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Servant Leadership:
A Model for Developing College Students

Students at Wright State University, with the assistance of faculty and administrators, have designed and implemented a new type of student leadership program, founded on concepts that stress service and a subordination of individual ambition to collective interests. Based on the notion of "servant leadership," articulated by Robert Greenleaf, the two-year program attracts students who are interested in developing a selfless yet influential leadership style characterized by commitment to others. It stresses skill and inner strength, the development of, as well as the ability to lead by persuasion, not coercion. A leadership phase follows an initial service phase.

As we move toward the twenty-first century, urban communities look increasingly to local universities for solutions to societal problems. In turn, metropolitan universities are challenged to educate and graduate students who are capable of leading effectively in a diverse and ever changing society.

Service is an essential component of Wright State University's mission. As a metropolitan university near Dayton, Ohio, WSU is committed to providing leadership to improve the quality of life for the people of the Miami Valley. WSU's link to area business, community, and research organizations in and around Dayton also offers unique educational opportunities to a diverse student body. The university serves more than 17,000 students with programs leading to more than 100 undergraduate degrees and 40 graduate and professional degrees through six colleges and three schools.

There is a widely recognized need for contemporary students to incorporate service into their lives, to acquire a sense of community, and to develop as students concerned about society and their role in it. This article describes Servant Leadership Development for Students, a newly implemented program for developing the leadership skills of students who are motivated to lead by an abiding concern for the welfare of oth-

ers. Designed by an undergraduate biomedical engineering student who was the 1994-95 Presidential Scholar at Wright State University, the two-year student leadership development program is based on Robert Greenleaf's concept of Servant Leadership.

According to Greenleaf, Servant Leadership is the natural feeling that one has of desiring to serve others. It seeks to develop individuals who ensure that others' needs are met, and advocates a group-oriented approach to decision making as a means of strengthening institutions and improving society.

This style of leadership has the potential to integrate the call to leadership with the need for service in a forthright and deliberative manner. A comprehensive review of literature and research, coupled with the student's own system of internal values and a creative method of gaining group identification of key leadership components, led to the creation of a multiphase student leadership program based on the concept of Servant Leadership.

The Notion of Servant Leadership

After a lengthy career, Robert Greenleaf retired from AT&T in 1964 as Director of Management Research. The same year, he founded an international, nonprofit organization known as the Center for Applied Ethics. Holding a joint appointment at the Sloan School of Management at MIT and at Harvard Business School, he coined the term "servant leadership" and wrote extensively about it during the 1970s and 1980s. His seminal work, *The Servant as Leader* (1977), has sold over 200,000 copies worldwide and continues to exert a powerful and growing influence on educators and leaders in business, higher education, service-learning organizations, and religious institutions. The Center for Applied Ethics became the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985. Greenleaf died in 1990 at the age of 86.

Servant leadership is the notion that a great leader is a servant first. According to Greenleaf,

> It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.... 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? (p.

xx).

As a servant, one is always searching, listening, and expecting to make the world a better place for an individual or a group of people. Servant leaders are not motivated primarily by the desire for power or personal gratification. Servant leaders are simply motivated, above all else, by the desire to serve. This leadership style advocates a group-oriented approach to decision making as a means of strengthening institutions and improving society (Spears, 1993). The importance of leadership in society is not only in managing institutions, but in nurturing those individuals affected by institutions.

Traditional leadership models once described the activities of leaders whose first concerns are to advance themselves. Such leaders are usually driven by a desire for power or personal gain. They serve out of "promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations" (Greenleaf, 1977). They not only provide the ideas and the structure, but also take the risks and claim the successes. In a difficult situation, they are more likely to react by trying to lay the blame on others, than by taking responsibility for their actions.

Servant leadership, by comparison, is driven by the overarching desire to serve others. The servant leader responds to issues and problems by listening first; making prejudgments or acting out a solution from a position of authority is not the first response. The servant as leader works hard to accept and empathize and not to reject another's ideals and methods out of hand. "Leaders do not elicit trust unless one has confidence in their values and competence (including judgment) and unless they have a sustaining spirit (entheos) that supports the tenacious pursuit of a goal" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. xx). Consequently, followers respond best to individuals chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants first.

Servant leaders are effective because they exhibit the following skills, attributes, and concerns: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Although many college students are willing to learn to lead with these characteristics, few have actively considered such a full list of desirable traits or been exposed to role models who possess them. However, there is no reason to doubt that such characteristics and attributes can be developed in a motivated person.

Servant leadership is a transformational approach to life (Spears, 1994). Servant leaders are motivated to build a better, more caring society. They thrive on watching and helping others grow and they acknowledge that it is necessary to develop a component of personal and spiritual growth within the individual. Servant leaders develop inner strength that inspires others to become a part of the vision for a better society.

