

# Servant Leadership *a Powerful Tool for Fast Change*

By Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D and Duane Trammell, M.Ed

With less certainty than ever before and everything being influenced by massive changes, it's easy and tempting to get infected by Hurry Sickness, the feeling that we can only succeed by doing everything faster! While it is true that business needs to find ways to deliver product and services much faster than ever before, the internal responsibilities demand a different response. The wisdom, "Sometimes we must slow down to go faster," is one of the intriguing paradoxes worth examining.

All of us have been on a team which became dysfunctional because the leader didn't have time, or make the time, to share the big picture with all team members. So he or she got caught in a bottleneck of giving out orders piecemeal and going into burnout as a result. Meanwhile, the line at this leader's door got longer and longer as team members waited for orders and answers. And frustration grew by leaps and bounds for all parties. Great ideas and unlimited creativity went undiscovered by a leader trying to supply all the answers, too busy to listen and too ego-centered to

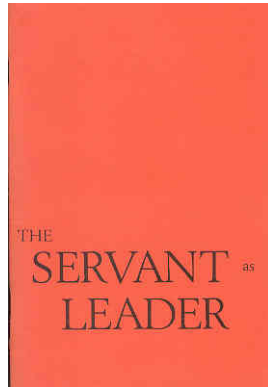
realize that collective intelligence always is far superior than any one person's ideas.

Once into this dilemma, it can be very difficult to get out. But let's talk about some options. Robert Greenleaf, the originator of the concept of servant leadership, spent his career as Director of Leadership Development for AT&T. Over the four decades of his work there, he noticed that the most successful managers led in a very different way. Instead of focusing on short-term outcomes, they also kept in their vision the long-term development of their team members. They used daily challenges as opportunities to develop the judgment and decision-making capacity of everyone around them. They listened more and gave far less commands. They asked good, probing questions,



not to humiliate or trap their colleague, but to enhance the capacity to get on all sides of a challenge and see obstacles before they happened.

In the early '70's, Greenleaf became aware of a small air conditioning and plumbing company in Dallas, called TDIndustries, that had ordered hundreds of copies of his essay, The Servant as Leader. He was curious about how and why these were being used. His phone call to Jack Lowe, Sr., founder of TDIndustries began a life-long friendship in which each man enhanced the education of the other.



Now, forty years later, TDIndustries has been recognized every year in the top ten of Fortune Magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For In America." And TD credits the deep work they have been doing over these four decades on servant leadership in addition to their balancing investment in quality as helping them earn this important recognition.

In the late 70's, we were invited to help design a leadership development process, which would engage every Partner in TD in learning the mind-set and skills of servant leadership. You might guess that this was about 180 degrees from the boss script that permeated their industry and the life experiences of most employees. So it has been a major challenge to earn credibility and buy-in. Each year we have engaged the participants in helping us strengthen the process. We learned early on that we needed respected field leaders as sponsors in the room to make sure each person really believed TD was serious about using this "soft stuff" out in the field.

We have come a long way in twenty-five years. Today servant leadership is co-taught by supervisors from all levels and reinforced by stories telling how servant leadership has made a difference to Customers, Partners, Suppliers, Families and all other Stakeholders. When supervisors work hard to teach the difference between leader as the hero (doing all the important decision making and the only one with the big picture), and a high performance team gleaning the collective intelligence and synergizing from it, you can bet they stay aware of how they perform over the next weeks and months.

### Ninety Day Review/Celebrations

Yet another innovation has been to invite Partners to meet back approximately 90 days following each class to celebrate personal gains made by each participant and share lessons learned. These valuable stories are collected and used in company newsletters, future meetings and teaching materials to make abstract concepts real. The pride people take in being featured is matched by the delight others experience as they learn heart-warming stories about their friends and colleagues. Remember when we were taught not to get too close to people at work because we might have to fire them or demote them, etc.?

Well, this is a very different approach, based on trust, doing the right thing and creating



win/win/wins. Jack Lowe, Jr., Chairman, credits their high level of trust for sustaining them through very difficult financial challenges in 1989; and for the organizational agility that led to TD receiving the Texas Quality Award in 1998 and repeated recognition by Fortune Magazine mentioned earlier.

## So, what are the defining qualities of a Servant-Leader?

First is a deep belief in the unlimited potential of each person and that it is the leader's role to invite, develop and encourage this valuable resource. Robert Greenleaf points out that the servant-leader is servant first wanting to bring value by lifting up others and doing what supports the greater good for all. This is sharply different from those who see themselves as leader first who are motivated by the need for power, prestige and/or material rewards.

## The Test of Servant Leadership: (from Robert Greenleaf)

"Do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous (self-reliant), more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived?"

Other defining qualities include:

- The ability to listen on a deeper level and truly understand.
- The ability to hear without judgment. To keep an open mind.
- The ability to hold ambiguity and paradox in mind, honoring all sides of a complex issue, knowing there are always "third and fourth right answers".
- The belief that the process of honestly sharing critical challenges/problems with all parties and inviting their ideas and support is often more important than providing solutions. The first honors the potential of others to solve their own problems, whereas solutions from the outside can breed dependence and imply that good answers come from experts, others or above.

- Clear on goals and good at pointing the direction.
- Servant, helper, and teacher first, then leader.
- Takes time to think, rather than just reacting.
- Chooses words carefully, so as not to damage those being led.
- Uses intuition and foresight.
- Sees things whole, sensing relationships and connections. Is a systems thinker.

Let me share the personal story of Ricky Hasserd, Vice President, Central Texas Region at TDIndustries. This is a great example of the power of Servant Leadership and how it awakens and truly empowers people.

## The Power of Treating Partners Like Owners

For twelve years I worked for a small plumbing contractor where I was taken in as a green helper and educated through an apprenticeship program. After six years of employment I finally tested out and qualified as a Journeyman Plumber. For the next six years, not much happened. Routine forty-hour weeks came and went. There was no continuing education program. Anything that affected my job was decided among the owners and passed down to me for



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implementation. This situation, compounded by a lagging economy forced me to search for a new job. Through a contact I found, applied, and got a job with TDIndustries. After a very short time **WOW! What a difference!** What seemed at first to be a very large and intimidating company soon began to reveal itself as a friendly, people-oriented family!

Within two years, after a lot of hard work and technical training, I was sent to a career development session called Servant Leadership Development. My initial reaction was: 'This company thinks I have the makings of a leader? I've only been here two years!' What a confidence booster! I learned about Robert Greenleaf and Stephen Covey. Just about everything I learned about these two men seemed to make perfect sense to me. And what was better yet, this was the company culture!

Well, that was many years ago and today I am still here. Every day has been a challenge, and opportunities for improvement are endless. TDIndustries treats Partners like owners. Empowering Partners with information needed to perform their jobs and allowing them to make mistakes is a winning combination that truly provides outstanding career opportunities."

*Ricky Hassard*  
Senior Service Manager

Ricky continues to provide outstanding servant leadership and has a great future with the company. He is just one of many who have caught the vision of a servant-led company. A company that has the crucial "tipping point," where non-servant-leaders are the exception rather than the rule. Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at [AMCA.com](http://AMCA.com)