

Servant Leadership in Management Practice

Servant Leadership in Management Practice:

Welcome to the Foodbank

By

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
Organisation of this book	vii
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	
Chapter 2	5
Literature-The case for servant leadership	
Chapter 3	39
Literature-The context of foodbanks and volunteers	
Chapter 4	59
Place and the narrative approach–Storytelling	
Chapter 5	70
The narratives	
Chapter 6	86
The outlier	
Chapter 7	106
Conclusion, discussion and comments	
Final reflection on servant leadership	133
References.....	136

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Dr Suzanne Kane

ORGANISATION OF THIS BOOK

The starting point for this book is a review of servant leadership and how many well-known authors have situated their view of this subject. It situates this concept in the context of foodbanks and the volunteer workforce, bringing together the personal narratives of individual volunteers. The issues which emerged from these stories are presented in reference to volunteering, supportive management, organisation, and reflections on the future of volunteer community groups.

The book also offers an explanation of the narrative approach utilised to record the personal stories of those involved, highlighting specific dominant themes in the narratives, which are framed with quotations to heighten understanding and meaning within the commentary. Reflection and discussion on the main points illuminate the detailed narratives, and underline the importance of the unpaid workforce. The conclusion includes some practical concerns, which will impact upon the future of the foodbank emergency food service, as we know it today.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction and overview of the book.

Chapter 2: Literature-The case for servant leadership

Many well-known authors have written on the theoretical, philosophical, and practical aspects of servant leadership. This chapter reviews the main themes within these explanations and explores links with aspects of volunteering and the foodbank context.

Chapter 3: Literature-The context of foodbanks and volunteers

Literature of an academic, government and research nature is reviewed in this chapter. Also, there is a specific section showing that the geographical location is significant to the context of the investigation. The nature of the related themes between foodbanks and volunteering is considered.

Chapter 4: Place and the narrative approach

This chapter sets the scene of the foodbank environment and presents an overview of the questionnaire information provided by volunteers who participated in the investigation. There is an explanation of the narrative approach used here to record the personal stories of those involved.

Chapter 5: The narratives

This chapter represents the content of the narratives. Specific dominant themes are suggested and the main points from the narratives are stated with quotations employed to heighten understanding and meaning within the commentary.

Chapter 6: The outlier

Presented in this chapter is a contrary narrative to that which was set by the prior presentation of common stories expressed by the majority. This narrative stands in stark contrast to the mostly faith-based support groups and appears to be the exception. Again, the main points from the narratives are highlighted with quotations employed to heighten understanding and meaning of the commentary.

Chapter 7: Conclusion, discussion and comments

This chapter provides reflection and discussion on the main points illuminated by the detailed narratives. The importance of the unpaid workforce and appropriate supportive management is underlined. This section concludes with some practical concerns, which will impact upon the future of the foodbank emergency food service as we know it today.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Almost fifty years ago Robert Greenleaf employed the term “servant leadership” to promote an enduring concept, which spoke of a servant leader who is servant first and leader second. The primary impulse is that of service to others which calls upon leadership qualities. As such, leadership is a supporting aspect, while service is the driving force. Servant leaders cannot simply lead those that serve, they must themselves continue to serve. Leadership should not be the dominant factor, leadership power which corrupts and causes conflict for some must be tempered with the notion of service. Greenleaf suggested checks and balances including questions to measure the concept of servant leadership in practice. These included:

“Do those served grow as persons?

Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society?

Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?” (Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership 2018)

The stated tenets in Greenleaf's explanation elegantly relate to the purpose of this book, which is to present the significance of supportive management practices portrayed in the narratives of those who are managed through a servant leadership approach. That is, not to say that the managers in this context are describing themselves as servant leaders. On the contrary, it is in the views of those who are managed and use descriptions which support defined aspects of the servant leadership approach. Due consideration will be given to the most appreciated components of such support and how this may be sympathetically introduced elsewhere. The context from which the narratives emerge is that of volunteer workers at UK foodbanks. The collection of narratives from volunteers was enabled through the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Methodology (Wengraf 2001). What emerged are insights into the diverse community of individuals who continue to volunteer, the admiration afforded to those who take on management responsibilities in this context, and how managers continue to inspire long-term commitment from volunteer staff.

