

## Leadership from a Servant Perspective

(Submitted by Les Comee)

### Introduction

Some of us in Young Life have had the extraordinary privilege of working with visionary leaders who approached their calling as a way to serve others. We could sense that the primary concern to them was not their program, goals, and vision - all of which were very important. They were led by a vision of the Gospel and touching kids' hearts. They exercised their power and influence in significant ways. They expected a lot from us and we wanted to give them the best. But deep down we knew their primary desire was that we would grow into the people God wanted us to be. We were more than just a way to get a vision accomplished. They led us not just by assigning work, but by being with us in the work.

We also knew that this was not a strategy on their part. It was grace. God's grace had given them something. They were bearers of grace in a special way. People grew in their presence. Gifts were utilised. Risks were encouraged and we continued to learn more about reaching young people in new ways.

One of the descriptions of Jesus I have most appreciated is "the Man for others." That seems to me to be at the heart of servant leadership<sup>1</sup>. Some wonderful books have been written about servant leadership. I want to discuss some of the simple implications for people who want to ask God to lead them in this way.

### i. Leadership from Within

Each year, for the past several, I have encouraged our staff to listen to God for a special scripture, then to ponder that scripture and let it shape their vision, shape their prayer, and shape their speaking. Jesus did this with Isaiah 61. He used it when He preached His inaugural sermon in Luke 4. It under girded His ministry. It focused His prayer life. When the disciples wrote the Gospels they remembered that Jesus' vision was not His own - it was given to Him. He listened first.

If we are going to be servant leaders, we begin with a listening posture, to our Lord in Scripture, to the leadership God has given us, to the people we are called to serve.

It is an important question we need to ask - how am I doing at listening? How clear am I on what I am being called to do? Am I being faithful to that vision in the midst of whatever struggles I face?

All leadership begins from "within."

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<sup>1</sup> Leighton Ford's *Transforming Leadership* is a solid biblical/practical study of Jesus' style, especially chapter 8 on Jesus as a servant leader. A.B. Bruce's *The Training of the Twelve* is a classic used by Robert Coleman in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership* talks about leadership in an institutional setting.

There are a lot of different ways to talk about this.<sup>2</sup> For the leader, the real issue is always an internal one. This is a hard lesson for me to learn. I want to change or blame everything but myself, "Young Life expects too much. Not enough leaders are committed. We do not have enough money." All this may be true. The issue for a leader is to begin to understand what is blocking him or her from hearing God's Spirit. What are we to do that will allow us to be open to God's grace? What, in me needs to be transformed?

This is another way of saying the servant leader has to be open to change, to listen, to hear the voice of God. So, the leader has to live with the paradox of being clear about a sense of call and vision, plus open to God and others. This is one of the many tensions with which a servant leader lives and works.

## ii. Servant Leadership and Cost

John Stott, in *Imitating the Incarnation*, said, "Evangelical theology is essentially a theology of the cross." There is no other way to understand Christian leadership than leadership that is self-giving and costly. Four times in John 10 Jesus talks about laying down His life for the sheep. It is something He does by His own free will. It is not something pushed on Him by a "program" of any sort.

A good deal of my ministry has been spent trying to understand the meaning and implication of these ideas. How do you lead and serve in this way? Being honest/vulnerable with the people we serve is one thing that we see in Jesus' ministry. It was misunderstood then, and we can expect the same response now.

In America, we are taught to expect to move from victory to victory. Our lives and ministry grow and grow from one mountaintop to the next. I have never heard an area director take scripture and teach his or her leaders how to deal with lack of response (or failure). Jesus took the time to warn the disciples in Mark 6 as He sent them out in mission by twos. Everyone will not "buy" the Gospel (Mark 6:10-11), and He gave them a sign to allow them to "let go" when people did not respond. He helped them deal with one of the outward stresses of ministry. He told them the truth. People do not always respond. They had not responded to Jesus in Mark 6:1-6. Do we ever talk with our leaders like that?

But, soon after the sending of the disciples, Jesus begins to prepare them for the inner cost of leadership. He begins in Chapter 8 of Mark and continues in chapters 9 and 10. Like me, the disciples are not interested in hearing about this. They want things to go smoothly, painlessly. In fact, in Chapter 10 they want glory and honour. Jesus then gives His most clear teaching about servant leadership. It has to do with suffering. It is the way God has chosen to transform us. In fact the primary paradigm for the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> R\_Foster in *Celebration of Discipline*. Gordon Cosby in *Handbook for Mission Groups*. H. Nouwen in *In the Name of Jesus*. C. Swindoll in *Improving Your Serve*.

life is death (deny self/let go/give up) and resurrection (new life/gift/renewal). Jesus modelled it and the disciples misunderstood it.

