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# COLLEGE PROFESSORS AS SERVANT LEADERS: PROMOTING STUDENT DIGNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Garfield R. Benjamin

## ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic brought great disparities to society as a whole. In the education sector, teachers were forced to deliver content while exploring new ways to do so through new or unfamiliar technologies, working in various modalities, while keeping students engaged. This change called for instructors to be flexible, be aware, have empathy, have foresight, build community, communicate, and care for students in this new, mostly virtual, environment. This research explores the idea of college educators as servant leaders by examining definitions of servant leadership, exploring how a servant leader empowers those they lead in times of crisis, examining implications for the classroom, and finally proposing a framework for the concept of the Professor as a servant leader, while considering what that might mean for students.*

## INTRODUCTION

The role of teachers in the U.S. educational system is one that is often discussed and critiqued, especially considering the everchanging landscape of the system and the content being taught in U.S. classrooms. Currently, we are at the onset of another critical shift in the landscape of this system as we reevaluate and rebuild our idea of ‘normal’, moving out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to the societal changes brought on by COVID-19, teachers explored new ways to deliver the content to students, learned to use technology in a myriad of new ways, and worked in various modalities, all while keeping students engaged. Educators did this while balancing the personal issues they, themselves, faced.

The change in the classroom environment called for teachers to communicate, be flexible, be aware, have empathy, have foresight, build community, and care for students in this new and mostly virtual environment. These are all characteristics that are commonly associated with servant-leaders. In redefining normal as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and considering what we have learned from the time of crisis, it is important that we examine specific traits that proved most effective. The traits that emerged with the shift in learning during the pandemic indicate that as the concept

of the classroom is redefined, there is a need for teachers to act as servant-leaders.

This paper explores the idea of college professors as servant-leaders. Through examining definitions of servant-leadership and exploring how servant-leaders empower those they lead in times of crisis, this paper offers implications for servant leadership in the classroom, and proposes a framework that considers what professors as servant-leaders might mean to their students.

## DEFINING SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The term servant-leadership was introduced in the 1970s by Robert Greenleaf in his essay *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1970). The servant-leader is “servant first.” They are motivated by serving others, and after deciding to serve, they then consciously and intentionally lead. The servant-leader and leader first models are the two extremes on a spectrum of leadership styles. What differentiates the servant-leader from the leader first is “the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Greenleaf, 1970).

Servant leadership is, according to Page and Wong (2000), “...multi-dimensional, rich in hues and wide-ranging in its meanings” (p. 2). This is because the inspiration behind Greenleaf’s theory

hails across genres and disciplines. This is visible in today's literature on servant-first leading, which borrows from religious terminology including *God, soul, and spirit* and psychological terminology including *personal growth, self-awareness, and identity*. All of these words are "...mixed with management "buzzwords" such as flat organization and shared vision" (Page & Wong, 2000, p. 2).

So, a servant-leader embodies the mix of these ideas and ultimately seeks to do so while maintaining the dignity of the people they lead. Empowerment, team building, self-worth, and shared vision all point to the central idea of people maintaining their sense of dignity. In their leadership style, servant-leaders act in ways where those that they lead feel comfortable in their spaces and feel a sense that their personal growth or wellbeing is considered when decisions are made. These traits are particularly important when servant-leaders are navigating times of crisis.

### **SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS SITUATIONS**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for global disruption, exacerbating many people's daily lives. People lost loved ones, suffered from serious illnesses, struggled with access to basic needs and resources, and many were forced into isolation with little connection to family and friends. The pandemic strained society globally, causing an increase in mental health issues including anxiety and depression. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront many social inequity issues, forcing important conversations around the dialectics of race, wealth, and access to quality education. The COVID-19 pandemic has expedited moving the world into a time of crisis.

An examination of the etymology of the word crisis provides context around an alternative understanding of the word. *Crisis* is defined as a "great time of disagreement, confusion, or suffering" or "an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)

which certainly describes the COVID-19 pandemic. However, crisis is also understood, medically, as "a moment during a serious illness when there is a possibility of suddenly getting either better or worse" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). The root of the word is Greek, *krisis*, meaning "decision," from the word, *krinein*, meaning "to decide." This understanding assigns to the word a connotation that necessitates a leader to make critical decisions. Upon further examination, the Chinese word for crisis is *weiji*, with *wei*, translating to "danger," and *ji*, translating to "opportunity." This understanding implies a similar notion, one where opportunity emerges from danger, difficulty, or trouble.

