A PRACTITIONER APPROACH TO MODELING AND TEACHING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP
—ROCKY WALLACE AND LARRY C. SPEARS

“I have a bias which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first. When [one] is a leader, this disposition causes [one] to be seen as servant first. This suggest that a non-servant who wants to be a servant might become a natural servant through a long arduous discipline of learning to listen, a discipline sufficiently sustained that the automatic response to any problem is to listen first.”

—Robert K. Greenleaf (The Servant as Leader)

ROCKY WALLACE:

As a college professor, working primarily with graduate students who are training to be school administrators, I have learned over the years that teaching technical skills is actually a small part of my work. Far more important is the adequate inclusion of how critical emotional intelligence and a lifestyle of serving is to the preparation and effectiveness of a school leader.

I emphasize “lifestyle” because an authentic servant-leader is paying attention and growing in how to better serve not only at work, but also in his or her personal life. I thought I knew what being a servant-leader was from the time I was a child. But, when earning a doctorate in Strategic Leadership at Regent University, I was
equipped with four years of being immersed in the topic. We studied the work of Ken Blanchard, was introduced to the writings of Robert Greenleaf, and were introduced to an array of other powerful literature and strategy on how to self-lead, and then grow others and organizations in healthy ways.

Soon afterwards, I had the opportunity to hear Larry Spears speak on Greenleaf’s core characteristics of servant-leadership (Larry had mined these from Greenleaf’s larger body of work). I was hooked. And over the last 16 years, I have increasingly integrated into my courses what it means to be a servant-leader, and how it can transform a school culture and organization through authentic relationship, trust, innovation, accountability, and genuine care (for all stakeholders).

Yet, teaching about something is not the same as modeling it. So, in my courses, I continue to grow in illustrating to my students what it means to practice servant-leadership. Here are examples:

- **Community (friendliness and ‘safe space’)**: My students are typically classroom teachers—many of whom are seasoned veterans. They lead busy lives—at school and at home (as well as in the community). When they are in class with me, I want them to feel as if they are in an incubator—removed from their daily stressors—and learning/ growing together in a comfortable, positive, engaging ‘community’.

- **Relevant Learning**: The vast majority of my students have multiple degrees. They are successful, and high achievers. So, the content covered in my courses is prioritized to motivate, engage, and challenge them with new learning that will continue to grow them in their personal lives and as school leaders.

- **Ethically-Driven**: School leaders have a responsibility to be positive role models at work and in the community. I do my
best to model this gold standard of integrity in my classroom—whether it be the speech I use, the quality of work I will accept, or the overall culture of the course from week to week.

- **Coaching/Mentoring Focus:** I see myself as a shepherd—not a “knows all” academic whose role is to lecture and pour info into my students. Whether my faith comes into the conversation, a recent book or research I’ve read, or a current topic we’re all doing work on that week, I try to make sure the class knows I see myself as a ‘leader of leaders’, and embrace the reality that we are all growing together. *Perhaps more aptly put: ‘A servant of servants.*

- **Humor:** As I continue to grow in my teaching style and setting class ambiance, I use more humor than in the past. I want my students to be relaxed and see me as a real person, and have noticed this helps me to be myself more—and the students enjoy it. Also, this subtle addition adds to the emotional intelligence emphasis of my teaching.

- **Growth Over Product:** I use four pillars in all of my online courses: Weekly ‘face to face’; Weekly group forum and personal journal work in the course online; Clinical experiences; Course project. I use very few additional assignments. In an eight-week course, if students are digesting the two or three texts I have required, are in attendance and engaging in our ‘live’ video sessions, are learning from other mentors in their school and district through a variety of clinical conversations/observations, and dive into an authentic, real-world project that is truly going to benefit their school and/or district…Then I am confident they have grown significantly in their comprehension and
ability to apply the themes of the course.

- **Mutual Respect of Intellectual Capital**: Some instructors have a stellar reputation for excelling in their area of content knowledge. And I pride myself as well in having an excellent grasp of the research in my field. Plus, I had lived it as a practitioner for many years before joining the ranks of higher education and serving in the role of “professor”. But it is critically important to me to acknowledge and celebrate the skills and experience of my students. They are living in the trenches right now, and thus they bring a tremendous amount of wisdom to the table. If I fail to tap into that gold mine of knowledge by not involving students in presentations, small group work, weekly discussions in our video sessions, and giving them ownership of their course projects, I have missed the mark in how much richer the course could have been—for everyone.

