

How Does Servant Leadership Work?

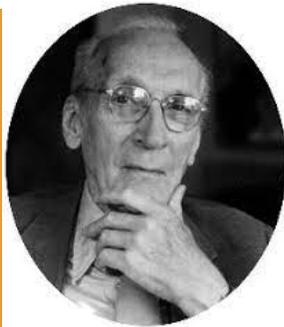
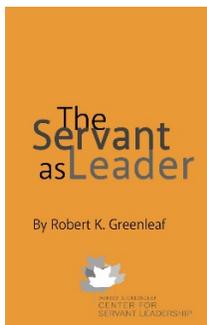
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A. Starting with the desire to serve

Servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, not the desire to lead. There are many ways to serve others, each with its own dignity and meaning. When a person who wants to serve others sees the opportunity to serve *by leading*, he or she assumes leadership responsibilities and becomes a servant-leader.



Robert Greenleaf, who launched the modern servant leadership movement with his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, defined the servant leader this way:

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 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?"

To order a copy of Greenleaf's essay, click **here**.

Servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They identify and meet the needs of their colleagues so they can perform at their highest levels. They identify and meet the needs of their customers so that they will be truly served. Colleagues perform well, customers get what they need, and the mission of the organization is fulfilled.

Greenleaf focused on 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.

Servant leadership is not soft. Servant leaders can make hard decisions whenever necessary in order to serve others. Also, servant-leaders can exercise power. However, when they exercise power, they exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and they exercise it *on behalf of* others, not for their own personal benefit.

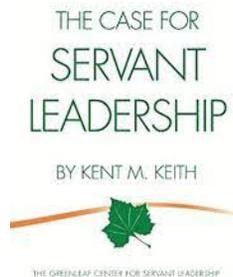
Servant leadership is not a single style of leadership. Servant leaders focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. Since those needs vary, servant-leaders use whatever style is needed to address each situation. For example, if the ship is sinking, the captain can serve others best by being authoritative and ordering people into the lifeboats. However, if the servant-leader is working with volunteers, listening and advising in a consultative role can be the best way to serve.

Servant-leaders also adjust their leadership behavior to meet the needs of the people they are leading. For example, some people need more direction; some need more encouragement; some need more coaching; some need more freedom. Servant leaders connect with people "where they are at" and help them to move forward, both personally and professionally.

Servant leaders get results. In fact, they get two kinds of results. They obtain the resources needed to continue and if possible expand the work of the organization. Obtaining resources is an organizational *need*. But they also serve their colleagues and customers and make the world a better place. That is the organization's *purpose*.

B. Key Practices

Dr. Kent Keith, in Chapter Four of his book *The Case for Servant Leadership*, selected seven key practices that help servant leaders to be effective. Those practices are self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight.



To download a PDF of Chapter Four, “Key Practices,” click [here](#).

Here is a brief description of each of the seven key practices:

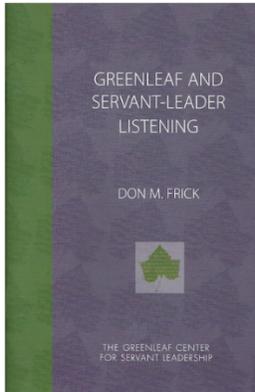
1. *Self-Awareness*. Each of us is the instrument through which we lead. If we want to be effective servant-leaders, we need to be aware of who we are and how we impact others. We want our impact to be as positive as possible.
2. *Listening*. By listening, we are able to identify the needs of our colleagues and customers. That puts us in a good position to *meet* those needs.
3. *Changing the Pyramid*. The traditional organizational hierarchy— the pyramid— makes it hard to listen well. We may look up at our bosses and not out at our customers. The chief has no colleagues, only subordinates, and may not get good information or be able to test ideas. The solution is to flatten the hierarchy with a team at the top.

