

### Book Review

Review of Wheeler, D. (2012). *Servant leadership for higher education: Principles and practices*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.  
ISBN: 978-1-118-00890-4 (hardcover, 208 pp.) \$40.00

John Howard III<sup>1</sup>

For those who find administration challenging and frustrating and also find many of the extant works on management and leadership to be mechanical or push persons outside of their comfort zone, Daniel Wheeler's *Servant Leadership for higher education* is a refreshing and encouraging read.

Wheeler's text takes Robert Greenleaf's (e.g., 1977) work on servant leadership and more than three decades of subsequent contributions and comfortably places them in the context of higher education administration. Those familiar with leadership literature and servant leadership in particular will find it no surprise that the manuscript has a strong collaborative and communicative appeal. However, this appeal extends beyond the simple tenets and principles of servant leadership and social interaction. Wheeler has discussed the processes as experienced social phenomena through case studies and his own research. The reader comes away with an understanding that although servant leadership has specified, defined characteristics, it can be realized in practice with great diversity and a modicum of personal change. Instead of reinventing oneself, being a servant leader requires creating and understanding oneself; it is not a change to something different, but a realization of something aspired to.

Wheeler's text begins with a thoughtful introduction of servant leadership and how a passage of Peter Senge's led him to consider the approach as practically and theoretically valuable. The first chapter reviews "unsuccessful" leadership models and highlights many of the traditional misconceptions about leaders, leadership, and social dynamics. Such views tend to focus on hierarchy, authority, centralized power, and one-way communication. He further discusses the challenges of finding who self-defines or could be defined as a "servant leader" in his research among higher education administrators. Chapter two defines a "philosophy of living" via servant leadership that characterizes the holistic experience of the leader as individual and group member. The philosophy serves as a counterpoint to the traditional views of leadership and illustrates how "service" is leadership.

The philosophy in chapter two is further articulated in the next 11 chapters of the book. Chapter three summarizes Wheeler's ten principles of servant leadership: service to others, meeting the needs of others, fostering problem solving and responsibility, promoting emotional healing, means as important as ends, attending to the present and the future, embracing paradoxes and dilemmas, leaving a legacy, modeling servant leadership, and developing more servant leaders. Wheeler's list shares many principles with other extrapolations of Greenleaf's work, most notably Kent Keith's (2008) seven key practices, Larry Spears's (2002) ten characteristics, and James Sipe and Don Frick's (2009) seven pillars. Wheeler's perspective variously supports and supplants these other approaches as he articulates his vision in the subsequent chapters.

---

<sup>1</sup> East Carolina University

Chapter four, “Principle One: Service to Others is the Highest Priority,” captures the essence of Greenleaf’s beliefs regarding leadership. Leadership is embodied in working with others for the best interests of all. Service is not martyrdom—it is the thoughtful and purposeful contribution of one’s efforts to a greater (organizational) good. The well-being of an educational institution is predicated on the efforts of all levels and all members.

Chapter five, “Principle Two: Facilitate Meeting the Needs of Others,” features how needs are opportunities to lead/serve and how meeting those needs fosters organizational health and success. Chapter six, “Principle Three: Foster Problem Solving and Taking Responsibility at All Levels,” addresses the role of individual initiative and integrity. Solving problems (a significant responsibility of administrators) involves ownership of the processes and outcomes. A decision does not end with its arrival or execution; it has ramifications that servant leaders must recognize and work with.

Chapter seven, “Principle Four: Promote Emotional Healing in People and the Organization,” features the role of the servant leader as a human being, albeit one with organizational and individual commitments. It features the humanity of collective/organizational action and the significant role that personal connection plays in well-being and successful organizational efforts.

Chapter eight, “Principle Five: Means Are as Important as Ends,” illustrates the importance of how leadership activities are conducted. Investing in others, providing guidance, and giving constructive criticism are important in content but also in presentation. As servant leaders support, motivate, and evaluate others, they wisely attend to the process and the outcome.