The personal stories of the volunteers speak of the reasons why they first chose to make a regular commitment of their own time for no financial recompense. They also speak of their shared experiences and how they envisage the future of their work within foodbanks. Food shortages evoke strong emotions about home, family and survival, to which these narratives attest. Thoughtful insights into this diverse community network and how it is managed are provided through the testaments of the individuals who continue to volunteer at a time when many of our social services are dependent upon the support of charitable projects. This book

presents examples of how these projects survive on limited resources and rely on the resourcefulness of dedicated volunteers and managers. The frank and well-informed reflections about the managers suggest appreciation of the management style utilised and appears to be key to how the ongoing, long-term commitment of volunteer staff can be supported into the future. Also, of interest, is the strong argument that communities should remain in control of volunteer services and not defer to government control.

Many of our social services are in crisis and depend upon charitable community projects to support those in dire need. Foodbanks are places of last resort for many vulnerable clients, and the story of these community-based projects is about far more than emergency food rations. Therefore, it would be a tragedy if these services were to disappear due to poor management and leadership of volunteer staff. This small-scale study, of sixteen highly detailed narrative interviews (from six different foodbanks), focuses on volunteers who work to support foodbanks in the North West of England, UK. All but one of the foodbanks in this study were located at premises provided or part-funded by local churches. This is a region that saw the greatest number of service users at foodbanks in the UK and year on year increases in the number of users from 2011 to the present day (Trussell Trust Foodbank Statistics). As this is a region that has seen a continued increase in the number who require support, qualitative details of how these groups endure and assist those in greatest need are of importance to community support planning.

In general, while managers may inform staff of what is expected of them, how they should treat clients, and what is acceptable behaviour, our

practice often reflects how we are treated ourselves. Therefore, managers as champions of good behaviour are important in shaping staff values, organisational culture, and morale. All too often we are privy to less than adequate examples of management behaviour. However, this book portrays true narratives about good managers by the people who are willing to be led by them on a long-term basis for no financial remuneration. Welcome to the foodbank.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE-THE CASE FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The title of this book “Servant leadership in management practice: welcome to the foodbank” documents an obvious premise of believing that servant leadership can be seen in the everyday practices reported here. The narrative elements contained in this book not only illuminate the practical commonplace aspects of volunteering in the foodbank context, but also share the many and varied personal rationales for why individuals first chose to volunteer and why they continue to volunteer. Also, in many cases, there is personal commentary about the genuine gratitude and respect for those who take on the management roles which give professional support and guidance to many foodbank community projects. But we also see that many of those who consider themselves to be simply providing a service are actually doing so much more and holding many forms of responsibility. As such, the thoughtful and richly detailed individual stories contribute to our overall understanding of what it is to volunteer and additionally the importance of dedicated managers who willingly accept the difficult questions and the testing circumstances that may occur, which go way beyond what might be expected of a normal volunteering experience. Even above and beyond this are those irregular times of conflict or misunderstandings between service users and service

providers. However, these are few and far between and the managers who may or may not hold an official title are always onsite or easily contactable and do much of the invisible work that often remains unrecognised, but noted by the valuable volunteers who take up the daily routines which require such background work in support of what they do for service users. The work which goes on behind the scenes may be to secure small funding pots to prop up parts of the service, or there may be meetings and informal conversations to build an external network of further support in the foodbank service. The time spent getting positive messages out to the local community and beyond is not insignificant and all part of the veiled multitude of activities that continue after opening hours. However, the dedication to also be front of house does not go unnoticed and continues to be uppermost in everyone's mind when the foodbank doors are open. Yet, importantly, the managers allow each volunteer their own responsibilities while continuing to support actions that require further guidance. The managers do not forget their commitment to the volunteers as individuals, as well as to the foodbank as a service. It is of little wonder then that these managers are thus admired and valued and surely candidates for inclusion in the category of servant leader. But as Breslin (2017, 1) keenly makes note:

“Within the concept of servant leadership, volunteers are not simply followers but are leaders in their own right. As such, they display both follower and leadership characteristics.”

