

## Servant Leadership: A Strategy for Philanthropy

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This paper shows how servant leadership theory provides a strategic framework for philanthropic leaders. When philanthropists understand servant leadership as a way of not only giving, but also more importantly living, then they will be less likely to see their role simply as a check writer, and more as a servant donor. By taking key elements from Robert Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership, this paper portrays how closely aligned servant leadership and philanthropy really is, giving strategic thought to the field and study of leadership philanthropy.

### **Servant Leadership: A Strategy for Philanthropy**

“To give money is an easy matter and in any man's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large and when, and for what purpose and how, is neither in everyman's power nor an easy matter.”  
Aristotle<sup>i</sup>

### **The Question**

Long before there were multiple philanthropic consultants, major philanthropists like Warren Buffet and Bill Gates, and numerous non-profit organizations, Aristotle understood there is more to philanthropy than simply writing a check. However, since Aristotle's day, not much attention has been given to leadership strategy in the world of philanthropy. Too often “donors give blindly without demanding the accountability that ensures results.”<sup>ii</sup> As a result, many non-profit organizations and non-government organizations (NGOs) continue to ask, “What do donors need,” in attempts to gaining more funding.<sup>iii</sup> Although this question is important for philanthropic endeavors, the driving question for this paper asks: Is there a leadership theory that already aligns with philanthropic activities? As both a philosopher and philanthropist, I propose servant leadership theory already aligns enough with philanthropic activities whereby philanthropists become servant donors.

### **Reasons To Give**

People are basically philanthropic for five main reasons: 1) their tax attorney and/or accountant encourages them to give, 2) they give to receive public recognition, 3) they give to network and/or receive a promotion, 4) they give from guilt, or 5) they give from having experienced some form

of a personal tragedy. In other words, these people tend to give to get something in return. However, I believe a sixth reason also exists: people give from a servant's heart; not to receive any thing in return, but rather to serve others in a spirit of love to see transformational flourishing.

### Greenleaf on Servant leadership

Robert Greenleaf coined the term “servant-leadership” in an essay “The Servant as Leader” in 1970. Servant leadership places the leader in the posture and position of a servant. In other words, one who gives. Serving and giving go hand-in-hand. Therefore, if philanthropists begin to ask the same questions that Greenleaf asked, if they begin to embrace servant leadership as a way of both living and giving, then philanthropy will become a more responsible endeavor. So what kind of questions did Greenleaf ask? Greenleaf asked: “do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?”<sup>iv</sup> These questions could clearly be asked from a philanthropic perspective. Will the money we give, help these people grow, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become donors too? Will funding this project actually benefit the least privileged in society, or will it entrap them to a life of destitute? For “Greenleaf understood the proper telos of human life to be the creation of a better society, a concept not entirely distant from that of full human flourishing...”<sup>v</sup> In other words, the final purposes of human existence (be it for a leader or not) is not for the self, but rather for the benefit of others.

### Philanthropy Defined

This idea of benefiting others for the greater good of society reveals the essence of servant leadership, which equally applies to philanthropy. Larry Spears claims, “At its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work – in essence, a way of being – that has potential for creating positive change throughout our society.”<sup>vi</sup> Likewise, “philanthropy is the act of donating money, goods, time, or effort to support a charitable cause, usually over an extended period of time and in regard to a defined objective.”<sup>vii</sup> Webster’s dictionary defines philanthropy as “goodwill to fellowmen, especially: active effort to promote human welfare.”<sup>viii</sup> The etymology defines the term simply as “loving people; love for mankind; benevolence; kindness.”<sup>ix</sup>

### A Model of Servant Leadership

Larry Spears captures the essence of Greenleaf’s servant leadership with ten key components. Spears’ classifies these components as a model of servant leadership: *listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community*. What follows describes each:

1. **Listening:** Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills. While these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. He or she seeks to listen receptively to what is being said. Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, is essential to the growth of the servant-leader.
2. **Empathy:** The servant-leader strives to understand and emphasize with others.
3. **Healing:** One of the greatest strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one’s self and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they also have an opportunity to “help make whole” those with whom they come in contact.
4. **Awareness:** General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Awareness also aids one in understanding issues involving ethics and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position.
5. **Persuasion:** Another characteristic of servant-leaders is a primary reliance on persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions within an organization. The servant-leader seeks to convince others rather than coerce compliance.
6. **Conceptualization:** Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to “dream great dreams.”

7. Foresight: Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision for the future.
8. Stewardship: Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staffs, and trustees all played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society. Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others.
9. Commitment to the growth of people: Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers.
10. Building Community: The servant-leader seeks to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution.<sup>x</sup>

### A Parallel Model

By taking the above model for servant leadership, a parallel model for philanthropy emerges.

