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ROBERT GREENLEAF: CHANGING MANAGEMENT TO CHANGE SOCIETY

Riccardo Colasanti

ABSTRACT

*This paper is a critique of the thought provoking, if not problematic, ideas presented in Robert Greenleaf's pamphlet, *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 2008) which appeared in print in the 1970's. This text constituted the seminal work upon which a progressive, transformational movement was created in the training of management cadres in North American companies, with the transition of the concept of a "leader boss" to that of "leader as a servant". The limits of Greenleaf's servant leadership model are tested against the capitalist society within which we live and found contradictory, but no less inspiring in its attempt to humanize both the leader and the corporate world. There is a clear contradiction in Greenleaf's desire to eliminate the competition laws of the market while maintaining faith in capitalism. The principles of rehumanizing the corporate world are often more a process of corporate advertising, or virtue signaling, than the actual reality of the corporate world.*

The very breadth of Greenleaf's expansive insight provokes the need for two tests, or rather two critical approaches, which require further investigation. The two critical lines I propose are (i) on the spiritual principles of Servant Leadership and (ii) on the effectiveness of Servant Leadership as a governance tool within a competitive, capitalist environment.

A NEW WAY OF MANAGEMENT

The Servant as Leader (Greenleaf, 2008), written by Robert Greenleaf, appeared in print in the 1970's. The text constituted the seminal work upon which a progressive, transformational movement was created in the training of management cadres in North American companies, with the transition of the concept of a "leader boss" to that of "leader as a servant". The book heralds the birth of a change in corporate management.

Greenleaf asks how it is possible to move from being a manager -a hierarchical role to which we are elected by appointed - to becoming an authentic leader of the group -which is instead consensus granted by the team. This line of thinking is achieving gradual success in a modern Western world where authoritarian principles have been demonized and where an attitude of being as inclusive and integrating the wills of a company's human resources is being sought more and more every day.

It must also be said that these principles of rehumanizing the corporate world are often more a process of corporate advertising, or virtue signaling, than the actual reality of the corporate world. One need only consult a network of the business world such as LinkedIn, where the difference between proclamations and corporate reality, between what companies' messages of inclusiveness say and the arrogant attitudes of bosses, is often blatant.

The foundational idea proposed by Greenleaf is that leaders acquire their authority not because of the office they receive but because of their commitment to the service of their co-workers. The attitude of caring for others and one's work group is typical of those who believe that others are important to them. One is first 'Servant' says Greenleaf and only afterward 'Leader'. Such thinking may seem bizarre in a capitalist society that has typically divided the world into the soft philanthropic section (ie. religious congregations, charities) where fraternal charities reign, or the

hard business one (i.e. money-making companies in the stormy ocean of the market and competition) where self-interest and selfishness rule.

Indeed, the natural and only driving force in this economic world is precisely self-interest. Is it not a mantra repeated by all economic gurus --the Adam Smith's superclassical quote-- that self-interest is the hidden engine for the world's wealth? In exchange, relations with market actors we address "not to their humanity but to their self-love and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages" (Smith, 1776). And, is it not the case that the liberalism, that is the historical foundation of capitalism, was born precisely on certain pessimistic foundations about the *nature of man*, typically Hobbesian, and that a selfish and vicious society will ultimately be the richer one provided certain rules of capitalism are maintained? Mandeville (1714) reminds us that a society of ascetics will undoubtedly be poorer than another where envy, ambition, selfishness, and pride will lead to competition and, thus, to the most significant economic movement.

Greenleaf's stance is far from these authors. He is closer to the vision of North American democratic capitalism. We do not know what he thought of the conceptions of Chicago monetarists like Milton Friedman or the epigones of the Austrian School like Von Hayek. He is familiar with the corporate world, in the U.S. In fact, he was Director of Management Research at AT&T. Greenleaf believes that capitalism needs to be transformed not in its structural rules, but in the approach to the actions of the individuals called upon to run companies and society.

The strength of Greenleaf's oxymoronic concept is rooted in the theme of recognition. Greenleaf believes that if the leader cares for his or her

employees, only then will the team recognize him or her as a leader by giving not only obedience to the authority but, more importantly, the moral authority for which the team has faith in the leader. However, there is also a reverse movement: only with the ways of persuasion, only with an attitude of persuasion and listening, the behaviors of the team members can be changed to the optimal efficiency and to optimal performance.

A united group that shares a mission- because of spiritual and emotional factors- should be victorious over an institution whose only social glue is selfishness or economic interest. The manager humanizes his or herself. An organizational theory seeks, in the corporate structure, those deep forces that unite individuals with prophets, messiahs, and visionary leaders.

"A united group that shares a mission- because of spiritual and emotional factors- should be victorious over an institution whose only social glue is selfishness or economic interest."