Chapter nine, “Principle Six: Keep One Eye on the Present and One on the Future,” articulates the simultaneous short and long-term efforts administrators must balance in the service of their organizations. It is only by living in the present and attending to the “now” that a path can be constructed to reach some future state or goal.

Chapter ten, “Principle Seven: Embrace Paradoxes and Dilemmas,” should remind many scholars of Baxter’s (1988) “dialectical tensions” and the regular discussions of boundaries and “work-home balance” (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Hochschild, 1989) in the organizational communication literature. By definition, one is an individual and a group member, a co-worker and a supervisor (or subordinate), a part of an organization and apart from it. Servant leadership is characterized by navigating paradoxes and contradictions within oneself and among others.

Chapter eleven, “Principle Eight: Leave a Legacy to Society,” notes that not just any legacy qualifies for the servant leader. The legacy is one that builds and upon which others can build. It is a legacy of service to others rather than one of looking up to leaders past. Succession planning, creating sustainable policies and benefits, and leaving society better off than one found it are all manifestations of the legacies Wheeler sees in his model of servant leadership.

Chapter twelve, “Principle Nine: Model Servant Leadership,” reveals that servant leadership has many manifestations. As noted by Senge (1990) in his work on “learning organizations,” there isn’t any one “learning organization”; the learning organization is a type of organization. Embodying servant leadership means living and practicing it as part of one’s own leadership, professional development, and fulfillment of professional and personal goals.

Chapter thirteen, “Principle Ten: Develop More Servant Leaders,” concludes the review of Wheeler’s principles. One of the best legacies a servant leader can leave is a succession of others who serve the greater good, sustain good programs and policies, and

foster positive change within and beyond the academy's walls. It is another example of how servant leadership is not simply a characteristic, practice, or trait – it is a collaboration of many who lead by serving and pass that on to subsequent servant leaders.

Chapter fourteen, “Care and Feeding of Servant Leaders,” summarizes the means by which servant leadership can be sustained and expanded. Servant leaders function best in an environment that encourages and recognizes service and that defines leadership in terms of process and product—rather than title or simply outcome (see Senge, 1990, 1996; Spears, 2002).

Wheeler concludes in chapter 15 with “Some Common Questions (Myths) Regarding Servant Leadership. He makes explicit references to some things that may be easily misconstrued in the definition of servant leadership (e.g, subservience, being “soft”) or are promoted by colloquial misunderstandings (e.g., servant leadership is religious. The chapter is short but forms a neat and concise closing to a book that addresses an ambiguous concept in a meaningful fashion without oversimplifying it.

Readers of “Servant Leadership for Higher Education” will likely find it a relaxed and engaging read. The case studies in the chapters bring the concepts (and challenges) to life and draw upon the academic context university administrators know so well. Furthermore, those aspiring to be servant leaders will be validated in their pursuits as leadership is not defined via title or position but as an activity of supporting the good of an organization and beyond (see Chaleff's 1995 book, *The Courageous Follower*). Academics have a unique vantage point to appreciate what it means to serve given their triumvirate obligations to educate (serve), research/or create (serve), and to engage in service (serve). Wheeler's work naturally fits with the commitments university members encounter on a daily basis and provides a thoughtful and encompassing approach from which the well-seasoned and novice leaders may benefit.

### References

- Baxter, L.A. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of Personal Relationships*, 257–273.
- Chaleff, I. (1995). *The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. New York : SUNY Press .
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1979). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. New York: Viking.
- Keith, K. M. (2008). *The case for servant leadership*. Westfield, IN: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Senge, P M. (1996). Leading learning organizations. *Executive Excellence*, 13(4), 10–12.
- Sipe, J. W., & Frick, D. M. (2009). *Seven pillars of servant leadership: Practicing the wisdom of leading by serving*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Spears, L.C. (2002). Introduction: Tracing the past, present, and future of servant- leadership. In L. Spears & M. Lawrence (Eds.), *Focus on leadership: Servant leadership for the twenty-first century* (pp. 1-16). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. *The Journal of Virtues & Leadership*, 1, 25–30.