We see this in the stories from foodbank volunteers, they are all happy to work out of sight while completing administrative duties, sorting goods,

stocking the storeroom, and preparing tea, coffee or cold drinks for the service users. Some would prefer to remain out of the public eye, but when required to be in public they readily do so and engage in management of the front desk, admissions, checking eligibility of service users, discussing the contents of food packages and the options which may be available that day. They are also always available to sit with service users, perhaps share a cup of tea and talk, in the hope that they may make the process somewhat less uncomfortable and whenever possible to suggest additional contacts or services that may be of further help.

To consider the potentiality of links to servant leadership from the narrative accounts, we must begin with Robert Greenleaf and his use of the term “servant leadership”, which is a concept that has caught the imagination of many who would wish to promote a supportive style of leadership and management. There are two particular terms here in want of further explanation, firstly the servant leader concept, which is central to Greenleaf’s approach, but also the importance of followers who are required to balance this conundrum and allow it to work in practice.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership promotes servant or stewardship as the most important facet to pass on to each generation of leaders and managers. Leading those that choose to serve is important and engagement in serving is an individual choice for leaders and followers. Those providing leadership must also serve on equal terms. On many occasions, this may require getting one’s hands dirty and this willingness must remain a constant as this involvement at the coalface is a powerful reminder of why

any individual is working within a particular environment (a reminder of their initial core commitments). Equally though is the presence of mind to know when to allow others to take on responsibilities which they may or may not actually seek to do. Sadly, the power of leadership has been known to corrupt, which is why the notion of service has relevance and binds us to recognising the value of others in its purest sense. Veeder (2011) makes particular note that:

“...servant leadership has become popular in the world of leadership studies in the last thirty years in part as a response to the negative effects of improper use of power. This power being wielded through phenomena such as: industrialisation, globalisation, and various other-isms, which have often widened the gap between the leader and the led, the haves and the have-nots, and men and women”.

The foundational idea of bringing servant and leader together as embodied as one and by each individual (at least in potential) and proposing that they, in their ideal state, are part of the whole, is that which envelopes the concept. It also sheds some light on placing other considered opposites together such as “haves and have-nots” and promotes evaluation of overall value of each state in society. A realisation comes forth that when taking different perspectives we can all be viewed as belonging to each category and it is only the human and sometimes inhuman use of measurement that often suggests such as “have-nots” also means of no value.

Reports of corruption and suffering due to inappropriate, unethical, and sometimes illegal activity damages all levels of trust. While inclusive actions and trust in others may sometimes appear to be difficult, and may

create conflict within our own plans, concerns and thinking, the intention of service must continue to live within the concept of servant leadership. Such difficulties underline the importance of the factors of supporting others to grow as individuals, for the individual's sake, providing care and attention while, at the same time, encouraging others to act as servants and be effective in assisting those in need are all tenets endorsed by the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership (2018).

Prior note is made of the links that have been highlighted on many occasions between leadership and corruption, and interestingly, Laub (2018, 77) promotes that:

“Servant leadership is the only leadership approach that recognises the danger of leader self-interest and counters that self-interest with a clear other focus directed toward the followers, to those led. The focus of the servant leader on those led is a critical point that distinguishes this approach from somewhat similar approaches like Transformational Leadership”.

As it is of no sense at all to hope that negative or destructive thoughts will be banished from the minds of all who choose that path of accepting servant leadership, the focal point of others as of paramount importance is the linchpin that acts as an integral guide to that which is truly of significance and shines a light into the dark corners of destructive practice as harmful to both leaders and followers alike. That is not to say that it can ever be considered to be an easy path. It is likely that servant leaders must find some comfort in the practice of being of great worth, which may not be an identity that we inhabit easily in the twenty-first century

environment. Being a celebrity for no good reason, having fame for ambitions that do no good, portraying skills in belittling others and working in support of no-one but oneself, all appear to be revered in our media culture. When it is uncovered that these, so-called, personalities are sneaking around and secretly doing good and kind works, we are always taken aback. It suggests that they felt they could not find fame unless they were infamous in our modern-day world. This proposes the odd thesis that only the brave can do good and be open and honest in doing so, for they attract the possibility of being greatly reviled! It appears that goodness is all very well so long as it is decidedly well-hidden and no-one is acknowledged. Few of us are immune to such a disposition and it chimes closely with the idea in servant leadership that the good work of the leader must not step away from the essence of the servant. So, while we may find the stories of sinners more interesting than that of saints, in times of distress we would all wish that any hand of friendship came from the goodness in the heart of an individual.