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AS A GLOBAL PROJECT

Although Greenleaf came from and spoke to the world of management, it seems to me that his proposal is much more than just a new technique of business leadership. Indeed, it is a comprehensive thinking that wants to transform, not only, the world of companies but

also the world of higher education, of churches of organized religions, of health care, and more. This transformation emerges from training the cadres toward a vision in which the leaders of an organization acquire the authority of leadership through serving others, transforming their institution and, eventually, the whole society.

This drive for global change came to Greenleaf when, after his retirement from AT&T where he worked from 1926 until 1964, he began a consulting business for higher education institutions at the same time the university establishment was clashing with the student protest movement that wanted a drastic change in the "system." The idea of servant leadership

dates back to 1968 when Greenleaf believed that the situation of universities was “beyond repair by patchwork” (Frick, 2004), and that deep transformation was needed: not changing the “system” as the students shouted in the rallies, but changing the behavior of the management.

Greenleaf, with an evocative, poetic, sometimes prophetic prose tinged with messianism typical of certain evangelical thought, argued that genuine transformation of society can only occur if its leaders understand that their power is a consequence of service to others.

Interestingly, Greenleaf was never a manager, a “frontline” man, or rather never wanted to be one, preferring to influence managers across the board, by persuasion and not command. Another noteworthy fact is the importance Greenleaf gives to board members. They are the ones who are free from the pressing issues of decision-making, the corporate line of fire, and can be the natural stimulus for managers to achieve humanization of leadership.

THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF GREENLEAF'S THOUGHT

There is no doubt that Greenleaf's vision draws from Christian and biblical roots. Classically, servant-leadership is defined by Christ in Matthew 20:25-28.

But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your Servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Here lies the difference with the pagan world, where authority is not the child of service but only an expression of primacy and dominion.

Greenleaf was fully aware of these Christian roots. Nevertheless, because of his Quaker vision, for

which Revelation does not end with scripture, and because of his own interest in a pluralist vision in which religions do not create fences- he preferred not to limit himself to the Bible tradition (Frick, 2004). His texts, alongside the Scriptures, are thick with the most diverse and unusual literary and artistic quotations (from Camus to Kropotkin).

Above all, his reference author is Hermann Hesse of “Journey to the East.” Reading this book kindled in Greenleaf's mind the conception of Servant-Leadership in the figure of Leo, the leader who hides in the Servant's shoes to better lead.

NECESSARY VERIFICATIONS

The very breadth of Greenleaf's magnificent insight provokes the need for two tests, or rather two critical approaches, which require further investigation. The two critical lines I propose are (i) one on the spirit of the project and (ii) another on the effectiveness of the project. The first on the spiritual principles of Servant Leadership, the second on the effectiveness of Servant Leadership as a governance tool.

On the former, i.e., the spirit of “Servant,” one may ask whether a servant-leadership approach is possible without a belief in a transcendent God. The question is how one can act as a “servant”, not only as a technique of leadership but, as Greenleaf intended-as an authentic mission, without spiritual deepening.

In Europe, from the wars of religion onward, we have seen the gradual dilution of the figure of God, which some argue was followed by the death of values and, eventually, with the death of posthumanism, that of human.

Out of the necessity to coexist without bloodshed due to differences of faith, first we relegated the transcendent God to a theism of expediency, then seeing the dullness of such a figure too pale to be true, we erased him with the “death of God,” and of values of Nietzschean memory. And, finally, without values we ended up as Foucault prophesied, with the death of man: only a mark on the sand that can disappear with even a light wave.

The great political polarization of the U.S. makes apparent the gravity of a dieresis between two visions of the American people. On the one hand, a paleoconservative moment and on the other a neoliberal approach closer to Critical Theory than to the Founding Fathers. Is it possible to be not only good citizens, but “servants” if one has no religious background?

The second problem is the more specifically practical one of corporate performance. The criticism comes from the same world Greenleaf belonged to: the corporatist world. Greenleaf believes that his model is not only valid for Christian religious communities, seminaries, and charities, but is also the most effective mechanism for the organizational management of a business in an advanced capitalist society. It is, therefore, not only the best ethically, but also the most effective and efficient.

It must be said that this thought is countered by at least three points of discussion (there would be many more but they cannot be dealt with for brevity in this text). There are three questions that need to be answered in order to give an assessment of Greenleaf’s project:

1. How is it possible to evaluate the business effectiveness of Servant Leadership? With what metrics?
2. How do we behave in a contemporary world where responses must be increasingly short-term, where the quarterly letter becomes as important as the annual financial statement?
3. How to integrate the concept of competition with that of Servant Leadership?

Greenleaf does not refer to an evaluation of the impact or goodness of a “servant as a leader” versus a “boss led” company using the usual company indicators (such as bottom line, market share, etc.). Nevertheless, he indicates the criteria for evaluating a manager’s servant goodness is the well-being of his employees. There is, however, no uncorroborated data that indicates happy and engaged employees lead, without fail, to success in the marketplace.