1. Listening: The servant donor must listen deeply to the needs of the community, charity, and/or needs at hand. This requires not only listening, but also asking strategic questions and reflecting on best practices for funding.
2. Empathy: Like the servant leader, the servant donor "strives to understand and empathize with others," rather than simply writing a check. Also, the philanthropist should only give where they are passionate. This not only prevents the donor from feeling used (like, "they only ever want me for my money"), but also it gets the philanthropist emotionally involved with the gift. Clearly, God loves a cheerful giver.<sup>xi</sup>
3. Healing: Servant donors not only fund projects to erect buildings, build clean water wells, and participate in other needs, but also they seek to bring healing through all their funding; be it for illiteracy to seeking a cure for cancer.
4. Awareness: Like the servant leader, servant donors need to be aware of their own values, and find ways to donate to organizations that align with their values and ethics.
5. Persuasion: Too often, non-profit organizations cater solely to demanding donors, rather than servant-donors. The servant donor who embraces servant leadership relies on persuasion rather than bribery or coercion with their money.
6. Conceptualization: Servant donors seek to "dream great dreams" just like servant leaders. Rather than funding small projects or overhead managerial expenses, the servant donor desires to brainstorm with non-profits to maximize funds while blessing organizations in ways they could never think or imagine on their own.
7. Foresight: Since most philanthropists are successful business people, they know the importance of foresight. Here, they can help start up charities and other organizations maneuver carefully through the present and future. Thus, the servant donor not only desires to give funding, but also wisdom and foresight.
8. Stewardship: Servant donors know the importance of financial stewardship. They understand accountability, trust, transparency, and the need for quantitative results.
9. Commitment to the growth of people: Philanthropy, first and foremost is not about money, but rather it is all about loving people. The servant donor loves people more than they love money, and they desire to see communities of people flourish.
10. Building Community: All the great philanthropists throughout the history of mankind have built legacies for present and future communities. Servant donors understand they are going to leave it all behind, and what they leave behind will either build up or hurt others.

### Value Theory

Ultimately, servant leadership and philanthropy deal with virtue ethics. Virtue ethics concerns itself with human flourishing. Human flourishing entails the values and ethics applicable to both servant leaders and servant donors. Patterson believes "servant leadership is a virtuous theory," where "a virtue is qualitative characteristic that is part of one's character..."<sup>xii</sup> Character of the servant donor, like the servant leader is not primarily concerned for "a higher profit margin or even increased productivity, but personal growth for those served." Likewise, Hesselbein understands that

philanthropy entails “investing in people – not giving to charity.”<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, when people are the prize, our values will determine our actions, and hence, our “way of being, or disposition, that directs individuals in the quest for the creation of a better society.”<sup>xiv</sup>

## Conclusion

As philanthropic leaders take on these characteristics of servant leadership in their giving and living, transformation begins to occur in both the servant donor and also the recipients of such service. In addition to the servant donor giving financial resources, they also give from a more holistic approach, which entails wisdom, managerial advice, vision, healing, and foresight. Since many of these individuals also run large organizations, they can provide “technological and communications support, and teams of employee volunteers.”<sup>xv</sup> Hence, by listening from a concerned heart while providing awareness they can use their influence to persuade others to work together to achieve bigger goals, while building a sense of community and development from a servant’s posture. Leaders can begin to give and live in such a way that does not demand self-promotion. When donors use the strategic model of both servant leadership and philanthropy, the world of philanthropy will see how closely aligned servant leadership theory is with servant donors giving for the benefit of others. As Aristotle claimed, giving money away is easy, but when it is given from the position of a servant, philanthropy takes on new meaning.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://findquotations.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> Eric Thurman, “Performance Philanthropy: Bringing Accountability to Charitable Giving,” *Harvard International Review*, Spring 2006. Vol. XXVIII, No. 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Joe Lumarda, “Philanthropy, Self-Fulfillment, and the Leadership of Community Foundations,” *Leader to Leader*, Fall 2001. No. 22.

<sup>iv</sup> Robert Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis: The Robert Greenleaf Center, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>v</sup> Mary Sue Brookshire, posting to *Ethic News & Views*, “Virtue Ethics and Servant Leadership,” Center for Ethics, Emory University, April 1, 2001, <http://www.ethics.emory.edu/news/archives/000165.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Larry Spears, ed. *Insights on Leadership* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philanthropy>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/philanthropy>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=5363>

<sup>x</sup> Spears, pp. 4-6, adapted from the complete descriptions.

<sup>xi</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:9.

<sup>xii</sup> Kathleen Patterson, “Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model” presented at Servant Leadership Research Roundtable, August 2004, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

<sup>xiii</sup> Frances Hesselbein, “Venture Philanthropy: Investing in People – Not Giving to Charity,” *Leader to Leader*, Summer 2001. No. 21.

<sup>xiv</sup> Brookshire, p. 5.

<sup>xv</sup> Craig Smith, “The New Corporate Philanthropy,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 1994.