

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Skills to lead through the turbulent times

By Gerry Starsia, Ph.D

As leaders of higher education auxiliary enterprises consider the strategic challenges of managing their units in the 21st century, invariably they sense significant change ahead. As a result of the recent economic downturn, there is mounting pressure to grow revenue and reduce expenses across the institution. Federal and state government officials are publicly acknowledging that retirement systems are underfunded or outright failing; funding for infrastructure is difficult if not impossible to identify; and competition between public and private institutions, and between for-profit and non-profits, intensifies. What are the leadership implications of these dynamic market conditions? What steps can organizational leaders take to weather the storm, maintain their competitive position and prepare for the future? What kinds of leaders do organizations need to guide them through the turbulent times ahead?

If you spend time researching leadership, you will inevitably uncover a robust consultative industry filled with many “experts” and “leadership flavors of the month”—the latter of which are prescriptive in nature and short-lived in effect. However, the traditional styles of leadership are slowly fading away and new models are emerging. These new models tend to emphasize teamwork and community. They often involve the community in their planning and implementation; include teams in decision-making; improve the lives of the participants and the community; and are often based on ethical and caring behavior (Spears, 1996). The emerging approach to leadership and service, as well as those who head these organizations, is known as “servant-leadership” and “servant-leaders” respectively.

Servant leadership has its roots in religious and humanist teachings dating back thousands of years with modern roots in the 1970s with Robert Greenleaf. As an executive at AT&T, Greenleaf worked in the areas of research and education, becoming increasingly interested in the motivations and traits of leaders in that organization. He left AT&T and began a two-plus decade consultancy that allowed him to overlay his thinking onto a number of leadership teams at major U.S. corporations. He founded the Center for Applied Ethics, which was renamed the Robert Greenleaf Center in 1985. It continues to operate today. For more information on the Greenleaf center, visit <http://www.greenleaf.org/>.

Scholars interested in servant leadership often describe these “great leaders” as first and foremost servants to others and this perspective as central to his or her greatness. Being a servant leader

means promoting a sense of community, sharing decision-making authority, and preparing followers for the day when they will lead others. McKinney (2011) describes the responsibilities as “custodial” in nature; that servant leaders are actually temporary caretakers of organizational assets with a stewardship role. Research has shown that human beings take cues from their environments. As these biases, desires and perceptions develop, our world view takes shape. Leaders can create a more constructive world view by living by the tenets of a longer-term vision, and having a more considerate and ethical approach to life.

Servant leaders believe that the good of community comes above all else and that living these values is the model leaders need to portray for others to follow. The willingness of the servant leader to serve is the essence of their greatness, and great leaders will learn to move back and forth between leading and following. An example of the servant leader is George Washington. Washington is remembered for his strength of character, discipline, patriotism and selflessness. He was the custodian of the values and beliefs of the nation and fought to defend these with disregard for his own interests. When called to defend a fledgling nation, he willingly answered the call and placed the nation’s interests in front of his own.

Leadership has always been a selfless action. It asks what is right or best in the broader interest. For those in leader positions, servant leadership reminds us to serve those we lead; for those in follower positions, it reminds us to look for opportunities to lead. Moving



2010 Senior Leadership Forum participants learn negotiation strategies with Professor Lucien Bass.

The McIntire School of Education at the University of Virginia will host the NACAS Senior Leadership Forum in July.



back and forth between the two ultimately raises the possibilities for yourself, your family, your organization and your community. According to Daniel Goldman, it also means that the leader must be able to take other's feelings and ideas into account but act on the behalf of the majority.

Tom Peters (2011), the management consultant, offers some simple reminders on how to practice servant leadership daily, by asking these three questions:

1. What have you done in the last 24 hours to be of service to someone in your organization?
2. What actions have you taken to make the work of those around you easier?
3. What efforts have you made to assist a team in reaching their goals?

By considering these questions in your daily management activities, you will inevitably become a more effective manager and leader. Other recommendations include starting the servant leader approach early in your career, remaining introspective and thinking holistically, upending the pyramid by staying in touch with all levels, and inspiring others with the importance of the shared mission.

The ideas related to leadership are at the core of the instruction, case studies and classroom interactions offered by the McIntire School of Commerce and NACAS at the second Senior Leadership Forum, an executive education program specifically designed for auxiliary leaders, scheduled for July 20-23, 2011.

In last year's program, keynote speaker Executive Vice President and COO of the University of Virginia, Leonard Sandridge, described the values of the servant leader as being both integral to his approach to managing the overall institution and

applicable to those managing auxiliary enterprises. He reminded us that parents entrust their sons or daughters to us; that leaders must also be confident in their abilities to manage diverse groups of people; that leaders need to be confident they can deliver; and that leaders need to be comfortable delegating responsibilities and functioning through others. He also recommended to Forum participants that they check their egos at the door, be willing to listen and support those around them. In the 2011 Senior Leadership Forum, the faculty and participants will explore these and other leadership-related topics in greater depth with the goal of providing new tools and techniques for the experienced auxiliary professional to be a more effective manager and leader.

For more information about the full curriculum, including strategy, critical thinking, marketing and negotiation, and for registration, visit: <http://apps.comm.virginia.edu/NACAS/>

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The Greenleaf Center: <http://www.greenleaf.org/>



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