



Servant Leadership



Vic Sassone
ICE Leadership President, U.S. Leadership, Inc.
Quality Texas Foundation Fellow

If ever the combination of two words seemed like a shoo-in for the oxymoron hall of fame, the combination of “servant” and “leadership” would fit the bill. How someone can be both servant *and* a leader does seem to bear some explanation.

The modern servant leadership movement began in the 1970s when Robert K. Greenleaf published his essay, “The Servant as Leader,” in which he coined the phrases “servant leader” and “servant leadership.” In the essay, Greenleaf defines servant leadership this way:

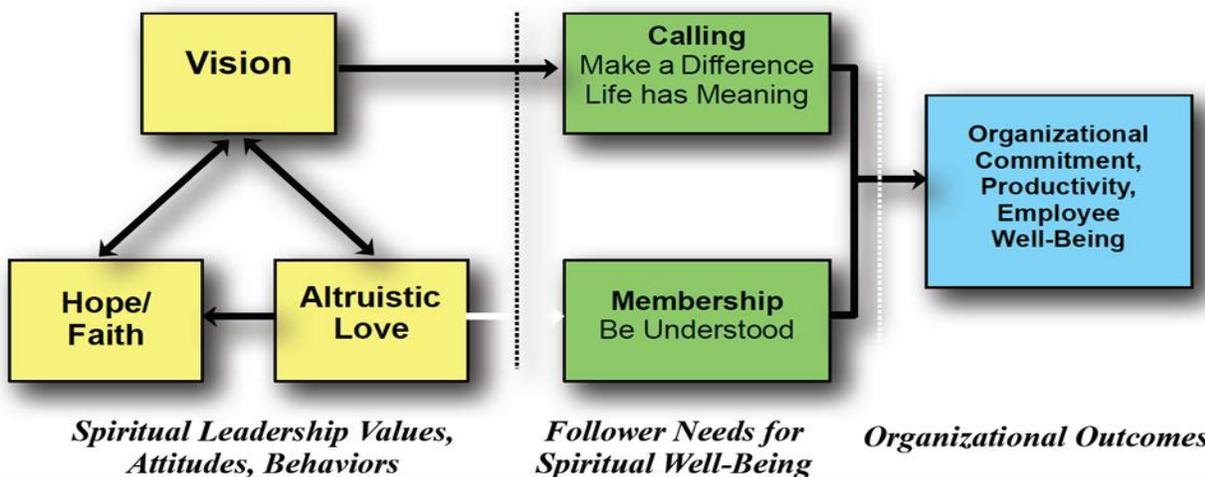
The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first; perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

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. *The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?* (Italics added)

The key for me is the assertion that a servant leader is about *growing people*. I like to rephrase Greenleaf’s definition by saying that servant leadership is a style of leadership based on motivating, directing and transforming others by attempting to meet their spiritual and physical needs. By “spiritual needs” I mean that part of us that longs for inspiration, challenge and encouragement. And, by “physical needs” I mean the collection of skills, knowledge and resources that equip us to perform and excel in a chosen endeavor.

The notion of meeting spiritual needs is beautifully modeled in a concept called Spiritual Leadership, through original work done by Dr. Louis (Jody) Fry, professor of management and leadership at Tarleton State University in Killeen, Texas. Dr. Fry says that:

Spiritual leadership comprises the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual well-being through calling and membership and, ultimately, become more organizationally committed and productive.



Spiritual Leadership involves:

- Creating a vision wherein leaders and group members experience a sense of calling in their life that has meaning and makes a difference;
- Establishing and reinforcing a social/organizational culture based on altruistic love with Hope and Faith, whereby people have a sense of membership, feel understood and appreciated, and feel genuine care, concern, and appreciation from their leaders.

