2010

Refreshing Your Philosophy of Servant Leadership: as a Christian Librarian

Nancy J. Olson
Lincoln Christian University, Lincoln

The Christian Librarian is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit http://www.acl.org/

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol53/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Christian Librarian by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Servant leadership, what is it all about? No two discussions of servant leadership are identical; each author accentuates a particular aspect or aspects of servant leadership from his or her perspective.

- The writer George MacDonald thought “real Christian leaders are people who are moved at God’s pace and in God’s time to God’s place, not because they fancy themselves there, but because they are drawn.”

- Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges in their book *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Times* emphasize that “the fruit of great servant leadership is realized when a leader seeks to send the next generation of leaders to meet the challenges of their season with all the wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual resources he or she can provide.”

- “A Christian leader is a servant with the credibility and capabilities to influence people in a particular context to pursue their God-given direction,” according to Aubrey Malphurs.

- Leader and leadership trainer Leighton Ford asserts: “Transforming leaders are those who are able to divest themselves of their power and invest it in their followers in such a way that others are empowered, while the leaders themselves end with the greatest power of all, the power of seeing themselves reproduced in others.”

So, what is servant leadership all about for the Christian librarian? To some servant leadership is about time or it is about stewardship. Others could say it is about attitude or about joy. Another could think it is about people or perspective. Further answers could be that servant leadership is about sacrifice or about ministry or about influence or about empowerment or about integrity. Most important of all, it is about God. Contemplating all of these ideas together can refresh your philosophy of servant leadership as a Christian librarian.

**Servant Leadership: It is About Wanting to Serve**

Well-respected and known for his influential writings on “servant-as-leader,” Robert Greenleaf begins his 1970 essay “The Servant as Leader” with this premise: “Who is the servant-leader? The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” The reaction to Greenleaf’s claim of servant leadership being about wanting to serve is not necessarily an obvious one. Even Jesus’ own disciples did not understand this leadership concept of serving. Jesus is the greatest example of a servant leader, especially for a Christian. Jesus said to his disciples, “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, how quickly a little power goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served — and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage,” (Mt 20:25-28 The Message).

---


From the world’s perspective, many times greatness is directly tied to one’s prominent position. Those in such positions have the power to rule, which in turn entitles them to their authority. Selfishness and pride can be at the heart of their motives. Their ambition is to exercise their authority over others to accomplish that which benefits them, forcing others to obey and serve them. They don’t care at all how people are treated. Their attitude is one of wanting to be served, rather than to serve.

Jesus, in sharp contrast, willingly came to be a humble servant and serve others. Jesus exercised authority through serving others, not lording over others. He established himself as the true paradigm of greatness and authority. One who follows his example will give his or her entire life in willing humble service to others in the midst of suffering. Coming as a servant, Jesus seeks to serve, rather than be served. By his example Jesus influences his followers, Christian librarians, to serve in a manner they would not do on their own.

The concept of wanting to serve can be summed up in the chorus, “Make Me Like You.”

“Lord, make me like you.
Please make me like you.
You are a servant, make me one, too.
O Lord, I am willing, do what you must do to make me like You, Lord.
Just make me like you.”

A servant leader has a sense of God’s calling, a calling that requires service, submission, and sacrifice. He or she is compelled to be a servant, but at the same time wants to serve.

Being a part of the Association of Christian for the past three plus decades, allowed me opportunities to come to know some outstanding servant leaders throughout the years. Serving along-side these servant leaders enriched my life tremendously. I watched them live out their selfless desire to serve – serving God, their colleagues in the Association, and their library staff and students and faculty back home. Early on, one of the concepts I was taught was that of ministry. At the time this was a new concept to me. The influence of these servant leaders caused me to change my paradigm – my perspective – from one of a job to a ministry. That shift was life-changing. Wava Buschlen, one of those early servant leaders, shared this poem. This poem, written by James N. Spurgeon, clearly encapsulates the contrast between “Job or Ministry?”

“A job is at your choice;
A ministry is at Christ’s call.
In a job you expect to receive;
In a ministry you expect to give.
In a job you give something to get something;
In a ministry you return something that has already been given to you.
A job depends on your abilities;
A ministry depends on your availability to God.
A job done well brings you praise;
A ministry done well brings honor to Christ.”