4. *Developing Your Colleagues.* When our colleagues grow, the capacity of our organization grows. That means that we will be able to do things better, or we will be able to do things we have never done before, or both. It's highly strategic and it's a win for colleagues, the organization, and customers.
5. *Coaching, not Controlling.* A good way to develop people is through coaching and mentoring.
6. *Unleashing the Energy and Intelligence of Others.* Once people are trained and coached, we can unleash them and allow them to make their fullest contribution to the organization.
7. *Foresight.* Foresight is the “lead” that a leader has. If we aren't exercising foresight, we really aren't leading— we are just reacting. And if we are just reacting, we may run out of options, and get boxed in, and start making bad decisions—including unethical ones. A failure of foresight can put an organization in a bad situation that might have been avoided.

Robert Greenleaf believed that listening is the premier skill of a servant-leader. Greenleaf said that “...only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*.” Servant-leaders don't begin with their own knowledge, programs, products, or facilities. They begin by asking: What are your wants? What are your needs? What are your hopes? What are your dreams? How can I help?



Don Frick wrote an essay, *Greenleaf and Servant-Leader Listening*, that provides background on Greenleaf's own journey as he learned about listening from his experiences with the Society of Friends, the Hawthorne studies, AT&T, and Wainwright House. The essay describes the ideas that Greenleaf used in teaching listening to others.



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

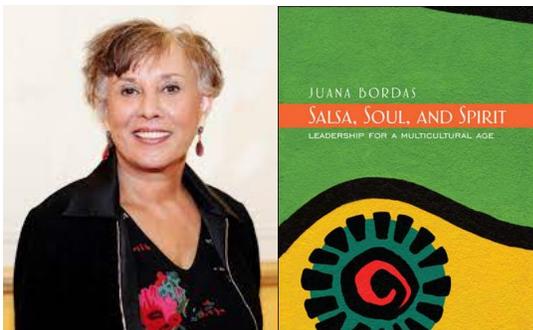
Listening is how servant-leaders identify the needs of colleagues and customers so that they can address those needs. It's how they link up and are able to solve problems and seize opportunities. Their listening activities can include observation, face-to-face conversations, interviews with colleagues and customers, surveys and suggestion boxes, discussion groups and focus groups, market research, and community needs assessments.



Ella Heeks was good at listening. When she graduated from Oxford University, she was invited to become the manager of Abel & Cole, an organic vegetable box delivery service in England. The company was struggling. Ella had no business experience and had not studied business in school. However, she was able to increase revenues by forty times, and after seven years of her leadership, her company was recognized by the *Financial Times* as one of the 15 best places to work in the United Kingdom.

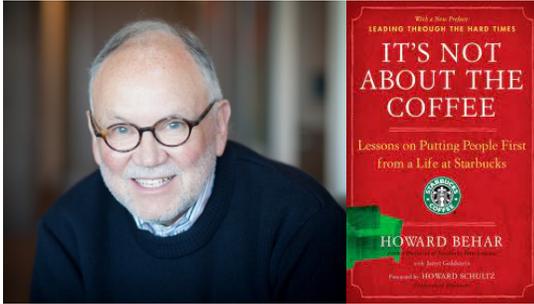
How did she do it? She listened. For example, she listened to the company drivers. She told the drivers that the company needed more customers, and they said okay, but first, why don't we try to sell more to the customers we already have? She agreed, and the company grew. Then when it was time to add customers, the drivers told her that they drove through a lot of neighborhoods, and would recommend the ones they thought were most promising. She listened, and the company grew.

When the company grew to the point that it had thirty drivers, Ella thought maybe it would be good for the drivers to have a foreman to make sure that their needs were being met. She had somebody in mind, but decided to ask the drivers who they thought would be good in that role. In an anonymous vote, 29 of the 30 drivers voted for the same person. It was not the person Ella had in mind. What she learned was that it was the person who spent time with new drivers to teach them the tricks of the trade. It was the person who took over the routes of other drivers when they were sick, or wanted to see their children perform in a school play. In short, it was the person who was a servant leader. She appointed him, and the company continued to grow.



Juana Bordas explored the leadership ideas of Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans in her book, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*. She interviewed John Ecohawk, a member of the Pawnee Nation, who said: “Listening is what I do first...to reflect on what people are saying...to discern the meaning behind their words. Then I can see the common ground and unifying themes and bring people together.”

