Developing Servant Leaders in Secondary Schools for Leadership Positions in the Workforce

By Ms Lee Siew Lian and Mr Sim Kang Kiang

Abstract

Schools in Singapore have increasingly recognised that gifted education does not just focus on helping students become educated. A shift has been made in the last decade to focus on a leadership curriculum and to expose students to leadership because schools believe that leadership can and must be taught. The concept of leadership identified by this paper is the concept of servant-leadership (from Robert K. Greenleaf’s “The Servant As Leader”). This paper attempts to explain how servant-leadership is taught in schools and how it is relevant in today’s workplace where upper management professionals, if they are to succeed in leading, are required to listen and empower others, rather than dominate. This study will be useful for educators in secondary schools to start a leadership curriculum based on servant-leadership or to review their current leadership programme for gifted learners and to consider developing servant-leadership in their students.
Introduction

Sisk, author of *Creative Teaching of the Gifted* (1993), stated that “Society cannot nor will not survive without intelligent, imaginative leadership. Leadership training for gifted students can provide leaders who have both the intellectual and creative potential to lead” (p. 493). Leadership is one of five U.S. Department of Education’s categories of giftedness; and like all other categories of giftedness, leadership can be taught. Hence it is not surprising to find numerous programmes and activities aimed at developing the skills and traits needed to improve one’s leadership ability. Thousands of books and research papers are written each year on leadership. However different situations require different leadership skills and traits. Sisk (1993) observed that “one finds about as many definitions of leadership as there are persons writing about the concept of leadership” (p. 491).

Singapore schools recognize the importance of developing leadership skills in their brightest students and almost every secondary school in Singapore is organizing leadership camps for their students. Some schools infuse their leadership development programmes into their daily curriculum so that all students have the opportunity to acquire and develop some leadership skills. However not all schools have a structured leadership programme or curriculum. Objectives of the leadership training change when different school officers take charge of these programmes. School officers involved in the programme may not be adequately trained to carry out the leadership training. In some leadership camps, leadership skills and traits are haphazardly chosen without taking into consideration the goals of the camps. In short, there is no continuity and consistency
in the development of leadership skills and traits. To ensure a sound leadership
programme and curriculum for the students, it is important for schools to identify the
kind of leaders they want to develop, the relevant skills and traits, and to structure their
training to achieve their desired goals.

One concept of leadership identified by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal work, *The
Servant as Leader*, continues to grow in influence and impact. The concept of servant-
leadership encourages all of us to serve and lead others to produce value for our society,
our organizations, our customers, our staff, our friends and ourselves. The servant-leader
concept has been adopted by many large corporations and institutions around the world.
Some have adopted the concept as their corporate philosophy or incorporated it in their
mission statement. These include The Body Shop, Chevron, Honda, Shangri-la Hotel
Singapore and Starbucks.

This paper attempts to explain the growing importance and relevance of servant-
leadership in the fast changing world we live in and to recommend strategies which
secondary schools can adopt to develop servant-leadership in their students.

**Characteristics of Servant-Leadership**

In recent years, we have witnessed the devastation and sufferings caused by leaders
whose ambitions surpass their moral compass. Leaders of terrorist groups are able to
lead thousand of followers across the globe to achieve their aim of destroying lives and
properties. Although these leaders are authentic leaders, they lack ethics and moral
values; and are those we should not idolize. Then there are leaders that abuse the authority and privilege that are bestowed on them. We have witnessed the abuse of power by many political leaders and heads of states, e.g. granting favours to their political supporters, spending state funds on personal consumption. There are also for-profit organization leaders who are so completely consumed with the bottom line and the need to satisfy the demands of shareholders that they have forgotten the reason why they are put there in the first place: to serve the people who are employed by the organization and the customers who purchase their products and services.

So how does society attempt to correct the actions of these leaders who have caused great sufferings and produced unprecedented change in our lives? The removal of these “evil” leaders would not bring permanent solutions for it is not in the nature of things that a society can be cleaned up once and for all according to an ideal plan. The simple and yet effective solution is to install good and intelligent leaders who have integrity and trustworthiness. Leadership should be bestowed on a man who by nature wants to serve, i.e. we need servants who have the potential to lead us.

Servant-leadership was first coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 in his essay “The Servant as Leader”. He believed that one has to first serve society and only through one’s service will a person be recognized as a leader. Spears (2004) said “Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community and the sharing of power in decision making” (p. 12). Greenleaf (1970/1995) describes a servant-leader:
The Servant-Leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. 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 (p. 7).

Purkey and Siegel (2002) spoke of two significant implications in Greenleaf’s definition of servant-leadership. First, Greenleaf points out that servant-leaders are community centred, altruistic and empathetic. Second, Greenleaf advocates “that leadership involves teaching and mentoring, as one of the major requirements of leaders to invite others towards service” (p 181). Tannenbaum (2000) looked at social leadership as the ability to help a group reach their desired goals while improving the human relationships within the group.