I recently penned five absolutes that capture the essence of being a servant-leader for me. These correlate well with the effective, serving mentor in the classroom. Nuggets that help keep me centered:

- A fulfilling, unselfish life is not about my wants and acquisitions, but instead God’s call on my life to in unselfish ways make a positive difference.
- A servant’s heart is about investing in others, and helping them grow into their full potential.
- Finding my ‘voice’ is not finding my comforts, but instead being in touch with who I genuinely am on the inside, and then helping others find their ‘voice’.
- The model of Christ (wash their feet, feed My sheep), and His core values of ‘love God, love others, make disciples’ is
the answer to addiction to narcissism and causing pain for others.

- The legacy we leave is not a resume of accomplishments, but a lifetime of unselfish purpose.

LARRY SPEARS:

Much like my friend and colleague, Rocky Wallace, I try to model servant-leadership as best I can, and to do so in some of the same ways as he has outlined above. In my teaching experience at Gonzaga University, nearly all of the 100+ graduate courses that I have taught since 2008 have been asynchronous online Blackboard courses in which the reading of texts, the viewing of video clips and feature films, the writing of papers, the sharing of daily email Announcements, and especially online Discussion Board exchanges are key aspects of how we practice servant-leadership—students and teacher alike. For the purposes of my own contribution to this article, I would like to focus on the content and approach that I take in teaching servant-leadership courses at Gonzaga University’s School of Leadership Studies. In particular, two courses in our Master’s program in Organizational Leadership: Servant-Leadership (ORGL 530) and Listen Discern Decide (ORGL 535).

But first, my introduction to the idea of servant-leadership came about in 1982 while working for the Quaker magazine, *Friends Journal*. One day we received in the mail an article submission from Robert Greenleaf. I still recall the excitement I felt as I saw this term, “servant-leader,” for the first time, and as I read his description of what it meant. I felt like he had given a name for something that I aspired to, but that I had not been able to put into words until that time. Over the years, *Friends Journal* published several articles on servant-leadership by Greenleaf, and I began to focus on my own development as a servant-leader.
In the forty years since that time, I have continued to do what I can to raise public awareness of servant-leadership, and to grow as a “servant-leader-in-training,” which is a term we use at Gonzaga University. For me, it is a potent reminder that we are, all of us, always servant-leaders-in-training.

In an earlier essay (“Make Your Life Extraordinary: The Teacher as Servant-Leader,” International Journal of Servant-Leadership, Vol. 12, 2018), Michael J. Reilly and I wrote the following on these characteristics of teachers as servant-leaders—

“One can see in the ten characteristics of servant-leaders the countless ways dedicated teachers serve their students. Each of these defining attributes of servant-leadership are evidenced by a servant-leader teacher’s approach to those they teach. A servant-leader teacher reflects the true essence of these listed qualities when he or she applies the specific actions advocated after each of the servant-leader’s characteristics—

1. Listening: Encourages participation; respects insights and opinions of others
2. Empathy: Respects all; fosters acceptance of all in their diversity
3. Healing: Supports and encourages the capabilities of all; cares for all
4. Awareness: Is a reflective practitioner
5. Persuasion: Communicates and shares a passion for learning
6. Conceptualization: Purposefully teaches in daily classroom activities; creates and stimulates dialogue about future possibilities
7. Foresight: Understands past influences; stays knowledgeable of influences on the present; applies knowledge in dealing with the future
8. Stewardship: Is committed to meeting the learning needs of all; trusts the potential of all; gives selflessly so others may grow in understanding

9. Commitment to the growth of people: Is committed to the growth and development of students

10. Building Community: Provides an encouraging and supportive environment for learning through open exchanges; conveys belief in the unique capabilities of all; fosters development of a community of learning where the shared pursuit of knowledge and understanding creates unlimited possibilities.”

Our servant-leadership courses at Gonzaga include a conscious effort to help students in their development as servant-leaders. The primary texts for our “Servant-Leadership” course (ORGL 530) include: *Journey to the East* (Hesse), *Servant Leadership* (Greenleaf), *Finding Leo* (Mathew), *Conversations on Servant-Leadership* (Ferch, Spears, McFarland, Carey), *Servant-Leadership in Training* (Horsman), *The Congruent Life* (Thompson), and *Seven Pillars of Servant-Leadership* (Sipe, Frick). In addition to these texts, we also incorporate supplemental readings, video clips, and three films: *Something the Lord Made* (Sargent, 2004), *Invictus* (Eastwood, 2009), and *The Mission* (Joffe, 1986). Mike Carey was the original designer of the “Servant-Leadership” course. In later years, John Horsman and I have added to it.

