

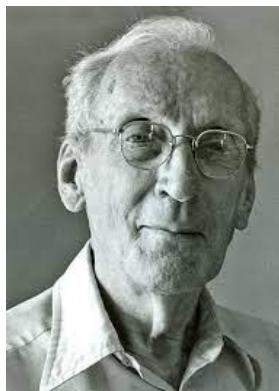
What is servant leadership?

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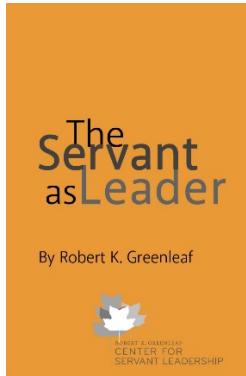
A. Robert Greenleaf and *The Servant as Leader*



The idea that leaders should serve others is an idea that goes back thousands of years and can be found in a number of traditions. However, there is a modern servant leadership movement. It was launched in the United States in 1970 by Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership.”

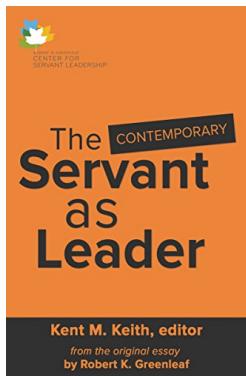
Greenleaf worked for AT&T from 1926 to 1964. During that time, AT&T had more than a million employees and was one of the largest corporations in the world. Greenleaf became involved in teaching, training, and personnel assessment. Eventually, he became AT&T’s Director of Management Research. It was his job to train and educate the senior leaders of this huge corporation. What he concluded after thirty-eight years of experience was that the most effective leaders were focused on serving others.

In 1970, Greenleaf published his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*. He revised it and republished it in 1973. The essay has been read by hundreds of thousands of people since then.



You can order a copy of his essay [here](#).

The Contemporary Servant as Leader was published in 2016. Dr. Keith lightly edited Greenleaf's original essay to make it easier to read, and invited leaders in the servant leadership movement to add their comments on various parts of the essay.



You can order a copy of this version of Greenleaf's essay [here](#).

In his classic essay, Greenleaf defined servant leadership by saying:

The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps

because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...

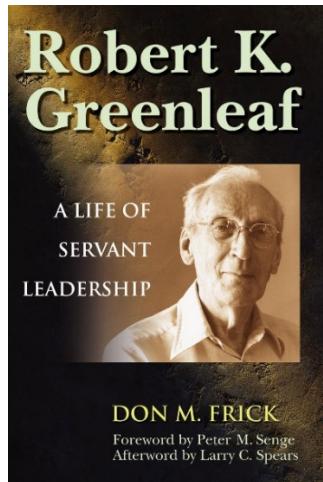
The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while 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 focused on growing people. He said that whatever business we are in, we should be in the business of growing people. Growing people is a triple win. When people grow, they benefit personally and professionally. Their capacity grows, so the capacity of the organization grows. When the capacity of the organization grows, it can do things better, or do things it was never able to do before. Individuals benefit, the organization benefits, and those served benefit.

Greenleaf was also concerned about the impact that a leader's decisions have on those whom he referred to as the least privileged. He asked: "And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

In addition to the desire to serve, Greenleaf mentioned other characteristics of the servant leader, such as listening and understanding; acceptance and empathy; foresight; awareness; persuasion; conceptualization; self-healing; and rebuilding community. Greenleaf said that servant-leaders initiate action, are goal-oriented, are dreamers of great dreams, are good communicators, are able to withdraw and re-orient themselves, and are dependable, trusted, creative, intuitive, and situational.

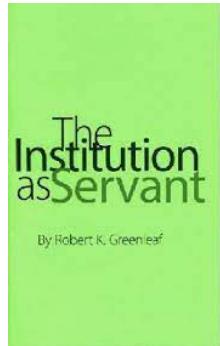
Dr. Don Frick wrote an excellent biography of Greenleaf, titled *Robert K. Greenleaf: A Life of Servant Leadership*.



You can order a copy of the book [here](#).

B. Greenleaf's Writings

Greenleaf's second major essay on servant leadership was *The Institution as Servant*, in which he discussed conceptual and operating skills, and argued for a council of equals or team at the top of the organization.



To order a copy of the essay, click [here](#).