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

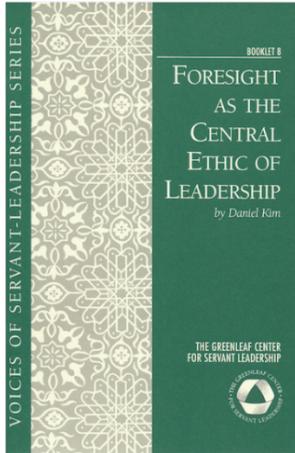


Howard Behar was one of the three people who built Starbucks from about 28 stores to about 15,000 stores. As the company grew, he served as President of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International. During those years, he had two words framed on his wall: COMPASSIONATE EMPTINESS. That is how he tried to listen—the word “compassionate” because he cared, and the word “emptiness” to remind him to temporarily empty himself of his own thoughts and opinions so that he was fully listening.

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



Greenleaf saw foresight as the central ethic of servant leadership. Daniel Kim wrote an essay that has helped people to understand foresight. He noted that foresight is about perceiving the significance and nature of events, not forecasting exactly when specific things will occur. Foresight requires us to continually expand our awareness and perception, and to develop insight, which is about grasping the inner nature of things.



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

C. Assumptions and Motivations

In addition to key practices, servant leadership works because servant leaders live the service model of leadership, not the power model; they rely on Theory Y assumptions instead of Theory X assumptions; they get beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation; and they promote meaning at work.

1. The Service Model of Leadership

There are two major models or ideas about leadership in the world: the power model of leadership and the service model of leadership. They are very different. The power model of leadership is about acquiring and wielding personal power. It is about using people. The service model of leadership is about making a difference in the lives of others. It is about serving people.

Servant leaders live the service model. The service model arises out of love for others and the leader's desire to serve them. It assumes that the leader doesn't know it all; the leader consults with others, and works with teams. The focus is not on the leader, the focus is on identifying and meeting the needs of others. Power is only a tool; it is a means and not an end.

The service model is good for the leader because the leader is not isolated, but is "first among equals" on a team. Leadership is shared, reducing the hazards and burdens of the individual leader. The leader finds meaning in helping individuals and organizations to grow.

The service model is good for the organization because individuals grow in their capacity to serve and perform at their highest levels. Research shows that teams led by servant leaders are more effective. Servant leaders create environments in which there is more commitment, creativity, and voluntary “pitching in” to get the work done. There is greater job satisfaction.

The service model is good for society because servant-led institutions identify and address real needs. Servant-led institutions respect all stakeholders, and strive to make a difference in the lives of those they serve. Servant-led institutions promote a more just, caring, productive, sustainable society.

So this is an important reason that servant leadership works. Servant leaders live the service model of leadership, which results in higher performance for individuals and greater good for society at large.

2. *Theory X and Theory Y*

Another reason servant leadership works is that servant leaders hold Theory Y assumptions about people in the workplace. These assumptions draw out the best in their colleagues.



Douglas McGregor was a Professor of Management at MIT. In 1960 he published his classic book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*. He noted that our assumptions about people affect how we try to lead them. He coined “Theory X” and “Theory Y” to describe two sets of assumptions about people in the workplace.

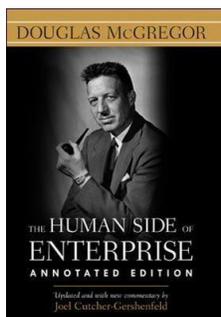
Theory X assumptions are that most people dislike work and will avoid it if they can. Because they don’t like work, most people must be coerced, controlled, or threatened with punishment to get them to work toward the achievement of organizational objectives. Most people want to be directed, and want to avoid responsibility. They have little ambition. They just want to be secure.

Theory Y assumptions are very different. Theory Y assumes that work is as natural as play or rest. The threat of punishment is not the only way to get people to work. People will exercise self-direction and self-control in working toward organizational objectives when they are committed to them. Commitment to objectives is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement, and those rewards can be intangible. Most people learn not only to accept but to seek responsibility. A lot of people have the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in solving organizational problems.

McGregor said that unfortunately, under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potential of most people is only partially utilized. That's because Theory X managers hold people back. Theory X managers think employees are lazy, indifferent, unwilling to take responsibility, uncreative, and uncooperative. As a result, managers don't let employees contribute their best work, and then they blame employees for not contributing their best work. They say that poor performance is the employees' fault.