The other course that I teach is “Listen Discern Decide” (ORGL 535). John Horsman and I developed this course together in 2013. This course is grounded in servant-leadership and focuses on how deeper listening leads to more powerful discernment and improved decision-making. Our primary texts for this course include: *Siddhartha* (Hesse), *Greenleaf and Servant-Leader Listening* (Frick),
Fortuitous Encounters (Davis, Spears), On Becoming a Servant-Leader (Greenleaf), Silence (Sardello), Listening (Burley-Allen), and What’s Your Decision? (Sparough, Manney, Hipskind). In addition to these texts, we also incorporate supplemental readings, video clips, and these three films: Babette’s Feast (Axel, 1989), Lincoln (Spielberg, 2012), and Apollo 13 (Howard, 1995).

One of the key experiences in “Listen Discern Decide” is something that sounds so simple, yet it has proven to be such an important source of personal growth for many students. It is an exercise that involves spending 10 minutes a day in silence, then journaling on the silence experience for 2-5 minutes daily. Students are invited to share some of their insights and experiences with others in the Discussion Board, and it is remarkable to read the powerful effect of this exercise for many of them. The act of slowing down, sitting still, listening to the silence, and consciously reflecting on the experience leads to a deeper integration of servant-leadership. It leads to a deeper interior awareness, and it increases one’s capacity to become a better listener.

Since 2008, I have had the privilege of teaching and learning from over 2,000 graduate students. The experience of reading over 8,000 student papers and 64,000+ Discussion Board postings has left me with a deep feeling of encouragement for the future of developing servant-leaders.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM ROCKY WALLACE AND LARRY SPEARS:

As the emerging literature and research on servant-leadership continues, authors in this domain have captured how to simplify what the phrase actually means. And, these definitions have helped us clarify servant-leadership in our courses with authors our students are more familiar with. For instance, Stephen Covey illustrated this
lifestyle as ‘finding our voice, so then we can help others to find their voice’ (Covey, 2004). His son Sean Covey boils it down to ‘trust’ (Covey, 2008). Scott Peck simply called it ‘the road less traveled’ (Peck, 1978). Ken Blanchard suggests it is four parts: Leading self, mentoring others, developing healthy teams, and thus growing healthy organizations (Blanchard, 2018). Margaret Wheatley states there is “no greater act on the part of the leader than to find ways to express their great faith in people” (Wheatley, 2001).

As one can determine from our sharing here, the servant-leader classroom is so much more than creating a culture of ‘let’s all get along’. Diving into the literature on the topic, building examples and assignments into the course structure and content, and then modeling the principles of the discipline in facilitating a culture of care. Servant-leadership is certainly easier to talk about than to consistently do. But it’s more than worth it to try—as we open the minds and hearts of our students (and ourselves) to the lifestyle of serving.

References and Recommended Readings


Van Oudheusden, K. (2022). *Selfless leadership: A complete guide to awakening the servant leader within*.


Rocky Wallace currently helps design courses, teaches, and connects partnerships in Campbellsville University’s graduate ed leadership program, and has helped develop similar programs at Asbury University and Morehead State University in Kentucky. Rocky is a former school principal of a U.S. Blue Ribbon School, served in the Highly Skilled Educator school leader support program at the
Kentucky Department of Education, and as Director of Instructional Support and Adult Education at KEDC (the education cooperative in Ashland, Ky.). Rocky has written, co-authored, or edited/co-edited 10 books with Rowman & Littlefield in the domain of servant-leadership and organizational health in the school setting, and has two more books with R & L in progress. He also provides consulting to schools on servant-leadership and school culture.

Larry C. Spears is a writer and editor who has contributed chapters to three dozen books on servant-leadership. He edited or co-edited all five books of writings by Robert K. Greenleaf, and he is the co-editor and contributing author to nine servant-leadership anthologies. Larry divides his time as Servant-Leadership Scholar for Gonzaga University (Spokane), where he teaches graduate courses in servant-leadership; and, as CEO of The Larry Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (Indianapolis), where he focusses on writing and editing projects in servant-leadership, including serving as Senior Advisory Editor of the International Journal of Servant-Leadership. From 1990-2007, Larry served as President & CEO, and as President Emeritus and Senior Fellow, with the Robert K. Greenleaf Center.