

Twenty-First Century Leadership for EU Institutions

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By

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and Derek Pelland

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9524-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9524-8

My fellows and I
Onwards to happiness by
Giving, not taking¹

—Herman van Rompuy

¹ English translation by John Macdonald, Senior Expert Learning & Professional Development, European Commission, DG COMM.

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PREFACE

Sixty years ago, on 25 March 1957, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany signed the Treaty of Rome, which brought about the creation of the European Economic Community. It remains one of the most important treaties in today's European Union (EU). Too many people have forgotten that it built on previous efforts to bring lasting peace and prosperity in Europe after the atrocities of the first and second world wars.

Our forebears devised the idea to create peace through economic cooperation just six decades ago. To achieve this plan, former arch rivals France and Germany had to unite under a common cause. The concept was based on the notion that nations intertwined economically would have no rational interest in starting another war with one another.

Indeed, the EU is a peace project by its very nature, one which has evolved over the past decades. The European project has always been an ongoing "work-in-progress" and has led to the unification of twenty-eight nations. Over time, cooperation has broadened its scope, and deepened in a variety of areas beyond the European single market with its free movement of goods, capital, services, and people. The uniqueness of this project is not so much that individual states surrendered some sovereignty to the larger EU, but rather the fact that this was done entirely voluntarily. This is truly unique in the light of Europe's turbulent history.

The twenty-first century presents enormous challenges both to Europe and the greater part of the world's population. In an ever-changing environment, we face increasingly challenging issues, including scarcity of resources, poverty, social injustice, global warming, shifting power balances, ecological devastation, economic and financial crises, and security issues.

It is becoming increasingly clear that survival of the fittest will lead human beings to the limits of our existence as a species, stretching our planet's resources in the process. A purely profit-oriented approach without social benefits has proven to be unsustainable for planet Earth. To address these challenges of "our times," a common European response is needed. Despite this understanding, broad support for the European project is no longer guaranteed.

Today's political climate has changed dramatically, with its roots in the multiple crises that have plagued the current generations in the second millennium, causing many to lose their sense of security and solidarity. In 2001, the dot-com bubble collapsed, leading to unprecedented losses on the stock markets, followed by an economic dip in 2005. The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 is considered by many economists to have been the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The European debt crisis (often referred to as the Eurozone crisis or the European sovereign debt crisis) is a multiyear debt crisis that has been taking place in the EU since the end of 2009. A pension crisis is becoming increasingly manifest due to the long-term low interest rates. On top of that, record numbers of people have been seeking refuge in Europe from civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East since 2015. Despite the risk and inhospitable welcome, the masses continue to migrate to Europe, also for economic reasons. The recent wave of terrorist attacks in various European cities has fuelled fear in our populations. All these crises have left governments looking inward to protect their own national interest first.

This changing political climate leaves the EU in poor shape to address these multiple crises jointly. Moreover, populism is converting peoples' fear into anger against ethnic minority groups and the establishment. The EU is included in this notoriety, and has not presented any immediate response. The EU Institutions are being criticised for being anonymous bureaucratic entities seeking ever more power at the expense of national sovereignty.

In 2016, the Brexit referendum took place against this nationalist background, leading to the UK government's decision to start the withdrawal process on 29 March 2017. With the UK on course to leave the EU by April 2019, it is pioneering a course towards a fragmented Europe. As a return to nationalism and a divided Europe, as in the years before the Second World War, becomes a plausible reality, we can see the potential instability and threats to all states. The alternative path would be to embrace the European project as an awakening journey that tends to bring about the future of peace and prosperity envisioned for the people of Europe.

The coming generations will need to take a conscious decision to overcome their fears and look towards that which unites us. This will determine what kind of EU our children inherit, along with outlining the institutions needed to lead us there. I believe that in the middle of the crisis lies the opportunity. This book holds a vision of the type of leadership needed to transform the EU Institutions so that they truly serve Europe's people. Our world today calls for leaders who are connected to themselves,

know how to unleash the potential of others, build organisations that serve people's needs, and are stewards of society.

The path towards transformation is not just about learning another trick or method—it is an inward journey each of us must undertake. We search to first recognise our best self and then give ourselves to lead our lives in service of a bigger purpose. The natural feeling to serve first leads to a conscious choice of one aspiring to lead. In doing so, others will experience this inspiration at all levels, learning to lead as servants. This timeless concept is what Robert Greenleaf referred to when he coined the term “servant-leadership” in 1970.

