

Chapter 6

Servant Leadership and School Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, public school leaders are often called upon to deal with tragedies that include suicides, homicides, and accidental deaths. When these incidents occur in small school districts, the roles and responsibilities of school personnel become those of counselors and civic leaders. This chapter presents a case study about the experiences of a school superintendent practicing servant leadership to help heal a small community when dealing with the accidental deaths of a local family. The superintendent's responses to the tragedy are based upon the foundations of servant leadership that include empathy, mental models, reflection, self-awareness, emotional healing, listening, commitment, and community building (Goen, 2009; Spears, 2004; Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership practices help guide educational leaders in providing support for students, teachers, and parents in school crises.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter illustrates how a public school superintendent applied servant leadership practices to respond to a tragedy in his school district. The superintendent served both his school and the community by dealing with the heart wrenching aftermath of a multiple victim house fire that claimed the lives of a local mother, her two daughters who were recent graduates of the local high school and her son, a well-known and well-liked high school junior.

School leaders, and particularly superintendents, must be well-prepared in advance to ensure that reactions and decisions in crisis situations are thoughtful and considerate of all stakeholders. Communications must be accurate and clearly understood by the community and the media. Most importantly, superintendents must be aware of the impact of the crisis on students, family members and staff.

Servant leadership characteristics are useful in guiding school leaders' interactions, behaviors and decisions in crisis situations. The servant

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leadership characteristics are: (a) listening; (b) empathy; (c) healing; (d) awareness; (e) persuasion; (f) foresight; (g) stewardship; (h) commitment to the growth of people; and (i) building community (Spears, 2004). These characteristics assist school leaders in supporting followers and in building a caring community.

Superintendents in small, rural communities serve in roles and functions that are different from their counterparts in the suburbs and urban areas. Superintendents in smaller districts are considered to be community leaders who work closely with agencies, churches and businesses. They understand that the school system's buildings and facilities serve as cultural, social and emergency centers for the community. These superintendents know that they will be called upon to serve their educational and community stakeholders in a crisis. A servant leadership approach is an effective way to ensure that superintendents meet the needs of their students and community members in these situations.

The chapter presents a literature review on the pros and cons of servant leadership. The effectiveness of the servant leadership practices of foresight, empathy, reflection, self-awareness and caring to promote emotional healing and to move a community forward following a crisis are presented. The importance of school leaders developing relationships and focusing on the needs of others to gain commitment and followership is emphasized. Guiding principles for preparing and implementing a servant leadership crisis management model included in the Appendix.

BACKGROUND

Superintendents who practice servant leadership combine their motivation to lead with a strong desire to serve (Dierendonck, 2011) and focus on the needs of their stakeholders (Schneider & George, 2011; Williamson, 2008). Servant leadership begins with a philosophy, belief and attitude to

serve others and then implements caring practices, actions and structures to make it happen (Page, 2004). A key component of servant leadership is an emotional healing dimension that is operationally defined as showing sensitivity and understanding for others' concerns (Liden et.al, 2008).

Servant leadership's emotional healing dimension is considered to be a powerful and effective force in supporting people through crisis and tragedy. Greenleaf emphasizes the importance of establishing a caring compact between the servant leader and those he or she is leading (1970, p. 7). This emotional influence dimension has an ethical component relative to the leader's role in helping followers deal with trauma and difficult situations (Heifetz, 1994; Burns, 1978).

The emotional, caring dimension of servant leadership is supported by needs theorists who state that basic needs must be met before individuals can move forward to higher levels of awareness and self-control (McClelland, 1987; Murray, H. A. & Kluckhohn, 1953; Maslow, 1943). Servant leaders are attentive to the needs of their followers and committed to helping them to succeed. Servant leaders realize the importance of developing relationships with their followers and the impact of aligning these relationships with the goals and objectives of the organization (DePree, 1989).

Spears has identified ten characteristics that are central to guiding the interactions, behaviors and decisions of servant leaders: (a) listening; (b) empathy; (c) healing; (d) awareness; (e) persuasion; (f) foresight; (g) stewardship; (h) commitment to the growth of people; and (i) building community (2004). The characteristics guide leaders in being attentive to others, empathizing with them, nurturing them, empowering them and helping them maximize their personal and professional development. This is accomplished by continually supporting followers' safety, security and emotional needs and encouraging them to overcome adversity. This commitment to others' growth helps the servant leader to build a positive

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