete understanding of what the client wants and needs. The designer cannot create whatever he or she wishes, being bound by the intention to serve client interests. The designer has degrees of freedom to make artful choices, but is also constrained in multiple ways - not least by the ethic of service.

Clients, however, are not always able to articulate fully exactly what they want. The designer, acting as both interpreter and interpolator, fills in the unspoken needs and wants of the client. Moreover, the design process is dynamic; client wants, needs and interests change over time. It is not simply that the scope of a project may grow or be cut back, nor that clients will change their minds, nor even that the external environment may change. Clients themselves influence and are influenced by the design process, as are designers. Together, they are on a journey that does not have a precise destination. Along the way, they discover and sometimes invent new possibilities that neither saw at the outset.

Desiderata and the Service Ethic
The design process itself is dynamic with an emergent quality - i.e., the client cannot specify with absolute precision what the finished product will be. Even if stringent design requirements are specified in advance, the designer and client together may discover along the way that certain realities dictate a change in the outcome specifications. For example, a homeowner's budget may change after the first set of blueprints is created, requiring a smaller scale. Insurmountable technical difficulties in the design of a circuit board may lead to the alteration or substitution of product features not originally in the project scope. A product manager may make additional promises to a customer, adding product features after initial design has already begun.

A closer look at the concept of ‘need’ suggests that “client needs” are social constructs that are problematic and insufficient to form the basis of design (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003; cf. Fry, 1992). As social constructs, needs require an interpretive act by the client, designer, or both. Instead, the design outcome “only emerges based on the situation, desiderata and intention” (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003, 144). To echo the wisdom of Lao-Tzu – (that leaders have succeeded when followers believe they accomplished the change by themselves) – the design process often results in a reality that the client never envisioned, yet immediately recognizes as what was wanted all along!

Unlike stereotypical leaders, who envision an end state, then guide followers in the realization of the vision, designers begin with design intentions. They explore the design in the context of expressed and unexpressed client desires. They apply “judgment of what is to be treated as the essential background, or foreground, of the design situation” (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003, 147). It is through an iterative alignment and re-alignment, design and re-design of designer and client intentions, that design aims emerge.

Current definitions of servant leadership hinge on an implicit understanding of the needs and interests of others and focus instead on the leader’s “primary intent and self-concept” (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Casting servant leadership as an instance of design activity suggests that leaders as designers need to arrive at explicit agreement with those others they intend to serve about the nature of their needs, wants and interests. Moreover, the process of identifying and clarifying client (follower) desiderata, an interpretive challenge, is itself a design process that must be led with intention. Moving beyond leader attributes to meanings that emerge between and among leaders and followers may also enrich our understanding of how servant leadership is operationalized.

Integration into a Larger Whole
To achieve excellence in design, the designer must understand the larger world in which the designed product will exist and must plan for the integration of that-which-is-to-be with that-which-already-is. A new automobile, in addition to having all the usual standard automobile features, will be only one of many different lines sold by the manufacturer; it must ‘fit’ with those other lines in addition to being able to compete effectively against similar lines sold by other auto makers. An employee training program needs to use vocabulary familiar to employees in specific jobs, be deliverable using specified media in multiple locations, and have an anticipated
shelf-life consistent with its budgeted cost; in addition, it will need to be consistent with the corporate culture or sub-culture of a variety of employee groups around the globe when it is delivered, and it will need to make sense for them in the context of their particular jobs.

Designers, then, must be systems thinkers and integrators *par excellence*. Skilled designers seek to understand the whole system in which the design product or outcome will exist, and ensure that what-is-designed will ‘fit’ or ‘work’ (and be appropriate) in that larger context. Without having the language of systems thinking, Greenleaf (1970; 1991) described this ability as ‘foresight,’ and described it as the “central ethic of leadership”:

> This requires living by a sort of rhythm that encourages a high level of intuitive insight about the whole gamut of events from the indefinite past, through the present moment, to the indefinite future. One is at once, in every moment of time, historian, contemporary analyst, and prophet – not three separate roles. This is what the practicing leader is, every day of his life. (17)

**Leaders as Designers**

Seeing the work of leaders as essentially design is not new. Senge describes the leader as designer of the organizational ‘ship,’ who by designing policies, strategies and systems – and integrating them in practice – has a profound influence on the future course of the entire enterprise (1989, 341-345). Heifetz’s description of the adaptive challenges leaders face (1994) bears a striking parallel to the designer’s challenge to frame a problem situation, and to avoid applying an ‘old’ solution prematurely – until the nature of the design situation is more clearly understood (cf. Jonas, 1993). Insofar as leaders create vision and strategic direction, shape culture and values, design and lead a learning organization, and lead change, Daft recognizes the leader as “social architect” (2005).