Just like Greenleaf, I am deeply convinced that revolutionary ideas do not change institutions—only *people* can change them by taking risks to serve and lead through the sustained painstaking care that institution building requires. It takes people to transform them into “servant-institutions.” I arrived at these insights after reflecting on my past experiences in setting up and managing two EU agencies and working with the European Commission for some time.

While writing an essay in an attempt to capture my own vision on leadership, I came across the work of Greenleaf and suddenly noticed that my vision had a name: servant-leadership. With the support of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership in the Netherlands, I founded the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership in Brussels with a group of like-minded people in 2014.² The Brussels Center aims at inspiring people working in and with EU Institutions to awareness, understanding, and application of servant-leadership at the individual, organisational, and societal levels.

During presentations and workshops, our team observed that servant-leadership resonates within those people working in the EU Institutions. I learned that many of these civil leaders feel that servant-leadership helps them evolve from “actors of their own destiny” towards “actors of a purposeful common destiny,” designed to address the complexity of a twenty-first century professional environment. Despite this thinking, they are left to wonder if there are any viable alternatives to the current management practices. Up until now, they have seen only a few positive examples of leaders or role models setting a model to follow in their daily working environments.

For this reason, this book not only gives insights into the servant-leadership philosophy, but also offers real-life interviews with twelve EU civil servants—men and women with different backgrounds, working at

² www.gcsleu.brussels.

different levels in different parts of the EU's Institutions. Their stories illustrate that servant-leadership is already manifesting inside the Institutions, albeit at a more personal level. They are doing what they feel is the right thing without necessarily having heard of the term "servant-leadership." Their stories not only point to the same vision, but also prove that servant-leadership is independent of background and function level. Their stories are actually the same story, that of the "EU civil servant-leader." The EU civil servant-leader is a hero with a dozen faces, so to speak. I sincerely hope that this hero will inspire you and our next generations to lead as servants!

I would like to thank my colleagues at the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership Brussels, in particular Dr. Derek Pelland and Sebastian Prieto Tovar for their contributions and fellowship. Also on their behalf, I would like to thank all those who helped make this publication possible, including our interviewees and our photographer Natalie Hill. Finally, let me thank our friends from the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership in the Netherlands and the Servant-Leadership Center for Research and Education (SERVUS) of the Free University of Amsterdam for moral support.

Dr. Ronald de Bruin
Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership Brussels
May 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Knowledge Age calls for a shift towards a new type of leadership, where the leader simultaneously acts as servant who consciously unleashes human potential. Such leaders are called “servant-leaders,” a term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970.³ Servant-leaders have the capability to connect with others and create a culture of mutual trust where people feel empowered to take more responsibility and initiative. People like to apply their talents and want to be effective and serve others in the organisation because they feel noticed, heard, and understood. When people grow, the organisation grows with them and becomes more successful. Organisations that apply servant-leadership score better: productivity and client and employee satisfaction increase, while sick leave decreases. A culture emerges where talent likes to work and flourishes. In this way, a sustainable, serving, and stable organisation is built that is supported by its stakeholders. That is why servant-leadership offers a unique opportunity to empower EU professionals in facing the challenges of the twenty-first century and help the EU to serve its citizens better.

A servant-leader knows that the use of hierarchical power is a sign of weakness and is capable of converting power into strength. In fact, leadership does not come with a position. Servants can choose to act as leading-servants. Therefore, this book is not exclusively aimed at people who hold positions with formal authority but is intended for anyone, irrespective of their position in their organisation, who aspires to taking more responsibility and initiative in serving others.

This book builds on the work of Robert K. Greenleaf and prominent authors on servant-leadership who followed in his footsteps, mainly Stephen R. Covey and Joseph Jaworski. It first analyses why servant-leadership corresponds to the kind of leadership we need in today’s Knowledge Age. A reality check reveals that the currently dominating management approaches are no longer working, while the required new type of leadership is not yet (fully) in place. It then describes in three steps how to achieve a sustained paradigm shift towards servant-leadership—from the inside-out. First, the inner journey of becoming a servant-leader

³ Robert K. Greenleaf, “The Servant as Leader,” first distributed as a pamphlet in 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf Center; revised edition 1991.

is described; second, it provides insight in how to inspire others to serve; finally, how to build and nurture servant-leadership communities in our societies is explained. Each step includes a theoretical part followed by more practical guidance.

This book also offers real-life interviews with twelve EU civil servants. Their stories illustrate that servant-leadership is manifesting inside the EU Institutions already, independent of background and function level, each of them with their own personal style. It takes people like this, who are taking risks to serve and lead, to transform the EU's Institutions into "servant-institutions." This will allow the EU to reach its full potential in truly serving the needs of Europe's people.