

excerpt from  
***Robert K. Greenleaf***  
by Don Frick

Introduction

It is entirely possible you have heard the phrase “servant leadership,” read a few essays on the subject, or even worked in the management or organizational fields for years, but know little or nothing about Robert Greenleaf and his contributions. Bob wanted it that way. All his life he avoided promoting himself, partly because he was a natural introvert and the world’s best listener, but mostly because it was a better strategy for him to get things done. The question then arises:

**WHY READ THIS BOOK?**

If this were a biography of Winston Churchill or Mother Teresa, the introduction would not need to answer this question. Those people and their contributions are already well-known to the general public. Not so for Robert Kiefner Greenleaf (1904–1990), the gifted, paradoxical man who first defined the term “servant-leader” and wrote about its implications for individuals, organizations, and societies. Greenleaf was willing to promote his writings in a conventional way, but he abhorred the idea of becoming a cult-like figure and even forbade the showing of a modest videotape about his life at the first Symposium on Servant Leadership held in Atlanta in 1988. Greenleaf wanted his work to stand on its own and for readers to apply it in personal ways without the benefit of final “answers” from him.

Perhaps because of Bob’s success in avoiding the spotlight and a general lack of knowledge about his historical role in inspiring scores of people and organizations during his lifetime, various experts insisted for years that no one really wanted to read about the life of Robert K. Greenleaf, a relatively obscure figure in leadership and management circles. They were right, of course, until recently. Today, through the work of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in Indianapolis, there is growing interest in Greenleaf’s ideas, with Centers in ten countries— and counting. As you will read in the Afterword, a number of prominent, successful corporations use servant leadership as a guiding philosophy, and these are joined by numerous religious, not-for-profit, and even government organizations. Interest in servant leadership has reached a critical mass through scores of books and hundreds of magazine articles. “The servant leadership concept is a principle, a natural law,” writes Stephen Covey, “and getting our social value systems and personal habits aligned with this ennobling principle is one of the great challenges of our lives.”<sup>1</sup> You may wish to read a biography of Robert Greenleaf simply to understand more about a powerful movement afoot on the international scale. There are other reasons, though:

- Readers familiar with any of Greenleaf’s writings will be curious about the inspiring and complicated person behind the philosophy. Here they will find dozens of previously-unpublished excerpts from Greenleaf’s letters, journals, essays, autobiographical notes, and a clear presentation of the basics of servant leadership.

- Readers who devour leadership and management literature, especially titles which emphasize value-based approaches to management and leadership, will be interested in knowing more about a person whose work is an inspiration to many of their favorite thinkers and writers. Warren Bennis, author of the leadership classic *On Becoming a Leader*, says, “Servant leadership is a counterbalance to the glorification, deification, and lionization of leaders who have neglected or forgotten what they are there for. Greenleaf’s work is like a superego conscience prod to remind leaders of why they are there. It is so easy for organizations to get totally consumed with the bottom line, with financial stakeholders, and not with the workers, not with all the clawed cartography of people whose lives are affected by the organization.”
- Although this is not a “how-to” book, organizational practitioners who are weary of the latest fads and are looking for more timeless principles upon which to base the evolving greatness of their institutions will find help and solace here.
- Religious leaders who seek to understand servant leadership and apply it to their faith traditions; educators who care about transformative, experiential learning; historians interested in filling in a few holes about twentieth-century history; consultants who understand the importance of pragmatism *and* reflection—all will find readable stories and practical ideas from the life of Robert Greenleaf.
- Finally, anyone who wishes to have a life of meaning and service or has asked, “How can I live as a servant-leader at work, at home, and in the community?” will find inspiration in these pages. In Greenleaf’s life hope, meaning, joy, and fulfillment of one’s greatness arise from the *process* of being a servant, a seeker and a leader. It starts with oneself but is only real when it results in congruent, strategic action in the world, right through old age.

Having said all that, readers will recognize that Bob Greenleaf was not perfect, but that is part of what makes him inspiring, at least to me. He was both darker and lighter than his writings. He faced and made friends with his inner demons, charted his own eccentric course, and cared deeply about improving American and global society. Young Robert began with all the limitations and prejudices of his time, but the arc of his life was one of emergence into greater consciousness— from a nineteenth-century male, to a thoroughly modern and enlightened twentieth-century business executive, to a twenty-first century visionary and practitioner.

Greenleaf’s first published essay reached the world when he was sixty-six years old and his first book when he was seventy-three, giving high hope to aging baby boomers (like me) who wonder where the time has gone and when they will finally make a lasting difference in the world.

Bob lived his life without following the advice one would find in traditional self-help books. He heeded inner promptings of intuition, prepared himself without always

knowing the goal of his preparation, gained much of his learning from astonishing people whom he sought out and befriended, and always, always remained a *seeker*. He lived servant leadership before he ever defined it, negotiated the complex bureaucracy of AT&T, survived good and bad bosses, had a second career as a writer and consultant, and left an influence that has not yet reached its peak.