Throughout the pandemic, leadership at all levels of society was challenged. Governmental leadership faced the need for decisions that took immediate and critical measures to ensure the safety of citizens. Leaders in business needed to act by shutting down operations for anything non-essential and seeking ways for people to work from their homes. Medical professionals faced the biggest challenge in finding ways to manage an extreme influx of patients and finding ways to save as many lives as possible. Schools were faced with finding ways to

continue teaching their students. In each case, the leaders that emerged and proved most effective navigated these urgent shifts as servant-leaders. The leaders that met the demands focused on the people and communities involved and on the opportunities that emerged from the crisis. It was their "... fundamental commitment to serving others with integrity and humility..." (Page & Wong, 2000, p. 3) which enabled them to emerge as strong leaders during one of the most tumultuous periods in global society since the second World War in 1945.

Good leadership during times of crisis is a good indicator of good leadership during normal times. Taking time to respond and make decisions while showing care and consideration for those being led

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during some of the most difficult times indicates that the leader is likely to be considerate of the person and their personal growth when making decisions during normal times. It is inevitably the leader's attitude towards their responsibilities that contributes most to the ways in which they are committed to developing those they lead. Page and Wong suggest that rather than being a model for weak leaders, servant leadership responds to responsibilities as other leadership styles do. They argue that:

Servant-leadership is an attitude toward the responsibility of leadership as much as it is a style of leadership [and it] must not be seen as a model for weak leaders or 'losers.' When the going gets tough or when difficult decisions have to be made, as is inevitable in all leadership situations, the servant leader must be just as tough-minded and resilient as other kinds of leaders. (Page & Wong, 2000, p.3).

Pointing back to the ten attributes, a servant-leader communicates, empathizes, is aware, has foresight, builds community, and is committed to growth whether or not they are faced with navigating a difficult period.

### **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COLLEGE PROFESSORS?**

Like leaders in organizations across other sectors, college professors were in many ways the first line leaders for students, navigating the many changes that came about during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thinking back to my experience as an instructor while New York City began the shutdowns in March 2020, I can remember a series of perplexing questions where students were wondering what was happening, how we would be meeting, if the semester would continue, what would happen to their campus housing, and so forth. College professors represent some of the campus' most important leaders because they not only serve as leaders in their lectures or discussions, but they also help with building future leaders of the world. In many ways, students learn from, take note of, and emulate the ways that college professors model leadership in the classroom.

Traditionally, we see the styles of classroom instructors defined in terms of the learning dynamic they create. We hear of the *authoritarian style* that strictly lectures on the subject in a lengthy one-sided discussion. Students, then, must try keeping up while taking notes and rely on their ability to memorize the information as it is delivered to them. Then, there is the demonstrative style that retains authority in the classroom but instead of relying on a verbal lecture, they combine the lecture with multimedia presentations, demonstrations, and other activities. Then, we hear of the *delegatory style* that relies heavily on student participation. In this style the instructor necessitates student involvement through group work, peer feedback, and lab-based learning, and they serve more as observers to peer-to-peer learning. Lastly, there is the facilitator who encourages student self-learning through increased student-to-teacher interaction. This typically occurs through activities where the instructor asks students to question and explore, rather than accept the text and regurgitate the materials. While it seems that what might be most effective is a combination of the traditional styles, I propose the idea of a *servant leadership style* which taps into the traditional models but includes the attributes of servant leadership.

This shifts the role of the professor away from overseeing the classroom and flattens classroom dynamics. As Page and Wong mention, "...in servant-leadership there is no such thing as "just a groundskeeper" or "just a secretary." Everyone is part of a team working to the same end in which people play different roles at different times, according to their expertise and assignment rather than their position or title" (2000, p. 7). This style aligns, in many ways, with the role of the facilitator but intentionally involves empathy, communication, community building, foresight and commitment to student growth.

It is important to note that this does not take the professor away from the role of subject matter expert. The servant leadership teaching style, instead, is a concept which seeks to empower students, create a sense of belonging, and maintain

their dignity in an environment where some students assume they will be judged. The instructor "... becomes the soft glue that holds the organization together as a virtual community working together..." (Page & Wong, 2000, p. 7).

## PROFESSORS AS A SERVANT-LEADERS

As mentioned previously, the most effective teaching style might be a combination of the four traditional styles. How would the inclusion of the attributes of servant leadership affect student learning? We saw elements of servant leadership emerge to address the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, but is this level of empowerment, community building, and dignity part of the normal student experience? While these questions may be best pursued in a subsequent project, it is helpful to consider both questions while exploring the possible benefits to the model being put forth in this paper.

