

# CFI WHITE PAPER SERIES

## Servant Leadership



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## Servant Leadership

*“Let the greatest among you become like the youngest,  
let the leader become one who serves”*

*Luke 22:26*

Servant leadership as a concept is applied in multiple types of organizations. The servant style of leadership is taught in military training, business schools, and churches around the world. Servant leadership has gained momentum in business as a means by which organizational performance can be enhanced through people-centric orientation. Servant leadership is not a new concept. Jesus frequently highlighted the importance of the greatest leader taking on servanthood over 2000 years ago. However, it has had growing or renewed recognition in business over the last 40 years. In 1970, Robert Greenleaf, former director at AT&T, founded the modern servant leadership movement in response to the prominent power-centered authoritarian leadership style that seemed to be failing institutions. He redefined effective leadership as servant leadership:

*“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive to acquire material possessions. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”*



A more succinct definition of servant leadership has emerged in recent years. Eva et al. define servant leadership as *an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and an outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community*. As such, servant leadership promotes the concept that the organization exists for the person as much as the person exists for the organization. This overlaps with and captures a stakeholder-oriented view of the organization or a manager's ability to give priority to the needs of multiple stakeholders beyond him/herself. Servant leadership is outworked in the following ways to affect multiple stakeholders, including the leader's direct followers:

- forming relationships with subordinates
- empowering subordinates
- helping subordinates grow and succeed
- behaving ethically
- having conceptual skills
- putting subordinates first
- creating value for those outside of the organization

Greenleaf believed that if there was a theology of the individual, there should also be a theology of institutions. The theology of the individual is broadly conceptualized in systematic theology as *Imago Dei*. *Imago Dei* directly translates into "image of God." The theology of the individual as the image of God is drawn from the creation story. In Genesis 1-2, where God states, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all animals, and overall the creatures that move along the ground." God creates *'adam*, humankind, in relationship to Him, in relationship to each other, and in relationship to creation. In short, the theology of the individual as *imago dei* encourages the relational reflection of humanity created in reflection of God's Trinitarian plurality. However, Greenleaf believed a theology of persons is inadequate to account for both persons relating to persons and the leadership necessary to navigate the social, political, and economic pressures of modern day institutions.

He framed his ideas of the theology of institutions within the context of the church. He purported that for church leaders to lead effectively they needed a theology of institutions that shifts church memberships and current style of leaders to the regenerative force of servanthood. This aligns with Biblical representations of leadership as personified by Wisdom in Proverbs 31:10-31. As portrayed by the Noble Woman and conceptualized in business research, servant leadership is leadership that is focused on serving the needs of others and is characterized by personal integrity, selflessness, and a strong moral compass. In the New Testament Jesus proposes in Matthew 20:26 that "whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave." Recent research, conducted by my logistics colleagues, has provided evidence that servant leadership is a unique leadership style that drives organizational commitment, operational performance, and financial performance in many organizations.

While leadership research, in general, tends to focus on the individual, research suggests that servant leadership also drives change at the group level. One of the most interesting findings in the supply chain research by Overstreet et al. is that servant leadership not only drives profitability, but it also impacts the day to day organizational commitment of employees and the

operational performance of the company. Because servant leadership encompasses the style and actions of leadership as well as the moral character of leadership, it bolsters reputation and provides long-term relationships with employees and external stakeholders. Servant leadership holds the key to performance and impact moving forward. In fact, according to Jesus, it is our key to greatness! When guided by a servant leader, businesses and business employees can flourish by taking on both the characteristics of the servant leader and the actions inspired by the servant leader, motivated through wisdom guided philosophies or orientations.

After his career in management research, development, and education at AT&T, Greenleaf retired and launched the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. After Greenleaf passed on in 1990, the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership was lead for 17 years by Larry Spears. Spears built on Greenleaf’s original conceptualization of SL to include ten characteristics of a servant leader. Interestingly, many of the themes of servant leadership build on concepts introduced in Wisdom Literature:

Characteristics	Spears’ Description	Wisdom Literature Description
<b>Listening</b>	Identify the will of a group and help clarify that will	Pro. 11:14 Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.
<b>Empathy</b>	Understand and empathize with others, accept others and recognize them for their own special and unique spirits.	Pro. 21:13 Whoever closes his ear to the poor will himself cry out and not be answered.
<b>Healing</b>	The potential for healing one’s self and one’s relationship to others, wholeness	Pro. 12:18 There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
<b>Awareness</b>	General and self-awareness strengthen the servant leader	Pro. 21:2 Every man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart.
<b>Persuasion</b>	The leader’s ability to convince rather than coerce compliance in others	Proverbs 20:5 The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.
<b>Conceptualization</b>	Broad based conceptual thinking beyond day-to-day tasks to dream dreams	Ps. 119:130 The unfolding of your words gives light, it imparts understanding to the simple.
<b>Foresight</b>	Ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation	Pro. 12:26 One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
<b>Stewardship</b>	Holding something in trust for another	Pro. 16:3 Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.
<b>Commitment to the growth of people</b>	Belief that people have intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers	Pro. 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not turn from it.
<b>Building Community</b>	Ability to identify some means for building community among	Pro. 27:17 Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

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those who work within an  
institution

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Later research reduced these 10 characteristics to 7 dimensions. The final dimensions include *emotional healing* or being sensitive to the personal setbacks of followers, *creating value for the community*, such as encouraging followers to engage in beneficial activities in the community, *conceptual skills*, or the problem-solving and task knowledge that helps followers, *empowering*, *helping subordinates grow and succeed*, *putting subordinates first*, and *behaving ethically*. Servant leaders see themselves as stewards of organizations, who seek to grow the resources, financial and otherwise, that have been entrusted to them.



By the end of Proverbs, Wisdom, personified as the Noble Woman, captures all 10 of the original servant leader characteristics as she works on behalf of her husband; she is serving him, her family, and her household with all the works of her hands. Pro. 31:11-12 says that he trusts in her and has no lack of gain as she does him good and not harm all the days of her life. We see her empathy reflected in her care for the poor and the needy (vs. 20). Her strength in verse 17 connotes physical health and healing. She provides tasks for her maids (vs. 15) and teaches/conceptualizes kindness (vs. 26). She has foresight in her care for her household (vs. 27) and stewards her husband's resources as she considers and buys land (vs. 16). Her commitment to others is evident in her care for her servants and family even working through the night. Finally, all those immediately around her, her husband and children rise up and call her blessed (vs. 28). Perhaps it is ironic that the Pro. 31:10-31 Wisdom is personified as a woman and 5 of the top 10 servant leader CEOs in the world are women. This is not a lesson about women in leadership roles in the marketplace or even a plug for more women in these roles. The passage in Pro. 31:10-31 encompasses wisdom for all believers who want serve God with all that they do. In fact, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ himself becomes the power and wisdom of God. Jesus sets an example similar to Pro. 31:10-31 to demonstrate for us the picture of a servant leader.