It seems to me there are numerous ways we may be called to suffer. We may be called to walk with brothers and sisters through their pain, suffering and darkness. The disciples did not want to do this with Jesus.

Then there is the more subtle call to death that comes with facing our own need to let go of power and control. It may be the call to face our own places of sin and darkness and surrender them to Jesus and our fellowship. How do we lead when we are tired, in pain, or not "together?"

Tom Wilson has amazed me with his vulnerability as a senior vice president. I invited him to our region one year to "G-up" the troops because I was too tired to do it. Instead, he shared his own struggles he and his family were facing. The whole meeting moved to a new level of honesty. Leadership can confer this gift if leaders serve by honestly sharing the suffering they face - suffering due to ministry or our personal lives.

When teaching the disciples about the cost of being a servant in Mark 10:45 or in Luke's more expanded account in chapter 22, Jesus never says that being a servant means giving up leadership. He redefines what leadership means, but He expects them to be "the greater" or "the one who rules" (in Luke). He just does not want them to rule by "lording over" people like the Gentiles. Their calling was to lead - Jesus' purpose was to reframe the meaning of leadership.

How have you worked in your own life with the inner cost of leadership?

### **iii. Anger and Hostility/Shooting Straight**

I do not know why, but I am always surprised by the amount of hostility that leaders face. In time, I have come to believe that the ability to face hostility (to work with it and through it) was an important task of a person who wanted to serve. I have always wanted to believe that if I am "nice" enough people will not get upset with me. That is the opposite of what I am talking about. I am called to be open about my struggles and encourage the same in others. All of us bring our own pains and wounds into ministry. The context a leader creates either encourages us to cover up all of our "stuff," or allows us to be who we really are. There is a cost to allowing that kind of openness. Some will be especially upset if the leader is vulnerable. We are not meeting their expectations.

There are many other reasons a leader faces hostility; but the issue is do we dodge it or allow it to surface and grow through it? We are faced with the decision to get on with the task/vision or work with a person. Often hostility is a clue to an important step in a person's spiritual journey. The leader who is willing to serve by facing hostility

knows that grace and transformation come at a high price to God and to the people of God.

I have missed too many opportunities in my ministry to help people grow by not shooting straight with them. I have not given them honest feedback about parts of their lives that need to change. Jack Fortin, one of our former vice presidents, used to say "Confrontation + Tribulation = Transformation." Are we willing to take the time, energy, and work that is necessary, (the "tribulation"), to help people grow?

Along with this question, it seems to me we are called to accept people where they are. It is one of the principles we teach early in ministry. How do you live with the tension of accepting people where they are and honestly giving them feedback about their growth?

*Following is an excerpt from an interview between Jeff Munroe and Max DePree.*

**Jeff Munroe:** What are the marks of a servant leader?

**Max DePree:** A servant leader is one who approaches leadership with the thought that the leader owes things to the followers. The leader owes opportunities, recognition, good orientation, reality.

There is a myth afoot that shows itself in our language, when a coach talks about "my team," or a manager talks about "my work team" - that's the wrong language. You don't own them, they own you. Servant leadership starts with this concept: Leadership is a posture of indebtedness.

To carry that out, some further attributes are necessary. Integrity is always at the top of the list, but I think vulnerability may be the point at which most of us struggle in trying to be servant leaders. It is very hard to be vulnerable, that is, open, to the gifts that others bring. When we interact with our children, whom we love dearly, it is not so hard to be vulnerable, but when we transfer that concept into the work place, it is more difficult. Being vulnerable to what other people bring is one of the things that is at the heart of servanthood.

Another thing that is at play here is that when you move steadily up the hierarchy of a really good organisation – an organization that is vital and has a mission that is worthwhile - you become more and more an amateur, because there is such a gap between the actual work that goes on and what the leader shares in. The leader cannot share in all the work that goes on in a good organization so he/she has to be educated in order to make decisions. If the leader understands that he/she is an amateur, the odds are much better that he'll/she'll be able to be a servant.