The process of becoming a servant leader begins within the servant, not within society (Greenleaf, 1977). In order to initiate this process in a person or organization, a strong foundation of beliefs, values, and ethics must exist. Role modeling of Servant Leadership behaviors encourages higher level group functioning.

Student Involvement in Developing a Leadership Program

At Wright State University, two focus groups were conducted, each involving six individuals representative of student leaders on campus, selected from a broad array of diverse campus coordinating organizations, such as the board coordinating student activities; policy making bodies, such as Student Government and the Wright Engineering Council; professional organizations such as Ohio Society of Professional Engineers; special interest groups such as Wright Outdoors Unlimited; and program offices such as the Residence Services and the Honors Office. The focus groups were formed in order to gather information regarding students' perceptions of the characteristics of leadership and learning methods that should be present in a campus-based Servant Leadership Development Program.

Characteristics of Leadership

The focus group participants identified several characteristics of good leadership, such as a positive attitude, an open mind, and an overall concern for the human race. Individuals exhibiting qualities of a good leader, it was agreed, are enthusiastic, excellent listeners, trustworthy, and have respect for others and their opinions. They are considered to be role models in society, and they have tact and diplomacy. In addition, good leaders are able to accept constructive criticism in order to improve their leadership styles. Effective leaders are also able to recognize their own boundaries, incorporate emotions into their work, recognize their power over others but not abuse it, and understand their followers. These individuals are able to make changes and empower others to do the same.

Students felt that the benefits of being a leader include personal growth and the ability to help a wide variety of people. Most importantly, leadership teaches students to be adaptable, open, and friendly. It also exposes them to different cultures and perspectives.

When asked to identify the roles leaders play in the community and at the university, students identified leaders as liaisons, role models, mentors, spokespersons, coaches, team players, organizers, resources, counselors, facilitators, and teachers. Students also saw leaders as visionary experts. In a brief brainstorming session, students identified leaders from their own experiences, and the resulting list included historical figures, personal contacts, and members of the university community.

Desirable Elements of a Servant Leadership Program

The students also identified essential activities for a servant leadership development program. Desirable elements included a variety of skill-building exercises that enhance leadership ability and individual growth, such as public speaking, reflective listening, conflict management, how to acquire inner strength or challenge by choice. Students said they expected to participate in group projects and to learn to effectively delegate, utilize resources, confront others, and identify their limits. Finally, students stated that it was important to have an understanding of national issues in order to apply them locally, as well as a knowledge of the political system and its resources.

Students also identified activities they would expect in a service learning program. These included skill-building sessions on how to encourage others to serve, and lectures on focusing on the community and its needs.

The students agreed that by the end of such a developmental program, they should have gained skills that would make them more effective leaders and individuals. To accomplish this, they identified factors that would help them to listen better, remain on task and focused, communicate their experiences, effectively delegate and empower their followers, and develop a clear definition of their goals. Finally, they wanted hands-on experience in the program.

Servant Leadership Development for Students at Wright State University

A review of the literature and the results of the focus groups led to the actual development and implementation of the Servant Leadership Development

for Students. The program initially introduces students to the concept of Servant Leadership and its goals, and then progresses through a wide variety of activities in order to integrate learning. It is designed so that students complete a two-year experience comprised of two tracks—a Service Phase and a Leadership Phase.

Students selected for the program must be highly motivated and willing to develop a set of characteristics in order to succeed. They must demonstrate a commitment to personal growth, begin to define who they are and who they would like to become, develop a commitment to others, and have an interest in leadership. The selection process includes nominations by faculty, deans, department chairs, and staff, while first year students are able to express their interest in the program during summer orientation. Applications are sent to both the nominated and the self-selected students. Students are asked to attend an information session in which Servant Leadership is explained in greater detail. Next, group interviews are conducted. For the first year, twenty-six students were selected, based upon their commitment to serving others. Grade point average is not a factor.

All students initially accepted for the program may not be open to the ideas of servant leadership. They are free to discontinue their involvement in the program at any time.

Service Phase: Institute of Serving Activities

Fall quarter experiences in the program enable students to examine their own values and beliefs about service and to develop the skills to make them more effective as they progress through the program. The program begins with an introduction to the concept of leadership versus power or management and a discussion of paradigms and their influence. The educational dimension continues with an Introduction to Servant Leadership by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, which gives students a clear picture of Greenleaf's vision and what impact it could have on them. Next, students explore how value judgments impact their ability to serve effectively and to learn to listen accurately. The students are then treated to a mid-quarter break that introduces techniques to relieve stress and establish balance in their lives.

Toward the end of the quarter, the focus gradually shifts from inward to outward as students learn about a number of social service agencies and their responsibilities, as the beginning of preparations for the service projects they tackle in winter and spring quarter service projects. Throughout fall quarter

students attend board meetings of social service agencies and observe how they function. At the end of the quarter the group discusses effective and ineffective behavior of the boards and how this affects those that they are trying to serve. Students also take advantage of a university program called Into the Streets, which calls for a half day of volunteer work with a social service agency. The quarter concludes with a week long trip to immerse students in service to others.