While servant leadership supports all that is good about serving others, it should not be held up as a paragon that will solve all issues of inappropriate management and leadership practice. It would be unfair to expect a cure-all concept, but it is also much more than a set of principled statements to uphold ethical practice, it is an invitation for each individual to understand why they believe and behave as they do. Peter Senge (cited in Frick 2004) specifically makes note:

“...I think it is a mistake for people to look to ‘servant leadership’ as a kind of formulaic solution... For above all, Robert Greenleaf’s writings were

concerned with what motivates us and how we might cultivate deeper sources of motivation”.

In addition to this, Frick (2004) also comments that:

“There is no master plan for living as a servant-leader, but it certainly involves learning from those who have tried valiantly to do so in their personal and organisational lives, as Robert K. Greenleaf did”.

The notion of people who have previously committed themselves to work as servant leaders, and those who presently do so without such a notion or title, help us all to understand how this may be done and the potential for development within us all. You may imagine that finding such leadership potential in all of us is too much to ask. However, the concept of servant leadership would counter this argument by considering that those who believe themselves not to be natural candidates or rightful successors, may actually embody more potential than those who seek out servant leadership for themselves. It is a conundrum indeed.

Narratives are particularly important here as they carry the stories which underpin our understanding and ignite the desire to both replicate and go beyond that which is observed. Servant-leadership is not promoted as a specifically documented doctrine or theory. Much of the approach is designed to encourage our own understanding of ourselves and how this may help us to help others. However, as noted in A Servant Leadership Primer (Frick 2004), the main points can be seen to include: holding a personal notion of being a servant ahead of being a leader, practicing good listening skills, using power in an ethical manner and preferably by persuasion, seeking group consensus, developing and utilising foresight,

withdrawing to seek wisdom and recognise intuition. Alongside these are the recognition of acceptance and empathy, conceptualising, and nurturing community. None of these points can explain the whole, nor is the whole complete, just as human life it is a continuous work in progress. The aim here being to continually progress rather than not, and the progress seen as important and precious is not for the few but for all individuals. The benefits are for each to be supported and for that support to be repeated by each individual for another (thus every domino feels the impact of the unbroken chain). This is a simple concept of enormous relevance for contentment in each of us which in time and given ample opportunity may love company as much as misery is said so to do. Much has been said here of servant leadership as a concept but each leadership is in want of followers, so the art of interpretation now falls on this term. Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson (2008, 162) provide the segue:

“Servant leadership is based on the premise that to bring out the best in their followers, leaders rely on one-to-one communication to understand the abilities, needs, desires, goals, and potential of those individuals. With knowledge of each follower’s unique characteristics and interests, leaders then assist followers in achieving their potential...because followers are nested within leaders, servant leadership may exhibit both between-leader and within-leader variation with respect to outcomes. We contend that the relationships that form between leaders and followers are central to servant leadership”.

Followership

The act of leadership exalts the potential for followers and in Robert Greenleaf’s words (reproduced in the 25th Anniversary Edition of his work

– A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness, 2002, p256) he details that:

“Followership is an equally responsible role [as leadership] because it means that the individual must take the risk to empower the leader and to say, in the matter at hand, ‘I will trust your insight’. Followership implies another preparation in order that trusting, empowering the leader, will be a strength-giving element...”

Schwarz, Newman, Cooper and Eva (2016, 1026) repeat the words of Robert Greenleaf, when they note that:

“Followers in turn view the servant leader as a role model and mirror his or her behaviours, thus becoming servant leaders themselves”.

The meaning here is that servant leaders are seen to support followers, as best they can, in the development of their own individual chosen ways to progress. Followers then replicate this service for others, thus enacting servant leadership themselves. This can be said to have its foundation in such actions as:

“a servant leader will listen to and understand the aspirations of his or her followers and will mentor followers to achieve these goal”. (Schwarz, Newman, Cooper & Eva 2016, 1026).