Predictably, not all the questions about Robert Greenleaf have been fully answered here. Still, studying his life teaches the value of listening, patience, reflection, study, heeding intuition, *and* engaging in strategic action. His work triggers fresh ways of thinking about leadership and ultimately poses ancient questions about transcendent meaning, personal shadows, and possible glories.

It is easy to read Greenleaf's writings and project him as a kindly Quaker icon, a wise sage who urged a more humane way of leading, managing and directing organizations, a prophet-preacher in the temples of organizations who invited us to replace money and egotistical power with active servanthood on the altar of ultimate meaning. There is partial truth in those projections but it all sounds soft, mystical, even religious. A kindly icon would have little of importance to say to organizations that practice a modern form of Darwinian capitalism, to adrenaline-driven workers who must stay wired to challenges of the global economy, or to disciples of the latest theories of leadership that use war, sports, and machines as their underlying metaphors.

Greenleaf *does* have much to offer in fact, to individuals and businesses, educational and religious organizations. His way is not soft, but hard—hard in the way it is hard to accept that our personal answers are not always right, hard to believe that organizations really are breathing organisms, hard to understand that we are capable of projecting our shadows onto the world and believing the problems are “out there,” and hard to embrace the truth that we each have it in us to engage in outrageous manipulation *and* brilliant, ethical genius. The *easy* way to personal and organizational effectiveness is to dwell on externals; the hard way is to first go inside—the path Robert Greenleaf chose.

### **WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP?**

The core idea of servant-leadership is quite simple: authentic, ethical leaders, those whom we trust and want to follow, are servants first. This is a matter of intent, action, skills, capacities, and being. A servant-leader stands in sharp contrast to the person who wants to be a leader first and then, after clawing his or her way to the top, decides to perform acts of service. Servant leadership is about “the nature of legitimate power and greatness,” to quote the subtitle of Greenleaf's groundbreaking book *Servant Leadership*, and it all begins with the individual. Servant leadership goes beyond individuals, however. To build a more caring society, organizations and their trustees can—and should—also function as servants. Those who are unfamiliar with Greenleaf's ideas may want to read the Servant Leadership Primer in the Appendix and consult several of the titles in the Bibliography.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Three themes define Greenleaf's life and work: servant, seeker, and leader. Those same themes organize this book in a more-or-less chronological fashion, even though Greenleaf acted in all three roles in every era of his life. He uses none of these terms in their traditional sense. For him, a *servant* is not a "service provider," a martyr or a slave, but one who consciously nurtures the mature growth of self, other people, institutions, and communities. This is done in response to the deepest guidance of spirit, not for personal grandiosity. Servanthood is a function of motive, identity and right action. A *seeker* is different from a mere achiever—one who sets goals and attains them in a straightforward fashion. A true seeker is open to experience from all quarters and follows a path without always knowing the destination. For Greenleaf, an authentic *leader* is one who chooses to serve, and serve first, and then chooses to lead. This kind of leader—a servant-leader—employs reflection, listening, persuasion, foresight, and statesmanship to act ethically and "go out ahead and show the way." A servant-leader may operate quietly or publicly, but his or her title—President or CEO—is not the point. The janitor of a school may be a more powerful servantleader to students than the principal.

The Servant section traces young "Rob" Greenleaf's experience from childhood through graduation from Carleton College. He first learned about servanthood from his father, a man worthy of his own biography. By the time he graduated from Carleton in 1926, Bob had embraced *servant* at the core of his identity.

The Seeker section tracks Greenleaf's career with AT&T, ending in 1964 when he took early retirement. During this period, Bob and his wife Esther learned from an incredible variety of famous and not-so-famous ministers, writers, thinkers, doctors, theologians, activists, business luminaries, psychiatrists, and even psychics. The theme of *seeking* was formalized when Greenleaf became a Quaker and when he realized he should prepare for usefulness in old age. During this period, Greenleaf made significant contributions at AT&T, was present at the founding of National Training Laboratories, began teaching at MIT and other schools, traveled for the Ford Foundation, and struggled to accept his own destiny as someone other than an AT&T executive.

The Leader section begins with Greenleaf's retirement and founding of the Center for Applied Ethics (now the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership) and tracks his peripatetic travels and consultancies as his ideas brewed and matured. The servant-leader philosophy emerged into public view with the publication of his first essay on the subject in 1970 and continued evolving through numerous writings until his death in 1990. Robert Greenleaf, a dyed-in-the-wool introvert, did not seek to become a public figure, but now the fat was in the fire. His life would not come full circle until he chose a more aggressive leadership role in advocating his own ideas. To paraphrase Kant, Greenleaf might have said that leadership without servanthood is empty; seeking without leadership is dead.

Robert K. Greenleaf's influence did not end with his death. In important ways, it simply took on new life. In the Afterword, Larry C. Spears, President and CEO of the Greenleaf

Center in Indianapolis, tells the remarkable story of what has happened with Greenleaf's ideas since 1990.

