

## Servant Leadership

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John 13 is undoubtedly the primary passage that comes to mind when Christians hear the term "servant leader." Ironically, the phrase was made famous in the 1970s by a business writer, Robert Greenleaf. He was not writing on biblical leadership, but rather describing effective leadership that flows from selfless concern instead of egocentrism. Christians readily adopted the phrase as the preferred way to articulate biblical values for leaders, values that Jesus taught quite explicitly.

The Master memorialized mundane service in his infamous foot-washing gesture with his disciples in John 13. He taught them that being great in his upside-down kingdom meant being willing to do the dirty work. They were not to look for public accolades and privileges, but rather to relish the opportunity to serve the least—even recognizing Jesus in the faces of the hungry, imprisoned, naked and poor (Matthew 25). During their last supper with him, he showed them again how serious he was about this point. "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14 NIV)

Early on in my ministry I believed that turning the traditional hierarchy of leadership on its head was the only biblical way to think of leadership. I literally flipped the organizational chart upside down to form a triangle with the point (directors, president, etc.) at the bottom. I believed that this inversion of the norm illustrated the ideal reality that leadership exists to support those whom the organization serves.

Service, however, is not all the Bible says about leadership.

One of the fundamental tensions in biblical leadership is the dynamic convergence of authority and service. The great leadership metaphors of the Bible—servant, steward, shepherd, and son—promote a sense of responsibility to care for God's people. This delegated responsibility necessarily involves the appropriate exercise of decision-making power. To lead a community—whether a church or family—requires love and discipline, compassion and justice, service and authority. While service can be expressed without titles and rank, authority requires clear lines of reporting and accountability.

Authority is a dangerous thing, of course - more dangerous than service. Authority can quickly inflate our sense of self-importance. Our powers of rationalization move at warp speed. The truism is all too often played out: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Fear of the power that comes with a position of leadership is wise, but we mustn't be so afraid that we fail to use this power appropriately. If people are to thrive in a secure environment, we need good and "smart" rules that are enforced. Followers need to know that leaders pursue equity and justice even when it is painful. They need to see the rod as well as the staff. Sometimes that means a process of discipline or probation. Sometimes, for employees, it means, "letting them go." If we find this too easy, we may have become intoxicated with power. But if we simply *can't* exercise authority, then we have abdicated our responsibility to lead.

I'm thrilled to hear young Christian leaders aspire to be "servant leaders." I do hope that the label doesn't exhaust for them the meaning of biblical leadership or somehow excuse them from the difficult, thankless work of exercising authority. That work requires wisdom to make complex decisions, courage to face criticism and misunderstanding, and just plain fortitude to follow through. The same disciples Jesus taught to serve were given authority to lead the Early Church in its infancy. Elders who "ruled" their families well were eligible to share in the rule of the Church (I Tim. 3:4)

I now draw my organizational diagrams with two triangles that nicely create a Star of David. One illustrates "bottom up" service, the other "top down" authority. Biblical leadership invites us into the dynamic interaction of both.