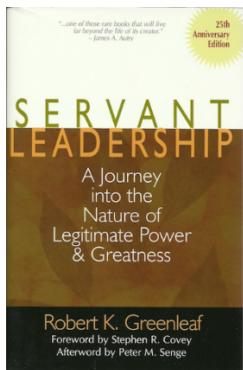
Trustees as Servants

By Robert K. Greenleaf

His third major essay on servant leadership was *Trustees as Servants*, in which he encouraged trustees (board members) to truly lead their organizations and to make judgments that add value and help their organizations become servant-institutions that care about everyone the organization touches.

To order a copy of the essay, click [here](#).

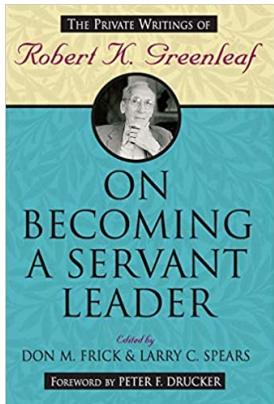
In 1977, Greenleaf published a collection of essays, including his first three servant leadership essays. In 2002, a 25th Anniversary Edition of the book was published: Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).



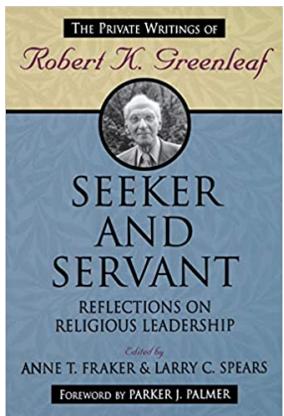
You can order a copy of the book [here](#).

The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, under the leadership of Larry Spears, published a series of books that archived Robert Greenleaf's writings. Those books include:

Don M. Frick and Larry C. Spears, eds., *On Becoming a Servant Leader: The Private Writings of Robert K. Greenleaf* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).



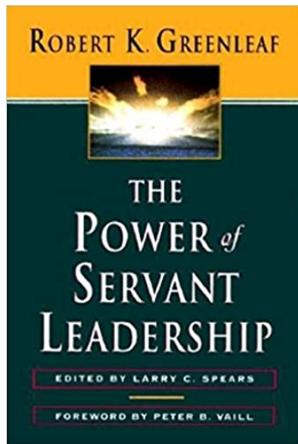
You can order the book [here](#).



Anne T. Fraker & Larry C. Spears, eds., *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership: The Private Writings of Robert K. Greenleaf* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996).

You can order a copy of the book [here](#).

Larry Spears, ed., *The Power of Servant Leadership: Essays by Robert Greenleaf* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1998).



You can order a copy of the book [here](#).

Dr. Kent Keith wrote an essay titled, “What Robert Greenleaf Called Us to Do.” The essay discusses the key servant leadership writings of Robert K. Greenleaf, including *The Servant as Leader*, *The Institution as Servant*, *Trustees as Servants*, and *Servant: Retrospect and Prospect*. The writings are set in the context of the rise of the modern corporation, which generated a worldwide crisis of institutional leadership. Greenleaf called us to become servant leaders, working at all levels to transform our organizations into servant-institutions. He also called us to become teachers, nurturing and training those who follow us to become servant leaders.

To download a PDF of Dr. Keith’s essay, click [here](#).

C. Definitions of Servant Leadership by Authors

Over the years, various authors have provided their definitions of servant leadership and the characteristics of servant leaders.

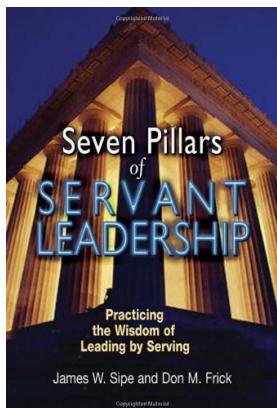
Larry Spears, who was CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership for many years, selected ten characteristics of servant leadership: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.



A 2004 article by Larry Spears, “Practicing Servant Leadership,” discusses the ten characteristics. You can download the article by clicking [here](#).



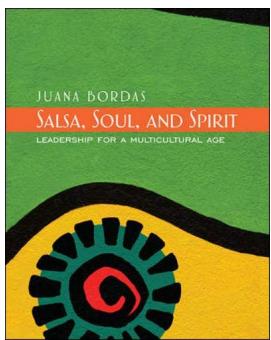
Dr. James Sipe is a licensed psychologist and executive coach, and Dr. Don Frick is an author, teacher, and the biographer of Robert Greenleaf. They wrote a book titled *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*. In their book, they said that the “seven pillars” of servant leadership are: person of character, puts people first, skilled communicator, compassionate collaborator, foresight, systems thinker, and moral authority.



You can order a copy of their book [here](#).



