

POLICY GOVERNANCE® AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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Often when I have given a presentation about Policy Governance to a board, someone will say to me, "You really believe in this, don't you?" While I always answer, "Yes, I wouldn't be spending my life teaching it if I didn't believe in it," the question has made me ponder just why it is that I do believe in it—besides the fact that, if properly applied, it works ... (As those of you with whom I have worked will know, I have a pragmatic streak!) I have come to the conclusion that I feel so strongly about Policy Governance because the model is founded on the concept that the Board is not there for its own benefit, but to make the best possible decisions on behalf of the "moral ownership." Policy Governance is rooted in the idea that the board is the "servant-leader" of the owners. In fact, Carver goes so far as to say that "proper governance is a logical impossibility if it does not include the concept of servant-leadership."

The term "servant-leadership" is widely attributed in this century to Robert Greenleaf, who pioneered the application of the concept to the business setting. However, the reason that the concept has such importance for me is that its origins go much farther back—it was Jesus Christ who said to His disciples, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." Since I try (not always successfully) to live my life as a disciple of Christ (not Carver, as I've occasionally been accused of!), a model which is based on the idea of servant-leadership is congruent with my own deeply held values.

Integrity has been described as something you cannot see until it is not there. Servanthood is similar—it is neither dominance nor servility. "The ability to empower others makes great leadership a servanthood" (Bennett Sims). Let's explore the concept of servant-leadership more fully—with liberal credit to Robert Greenleaf for enlarging the concept and John Carver for applying it in a practical way to boards. Carver suggests that Policy Governance might be considered a "technology of servant-leadership"—a carefully-designed method for boards that are committed to being servant-leaders. A review of Greenleaf's writings has identified ten major characteristics of servant-leadership. We will examine just a few of them.

Stewardship

Servant-leader boards see themselves as stewards. This means pondering what has been entrusted to them, and what they will hand on. Many aboriginal North Americans apply the "seven generation" test to the decisions they make. Boards would do well to consider what the impact of their decisions will be, not just today or tomorrow, but on the next seven generations.

Conceptualization

One of the most important tasks of board servant-leadership is shaping the vision for an organization. The "leadership" is evidenced by the board's ability to see beyond the present, to understand the "big picture." Greenleaf says, "A mark of a leader, an attribute that puts him in a position to show the way for others, is that he is better than most at pointing the direction ... the leader can articulate [the vision] for any who are unsure." This vision is stated so that it excites the imagination and challenges people to work for it even if they do not yet know how to do it. Carver puts it slightly differently, suggesting that board members must be "capable of envisioning a world that isn't, rather than being captured by a world that is." Creating the

vision cannot be done in isolation. The "servanthood" comes into play in inviting the ownership to help shape that vision.

Listening

The servant-leader has "an openness, an ability to listen, and an ability to speak in a way that engages people directly affected by the choices to be made" (John Rosenblum, dean of University of Virginia's [business school](#)). From shared dialogue emerges a vision that is stronger and better. Building shared vision does not mean surrendering individual visions, but establishing harmony among diverse visions so that the group can move forward together.

Richard Smith of the Greenleaf Center suggests the concept of "holographic inquiry—the skill of seeing the issues from all sides and perspectives ... accepting the perceptions of others as valid ... Being open to viewing the world from another point of view tends to threaten us because we might have to admit that a view we have held for years is not right."

Unfortunately, the approach many of us take is, "I don't want to understand more about the problem. I only want to know what to do about it." The next time a critical issue is discussed at your board meeting, try taping the exchange. Then analyze it and ask, "How much of the exchange was simply each member trying to convince the others that their opinion was right? How much effort was made to truly hear what others were saying? How many questions were asked to try to understand the point of view of others?"

Listening to understand also takes time. Ann McGee-Cooper suggests that most leaders are consumed with "hurry-sickness," in which they cannot increase their awareness or broaden their perceptions because they have moved on too quickly to notice anything in depth about a situation. Reflect on a recent board meeting. Was so much time spent on making decisions that should really have been made by management, or hearing "reports" about "nice-to-know" (but not critical for governance) items, that the board did not have sufficient time to seriously grapple with understanding what was most important to the owners, or considering the future implications of an Ends decision?

Foresight

Servant-leader boards must be able to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences that their decisions will have on the future. Greenleaf proposes the interesting perspective that failure to foresee is an "ethical failure, because serious ethical compromises today (when the usual judgment on ethical inadequacy is made) are usually the result of a failure at an earlier date to foresee today's events and take the right actions when there was freedom for initiative to act."

Carver suggests that owners have the right to expect boards to know more about any given issue than the owners do, because the board has been put in a position of trust and leadership on their behalf. So, while the board must take into account the opinions of the ownership on any issue, they must also exercise leadership by making decisions which factor in additional information that the owners may not have. Leadership includes going ahead, not avoiding controversy. Servanthood may include being willing to be vilified for your position on a controversial matter.

A few suggestions from Greenleaf on "preparing to know the unknowable and foresee the unforeseeable": Approach the problem in the spirit of a search for understanding. Ask, "what questions can I ask about it?" Acknowledge that you see the present in terms of partial truth only. If you are dogmatic about the present, you are likely to be

dogmatic about the future—and wrong. The best knowledge is not certainty, but progressively sharper insights. He concludes by suggesting that one must always live at two levels—in the "real world," and also "detached," seeing today's events in the long sweep of history and into the indefinite future.

Self-Discipline

Meeting the tall order imposed by the characteristics of servant-leadership demands that a board exercise considerable self-discipline. A number of boards I have worked with have expressed discomfort with the word "discipline" when developing a policy that talks about their own behaviour. They see discipline as a negative, punitive concept. In fact, the word comes from the Latin "discipulus," which means "pupil"—also the root of the word "disciple." So discipline in the context of board servant-leadership refers to the board "disciplining" itself to follow a set of principles, to clearly articulate its values and then to "walk as it talks."

The Test of Servant-Leadership

Greenleaf suggests that the best test of servant-leadership is "do those served grow as persons? Do they ... become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to be servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?" Servant-leadership concentrates on building up others, not on the leader's self-importance.

Senge says that the choice of servant-leadership is not something you do, but an expression of your being. Leadership must be obsessed with values, says Carver. We need a way of connecting who we are to what we can do. For Boards, this connection is not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of those they serve. "If the board fails to act powerfully, it cheats those for whom it is holding the organization in trust of a voice. If it acts self-servingly, it fails to act in their behalf. It must be powerful and deferential at the same time, for both timidity and high-handedness defraud the trust."

You can't learn to use a computer just by reading about it—you must **do** computers. Servant-leadership is the same. You can't learn about servant-leadership only by hearing about it. You must do servant-leadership. And "doing" servant leadership means "being" servant leaders. So, don't just be a human **doing**. Be a human **being**.

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