Winter quarter begins with a closer look at what kind of impact the students want to make. Program participants tour the Dayton community, which exposes them to the wide variety of people and needs in the area. Class time is also devoted on how to plan a manageable activity that benefits others. Subtopics include realistic goal-setting, planning, and a thorough understanding of community needs. Students then form small groups to formulate a service project in conjunction with a social service agency. This type of service is based on the idea that project oriented volunteering is more effective than drop in volunteering. As students work on their projects, the amount of class time decreases and is used to facilitate discussion of issues that surface as students progress toward their service goals. The group examines how to deal with conflict and how to be creative problem solvers, as well as how to support each other and provide constructive criticism.

Students discuss among themselves which participants will move into the Leadership Phase and which will remain within the Service Phase. At the end of the Institute of Serving, students select those individuals who enter the leadership phase. Students choosing to continue in the Service Phase participate in activities such as internships within their field of study, in addition to the service activities mentioned above. At the end of that year, the students have a second opportunity to enter the leadership phase. Alternatively, they may choose to stay within the service institute for their entire participation in the program. Development in this program includes understanding the effectiveness of both servant leaders and servant followers, and the important recognition that both are of equal stature.

Leadership Phase: Institute of Leading

In the second year of the program, students going into the leadership phase are exposed to leadership development and service learning activities. The first quarter focuses on educating the students about leadership, and topics covered include conflict management, communication skills, and problem

solving skills. Students are assigned research on a leader of their choice, and this information is presented and discussed among the participants. A mentoring program is an important aspect of this phase, and it is essential for students to select their own mentors. Keynote speakers are invited to discuss topics such as "The Power of Followership" and "Leadership as an Art." Again, interaction and dialogue are the most important aspects of this phase.

The second and third quarters focus on infusing the ideas learned from the first quarter into the university or community. Students choose their own leadership development project. Projects range from planning to expose the university community to the idea of Servant Leadership, working with the students participating in the Institute of Service, or contributing their leadership skills within the metropolitan area.

At the end of this year, these students may choose to return to the Service Phase or remain within the Leadership Phase and facilitate activities and interaction with the new student participants. Either way, students may continue in the program for the continuation of their undergraduate career.

It is recommended that once participants graduate from the University their involvement in Servant Leadership activities continue. The University provides opportunities to do so. For example, alumni are invited to participate directly in the development program as mentors or speakers; service activities are planned for weekends; a quarterly newsletter is published to highlight activities of these individuals; and former participants in the program are utilized as resources.

Implementation Issues

Fall 1995 marked the inaugural implementation of the program at Wright State. There have been few difficulties to report except for the challenge of scheduling sessions at mutually agreeable times. Also, some faculty are not interested enough in the terminology or concepts of Servant Leadership to support the program, and a few find it disagreeable at face value. However, there are no major detractors and the president continues to support the program and maintains interest in the formative evaluations and adjustments. First year costs, funded by the president, added up to about $14,000. Second year costs are expected to reach nearly $34,000, due to the added expense of running both a servant phase and a leadership phase concurrently.

The support of the university community is essential to the success of the program, so it is necessary to obtain the support of the university faculty and must continue to come from members of the student body. A successful program is student initiated and driven, but is supported by the content expertise and resources of the faculty and administration.

Student leaders will continue to provide logistical and organizational coordination for the program, seek additional resources if needed to strengthen or grow the program, and model the characteristics exemplary of a Servant Leader. The current coordinators are a graduate assistant and the undergraduate student who developed the program. They work with an advisory board consisting of student-centered faculty and staff, especially those with key interests in service and leadership, students, and members of the external community (nonprofit and profit sector community leaders). It is essential that members of the board exemplify characteristics of a servant leader. Resources such as the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, and university and community leaders must be utilized to benefit the students participating.

Assessment

In order to be consistent with the ideas of Servant Leadership, it is necessary to gather formative input from program participants, facilitators, and the advisory board. The students are asked to complete weekly assessment forms on the information presented in the session and to keep a journal of their learning experience and how it relates to their lives outside the program. Additionally, significant time is devoted to process discussion among participants. Facilitators submit competency statements detailing their goals and objectives for each session. The advisory board is consulted regularly for their expertise in the curriculum design. Coordinators continually monitor all aspects to ensure adherence to the principles of Servant Leadership and the program mission. At the end of the first and second years, summative assessments of the program will be completed with the guidance and assistance of appropriate faculty and staff members.

Conclusion

As a metropolitan university, Wright State is a link between the community and its future. Consequently, WSU is committed to the development of effective leaders. In response to this challenge, students have recognized the need for integrating service and a program of leadership development. The

Servant Leadership Development for Students program attempts to address this need by providing students with opportunities that are designed to have an impact in the Dayton metropolitan community.

Suggested Readings

Greenleaf, R. K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness.* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977.

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