The more explanation that is given to distinguish servant leaders from followers, seems to have the opposite influence. The examination serves to bring them closer together, as Horsman (2018, 63) makes note:

“The need to authentically influence and persuade rather than command and control denotes a fundamental value shift that provides insight into the

kind of humble respect and self-examination leaders and followers need to undergo... A need for leadership development that no longer distinguishes leaders from followers as superiors and subordinates, but rather assumes that we are all leaders and followers”.

The heartfelt narratives of everyday service contained in this book include a number of descriptions which portray recognised elements of the servant leadership approach. Such supportive management and leadership behaviours are evidently of great and deep importance to those followers, also known as volunteers, working within the foodbank context, caring for others, giving their time and expertise, providing a vital service which could not survive without them. The receivers of the service are grateful for the work of the volunteers, the volunteers have naught but praise for the commitment of those acting as managers and leaders in the foodbank, and those continuing to manage the volunteers can be seen to care for each as individuals. This presents the ongoing story of servant leadership in the foodbank. The proof of the story is seen in the continuous practice of service to others. Many authors have written in regard to servant leadership from different perspectives, some of which are considered in this section. To begin, Parris and Peachey (2013) suggest servant leadership as:

“A new research area linked to ethics, virtues, and morality”.

This is important as it shows how a concept can be recognised at different times from different perspectives. Ethical practice is certainly an area that is highly relevant to the servant leadership approach. However, Robert Greenleaf’s work began much earlier than this and takes us back to his first

published essay in 1970 (Centre for Servant Leadership 2019): Words from Greenleaf's 25th Anniversary Edition of Servant Leadership (2002, 21) include:

“the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness”.

A person can be leading all the time but act as servant first because *“deep down inside”* that is what they are, to serve others being that which is most important to them. This simple, but refined statement of Greenleaf's concept goes straight to the heart of the issue and leaves us with no doubt that the best of all leadership is that of service to others as individuals. Although the practice of such is unlikely to be described as easy by anyone engaged in such service, the achievement is great and there is opportunity for the cycle to continue into the lives of others, if only the goodness of the action could become infectious and addictive.

Servant leadership –philosophy, theory and practice

Crowther (2018, 1) writes about the foundations of servant leadership theory and notes that:

“The ideas and concepts for servant leadership have been around for centuries in different forms. Even when Aristotle and later Aquinas discussed leadership, they pondered the concepts of virtues as an important component of human life and leadership. Other philosophers such as Plato discussed leadership but with some different ideas that became mainstream ideas for ruling and power”.

Crowther goes on to explain:

“This focus on power carried the day in leadership thinking with concepts of leadership like in Machiavelli’s-The Prince that endorsed a power center to leadership...while in other contexts alternative concepts for leadership became part of the lived experiences of leaders”.

He then relates the beginnings of servant leadership expressing that Greenleaf:

“believed that there were students who were looking for a better way to lead and there were others as well like trustees...who wanted more effective models for leadership”.

Certainly this is a discussion that relates to conversations had by trustees at foodbanks. They take on great personal responsibilities and need a mechanism which they are able to trust for the purposes of safeguarding their own and their family’s financial security.

Robert Greenleaf’s work came from a lifetime of experience. Great ideas of many kinds come from our life experiences, but fewer are recorded for posterity. In his retirement, Robert Greenleaf reflected upon his work and life experience and continued the activity of research and engagement in writing about a concept to progress the support of others as the commitment and heart of management and leadership. He wrote of this heart as a living and life-giving essential without which veracity the management and leadership of others simply does not truly exist. Without the heart of a servant leader you may organise, collaborate, engage, and much more. But, without the concept of care for each individual as an individual we are simply moving pieces around a chessboard. These are pieces which may or may not have any impact, just as unconnected,

underestimated, and unsupported individuals may do. Talk of wasted resources is evident in many discussions of modern-day life, but there is little as sad as the waste of individual life which could be supported to higher potential. Importantly, Greenleaf does not refer to human beings as resources which is to his great credit, for human potential is so much more. In Spears (1998, 8-9) presentation and discussion of Greenleaf's early work and his considered categorisation of ten characteristics, he particularly expresses philosophical underpinnings in the characteristic of building community. This last of the characteristics states that:

