

VENTURING MAGAZINE

LeaderThoughts #5 by Michael Brown

September 2012

10 characteristics of a Servant Leader

In one of my first Thoughts on servant leadership, I spoke of the concept of 10 characteristics of servant leadership that was developed by Larry Spears, taken from the works of Robert Greenleaf. While only briefly mentioned in that work, this concept is so important that I think it deserves its own Thought.

My Fraternity, in teaching servant leadership as the core underlying concept of our whole leadership development program, works in these 10 characteristics as well. We spend 45 minutes in our core course going over servant leadership and the 10 characteristics, tying in other leadership skills to several of them.



So what are the 10 Characteristics? They are:

1. Conceptualization
2. Persuasion
3. Foresight
4. Stewardship
5. Listening
6. Empathy
7. Healing
8. Building community
9. Commitment to the growth of people
10. Awareness

So let's look a little more deeply in these characteristics.

"Conceptualization" is about being future-oriented. You need to visualize a long-term plan for the group. Next you need to then articulate that vision. Having a vision is nice, but you need to be able to articulate it. And to realize that vision, you need to balance the daily operations of the group with achieving that goal. This means using both leadership and management skills.

"Persuasion" then continues that. Here, you need to sell that vision and goal to the others in the group. They need to buy in to that vision, otherwise how will you achieve those goals. Both conceptualization and persuasion tie into the concept of a VISION and a MISSION, which we covered in a previous Note, as well as the importance of GOAL SETTING, which we also covered.

"Foresight" is about learning from the past, be aware of what is going on today to plan for the future. This touches on the importance of CHANGE, another previous topic. And as we noted, we must also learn from the past. What worked, what didn't work, what does that tell us?

The next characteristic is one I too often don't see in Venturing, and that is "Stewardship". Stewardship is about holding something in trust for another. We often hear the term used in the sense of natural resources (park and wilderness). But here it means our organizations, our crews, VOAs, etc. We (or more precisely the Venturers) should hold their crew in trust to those who will follow them. They should take a responsibility of growing and sustaining their crew, passing them along to their successors, who should do the same.

For any leader, there is a need for communication skills. We have touched presentation skills, but another vital skill is "Listening". This is vital for decision making (a future topic). It's important that the leader understand what the will of the group is. And this can be obtained by listening to what is said AND what is not said. Further, listening is a vital skill to deal with conflict resolution (another future topic) or even avoiding conflict.

"Empathy" is also a vital communication skill, as it's about understanding others. Everyone is unique, with unique backgrounds and needs, and the leader needs to be open to this. We've probably all heard the old saying of "walk a mile in another's shoes", which is about understanding the point of view of others. This can be difficult, but necessary.

Further, if there is conflict, the servant leader must work to resolve that conflict constructively. There needs to be "Healing" whenever there is conflict. Only then can things be made whole and the organization become stronger.

For the organization (crew, VOA, etc) to be stronger, the servant leader should be encouraging the organization to develop as a health group. There should be a good sense of "Community", which can happen if the leader is working to "Build that Community". This sense of community can often come about ONLY if there is a common sense of purpose and goal, which goes back to some of the other characteristics. Promoting a mentoring program for new members is also a great way to develop this sense of community.

A big part of being a servant leader is that they have a "Commitment to Growth" of others. They take an interest in their followers. They want their followers to develop themselves as leaders in their own right. This can be by being a mentor (again, another past topic). This can be by being a trainer. A true mark of the servant leader is they are always on the lookout for potential leaders and want to help them develop.

Finally, the servant leader must have a sense of "Awareness" about themselves. This is actually a big part of what this series is all about. A servant leader must be learning. They must be working on improving themselves. What skills do they have, what do they lack, what do they need to work on? Too often, people don't want to bother with learning or improving themselves. If the servant leader is working to develop their followers, shouldn't they also be working to develop themselves?

So if we looking again at these 10 characteristics, we see:

1. Conceptualization ⇒ Vision, Mission, Goal Setting
2. Persuasion ⇒ Vision, Mission, Goal Setting
3. Foresight ⇒ Change
4. Stewardship ⇒ maintain the group
5. Listening ⇒ Communication
6. Empathy ⇒ Communication

7. Healing ⇒ Conflict resolution
8. Building community ⇒ create a community
9. Commitment to the growth of people ⇒ mentoring of others
10. Awareness ⇒ self development

Here we've matched up some of the other skills and topics (again, a few will be the topic of future Thoughts), with the characteristics.

For those wanting to learn more about these characteristics check out the work "Practicing Servant-Leadership", edited by Larry Spears. The introductory essay covers it. There is another essay you can assess on-line here: [www.sullivanadvisorygroup.com/docs/articles/Practicing Servant Leadership.pdf](http://www.sullivanadvisorygroup.com/docs/articles/Practicing%20Servant%20Leadership.pdf)

I couldn't find a video on this topic, but did find a good series of videos of Larry Spears interviewed by Gonzaga University. Here is a pair on Leaders Growth that I think are appropriate here:

- Larry Spears – Leaders Growth 1
http://www.youtube.com/v/aDeF9clVIhg?version=3&hl=en_US&rel=0
- Larry Spears – Leaders Growth 2
http://www.youtube.com/v/o6SC9Q9c5PE?version=3&hl=en_US&rel=0