Vision	Altruistic Love	Hope/Faith
Broad Appeal to Key Stakeholders	Trust/Loyalty	Endurance
Defines the Destination and Journey	Forgiveness/Acceptance/Gratitude	Perseverance
Reflects High Ideals	Integrity	Do What it Takes
Encourages Hope/Faith	Honesty	Stretch Goals
Establishes Standard of Excellence	Courage	Expectation of reward/victory
	Humility	Excellence
	Kindness	
	Compassion	
	Patience/Meekness	

Table 1: The Qualities of Spiritual Leadership

Here at U.S. Leadership, we've brought these ideas together in a concept we call ICE leadership (Influence, Challenge, and Equip). We believe ICE leaders display the fundamental qualities of servant leaders through these practices:

- Clarifying and Communicating – Setting or interpreting the direction and goals of the organization in a way that creates excitement in people and causes them to enlist in the journey.
- Listening and Persuading – Responding to people and problems by listening first to understand, along with a reliance on persuasion, rather than coercion to convince others.
- Caring and Character – A sincere and altruistic interest in and love for people coupled with values-based character traits.
- Enabling and Empowering – A deep commitment to the growth of individuals and supporting that growth with challenge, freedom, and accountability.
- Encouraging and Celebrating – Encouraging people's hearts and creatively recognizing and celebrating accomplishment.

Texas companies are among the world's leaders in the practice of Servant Leadership. Among them—Southwest Airlines and TD Industries. TD Industries, one of the earliest practitioners of servant leadership in the corporate setting and a 1998 Texas Award recipient, is a heating and plumbing contracting firm that has consistently ranked high in Fortune magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for in America. TD's founder, Jack Lowe Sr., came upon Greenleaf's "The Servant as Leader" in the early 1970s and began to distribute copies of it to his employees. They were invited to read through the essay and then to gather in small groups to discuss its meaning. The belief that managers should serve their employees became an important value for TD Industries. In their own words:

Every TD employee (or TD Partner) completes Basic Servant Leadership training. Those that aspire to lead will spend many more hours in the classroom and get regular feedback on their performance. Our commitment to this philosophy has created an environment where partners trust leadership to listen to their thoughts and ideas. And, in turn, leadership has learned to trust the judgment of partners.

A brief account of Greenleaf's philosophy teaches us that:

- *People can and should work together to grow a company. If an organization is to live up to its basic values and vision, a key ingredient will be leadership from all of us.*
- *Simply and plainly defined, leaders are people who have followers. They have earned recognition and respect.*
- *Leaders are first a servant of those they lead. They are a teacher, a source of information and knowledge, and a standard setter more than a giver of directions or a disciplinarian.*

Copyright – Quality Texas Foundation

- *Leaders see things through the eyes of their followers. They put themselves in others' shoes and help them make their dreams come true.*

At TD, Servant Leadership is a way of life that deeply enhances our culture and our business. It's what makes us such a great place to work. Here are the rest of Robert Greenleaf's thoughts.

- *Leaders do not say, "Get going." Instead, they say, "Let's go!" and lead the way. They do not walk behind with a whip; they are out in front with a banner.*
- *Leaders assume that their followers are working with them. They consider others to be their partners in the work and see to it that they share in the rewards, and they glorify the team spirit.*
- *Leaders are people builders. They help people to grow because the leader realizes that the more people grow, the stronger the organization will be.*
- *Leaders do not hold people down – they lift them up. They reach out their hand to help their followers scale the peaks.*
- *Leaders have faith in people. They believe in them. They have found that others will rise to high expectations.*
- *Leaders use their heart as well as their head. After they have looked at the facts with their head, they let their heart take a look too.*
- *Leaders keep their eyes on high goals. They are self-starters. They create plans and set them in motion. They are people of thought and action – both dreamers and doers.*
- *Leaders are faced with many hard decisions, including balancing fairness to an individual with fairness to the group. This sometimes requires "weeding out" those in the group who, over a period of time, do not measure up to the group needs of dependability, productivity and safety.*
- *Leaders have a sense of humor. They are not stuffed shirts. They can laugh at themselves. They have a humble spirit.*
- *Leaders can be led. They are not interested in having their own way, but in finding the best way. They have an open mind.*

My own experience with TD has convinced me that their implementation of Servant Leadership has been a key part of their development as a world-class organization.

Servant Leadership is consistent with the core values and concepts of the Criteria for Performance Excellence. Values such as Visionary Leadership, Organizational and Personal Learning, and Valuing Workforce Members and Partners are consistent with and thoroughly reinforced by the practice of Servant Leadership. Your organization's pursuit of excellence would be well served by embracing the Servant Leadership philosophy and practices.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Vic Sassone is a Master Trainer and consultant. He is the author and facilitator of the course *Servant Leadership – Fundamental Characteristics of the Servant Leader*. In 2008, Vic was recognized as Quality Texas Foundation Fellow. He currently serves as ICE Leadership President at U.S. Leadership, Inc., a leading consulting and training firm in Texas.