Theory Y managers see things differently. They think that employees have a lot of potential. If employees are not contributing their best work, it is management's fault. Managers need to help employees contribute and realize their full potential. That's management's job.

Servant leadership works because servant leaders have Theory Y assumptions about people at work. They respect their colleagues, believe in their potential, and help them to contribute their best work.



To order a copy of McGregor's book, click [here](#).

3. Meaning, Motivation, and Productivity

Another reason that servant leadership works is that servant leaders focus on intrinsic motivation. People who are intrinsically motivated perform better than those who are extrinsically motivated.

Extrinsic motivation is about what you *have* to do, not what you *want* to do. The task needs to be done, but it is not fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. Managers therefore offer incentives or threats of punishment to get the task done. They tell people that if you do *this*, you will get *that*. And *that* is a reward not related to the work itself.

Intrinsic motivation is the opposite. It is about what you *want* to do, not what you *have* to do. People are intrinsically motivated when they do something because it is fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. When you are intrinsically motivated, the work itself is your reward.

One of the most-read articles in the history of the *Harvard Business Review* was an article by Frederick Herzberg published in 1968 titled: “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” Herzberg argued that some factors are “hygiene factors” and others are “intrinsic motivators.”

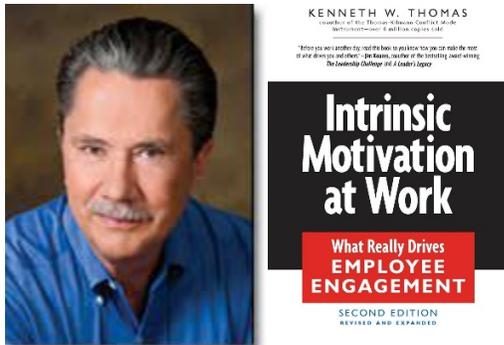


To order a copy of Herzberg’s article, click [here](#).

Hygiene factors are company policy and administration, supervision, relationship with the supervisor, work conditions, salary, relationships with peers, personal life, relationships with subordinates, status, and security. These factors are the primary cause of extreme *dissatisfaction* on the job. Employers need to get these factors right so that employees will not be *dissatisfied*.

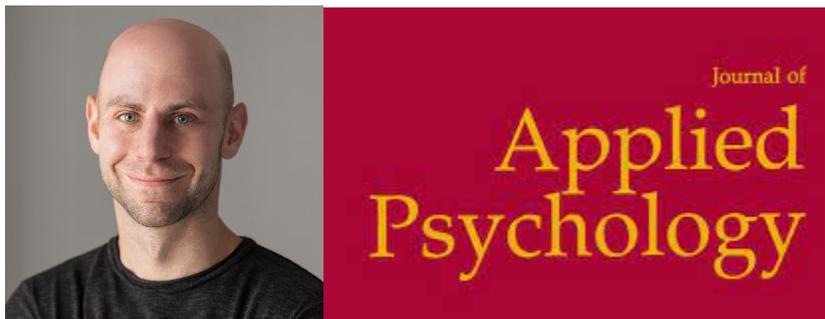
However, more and better hygiene factors will not produce extreme satisfaction—only intrinsic motivators will do that. Those intrinsic motivators include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth.

The hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators are *not* the opposite of each other; they represent different needs.



In his book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work*, Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas identified four intrinsic rewards at work: a sense of choice, a sense of competence, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense of meaning. He said that “a sense of *meaningfulness* is the opportunity you feel to pursue a worthy task purpose... that you are on a valuable mission, that your purpose matters in the larger scheme of things.”

To order a copy of Dr. Thomas’s book, click [here](#).



Common sense tells us that if you find meaning in your work and you are intrinsically motivated, you will be able to do more, and do it better, for longer. Dr. Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, explored this issue in his research. As reported in his article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, he separated prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation to study their effects (if any) on each other. He defined prosocial motivation as the desire to benefit or help others—to serve a greater purpose. He said that intrinsic motivation comes from interest in the work or the enjoyment of doing the work.

