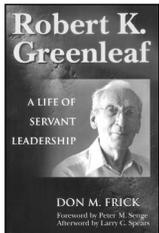




TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP: THE STORY OF ROBERT GREENLEAF

BY DEBORAH VOGELE WELCH



**Robert K. Greenleaf:
A Life of Servant
Leadership**

When we read the stories of extraordinary leaders, we may be inspired to see new possibilities for ourselves. The biography *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler, 2004) by Don Frick is especially compelling because its rich and honest story taps into what is vital in learning, life, and leading. It raises powerful questions, such as “Who am I as a leader” and “Am I living my personal genius and greatness?” By considering these questions, readers may discover a path to their core identity and natural strengths as leaders.

Robert Greenleaf (1904–1990) is known for initiating the powerful movement called “servant-leadership.” Servant-leaders embody leadership characteristics, capacities, attitudes, and values such as trust, deep listening, foresight, caring, accountability, and balance. By leading in a way that truly serves others, such leaders develop human possibilities—in themselves and in others.

Catalyzing Change in a Large Institution

Greenleaf began his career as an executive. As a young man, he was encouraged by a college professor to “create change from inside a large institution.” Following that advice, Greenleaf chose to work within the largest institution in the world at that time, AT&T. After three years of climbing telephone poles, he moved

into a job in hiring and assessment.

Greenleaf was intuitively drawn to lead in a different way. During his time with AT&T, he incorporated certain leadership practices in his work.

- **Deep Listening and Powerful Questions.** First, Greenleaf helped people discover their own greatness by asking powerful questions. “True listening builds strength in people,” he said. By choosing to listen, you assume “a healing attitude with faith that another will rise to the challenge.”

Joseph Distephano, one of Greenleaf’s mentees, recounts, “We would talk about ideas; I would ask him two or three questions; he would turn them around on me with Rogerian skill, and he’d hold me accountable for them at the next meeting.” Greenleaf focused not on giving advice, but on asking deeper questions so that others would access greater wisdom and “become convinced in their own hearts for their own reasons.”

- **Co-Creativity.** Greenleaf also recognized resistance to change in organizations and observed, “People don’t change a habit just because they know a better way.” To support the change process, he developed “study teams,” an early form of action research, so employees could learn from each other.

When Greenleaf conceived of the idea of the world’s first corporate personnel assessment center in 1948, instead of pushing the idea, he seeded a slow transformational change. He honed his idea, reading texts, exploring the issues, asking questions, and collaborating in the development of a vision of assessments based on the whole person. Ten years later, AT&T launched the world’s first corporate assessment center. Other corporations

quickly followed.

Greenleaf later discussed this approach to change with his son, Newcomb. “Suppose you had a really good idea? How would you go about trying to get it accepted? Here’s how I learned to do it. First, decide who the key people are in getting it adopted. Then, tell them the idea but only a bit at a time.” He explained that eventually others would “come to an idea on their own.” “But,” his son asked, “how will they know it was your idea?” “They’ll never know,” Bob Greenleaf answered—as if that were the core beauty of the stratagem.

“All great things are created for their own sake,” Greenleaf wrote, quoting Robert Frost. Paradoxically, by giving over his ego, he became a legend at AT&T. His humility was based on knowing who he was, his deepest identity.

- **Inner Listening.** Finally, Greenleaf taught managers to gather “enough information, thought, and intuition to do something useful.” To access this inner knowledge, Greenleaf found ways to “listen inside.” Listening inside was revitalizing and also a pragmatic practice to gain a “wider span of awareness.” This was true whether he was looking out at the stars, sitting quietly on a train, or taking time alone in his favorite room at Bell Labs—the absolutely silent anechoic chamber. Greenleaf often stayed there, renewed by the silence, until he was kicked out.

In his journal, Greenleaf described a time when his creative drive was blocked. He wrote about a “shadow side” in himself that did not take enough time for his family and was overly concerned with prestige. Once

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aware, Greenleaf put his insights to work, finding ways to achieve more balance and taking a chance on greater life and creativity. At 49, he let go of the prestige of his position at AT&T to retire early, a powerful turning point that accelerated his unique work and contribution.

