

# Chapter 13

## The Origin of Servant Leadership: The Foundation of Leadership

**Ben Tran**

*Alliant International University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Servant leadership suffers from the same limitation as leadership studies in general. Many are now calling for a deeper study of the meaning and application of this emerging subfield of leadership study so that servant leadership could be adapted with open minds and effectively be practiced. A strong foundation must be built to support the emerging structure of servant leader scholarship. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the origin, the meaning, the role, and the purpose of authentic servant leadership. In so doing 1) the foundation and meaning of leadership is defined and clarified, 2) the role and meaning of follower is defined and clarified, and 3) the role and meaning of management is and clarified. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the intended meaning and purpose of authentic servant leadership. In so doing, this chapter addresses the following common confusing terms in research and misused roles in corporations: leadership, follower, and management.*

### INTRODUCTION

Servant Leadership<sup>1</sup> is attracting increased attention from scholars, writers, researchers, and practitioners. Many are now calling for a deeper study of the meaning and application of this emerging sub-field of leadership study. Servant leadership suffers from the same limitation as leadership studies in general. Writers on servant leadership have not taken the time nor the precision of effort to clearly define the concepts they

are working with. There is solid conceptual work to be done and it is important that it be developed now as the body of servant leadership research is beginning to grow. A strong foundation must be built to support the emerging structure of servant leader scholarship.

There is a confusion of terms; when discussing leadership, servant leadership is often used as if *is* leadership. The terms leadership and servant leadership are not the same thing. According to Rost (1993, p. 6), “the reality is that, as of 1990,

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scholars and practitioners do not know, with certainty, what leadership is.” Most of the definitions of leadership used in today’s leadership textbooks are conceptually vague, fail to clearly distinguish between related concepts such as management and leadership, and does not make any attempts to establish a generally accepted definition of terms. On the one hand, there may be arguments that this claim is a little outdated and inaccurate, because of the diversity of audience from various disciplines that this book has been geared to benefit. However, it is because of the diversity of audiences that this book has been geared to benefit, practitioners may at times disagree with researchers. On the other hand, according to Yukl (2002, p. 6), “it is neither feasible nor desirable at this point in the development of the discipline to attempt to resolve the controversies over the appropriate definition of leadership. Like all constructs in social science, the definition of leadership is arbitrary and very subjective.”

As such, a good definition of leadership must be understandable, usable, researchable, and comprehensive while possessing the ability to discriminate (Rost, 1993, p. 99). It is important that the definition of the term *leader* be distinguished from the *positions* of leader. This is because positional leaders do not lead. It is important then that we maintain the difference between leading and simply holding a role, or office, that some would call *the leader*. It focuses not on a positional role but on what the leader does. This is an action basis of leading versus a trait or a positional approach. Terry (1993, p. 53) states that action is “the human universe within which leadership must exist,” and that “leadership has always been considered action, even if that connotation was unexamined and intuitive.” The person who takes the lead is the one who acts with a situation.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the origin, the meaning, the role, and the purpose of authentic servant leadership. In so doing 1) the foundation and meaning of leadership will be defined and clarified, 2) the role and meaning of

follower will be defined and clarified, and 3) the role and meaning of management will be defined and clarified. The chapter will conclude with the explanation of the intended meaning and purpose of authentic servant leadership. In so doing, this chapter will address the following common confusing terms in (business and organizational studies) research and misused roles in corporations: leadership, follower, and management.

## **ROBERT K. GREENLEAF**

Robert Keifner Greenleaf [for those who are curious about what the “K” stands for (is commonly known, written, and referred to as Robert K. Greenleaf)] was born in 1904 in Terre Haute, Indiana. In the mid-1920s during Greenleaf’s senior year in college, Greenleaf began to ponder his vocational aim. A final course on the Sociology of Labor in college provoked thought regarding societal involvement and clarified for Greenleaf the difference between scholarship and wisdom. Greenleaf sought the latter as it appeared more useable in practice. Greenleaf came to believe that business offered the greatest potential for growth and starts as a lineman digging postholes for a division of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). Within one year, Greenleaf was trained for a supervisory position where Greenleaf informally and often verbally, trained others on the many facets of being a foreman. Each of Greenleaf successive management training positions at AT&T was created for Greenleaf’s appointment. Greenleaf’s last position, in 1964, just prior to retirement, was the Director of Management Research. This was an internally created group who were to be “concerned with values, organization, and the growth of people, especially executives” within the organization (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 3).

After Greenleaf’s retirement, Greenleaf started a second career, a career that focused on role of education. Greenleaf worked as a consultant

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