

# First Among Equals

A CORPORATE EXECUTIVE'S VISION AND THE REEMERGING  
PHILOSOPHY OF TRUSTEES AS SERVANT LEADERS

By Deborah Brody

Although the notion of “leaders as servants” goes back to Biblical days and perhaps even further, in modern times many leaders seem to have forsaken this simple yet powerful concept in favor of leadership as self-aggrandizement and power. But the increasing acknowledgment of the philosophy of Robert K. Greenleaf perhaps can be attributed to a loss of faith in our modern leaders—be they corporate CEOs or politicians.

A native of Indiana, Greenleaf spent 40 years working with the AT&T Company as essentially a “talent scout.” He identified promising middle managers within the company and developed educational programs for them. Along the way, Greenleaf developed a knack for identifying exceptional leaders and found that these people had something in common: they worked primarily to empower their team and generally were not motivated by personal gain. They used the sharing of authority and responsibility as a way to enhance the well being of their programs.

Following his retirement in 1964 as vice president for management research, Greenleaf embarked upon a second, 20-year career as a writer and management consultant to organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and the American Foundation for

Management Research. In 1970 he wrote *The Servant as Leader*, the first in a series of essays discussing the servant-leader concept. In it, Greenleaf describes the prototypical 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 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? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?”

Today Greenleaf’s work continues through the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in Indianapolis. The Center’s mission is to promote a new approach to leadership, structure and decisionmaking. It advocates a holistic approach to work, a strong community, and shared power. Grantmakers supporting the Center include the Lilly Endowment and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

A handful of corporations including the AT&T Consumer Products Education Division in New Jersey, Herman Miller Co. in Michigan, and

Indiana-based Schmidt Associates Architects have adopted servant-leadership models as part of their corporate philosophy and mission statement. For a corporation, servant-leadership requires turning the traditional U.S. corporate “pyramid” structure upside down, thus making it an inverted pyramid with employees, customers and the community at the top.

According to Larry Spears, executive director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, the concept can be traced back to an ancient Roman model: *primus inter pares*, first among equals. In more concrete terms, this means involving staff in making decisions and setting organizational goals.

## QUESTIONS FOR FOUNDATION TRUSTEES

But how does this concept apply to foundation boards? Greenleaf addresses this in another essay entitled *Trustees as Servants*. Here he urges trustees to ask themselves two central questions: “Whom do you serve?” and “For what purpose?” According to Paul Olsen, president of the Blandin Foundation and board member of the Greenleaf Center, foundation trustees exist to serve the public trust. They should ask themselves: “How will we serve the public trust?”; “Who is our specific target audience?”; “How will our work make our target

audience better off?”

The Blandin Foundation is in the process of adopting a servant-leader philosophy. Its focus is to “help create healthy rural communities.” To do this effectively, the board is looking at ways to listen to the interests, concerns and needs of the rural people it serves. Listening is an essential component for servant-leaders, thus the Blandin Foundation board is experimenting with different ways to be a good listener.

According to Olsen, it is especially important for family foundations “to find a zone of agreement” among their board members. Boards comprised solely or mostly of family members have an even higher need for public trust. They must ask themselves: “What do we want our real accomplishments to be and how can we achieve them?”

Last spring Kellogg made a three-year grant to the Greenleaf Center to fund a servant-leadership workshop program. The workshops are structured to introduce participants to the principles and practices of servant-leadership and suggest approaches to making this philosophy an important part of one’s daily life—both at work and at home.

The workshops draw upon a variety of methods including traditional teaching methods, exercises, personal reflection, videotapes, and small group discussions.

**FOUR QUESTIONS FOUNDATION TRUSTEES SHOULD ASK THEMSELVES**

Whom do we serve?  
How do we measure our progress?  
How will we interact with our constituencies?  
How will we empower our constituencies?  
—PAUL OLSEN

**ALSO APPLIES TO GRANTEES**

According to Lorraine Matusak, coordinator-program director for leadership at Kellogg, the foundation is committed to the concept of servant-leader both for its internal operations and for its grantees. It is important to Kellogg that its grantees have adopted or are working toward a servant-leader philosophy. Since 1987, 69 of its grantees have become servant-leader organizations.

To monitor the progress of their grantees, Kellogg program officers engage in extensive dialogues and visits with their grant applicants, and about one year into the grant the program officer makes another site visit to determine whether servant-leader objectives are being met. It is important that grantees develop their own strategies for becoming servant-leaders.

Kellogg is also working with colleges and universities to ensure that future generations of leaders understand the servant-leader philosophy. Matusak’s advice to foundation boards seeking to adopt the Green-leaf philosophy is to strive to become servant-leaders as individual trustees and to encourage grantees to adopt the servant-leader model.

Other helpful resources for trustees are being produced by the Trustee Renewal Project, another Greenleaf

Center program. The project staff develop materials for trustees to use to reflect on their responsibilities, including autobiographical stories told by trustees. The stories reflect their experiences, including problems encountered and what motivates them as trustees.

These tools and others can help trustees assess both their personal and professional lives. Boards as a whole might consider undergoing a series of workshops, retreats, or even conversations. The Greenleaf Center can put trustees in touch with consultants who specialize in servant-leader issues. “Still,” asserts Larry Spears, “this is not a management philosophy; there are no 14 points to follow. Instead, trustees must reflect upon their philosophies and behavior and have ongoing discussions.”

This may sound like a tall order—especially for busy trustees who often lead dual professional and volunteer lives in addition to having personal and family commitments.

But as James P. Shannon, former executive director of the General Mills Foundation and an experienced foundation and nonprofit board member maintains, “Power is something you can give away and still get more of; shared power is power multiplied. Moreover, the best trustees are humble enough to know that they can improve.” With this type of thinking, the possibilities abound. Not only do we change ourselves, but we change the world in the process.