Without sacrifice there is no ministry. In other words, ministry involves sacrifice. A dictionary defines sacrifice as “the surrender or destruction of something valued for the sake of something else.” Sacrifice enables a servant leader to “surrender or destroy” something she or he values in order to be a servant. Richard Foster points out that, “When we choose to serve, we are still in charge. We decide whom we will serve and when we will serve. ... But when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge. ... When we choose to be a servant, we surrender the right to decide who and when we will serve. We become available and vulnerable.” A servant leader will contemplate what she or he is willing to sacrifice. A servant leader will ask, “How may I serve you today?”
Servant Leadership:  
It is About Watching One’s Attitude

One’s attitude is a matter of choice, a day by day or sometimes a minute by minute choice. Attitude will determine how a Christian librarian will respond to that next interruption, to the latest cut in the library’s budget, to a colleague’s criticism, to his workload, or to any other scenario. One’s attitude can cause fretting and exerting energy over things that cannot be changed or result in thinking there is no challenge too great and putting forth energy to meet that challenge.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians has much to say about attitude. He writes: “if you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if this love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends,” (Phil 2:1-2 The Message).

Paul’s instruction is to take charge of one’s attitude. A servant leader has the God-given ability to take charge of one’s own attitude, change that attitude to focus on those things that build up one another. Max Lucado puts it this way: “Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.”

A servant leader seeks out the why behind the words and actions of others and themselves, those words and actions that don’t appear to build each other up. He or she knows that a person’s perception or paradigm is his or her reality. Yet, a servant leader goes beyond that perception or paradigm and seeks to understand the other person. Stephen Covey illustrates this through a story.

“I remember a mini-paradigm shift I experienced one Sunday morning on a subway in New York. People were sitting quietly – some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people’s papers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, ‘Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?’

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, ‘Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.’

Can you imagine what I felt at the moment? My paradigm shifted. Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behavior; my heart was filled with the man’s pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely. ‘Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?’ Everything changed in an instant.”

Covey points out that “Our paradigms, correct or incorrect, are the sources of our attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately our relationships with others.”

10. Ibid., 30.
Later in Philippians Paul says, “Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand,” (Phil 2:3-4 The Message). Paul defines unselfish humility. Again, it is a matter of choice, and sometimes a very hard choice, not to focus on “me, myself, and I.” Christ Jesus is the example for this selfless humility. Paul continues, “Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave [servant], became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion,” (Phil 2:5-8 The Message). What an attitude of humility. Jesus did not cling to the advantages of his status, but set aside his privileges to come and be among us. He went outside of his comfort zone. Jesus made a choice to be a servant and live a life of selfless humility.

An attitude of joy can make a profound impact. Nehemiah explains that “the joy of the Lord is your strength,” (Neh 8:10 NIV). God-given joy can energize, strengthen, uplift, invigorate, even refresh. The psalmist declares, “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Ps 118:24). Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but this day. Paul exclaims, “Celebrate God all day, every day, I mean, revel in him!” (Phil 4:4 The Message). There is a sense of urgency in rejoicing today, every day. Joy is a learned attitude and behavior. Joy begins from within the servant leader. A servant leader is deliberate in choosing an attitude of joy and striving to maintain that attitude. John Ortberg observes “True joy, as it turns out, comes only to those who have devoted their lives to something greater than personal happiness.”11 Joy emerges from how a servant leader thinks – thinking and meditating “on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, completing, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse,” (Phil 4:8 The Message). With joy comes celebration. Joy brings about more joy. Celebration leads to more celebration. A servant leader pursues joy and celebration.

Closely interconnected with an attitude of joy, is an attitude of gratitude. It is an attitude that will “give thanks in all circumstances,” (1 Thes 5:18 NIV). Again, gratitude is an attitude that is a matter of choice. Early this spring my staff and I, along with the rest of the campus employees, were told that in the new fiscal year we would receive a reduction in our salary and benefits. The next morning, one of my staff expressed her response to the news in this manner, “I am grateful to have a job.” No one disagreed with her. That was all that was said. Gratitude was the attitude of choice. Servant leaders watch their attitude.

**Servant Leadership: It is About Weighing Priorities**

It has been said that the dilemma of a librarian is “too much stuff to do, too little time.”12 Many Christian librarians can identify with that dilemma. The psalmist says, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom,” (Ps 90:12 NIV). Only God has control of time, no one else can control time. What can be controlled is one’s attitude toward time and one’s use of time.