The second aspect, that of short-term vision, is a well-known problem. Greenleaf himself indicates the problem: “Administrators, important and necessary as they are, tend to be short-range in their thinking and deficient in a sense of history-limitations that preclude their producing visions” (Greenleaf et al., 2014) .

This is one of the biggest problems: modern corporations need short-term, indeed very short-term, results. Investors do not have an interest in the improvement of companies over the long-term but in the production of short-term profits. Managers find themselves in an awkward position: that of prioritizing the short-term performance of the company over that of employee well-being. This issue arises from modern corporate transformation, where the ownership-company connection is increasingly limited to only a financial one. It is unclear whether a manager with a training in Servant Leadership should direct his or herself “to serve” to the company and not just serve its employees or stakeholders. The old-fashioned manager who is only interested in his own self-interest (remember the Enron executives?) is as bad as the one who, in order to defend his employees and collaborators, determines choices that reduce quarterly performance, negatively impacting the stakeholders. For finance, only numerical results count. The ideal manager in this case is the Servant as a leader, but not of his employees, but of the company. This is the new abstract behemoth of modern world.

The problem of time is at the root of capitalism. Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, points out that the persuasive approach, the affective one, the non-interest-centered one, needs time...

Certainly, Greenleaf’s vision is grandly ethical. It appeals to the business world, universities, the health care arena, but that does not mean that it is automatically the most efficient in the actual marketplace in the short term.

The third question of integrating the concept of competition with Servant-Leadership, is perhaps the

most difficult. In the stormy ocean of the market, the struggle between companies is ruthless. The dog-eat-dog ideology is the essence of neoliberal capitalism and its destructive force. Von Hayek sees in the death of weaker firms, in this market Darwinism that selects only the most innovative and profitable ideas to survive, the reason for capitalism's superiority to centralist forms of planned economy. This is the not-hidden great secret of the west.

We saw during the pandemic how the fight for survival led to the dismissal of thousands of employees of certain kinds of companies, such as hospitals and airlines, who suddenly found themselves with a significant reduction in sales. In this case, a good corporate boss manager lays off employees, while the Servant Leader tries to keep employees on payroll. At what point does the Servant Leader make the decision to lay off employees to save the company?

If it is true that Servant Leadership is finding more acceptance in the corporate world every day, it is also true that a "disruptive economy", with all its baggage of illustrious corporate casualties, has become a new mantra. We are in an historical period in which the "life expectancy" of even the largest and most famous companies is limited. Kodak, Polaroid, Xerox, Sperry (who remembers their glorious past times?) are some of the outstanding victims of a world that has made instability its hallmark and disruptive competition its dogma.

It seems that Greenleaf underestimates, or at least does not emphasize, this issue. He is still in the happy post-war world in which the American establishment protected with its supremacy the market stability.

This can also be found out in the list of traits that -according to Greenleaf, good managers must possess. Most of them are relational skills (listening skills, team-building skills, empathy, ability to take care of the group) and only two (conceptualization and foresight) are useful tools for those who must operate in the battlefield. There seems to be a lack of integration with other talents (prudence, audacity, decision-making skills, cunning, tactical elasticity) typical of those who operate in the trenches.

If the market approves the best performance, somewhat like when a team has to climb a mountain, then no doubt Greenleaf's characteristics are essential. However, if, on the other hand, the model is the competitive one between two teams, between two armies, between two competitors, if the model is the war for survival, then it is necessary to train management with other added skills.

Greenleaf is well aware of the problem and asks:

How can we elicit optimal service from people and institutions, as long as competition is uncritically accepted as good and is deeply imbedded in the culture? In the preparation of young potential servants to be servant-leaders, the issue of competition must be critically examined, and alternatives sought. (Greenleaf et al., 2014, p. 50)

The problem is that alternatives to market competition are only achievable with a profound alteration of the liberal capitalist system-perhaps with its very death. Greenleaf finally concludes: "My position is: if we are to move toward a more caring, serving society than we now have, competition must be muted, if not eliminated" (Greenleaf et al., 2014, p. 51). This is the weakest point in Greenleaf's thinking. For it is one thing to train leaders for a more just society, another to eliminate the competition laws of the market, yet maintain faith in capitalism.

On the world's chessboard, the new Asian capitalisms are trying to seize power while automation, artificial intelligence, robotics are changing modes of production; the transhumanist movement are recreating seemingly inexhaustible market niches with the complete transformation of the biological person into something very different. Will the goodwill of Leo, Hesse's Servant-leader, manifest itself by serving?

With all the above distinctions, I believe Greenleaf's proposal for an organization is too important not to be fully pursued... Before it is too late.

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