What I am suggesting is that design is more than a mere metaphor for leadership; it is a paradigm that can inform a wide range of human activity. Leadership-as-design, when practiced in a self-reflective manner, offers a rich set of meanings and patterns for making sense of ordered change. To the extent that one’s practice of leadership-design can tap into all that we currently know about the science and the art of leadership, a design approach to realizing integrative solutions in a complex, interconnected world should produce better results. It is my hope that by making more visible the linkages between design praxis and leadership theory, further research can establish the appropriateness of designed solutions to social problems.

**Reflections on Servant Leadership**

I now turn to suggest a few specific lines of inquiry for seeing servant leadership, as discerned by viewing it through a design ‘lens.’

**Focus on the Servant Leader**

Study of the process by which outcomes (new products, concepts, and social realities) are designed and realized illustrates the participation of people as change agents in multiple, fluid roles. While a few ‘star’ designers get much attention for their work, as outcomes become more and more complex, the work of a design team is increasingly the norm. Design work invariably entails co-design. When it comes to producing (complex) social change, it makes increasingly less sense to focus attention on or give credit to a single ‘hero,’ ‘great man,’ or leader. Leadership scholars have begun to write about shared (Lambert, 2002; McClure, 1988; Pearce & Conger, 2002) and distributed (Brown, M. H. & Hosking, 1986; Gronn, 2002) leadership. Organizations are often said to be led by a “(top) leadership team” (Hart, 1995; McIntyre, 1999). Writers on servant leadership do not normally make this extension to a collective entity, but the exploration of how “group servant leadership” comes about could be fruitful (cf. Laub, 2003). An ancient allusion to this phenomenon is seen in some interpretations of Isaiah’s “suffering servant,” where the nation of Israel is used by God to serve a larger redemptive purpose (Wilcox & Paton-Williams, 1988). A more contemporary example could be found in the generation of Allied soldiers that risked and gave their lives to rid the world of the Nazi threat during World War II.

**The Leader-Follower Differential**

Relationships between designers and clients are egalitarian in nature. In commercial design, the work performed has exchange value. Designers are not subservient to clients, although they serve their interests. A
spirit of professional collegiality prevails. In contemporary servant leadership, however, the leader-follower status differential is the very premise on which the call for leaders to become servants is based. Does this not confound positional authority with leadership (cf. Heifetz, 1999)? Is this status differential, which pervaded the hierarchical milieu of the A.T.&T. in which Greenleaf spent his career, a necessary premise of servant leadership? If not, would we dare say the courageous followers of which Chaleff (2003) writes and the active, engaged followers of Kelley (1992) are ipso facto servant leaders? Likewise, if we extend this logic, do we need to call Kelley’s passive, alienated followers to practice servant leadership?

The Larger Context of Leadership Outcomes

In examining good design practice, we saw that designers concern themselves with the appropriate “fit” of what is produced into a larger whole; designers never design in a vacuum. Similarly, effective leaders, although acting locally, think globally; they are systems thinkers. The results leaders help followers achieve have meaning and persist over time within multiple, larger contexts. A reorganization of individual departments and the re-engineering of business processes are done in the context of greater effectiveness and efficiency for the organization as a whole; to ignore the whole, while perhaps beneficial to one or more work groups’ members, produces sub-optimal results. Churches that attempted racial integration prior to the civil rights movement in 1960s America challenged the structural order of the day; they did so because their design aligned with the values of a ‘larger system,’ namely the kingdom of God. In the short run, their choices produced tension; as leaders who brought about micro-change, while still longing for macro-change, they held the tension (cf. Fritz, 1989).

Stone, Russell and Patterson contend that servant leadership and transformational leadership are “valid, yet distinct paradigms,” with the former focusing on individual change and the latter bringing about organizational change (2003, “Conclusion”). I raise the possibility that servant leadership can operate on multiple levels simultaneously. Ultimately, the individuals served and helped to grow and develop by their leaders, live in - and may be called to act as servant leaders within, and for the transformation of - larger systems. One of today’s greatest leadership challenges is to play in a field that is increasingly complex and interconnected. As the old adage reminds us, “in a system, you can never do just one thing.” Every choice that leaders-as-designers make can have unintended consequences that are good or bad, depending on what level of the larger system one views it from. Today’s skilled leaders work long and hard to achieve robust designs that integrate the diverse and seemingly incompatible needs of multiple constituencies, holding out for both individual and group, first and second order changes.