Let's examine the ten attributes of servant leadership and consider how instructors can bring these attributes to the classroom. J. Martin Hays (2008), in his article, "Teacher as Servant Applications of Greenleaf's Servant Leadership in Higher Education" offers the following applications for the attributes in higher education.

1. Listening. Only through listening with an open mind and open heart can one come to understand people. (Hays, 2008, p. 123)
2. Empathy...the ability to sense and understand others' sentiments and perspectives and disciplined practice to do so - is crucial to being effective in leadership and other roles. (Hays, 2008, p. 124)
3. Healing. The servant leader cares about how his or her people are doing; he or she cares about their well-being, and wants to improve the condition of their lives and the circumstances surrounding them that promote health and well-being. (Hays, 2008, p. 124)
4. Persuasion. Servant leaders don't push; they pull. They don't try to force people to their views or way of doing things. They don't

try to convince people that their way is right or the only way. They argue or debate only when such action will directly benefit those involved; that is, when it contributes to a 'win-win' for everyone. (Hays, 2008, p. 125)

5. Awareness. Servant leaders are acutely aware of what's going on within themselves and others, and what's happening in their immediate and broader environment. (Hays, 2008, p. 125)
6. Foresight. Foresight is the ability to see and make the most of possible outcomes. It involves thinking ahead; planning and preparing for the *unknowable*; and understanding the long-term consequences of actions today. (Hays, 2008, p. 126)
7. Conceptualizing. Servant leaders see the big picture. They understand it, and can describe the work effectively within it. They see the forest *and* the trees. (Hays, 2008, p. 127)
8. Commitment to Growth. Servant leaders are committed to personal and community learning and development. (Hays, 2008, p. 127)
9. Stewardship. Stewardship is the acceptance of responsibility for protecting the rights, property, and welfare of others, and acting with best intentions to do so. Stewardship connotes a sense of supervising or managing affairs that serve others. But the concept is more meaningful in long-term, big-picture applications. (Hays, 2008, p. 128)
10. Focus on and Building Community. A community is a diverse group of individuals who share a sense of identity and commitment to a set of ideals or objectives. (Hays, 2008, p. 129)

Applying Hays's application to teaching, I would call the first attribute "communication." This distinction is important because the learning process for students requires healthy feedback for growth. The minor change is essential for tying each of the attributes together to create a holistic experience for

students. Communication is essential to highlight the commitment to student growth.

Empathy is applied here as what emerges from the communication. Much like what happens with the traditional style of the facilitator, the instructor develops relationships with their students through their communications and can develop an understanding of the perspectives of their students individually.

Persuasion, also relates heavily to the facilitator model in that it pulls, not pushes. For Hays, this would be about the instructor not pushing their perspectives on students. I would further add that this should also include that instructor assist with self-discovery. Instructors as servant-leaders would facilitate the process of self-learning where students explore and question materials to be able to think critically about the content they learn.

Focusing on building community amongst students in the classroom is key. It creates an environment where students are comfortable sharing their ideas and feel that they belong which are key components of establishing student dignity in the classroom. The combination of the feeling of belonging – a sense that they have an identity in the classroom and feeling agency through self-learning create the feeling of student dignity. This “...can make a profound difference on the impact of learning and in the learning experiences of both students and teachers” (Hays, 2008, p. 113).

For the instructor, one of the main advantages of this concept of the teacher as a servant-leader is

that “...it is flexible. Whether you are a charismatic intuitive leader or a down-to-earth methodological type of leader, you can always benefit from practicing servant leadership. No leader can be effective in a culturally diverse workplace by adopting only one leadership style” (Wong et al., 2007, p. 6).

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The idea of the professor as a servant-leader is one that has potential to aid the student experience in a way that helps them grow as leaders and ultimately pass on the attributes to those they lead. Because the commitment to develop people is a key attribute of a servant-leader, it is without question that servant leadership, in itself, is an educational structure, preparing the (servant) leaders to follow.

Another key component of this leadership style is the aim of maintaining student dignity in the classroom. While students are there to ultimately learn from their instructors and build knowledge around subject matter, college, particularly, is a delicate space because for many at the undergraduate level, people are coming together in one place from many different places and backgrounds. Professors have the tough role of unifying students around the content of their class. Doing so while creating a space for the student to develop an identity, gives them the opportunity to share their culture and experiences while appreciating the cultures and experiences of others, thus creating an environment where everyone feels empowered, and dignified.

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