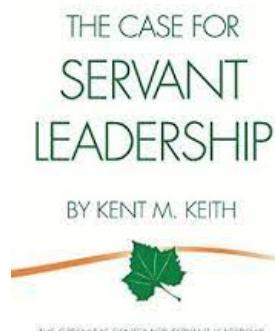
Juana Bordas, who served on the Greenleaf Center Board for many years, wrote a book titled *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*. She said that servant leadership is found in the cultures of Native Americans, African-Americans, and Hispanic Americans. She identified three dimensions of servant leadership in those cultures. She said that it is understood in those cultures that leadership positions are conferred by the community and belong to the community, not to the individual leader; that leaders are guardians of public values, not their personal self-interest; and that leaders are community stewards, working for the common good, not for their personal gain.



You can order her book [here](#).



Dr. Kent Keith, who served as CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in the United States and then as the CEO of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership (Asia) in Singapore, shared the definitions of practitioners and scholars in the first two chapters of his book, *The Case for Servant Leadership* (2nd edition, 2012).



To order a copy of his book, click [here](#).

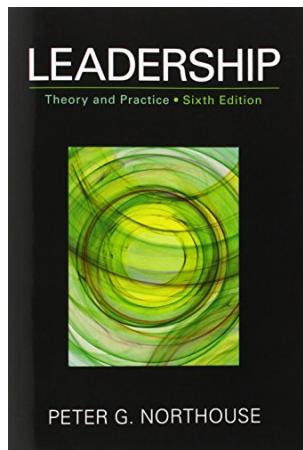
D. Definitions of Servant Leadership by Scholars



Scholars have developed definitions of servant leadership and the characteristics of servant leaders. For example, Dr. Peter Northouse is the author of a textbook titled *Leadership* that includes a chapter on servant leadership. In that chapter, Northouse said:

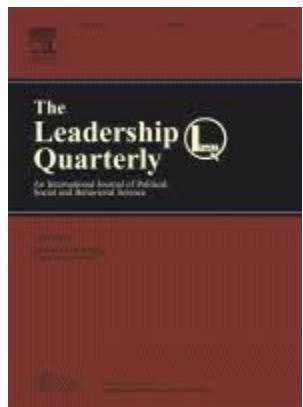
...servant leadership emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them. Servant leaders put followers *first*, empower them, and help them develop their full personal

capacities... Furthermore, servant leaders are ethical... and lead in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large.



You can order a copy of his textbook [here](#).

In his textbook, Northouse discusses the model of servant leadership that was developed by Robert Liden, Sandy Wayne, Hao Zhao, and David Henderson. They published their model in an article titled “Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment,” in *The Leadership Quarterly* in 2008. They use seven domains of servant leadership in their research. Those domains are emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping followers grow and succeed, putting followers first, and behaving ethically.



You can order a copy of their article [here](#).

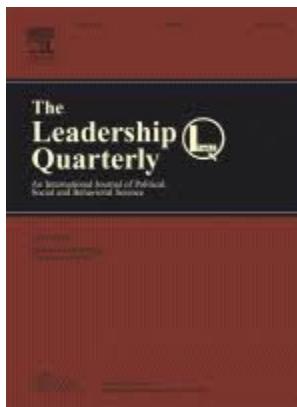


**Erasmus
University
Rotterdam**

The Erasmus University Rotterdam logo, featuring the word "Erasmus" written in a stylized, cursive script font.

Dr. Dirk van Dierendonck is a professor at Erasmus University in Holland. After surveying the servant leadership literature, he published an article in 2011 in the *Journal of Management* that described six characteristics of servant leadership. He said that servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility; are authentic; accept people for who they are; provide direction; and are stewards who work for the good of the whole.

You can order a copy of his article [here](#).



In an article published in 2019, Dr. Nathan Eva, Dr. Mulyadi Robin, Dr. Sen Sendjaya, Dr. Dirk van Dierendonck, and Dr. Robert Liden published an article in *The Leadership Quarterly* titled “Servant Leadership: A systematic review and call for further research.” They commented that “servant leadership focuses on followers’ growth in multiple areas, such as their psychological wellbeing, emotional maturity, and ethical wisdom.” They said:

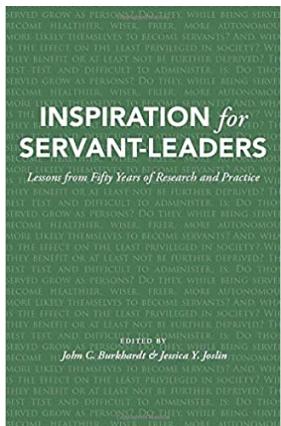
...the mindset of servant leadership... reflects that of a trustee... servant leadership is a centrifugal force that moves followers from a self-serving towards other-serving orientation, empowering them to be productive and prosocial catalysts who are able to make a positive difference in others' lives and alter broken structures of the social world within which they operate.