Dr. Grant studied 140 workers at a telephone call center and 58 employees at a fire department. He focused on the issues of persistence, performance, and productivity. He concluded that “employees display higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity when they experience prosocial and intrinsic motivations in tandem.” His conclusion supports Greenleaf’s definition of servant leadership. Greenleaf said that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, to benefit others (prosocial motivation), and he emphasized growth and meaning (intrinsic motivation). Grant’s research supports the idea that servant leadership results in higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

To order a copy of Grant’s article, click [here](#).

4. Meaning at Work

Another reason that servant leadership works is that servant leaders enhance meaning at work. They understand that when people find meaning, they are intrinsically motivated, perform at higher levels, and find greater satisfaction in their work.

Meaningful work was central to Greenleaf’s business ethic. He said: “the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work. Put another way, the business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customer.”

Fortunately, there is a lot of meaning to be found at work. When we go to work each day, we help people to get what they need— food, clothing, shelter, education, work space, equipment, information, recreation, healthcare, spiritual growth, and so on. When we help people get what they need, we make a difference in their lives—we improve the quality of their lives, and may even save their lives. That should give us a lot of meaning at work.

MIT Sloan
Management Review

How important is meaning at work? Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden interviewed 135 people who work in a variety of occupations and published their

results in an article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* titled “What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless.” They said:

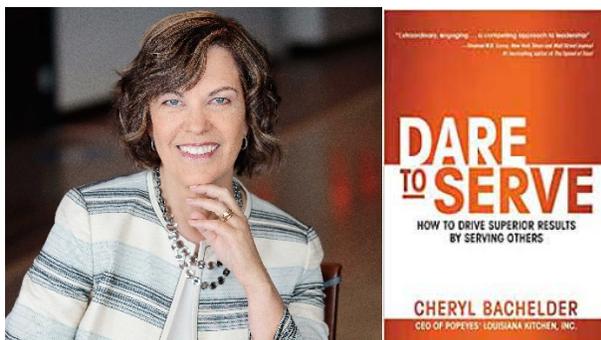
Researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions... Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction.”

The researchers noted that individuals tended to experience their work as meaningful when it mattered to others more than just to themselves. They talked about the impact or relevance that their work had for other individuals, groups, or the wider environment. Meaning often comes from connecting work with the personal lives and values of the workers. Bailey and Madden said:

In experiencing work as meaningful, we cease to be workers or employees and relate as human beings, reaching out in a bond of common humanity to others... For organizations seeking to manage meaningfulness, the ethical and moral responsibility is great, since they are bridging the gap between work and personal life.

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

Because meaning is so important, servant leaders do whatever they can to create an environment in which meaning is enhanced for their colleagues. Servant-leaders find meaning in the work of others and share that meaning with them. Servant-leaders seek to redesign work to make it more meaningful.



One leader who focused on purpose and meaning as a way of lifting her colleagues and her company was Cheryl Bachelder. Cheryl was the CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen from 2007 to 2017. The restaurant chain had \$2.4 billion in

sales and over 2,187 restaurants in 27 countries. Sales and profits had been declining for years. But six years after Cheryl assumed leadership, sales had climbed 25%, market share had grown from 14 to 21%, profitability was up by 40%, and the stock price was up 450%.

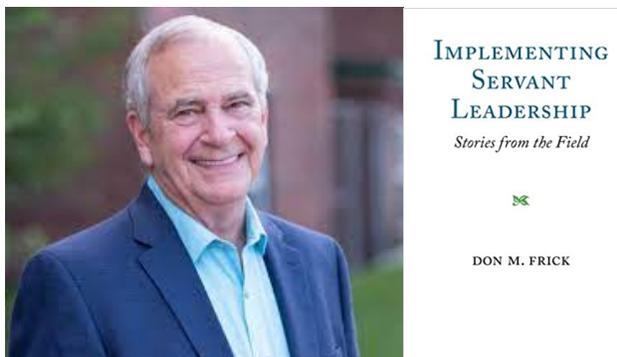
In her book, *Dare to Serve*, Cheryl said that one important step she took was to invite the company's leaders to develop a personal purpose that gave meaning to their work. She said: "It is the leader's responsibility to bring purpose and meaning to the work of the organization." Popeyes conducted workshops that took team members through several exercises regarding their life experiences, values, strengths, and action plans. She said: "At Popeyes, leaders who have an action plan for their personal purpose are having more impact on the business. Personal purpose leads to sustained superior performance."