Servant-Leadership Is Conceived

After retirement, Greenleaf did leadership consulting. This was in the heat of the tumultuous 1960s era. He left one consulting job at a college feeling like a complete failure, stating, “It was virtually impossible for me to carry out the task that I had gone there to do.”

Greenleaf didn’t bury or deny the pain of failure. He held the creative tension, clarifying his vision of a university that could serve the high purpose of nurturing the needs and spirit of students. He had read all of the novels by the student’s most popular author at the time, Herman Hesse. He thought about one character in Hesse’s *Journey to the East*, Leo, “a man of extraordinary presence, a servant who raised the spirit of the group with song while doing chores.” In the book, Leo suddenly disappears. The group members later discover that this servant was actually a wise and influential leader. In reflecting on the book, the phrase “servant-leader” popped into Greenleaf’s consciousness.

Greenleaf found a way to put this idea into action. He wrote a short essay called “The Servant as Leader” and sent copies to 200 friends. The piece became an underground classic in the business world.

Greenleaf later learned that companies such as TDIndustries were continually reordering copies. One day, he called TDIndustries CEO Jack Lowe and asked, “What are you doing with all those copies of my essay?” It turned out that Lowe was giving them to everyone in the organization, from office workers to executives. Furthermore, they were all meeting in small groups to read the essay and apply its insights. More than 30 years later, new employee-partners at TDIndustries still receive copies of “The Servant as

Leader” and discuss it in groups. This practice may be one reason that the company is consistently in the top 10 of *Fortune* magazine’s 100 best companies to work for in America.

The essay was distributed more widely than Greenleaf could ever have imagined and catapulted his leadership influence to another level.

Greenleaf’s Legacy

During his elder years, Greenleaf never became rigid or wavered from his focus on life-long learning. He gathered wisdom in resonant conversations with others—some well-known and others not—including ministers, writers, thinkers, doctors, activists, and business luminaries, such as Ira Progoff, Aldous Huxley, Karl Menninger, and Bill Wilson. He and his wife, Esther, intentionally sought out certain people; others, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, appeared synchronistically.

From the wisdom and maturity of his elder years, Greenleaf began to write books, publishing his first at age 74. A quote conveys the experience of his final “meaning-making” years: “The rewards of living a full life may be measured in joyous moments rather than days or years. These are the treasures that return to mind in the quiet hours. The moments nobly lived, the challenges met, the truth spoken. Meeting life—taking responsibility and leaving it joyfully once taken.”

Greenleaf’s circle of influence continues to expand today, as Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, Margaret Wheatley, Parker Palmer, Ann McGee-Cooper, and many other authors cite servant as leader as an inspiration. Warren Bennis called Greenleaf’s work the “most moral, original, useful writing on the topic of leadership.” According to Peter Senge, “No one in the past 30 years has had a more profound impact on thinking about leadership.” In addition, success stories are emerging from companies that have adopted the principles of servant-leadership, such as Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, Starbucks, USCellular, and Synovus Financial.

The scope of Greenleaf’s influence goes far beyond the workplace. His

seminal writings can be found in graduate and undergraduate courses at dozens of universities. Leaders from a spectrum of religious denominations find that servant-leadership mutually reinforces faith literature. Board trustees are using servant-leadership principles to hold institutions “in trust” for all stakeholders. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership has become a hub for servant-leadership efforts around the world.

Lessons from Greenleaf’s Life

The “Servant Leadership Primer” in the appendix of *Robert Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership* offers insights and reflections on developing as a servant-leader. Servant-leadership can’t be reduced to a formula or technique. It is about developing capacities, habits, attitudes, and values. All of these contribute to a leader’s growth—like tributaries feeding into a moving stream. And the source of this development starts with one’s identity and spirit.

As you read this biography, you will likely become open to exploring powerful questions about life and leadership. Important questions compel us to reflect deeply and measure success in new ways. Greenleaf measured himself by the “best test” of servant-leadership: Do we, and those we serve, grow as persons? Become healthier, freer, more autonomous, more likely to serve? And what is the effect on the least privileged, are they served or at least not harmed?

Whether you adopt Greenleaf’s best test, develop your own, or find other issues to explore, this book will evoke questions that matter. The story will breathe new life into the way you think about developing the capacity to serve—in yourself, your organization, and your community. ■

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