“The servant-leader senses that much has been lost in recent human history as a result of the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives. This awareness causes the servant-leader to seek to identify some means for building community among those who work within a given institution. Servant leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions. Greenleaf said: ‘All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his [or her] own unlimited liability for a quite specific community related group’. These ten characteristics of servant leadership are by no means exhaustive. However, they serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge...There are a half-dozen major areas in which the principles of servant leadership are being applied in significant ways. The first area has to do with servant leadership as an institutional philosophy and model. Servant leadership crosses all boundaries and is being applied by a wide variety of people working with for-profit businesses, not-for-profit corporations, churches, universities, and foundations.”

Spears panegyric continues Greenleaf's convictions of individual commitment and the importance of community coming together much as the same way as a servant-leader may be misunderstood as an incongruent term. Other authors who speak of philosophical elements in Greenleaf's seminal work include Horsman (2018, 2) as he considers servant leadership within the realms of philosophy, saying:

"[servant leadership] is a relatively stable open philosophy in perpetual transformation".

Lapointe and Vandenberghe (2018) note that:

"Greenleaf's early work reflected more a servant leadership philosophy than a servant leadership theory..."

while Laub (2018, 142) suggests that:

"Servant leadership is best viewed not as one leadership style among many, but is a mindset, a set of underlying assumptions that guide our leadership philosophy and behaviour".

This portrays a much more human-centred approach than a resource-centred view.

Continuing this human and humane perspective, Hakanen and Pessi (2018) suggest the importance of compassion in the workplace when saying that:

"There is also a theory of leadership approaching the topic in a positive and empowering manner that clearly considers both compassion and co-passion; both how to ease suffering at work and how to build proactive engagement and innovativeness at work, namely, servant leadership.

Servant leadership as a philosophy of leadership and a set of practices provides several approaches and tools to lead compassionately and passionately". Relating this to Greenleaf's idea of servant leadership, they say: "...when introducing the theory of servant leadership, [Greenleaf] did not explicitly write about compassion and servant leadership. However, he discussed empathy and acceptance as essential parts of being a servant leader. With good reason it can be said that servant leadership is the theory of compassionate leadership".

In line with this commentary, Kantharia (2012) gives high praise indeed to servant leadership. In a study of leadership styles he denotes that:

"Servant Leadership seems to cut across all leadership theories and provides foundational philosophy for theories which are congruent with the growth of humankind".

Frick (2004, 21) states:

"I consider servant leadership a philosophy rather than a theory of leadership"

The Encyclopaedia of Management (Hill 2012, 897) professes servant leadership to be

"a philosophical approach to organizational management that prioritizes practical participation over the oversight responsibilities of the leader in organizational activities. The leader's execution of authority, power, and influence is not as important as his or her direct participation as an ordinary member of the organization's work teams".

However, specific relationships are also made to theory, linking it to:

“...the great person theory, path-goal theory, and theory Y” (Hill 2012, 897).

But, Parris and Peachy (2013, 378) state that Greenleaf himself suggested that the concept of servant leadership portrays *“a way of life”*, they suggest that this did perhaps not chime well with relationships to *“management technique’* and *‘slowed the acceptance of this leadership theory in academia”*. They also note the extensive work on servant leadership by Larry Spears and highlight that his identification of:

“... characteristics of Servant Leaders from Greenleaf’s writings: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community”.

In qualifying this, Laub (2018, 115) notes:

“...it was Greenleaf who developed the philosophical underpinnings of the concept [of servant leadership] and it was Spears who codified the list of ten characteristics drawn from the work of Greenleaf”.

Ferch (2011, 122) posits that the people, who are considered to be today’s thought leaders, uphold the values of such characteristics. She also specifically notes, in relation to the first of Greenleaf’s servant leader stated characteristics, that:

“...listening occurs both in one-to-one relationships and in the context of a higher order more concerned with the life of the community as a whole...In servant leadership, the listener becomes a person who sees more clearly his or her own faults, works diligently to overcome them, and understands then how to bring healing to others”.