To order a copy of Bachelder's book, click [here](#).

Summary

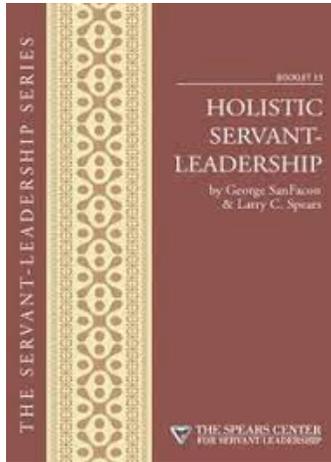
Servant leadership not only works, it works *very well*. That's because servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They implement effective key practices like listening. They live the service model of leadership, not the power model. They hold Theory Y assumptions about people, not Theory X assumptions, and they go beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation. They focus on meaning at work and are meaning makers for others. This helps their colleagues to perform at their highest levels.

Additional Resources



Dr. Don Frick wrote a book, *Implementing Servant Leadership: Stories from the Field*. The book tells the stories of servant leadership at a hospital, TDIndustries, a coffee shop, and a Christian faith community in South Africa. The book includes a chapter on how to implement servant leadership, as well as “an executive primer” on servant leadership.

To order a copy of Dr. Frick’s book, click [here](#).



George SanFacon and Larry Spears wrote an essay on *Holistic Servant-Leadership* that discusses each of the dimensions of servant leadership: (1) motives and intentions, (2) means and methods, and (3) outcomes and results. In this holistic approach to work, leaders create domains where individuals and communities can heal, grow, and thrive through mutual caring and trust. Organizational life is thereby gradually transformed from a treadmill and struggle of opposing forces to a journey and celebration in co-creativity. Through this process, both natural servants and positional leaders become servant-leaders, the journey becomes the destination, and the world becomes a better place for all.

To download a PDF of their essay, click [here](#).



Dr. Kent M. Keith, “Servant Leaders Are Good at Leading Organizational Change”

Leading organizational change is a continuing challenge. Even when the need for change is clear, people can experience stress, pain, and doubt during the change process. In this essay, Dr. Keith argues that servant leaders are good at leading change because they connect with people, empathize with them, and involve them in planning the change process. Servant leaders consult extensively with others about what needs to be changed and how the change will occur. She or he seeks a wide range of facts and ideas, and develops a change process that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the costs. The servant leader knows that he or she does not accomplish the change. The change is accomplished by teams of colleagues throughout the organization who have participated in shaping the change process, understand it, and are committed to making it work.

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

Dr. Kent M. Keith, “How do you flatten the hierarchy?”

In his essay, *The Institution as Servant*, Robert Greenleaf described a flat organizational structure in which the leader is *primus inter pares* or “first among equals.” The leader has additional responsibilities for the team, but Greenleaf pictured the leader on the same level as her or his colleagues. How do you flatten the hierarchy that way? In this essay, Dr. Keith explains the disadvantages of the organizational pyramid, and describes how the hierarchy can be flattened through teams, networks, and chains of coaching.

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



**UK GREENLEAF
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FOR
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Dr. Kent M. Keith, “Is servant leadership radical enough for the 21st century?”

Dr. Keith made this video presentation on May 4 to the 2021 Conference of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership in the U.K. In his presentation he addresses the conference theme: Is servant leadership radical enough for the 21st century? Dr. Keith argues that servant leadership is the only approach to leadership that is radical enough to meet the coming challenges. Servant leaders will improve performance in their organizations by engaging more employees, building communities at work, and helping employees to find meaning so that they will be intrinsically motivated and perform at high levels. Servant leaders will make sure that their work environments encourage people to be more helpful and creative, qualities that will give their organizations a competitive advantage during times of significant turmoil. Servant leaders will also take into account a broad range of stakeholders, giving them a more comprehensive view of the changing external environment. This will help them to adapt, respond, and be more successful in the years to come.

To download a PDF of the text, click **here**.

For a link to the video, click **here**.