Leader Needs versus Follower Needs

Without going so far as to endorse principles of servant leadership, Mintzberg, Simons, & Basu (2002) deplore leaders who act out of self-interest. Greenleaf’s chief qualification for being a servant leader is the desire to serve first; thus, “servant leaders are leaders who put other peoples’ needs, aspirations and interests above their own,” (as cited by Senjaya & Sarros, 2002). It is implicit that leaders, like followers, have needs, aspirations and interests. Recent articles on self-sacrificial leader behaviors (Choi & Moi-Dalton; De Cremer, van Dijke, & Bos) give rise to questions about the relationship between leader needs and follower needs. If a Lee Iacocca accepts an annual salary of $1, and it has the effect of increasing leader credibility and trust between management and employees, does this make him a servant leader? Apparent self-sacrifice on the part of a ‘leader’ can have instrumental and transactional value. As these authors and others (cf. Fry, 1992) point out, this whole area bears deeper examination, particularly with reference to the interpretive frameworks used to assess need, the underlying economic models by which needs are prioritized, and our (atomistic) assumptions about self in relation to others (Rosenthal & Buchholz, 1995).

If we look to the leadership-as-design metaphor, we find a more egalitarian and perhaps even utilitarian ethic at work in the needs of designers and the needs of clients. Designers may well love their clients, but that doesn’t mean they will work for free. Designers see themselves as part of the system and the world in which their clients live. Designers as problem solvers use creativity to explore the world of possible solutions, seeking whenever possible “win-win” solutions for all stakeholders, including themselves. In large, complex systems, with multiple interconnected sub-systems, the achievement of an outcome valued by one part of the system does not necessarily entail a loss for another part of the system.
Martin Luther King, Jr., as an African-American, himself stood to benefit from the civil rights gains for which he fought. This does not make him any less a great servant leader. We may admire Raoul Wallenberg more as a servant leader, because he did not stand to gain personally by saving Jews in Hungary during the holocaust. His story reminds us of the reality that self is dynamic, and that a leader’s perception of his or her own needs, wants, and values can change throughout the design process. Wallenberg’s eyes were opened gradually to the horrible realities unfolding around him, and his responses formed, as well as revealed, his emergent character. A chief reason we admire Wallenberg, Gandhi, King and Jesus Christ as servant leaders is because of their supreme empathy for and identification with those they chose to serve. That they each gave their life in service to others attests to their own choices and values as designers of social change. We may attempt to assign a transactional or an economic value to such altruism, but it does not compute, because their personal values transcend those of a market economy. In advocating for servant leadership, then, we ought to examine critically the underlying assumptions we make about the relative value and priorities given to follower and leader needs.

Conclusion
Leadership-as-design bears many similarities to the challenge of servant leadership. Both depend on service as a core, organizing principle. Both entail a focus on follower needs, wants and interests. Other features of design (explicit agreements about outcomes, relationships between designers and clients, integration with a larger whole) suggest different ways of articulating servant leadership. The message of servant leadership, with its emphasis on service, is an important counterbalance to those who would see leadership primarily as art (cf. DePree, 1989; Klein & Diket, 1999; Cadenhead & Fischer, 2000); both leadership-as design and servant leadership are constrained by the real needs, wants and interests of followers. Our understanding of servant leadership could be enriched with the inclusion of a wider, ‘systems’ perspective when framing the relationship between leaders and those they serve, and the need to integrate outcomes into a larger whole.

References


Footnotes

1A recent effort to articulate a “general theory of leadership” has curiously divided roughly into two camps: those primarily informed by the social sciences and those arising from the arts and humanities (Wren et al., 2002 and 2003). In such a context, I suggest that design as a “third way of knowing” may hold useful insights into the study of leadership that bridge and integrate the other two perspectives. See also Nelson (2001) and Nelson & Stolterman (2003).

2Along with the leader’s role in managing meaning, we may include the leader’s use language. Greenleaf (1970) wrote on language and imagination: “as a leader ... one must have facility in tempting the hearer into that leap of imagination that connects the verbal concept to the hearer’s own experience” (11). Similarly, design has been called ‘meaning making’ (Kazmierczak, 2003). Building on these rich notions, one may see leaders as designers of personal and group narratives, giving voice to followers so that through a design-as-meaning-making-process, a new story (perhaps even a new identity) may emerge.

3Designer attributes and design process characteristics are related, of course. It might be an interesting study to examine relationships between designer attributes, design process characteristics, and impacts on
followers. For example, do inclusive, participatory designs for “whole systems change” result in followers themselves being more inclusive and participatory?

4To borrow Carse's terminology, they were playing an ‘infinite game (1989).

5As leaders self-reflectively grow their own leadership practice, they have opportunity to continually design and re-design themselves as designers of change. Thus, self-leadership may be framed as a design challenge.