

Why Servant Leadership Is Not Enough!

The Multi-Dimensional Aspects of Leadership as Taught in Scripture

By Eugene B. Habecker

SOMETIMES STUDENTS OF LEADERSHIP LITERATURE find themselves riddled with confusion, given the often seemingly contradictory material on leadership. First, I want to make it clear that the purpose of this article is not intended to address personal or civic leadership, but organizational leadership, specifically on those who have the responsibility for it and who are looking for better ways to lead.

Second, there remains confusion about what is meant by servant leadership and how its effectiveness is measured. Do I as an employer measure servant leadership by how it benefits me, by how I feel about the person doing servant leadership, or by whether or not the service rendered fits the organization's mission?

However, the biblical model for leadership is significantly more inclusive than just servant leadership and only by understanding the various models and metaphors for leadership used in Scripture can we come closer to understanding how God wants us to carry out leadership. Let's explore some of these other models.

LEADING BY FOLLOWING

Models of the leader who serves tend to focus on what the leader does for the people, without recognizing the tremendous contribution people can make to the life of a leader. It doesn't allow for the "one anothers" frequently referred to in Scripture: love one another, serve one another, prefer one another, forgive one another, exhort one another, comfort one another, etc.

In addition, we need to remember the story of Jesus visiting Mary and Martha, where he points out to Martha that "serving" wasn't always the highest priority.

A second model—one I and others have championed—is the idea of the leader as follower *and* the follower as leader. The reality is that often in an organization leaders follow while followers lead.

In the servant-leader model, the necessary tension between leaders and followers is not addressed. Indeed, the focus is primarily on the leader, ensuring his role as a servant. But even basic definitions of leadership note the link between leading and following. In fact, the most basic definition of a leader is one who has followers. If the leader has no followers, no matter how well servant leadership is pursued, there's no leadership. John Maxwell, writing in *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, says it this way: "As the leadership proverb says, if you think you're leading and no one is following you, then you're only taking a walk."

In both the servant/serving model and the leader/follower model, the basic focus is on the role carried out by the leader and the people being led. I believe both models are

helpful, and each helps us understand the roles carried out by leaders. Leaders both serve and at times follow.

I'm convinced we will understand leadership best if we think of it, not only along one or two dimensions, but along a multitude of dimensions.

However, as I have come to understand leadership, as a practitioner, not a theoretician, I believe the use of only a mono-polar and/or bi-polar model don't go far enough in helping us understand *how* leaders do what they do. Accordingly, I'm convinced we will understand leadership best if we think of it, not only along one or two dimensions, but along a multitude of dimensions. By understanding leadership as multi-dimensional and multi-polar, I believe we come closer to understanding leadership and *how* leaders actually do the work of leadership.

Let me use several teaching sections from Jesus and St. Paul to further illustrate these points.

JESUS AND LEADERSHIP

It's true, as we have already noted, that Jesus calls us to be servants. And so we could argue that Jesus would be supportive of the idea of servant leadership. He was always concerned with the servant and with those being served. So, too, we could make a similar point with the leader needing to be a follower, particularly of the Lord. Indeed, Jesus not only modeled servanthood, he also modeled followership. Indeed, he was sensitive to and obedient to the directives of his heavenly Father, as he calls us to be his followers. Jesus served and followed, was served by others and he led.

But it's important to note here that Jesus never states these ideas of servanthood and followership to be the *only* dimensions in how leaders should lead. Even these two ideas were never presented by our Lord to be the first, let alone the only "chairs" in the orchestra of organizational leadership. Indeed, he placed an emphasis on these and other leadership dimensions and models.

Again, this is what leads me to argue for a broader, multi-dimensional model of leadership that includes not only these servant/follower elements but many others as well. Jesus used several other metaphors in discussing leadership: the leader as manager, shepherd and mentor.

THE LEADER AS MANAGER

One could argue that much of what Jesus dealt with in the gospels had to do with the leader as manager: the story of a king who sent his servants, and ultimately his son, to collect rent; a financial manager who was shrewd in handling the accounts of his boss so

he would have friends after he was fired; a confrontation with other leaders for violating the mission of his Father and throwing people out of the Temple; a commendation for those who had adopted the right investment strategies; the story of a CEO who paid the *same wage* for people working differing hours—and there are many more stories.

Jesus, it seems, was emphasizing the importance of managing, and being accountable for what one's been entrusted with. He emphasized the importance of an aggressive investment policy, and insisted on holding people accountable, even for small things.

My sense is that the servant-leader model is inadequate to fully understand these and other stories in the Gospels that often required difficult management decisions. Jesus' instruction to "take from the one who buried his gift, and give it to the one who had the most aggressive investment policy, the one who has the most" hardly sounds like servant leadership.