You can order a copy of their article [here](#).



In 2020, the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership published *Inspiration for Servant Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice*. In Chapter 1 of that book, Dr. James Lemoine and Dr. Terry Blum proposed this definition:

Servant leadership is composed of influence behaviors, manifested humbly and morally within relationships, oriented towards continuous and meaningful improvement for all stakeholders. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to, those being led, communities, customers, and the leader, team, and organization themselves.



You can order a copy of the book [here](#).

E. How is servant leadership unique?

What makes servant leadership different from other ideas or theories about leadership? Based on his own reading of the scholarly literature, Dr. Kent Keith believes that there are four elements that are unique to servant leadership.

First, the moral component. Servant leaders treat people right and create an environment in which people can raise moral issues and engage in moral dialogue. Some leadership theories have no moral component—they are just about the skills of leadership that can be used for good or ill. By contrast, the moral component is embedded in servant leadership.

Second, the focus on serving followers for their own good as well as the good of the organization. Some leadership theories allow leaders to *exploit* followers for the good of the organization. Servant leaders don't do that. They encourage the growth of their colleagues so that they can reach their fullest potential while serving the organization.

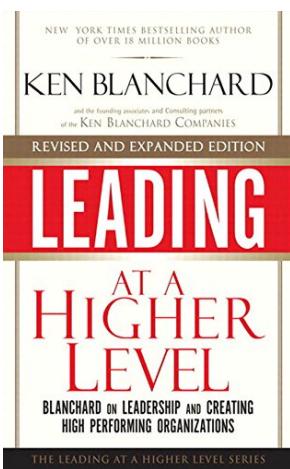
Third, concern with the success of all stakeholders, broadly defined. Servant leaders care about employees, customers, business partners, shareholders or members, communities, and society as a whole—including those who are the least privileged. This is the only ethical position a leader can take. Leaders should care about the impact their organization has on *all* the people their organization touches.

Fourth, self-reflection, as a counter to the leader's hubris. Servant leaders know that the focus is not on them, it is on identifying and meeting the needs of others. As a result, servant leaders tend to be more humble.

F. Other Resources



Ken Blanchard, Scott Blanchard, and Drea Zigarmi, “Servant Leadership,” Chapter 12, in Ken Blanchard and Associates, *Leading at Higher Level* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007).



To order a copy of the book, click [here](#).

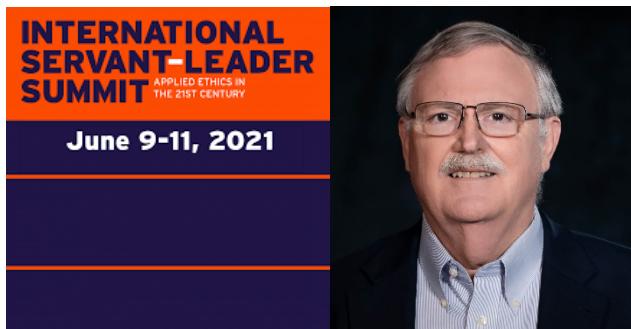


Kent M. Keith, “Frequently Asked Questions about Servant Leadership”

This article provides short answers to the following questions: What is the basis for servant leadership? What are the characteristics of a servant leader? Isn't servant leadership a contradiction in terms? Can servant leaders be effective? Do servant

leaders get results? Does servant leadership work in all kinds of organizations? Can I be a servant leader if the person I report to is not? Won't people take advantage of me if I'm a servant leader? Can servant leadership work when times are tough? Are there common misperceptions about servant leadership? Is there a downside or disadvantage of servant leadership?

To download a PDF of the text, click [here](#).



Dr. Kent M. Keith, "What is servant leadership?"

Dr. Keith made this presentation to the Servant Leadership Summit on June 9, 2021. His talk provides an overview of servant leadership, including Robert Greenleaf and the modern servant leadership movement, the characteristics of the servant leader, scholarly definitions of servant leadership, what is unique about servant leadership, and anecdotal and research evidence that servant leadership works. He explains that servant leaders hold Theory Y assumptions about people in the workplace, they promote intrinsic motivation, and they enhance the meaning and purpose that help people to perform at their highest levels.

To download a PDF of the text, click [here](#).

For a link to the video, click [here](#).