



BOOK REVIEW: KENT M. KEITH'S (2008) *THE CASE FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP*

PLACE OF PUBLICATION: WESTFIELD, IN
PUBLISHER: THE GREENLEAF CENTER FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP
NUMBER OF PAGES: 85
ISBN: 978-0982201244

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As Chief Executive Officer for the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, Dr. Kent M. Keith is an advocate of servant leadership. His advocacy for the service model of leadership is based on his experiences over the past thirty years as an attorney, state government official, high tech park developer, university president, YMCA executive and full-time speaker and author. In *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Keith presents a pragmatic argument for the service model of leadership and how it can help us create a better world.

In *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Keith (2008) argues that servant leadership is the healthiest model of leadership for both leaders and followers. The book presents the rationale for servant leadership and provides practical examples of servant leadership in action.

Keith presents the service leadership model as a means to creating a better world. He asserts that the reason there is so much starvation, unsolved problems, and lost opportunities is because people are using the power model of leadership.

Highlights

The book is organized into five chapters with a postscript and questions for reflection and discussion. Keith suggests that the decision to become a servant-leader is the result of thoughtful reflection over time. Therefore, he presents his case for servant leadership in a practical manner

that includes specific examples of servant leadership in action and adds questions for reflection and discussion to assist in the journey of becoming a servant leader.

Keith begins by stating the servant leadership model starts with a desire to serve. He bases his support for the servant leadership model on insights from Greenleaf (1977), who is considered the founder of the modern servant leadership movement. Keith reinforces Greenleaf's insights with examples from the teachings of the world's greatest religions and respected thinkers. He suggests the desire to serve is a "natural, moral desire that is recognized as important by the world's greatest religions and many great thinkers" (p. 5).

Following his argument that the desire to serve is a natural, moral desire, Keith describes a servant-leader as follows:

A servant-leader is simply *a leader who is focused on serving others*. A servant-leader loves people, and wants to help them. The mission of the servant-leader is therefore to identify and meet the needs of others. Loving and helping others gives a servant-leader meaning and satisfaction in life (p. 9).

In chapter three, Keith compares and contrasts the power model of leadership to the service model of leadership. He argues that in the power model, leadership is about accumulating and wielding power to make people do things to get what the leader wants while the service model is about helping people do things for their good and the good of others.

Practical examples of servant-leaders in action are described in chapter four. Keith draws from the work of leadership experts like Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Jim Collins, and Peter Senge. He cites organizations such as TDIndustries, Southwest Airlines, Synovus Financial Corporation, the Container Store and AFLAC as examples of organizations that have implemented the principles of servant leadership.

Keith concludes his case for servant leadership, by describing how a life of service provides "personal meaning that will feed your spirit and your soul and give you deep happiness" (p. 70) as a leader. He quotes Albert Schweitzer who said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve" (p. 72).

Observations

As Keith readily admits in the preface, *The Case for Servant Leadership* "is not an impartial assessment of servant leadership, nor a survey of the literature on servant leadership" (p. ix). Therefore, the reader must keep these limitations in mind. For example the book only presents the Greenleaf (1977) concept of servant leadership; it does not include other models of servant leadership with different dimensions (Cerff & Winston, 2006; Patterson, 2003; Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008; Sipe & Frick, 2009; Wong & Page, 2003).

Although Keith (2008) presents a compelling case for servant leadership, one is left wondering about its applicability in different contexts and with different followers. Are there situations where servant leadership is inappropriate and a different leadership approach would be more effective? What if the followers' perception of what would be good for them differs from

the perception of good by the leader or the community? Because leadership is a process that involves interaction between leaders and followers in a particular situation (Yukl, 2006), the characteristics of the followers and the characteristics of the situation are important variables that need to be considered in addition to the characteristics of the leader. Focusing on the leader's approach without addressing the characteristics of the followers and the situation is a limitation in *The Case for Servant Leadership*.

Another limitation to *The Case for Servant Leadership* is that it does not address the question of whether servant leadership is a philosophy or a theory as posed by Prosser (2010), nor does it discuss the perspective held by some that it is simply an ethical form of leadership (Northouse P. G., 2010). Greater clarification of the construct servant leadership in this book would be helpful to practioners as well as scholars of servant leadership.

Even with the above limitations in mind, *The Case for Servant Leadership* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon of servant leadership. It is a valuable and thought provoking book for anyone on a leadership journey.

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