### **LIVING LIFE FORWARD, READING LIFE FORWARD**

We live our lives forward as a grand adventure, striving to accomplish that which we were born to do. Rarely does the journey proceed with linear simplicity. Although I have tried to give context for major people and events when they are introduced and some sense of their influence, this biography is written more-or-less as Greenleaf lived it, without knowing all the answers beforehand. Indeed, at the end of his life Bob admitted that even he did not always understand the full impact of certain people and ideas in his life. Readers who are familiar with Greenleaf's writings will spot ideas and phrases he may have borrowed from one or more of his friends and intellectual mentors, but simultaneity is not causality. Unless Greenleaf made the connection or reported it to others, I do not.

Rest assured that the accumulated, colored threads of Bob's living did come together in a gift to the world during the last twenty years of his life: the tapestry of his servant leadership writings. (For those who wish to see a visual representation of Greenleaf's life and ideas, a timeline of his life and mindmaps of his servant writings are offered in the Appendix.)

When Robert Greenleaf was born in 1904 he inhabited a world radically different from the one we live in, and the same could be said for the world he left when he died in 1990. I have sought to present the times of Bob's life through vivid details so the reader may not only have knowledge of then-contemporary events and worldviews but also develop a *feel* for them. In like manner, one cannot assume that today's readers are familiar with some of the people whom Bob befriended, even if they were famous in their day. For that reason I have included short sketches of the lives and/or ideas of people like Sir Laurens van der Post, Gerald Heard, Alfred Korzybski, Rabbi Joshua Heschel, Ira Progoff, and Nicolai Gruntvig, along with snapshot views of Quaker history, the human relations movement in business, the Hawthorne studies, and other historical and intellectual trends.

No details, quotes, or thoughts are invented. From George Greenleaf's 1904 musings about his home town of Terre Haute, Indiana to the weather in New York on the October day in 1929 when Bob started work at AT&T headquarters, I have sought to be accurate, crosschecking multiple sources where possible. Speculations—and there are very few of them—are clearly labeled. Any mistakes are my responsibility alone.

Readers may have questions about some events. Why, for example, did Greenleaf's parents learn about his marriage by reading of it in the paper? I don't know, and Bob did not write about it. If a life is a work of art, and this one is, there are always tantalizing unanswered questions about the meaning of things. Without that lure, art is merely decoration, and a life is merely an existence.

## A WORD ABOUT WORDS

Throughout this book, you will see a hyphen between the words “servant” and “leader,” because that is how Bob Greenleaf wrote it. He omits the hyphen in the phrase “servant leadership.” Many other writers have left out the hyphen in both usages, but it is not a trivial matter. Like so much of Bob Greenleaf’s thinking, his usage does not quite fit standard rules. “Servant” and “leader” are not two adjectives connected by a hyphen to form a compound adjective, nor are they two words which are in the process of becoming one word—as far as we know. Both of these usages were suggested by Bob’s intellectual mentor E. B. White in his classic *The Elements of Style*.<sup>3</sup> Generations of college students have learned another rule from Harbrace: “Hyphenate words chiefly to express the idea of a unit or to avoid ambiguity.”<sup>4</sup> The idea of a unit comes closest to Greenleaf’s usage, but his phrase purposely does *not* avoid ambiguity.

Servant and leader are two nouns which usually describe two quite different roles. The hyphen holds them together in paradox, creating a Zen-like *koan* which stops the reader as he or she considers how two such dissimilar words could go together. Greenleaf was fully aware of this effect and wanted the reader to complete the meaning.

He wrote that he was comfortable with paradox in his own life, and even welcomed it:

*I believe in order, and I want creation out of chaos. My good society will have strong individualism amidst community. It will have elitism along with populism . . . Yet, with all of this, I believe that I live with as much serenity as do my contemporaries who venture into controversy as freely as I do but whose natural bent is to tie up the essentials of life in neat bundles of logic and consistency.*

The phrase servant-leader points to a whole that is greater than the sum of the two parts. The joining evokes the presence of a third force, one which is as ancient as Buddha, Lao-Tsu, and Jesus, and as fresh as the latest book on organizational behavior—the transformative power of serving.

Although Greenleaf never wrote about it, he may have omitted the hyphen in the phrase “servant leadership” because that phrase describes a *philosophy* of leadership, one among several possible, and refers more to the strategic actions taken by a servant-leader. Although it is a topic beyond the scope of this discussion, I consider servant leadership a *philosophy* rather than a *theory* of leadership, when the word *theory* is used in its traditional academic sense.

Greenleaf often uses the words “man” and “he” as generic indicators of humankind and people. This does not mean he was sexist, but that he was a product of his times. Part of his story is how he evolved into greater consciousness about such matters. Toward the end of his life, for example, he wondered aloud, “Why *do* we use the word ‘chairman’ when it could be ‘chairperson’?” In most cases, I have left his original language intact.