A servant leader is intentional with the use of her or his time. Lack of intentionality exposes one’s attitude toward time, even to the point of walking past an opportunity to serve. For example, there can be a certain level of attitude in a “busy schedule” – one may even wear it as a badge of honor. One can become persuasive at rationalizing the busy schedule that is needed to be effective in fulfilling all of his or her responsibilities. Then the focus becomes one’s own schedule which can result

---


in not really serving those around the leader, like it was with the Mayor of Flibber-O-Lou in the Veggie Tale Are You My Neighbor? Even though the Mayor claimed he shared the frustration of the boy from his village who was in need, he could not help the young man because, according to the words of his song, “I’m busy, busy, dreadfully busy, you no idea what I have to do. Busy, busy, shockingly busy – much, much, too busy for you.”13 Nothing quite gets at truth like a Veggie Tale story. The Webster dictionary offers this definition: “Busy stresses activity as opposed to idleness or leisure but does not in itself convey anything about the utility or effectiveness of the activity.” For the servant leader there is a choice to be made between being intentional or “busy, busy, dreadfully busy” with one’s time.

The foundation for the servant leader’s intentional use of time is his or her vision and mission. This thought-provoking description of vision was written by George Barna: “Vision for ministry is a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstances.”14 In their book First Things First Covey and his colleagues contend that “the passion of vision” ... taps into the core of who we are and what we are about. It’s fueled by the realization of the unique contribution we have the capacity to make – the legacy we can leave. It clarifies purpose, gives direction, and empowers us to perform beyond our resources.”15 From vision flows mission.

Within the context of vision and mission, whether it is that of one’s library and or one’s personal life, a servant leader will be focused on the future with confidence. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you,” (Jer 29:11 NIV). A servant leader will take time to think about the future, asking what I want the future to look like for the library, for me personally. In other words, “plan as though you’ll be living for a century; live as though you’ll be leaving today.”16 In his or her library the servant leader will set direction and lead the library team in developing goals, plans, and priorities. He or she will model and help his or her library team understand how priorities are vision and mission-based. Only God has control of time. Time is a gift from God. Knowing this, a servant leader will seize the opportunities that God gives him or her this day. The servant leader realizes that when one says “yes” to one thing it forces a “no” to something else. A choice is made.

**Servant Leadership: It is About Working With People**

A servant leader values people over things. A crucial reason for a servant leader’s intentional use of her or his time is the investment of time in people’s lives. He or she will determine whether people are an interruption or people are an opportunity. Henri Nouwen, in Out of Solitude, wrote:

“A few years ago I met an old professor at the University of Notre Dame. Looking back on his long life of teaching, he said with a funny twinkle in his eyes: ‘I have always been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I slowly discovered that my interruptions were my work.’ This is the great conversion in life: to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions of our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us for his return.”17

People can be an interruption or an opportunity; a servant leader will make a choice as to which one.

---


A servant leader builds trust, a trust that begins with God. A servant leader is aware that he or she cannot expect people to follow his or her leadership without trust. This trust is built and earned over time. It is a deliberate process. From the servant leader trust demands integrity, meaning an “uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles,” according to the dictionary. As trust builds the servant leader becomes credible – that is trustworthy, reliable, and believable. Yet, the servant leader recognizes the fact he or she is human and fallible and will make mistakes – jeopardizing, even losing, his or her trust and credibility. A servant leader with act in a biblical and healthy manner to regain the trust and credibility that is lost.

A servant leader models and facilitates teamwork. Like trust, it takes time to build a team. Team building is hard work, but very rewarding once it is achieved – when the team arrives at the “ah-hah” moment of truth that there is no I in team. The leader of the team, the servant leader, encourages the building, rather than the destroying, of relationships. Unity, rather than selfish discord, is promoted by the servant leader. He or she values every member of the team, individually and collectively. As well, every member of the team values every other member of the team, individually and collectively.

A servant leader understands he or she cannot empower people, people will empower themselves when an environment that encourages empowerment is created. There are many aspects to that environment including, but not limited to: trust and credibility based upon the character and the competence of the leader; sense of stewardship; aligning people with their passions and giftedness; clear vision and mission; building the character, competence, and confidence of each employee; openness to creativity; affirmation and encouragement; accountability. A servant leader will take on the challenge of creating an environment that encourages empowerment for his or her staff, not being quick to solve problems the staff can and need to solve as they learn to empower themselves.

A servant leader uses his or her ability to influence those being led in a manner that is God-honoring to go places and to try things beyond their own expectations. This influence begins within the leader, how the leader responds to the circumstances she or he experiences in life. The leader’s efforts and energies can be focused on what can be changed or on what cannot be changed. The servant leader will acknowledge that, “When there is a problem, there is only one person I can change – myself.” Through the leader’s influence people can change their thinking, and eventually change their behavior. A servant leader will motivate, not manipulate.