Jesus emphasizes through these and other stories that one of the dimensions in which leaders lead is through appropriate management and insisting on accountability.

THE LEADER AS SHEPHERD

One of my favorite descriptors about leadership is as shepherd leaders—presuming a knowledge of the true Shepherd. There are numerous examples from Scripture that point to this as an appropriate leadership metaphor. One particularly powerful one comes from Ezekiel, where God is speaking to the leaders of Israel: "I, the Lord God, say you shepherds of Israel are doomed! You take care of yourselves while ignoring my sheep. You drink their milk and use their wool to make your clothes, then you butcher the best ones for food. But you don't take care of the flock" (Ezek. 34:2-3)

These verses are followed by God's description of what shepherd leaders didn't do: "You have never protected the weak ones or healed the sick ones or bandaged those that get hurt. You let them wander off and never look for those that get lost. You are cruel and mean to my sheep" (Ezek. 34:4)

Many of us have memorized the 23rd Psalm about the Lord being "my shepherd." Jesus used the shepherd image throughout much of his teaching, lamenting that the people were like sheep with no shepherd.

The shepherd leader is a protector, restorer and healer of those within his or her leadership charge. Protecting those under your care and being concerned for those who have lost their way is an apt description of what leaders ought to be doing. It includes serving, but it's more than serving. One of the reasons why I believe King David was such an effective leader was because the shepherd boy, as shepherd king, understood this part of how to lead.

THE LEADER AS TEACHER/MENTOR

There's no doubt the teaching and mentoring roles, which are related but different, were important to Jesus during his ministry. I'd argue that the leader as teacher and mentor are important dimensions of leadership effectiveness.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus, he seemingly had a driving concern for these important elements of leadership. He rarely worked alone. In fact, more often than not, he was with his colleagues as future leaders-in-training. He practiced what we call “just-in-time learning.”

Here’s how he did it. He taught the principles during the course of normal living, and then he’d follow up with an experience or a question: “Did you understand what I just said, or what I just did? Are you really seeing and hearing with all the faculties I’ve given you? Do you get it?”

Then he would explain the parable or the miracle, and they would move on, only to do it all over again. There were times when his followers understood it, so he’d send them out two by two on an assignment or field trip. Then he’d debrief them and perhaps make a correction or two, and then move on again. Often he’d take the time to confront his students, like when he asked Peter, “Do you really love me?”

It was in the process of his teaching, which was usually interspersed with just-in-time learning experiences, that his group of leaders and followers were mentored by the living Son of God. And this mentoring was also carried on during the days of the early church, such as Paul with Timothy and Barnabas with John Mark. Charles Manz’s book, *The Leadership Wisdom of Jesus*, is a wonderful series of case studies in the way Jesus went about teaching and doing leadership.

There are countless other elements of leadership which our Lord modeled, and that’s the point. Ask yourself this question: In organizational leadership, which of the following five elements is most important: to be a leader who serves, who follows, who manages, who shepherds or who teaches and mentors? Obviously, all these elements are necessary for effective organizational leadership. Accordingly, a leadership model that emphasizes multiple dimensions, not simply one or two, best serves our understanding of how transformed leaders lead.

As I understand leadership, the leader is constantly moving from one role to another, making various tradeoffs and exchanges, constantly adjusting focus and emphasis as contexts change. Just as we constantly shift roles in our personal lives, be it as parent, spouse, neighbor, employee, citizen, or child, we’re constantly using multiple skills, roles and tactics to do leadership.

TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP

I’m persuaded leadership truly is an art, not a science. You can’t become an effective leader by following textbooks. Leadership has to be learned and practiced in the trenches. Knowing what to do and when to do it is terribly important in leadership.

So how do we lead if we’re truly being transformed as Paul states it in Romans 12:2? Ultimately, the only way I learn to do it is by depending on the powerful leadership of the Holy Spirit. Just like it says in the Psalms: “You lead me, Lord, as I follow closely” (Psalm 119:59, CEV).

Henri Nouwen said it best. “It’s not enough for the [leaders and managers] of the future to be moral people, well-trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to

respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it's not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is this: Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, listen to God's voice, look at God's beauty, touch God's incarnate Word and taste fully God's infinite goodness?"

That's the heart of Christian leadership!

Eugene B. Habecker is president of the American Bible Society, author of four books, including *The Other Side of Leadership*, *Leading with a Follower's Heart*, and *Rediscovering the Soul of Leadership*, and a recipient of CMA's Christian Management Award.

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