A servant leader communicates clearly. Max DePree in Leadership is an Art claims, “There may be no single thing more important in our efforts to achieve meaningful work and fulfilling relationships than to learn and practice the art of communication.” An effective servant leader will listen with the aim to understand – he or she will use empathy and request of the other person, “Help me understand ...” Then when speaking the leader will make him or herself understood, sharing the why behind what is being said. There is more to the art of communication than listening and speaking. Experts in communication estimate that 60% of our communication is represented by our body language such as eye contact, smiling, head nodding, posture, handshaking, gestures, voice and vocal clarity, even one’s dress and appearance. A servant leader will learn and practice the art of clear and effective communication.

Most of all, a servant leader loves people. That is no small task. Since I Corinthians 13 depicts how love is to look and act, it can describe how a servant leader is to act when working with people. Here is author Paul Cedar’s paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

19. To learn more about these and other communication principles see Bert Decker with James Denney, You’ve Got to be Believed to be Heard (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).
“A servant leader is patient and kind.
A servant leader doesn’t envy others or boast.
A servant leader is not proud or rude, does not insist on having his or her own way.
A servant leader does not become easily angered, doesn’t hold grudges or keep a list of people’s past mistakes.
A servant leader is never happy with any form of evil, but is always searching for truth.
A servant leader always protects others, trusts others, and always hopes for the best.
A servant leader never gives up.”

Servant Leadership: It is About Walking in God’s Presence

Godly character qualifies a leader to be a servant leader. It is achieved by walking in God’s presence. Servant leadership is both doing and being. Godly character is the being part of servant leadership. Character development is an ongoing process for the servant leader.

Prayer and service become inseparable as the servant leader walks in God’s presence. In his book The Living Reminder Henri Nouwen writes, “We have fallen into the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality, service from prayer. Our demon says: ‘We are too busy to pray; we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal. Prayer is a luxury, something to do during a free hour, a day away from work or on a retreat. ... But to think this way is harmful; ... Service and prayer can never be separated; ...’”

The servant leader prepares through prayer. He or she needs to pray so that his or her servant leadership is truly spiritual, coming from a right relationship with God, and not from self-righteousness. It is a prayer that calls upon God, submitting oneself and the situation to God. For it is God the servant leader serves. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, in their book Lead Like Jesus, puts it this way: “If you are to lead like Jesus, you must worship God only, depend on God completely, exalt God as your only audience, authority, and judge, and be aware that God is watching you.”

As a part of walking in God’s presence the servant leader schedules and savors Sabbath rest – a deliberate time of ceasing his or her work to focus on meaningful rest, renewal, and refreshment. God created then God rested. God established the pattern of Sabbath rest for a servant leader to follow. Author Walter Brueggemann contents that, “... recovery of the Sabbath is the most crucial and most demanding covenant command (spiritual discipline) now to be faced in the technological society.”

If a servant leader is walking in God’s presence, he or she will be imitating God in character, keeping prayer and service together, worshiping only God alone, and observing Sabbath rest.

Servant Leadership: It is About Weaving a Legacy

An effective servant leader is committed to lifelong learning in God’s world. He or she admits there is always more to learn at any stage of life. There is a thirst for excellence. He or she participates in learning and/or training opportunities and life experiences that can refocus, retool, and even reenergize. The Association of Christian Librarians’ annual conference is one example. Lifelong learning impacts a servant leader’s legacy.

An effective servant leader is connected to meaningful mentoring relationships. He or she comprehends that “mentoring is a relational experience in which one person empowers


22. Blanchard and Hodges, 80.

another by sharing God-given resources.”

For this definition and to learn more about mentoring relationships read *Connecting*, by Stanley and Clinton. Mentoring relationships, including the responsibility of mentoring the next generation, impact a servant leader’s legacy.

An effective servant leader is compelled to *finish well*. Not all leaders finish well, but according to Stanley and Clinton’s research the servant leaders that finish well share these characteristics: “Perspective, intimacy with Christ, discipline, positive learning attitude, and a network of meaningful relationships.”

A servant leader reflects on what it means to finish well – asking, “what does finishing well look like for me?” Finishing well will impact the legacy of a servant leader.

**Conclusion**

Jesus, the ultimate servant leader, has taught Christian librarians much about servant leadership. Servant leadership is about wanting to serve, watching one’s attitude, weighing priorities, working with people, walking in God’s presence, and weaving a legacy.

> “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love,” (Jn 13:1 NIV). He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him,” (Jn 13:4–5).

Jesus did not just talk about serving He did it – every day! Take time TODAY to be a servant leader! ✨

---


25. Ibid., 215