Spears (1995) identified servant-leadership as an approach that “attempts to simultaneously enhance the personal growth of workers and improve the quality and caring of our many institutions through a combination of teamwork and community, personal involvement in decision-making, and ethical and caring behaviour” (p. 2). He identified ten characteristics of servant-leadership that are of critical importance. The following ten characteristics are central to the development of servant-leaders:

1. *Listening: The Foundation of Servant-Leadership.* It is through listening that many of the other characteristics of the servant-leader can be developed. Leaders have
traditionally been valued for their communication and decision making skills. However, they must reinforce these important skills by making a deep commitment to listen to others. Servant-leaders seek to identify and clarify the will of a group by listening receptively to what is being said. Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s inner voice and seeking to understand what one’s body, spirit, and mind are communicating. Listening, if coupled with reflection, will lead to the growth of a servant-leader.

2. Empathy: People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. Hence servant-leaders strive to understand and empathize with others. While refusing to accept the behaviour or performance of co-workers, one must assume their good intentions and should not reject them as people. Secretan (1996) describes empathy as “identifying with the thoughts, feelings, and perspective of others” (p. 240). Greenleaf wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy.

3. Healing: Addressing the Spiritual Side of Leadership. The potential to heal one’s self and others is one of the great strengths of servant-leadership. Servant-leaders recognize that they have the opportunity to “help make whole” those with whom they come in contact with. Secretan (1996) reminds us that our words “have the capacity to raise or dash each other’s spirits” (p. 101) so we should choose our words and actions wisely.

4. Awareness: Keeping in Touch with Ourselves and Others. Awareness is developed through self-reflection, through listening to others, through being continually open to learning, and by making the connection from what we know and believe to what we do or say. Palmer (1998) says that we must find every possible way to listen to our
inner voice and take its counsel seriously. Awareness aids the servant-leader to understand issues involving ethics and values. General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader.

5. **Persuasion: Beginning with the End in Mind.** This refers to the ability of the servant-leader to convince others rather than to coerce compliance. Servant-leaders do not use positional authority in making decisions within an organization. This sets the servant-leader, who is effective at building consensus within groups, apart from the authoritarian leader. Transparent, fair and just action invites and persuades others to cooperate with servant-leaders.

6. **Conceptualization: Seeing the Big Picture.** The ability to look at problems from a conceptualizing perspective means that the servant-leader thinks beyond the day-to-day realities. Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to “dream great dreams”. They need vision to lead their organization effectively.

7. **Foresight: Plotting the Course.** Foresight enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision for the future. Conceptualization shows us where we want to go, and foresight shows us how we are going to get there. Greenleaf (1970/1991) says foresight is “the lead that a leader has” (p. 18).

8. **Stewardship: Being Accountable and Sharing Control.** Greenleaf believed that all members of an organization play significant roles in holding their organization in trust, i.e. caring for the well-being of the other members and serving their needs, for the greater good of society. He speaks of servant-leaders as “first among equals” where the leader is among the people, not above but more on the same lateral plane.
De Pree (1989) stressed the need for us to make a contribution to society when he highlighted that “the art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values” (p. 13). Stewardship emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion (rather than control) to manage one’s life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people.

9. **Commitment to the Growth of People:** Servant-leaders are deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within the organization and recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything possible to develop the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees.

10. **Building Community:** Servant-leaders seek to identify some means for building community among those who work with them and to show these people the way by using their abilities for a specific community-related group. Approaches to building community include giving back through service to the community, caring about one's community and giving financial donation or investment into the community.

Three of the ten characteristics (altruistic, persuasive and integrity) are also traits identified at the 1980 California Association for the Gifted Annual Conference in Los Angeles.

There is a growing trend toward servant-leadership. It reflects a strong yearning of people to find a better, more caring way of working together. In fact, organizations want leaders that recognize teamwork and community, involve others in decision making, are
ethical and caring, and attempt to enhance the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of organizations. In short, organizations are looking for servant-leaders to serve the people who have a connection to, and are affected by, the organizations. The ideal group of people whom we should start developing the characteristics of servant-leadership is our youth, and the best place to do so is in our schools. Hence it is imperative that secondary schools start laying the foundation for the development of servant-leaders since schools can provide the necessary knowledge and practise of servant-leadership.

**Training of Servant-Leadership Skills and Traits**

There are several ways to develop servant-leadership in schools. Taking the recommendations from Magoon (1980) on leadership training:

1. *Classroom monitorship*, in which students are given responsibility for monitoring the behaviour of their classmates or other duties (similar to our practice of Class Chairman, AVA Representative and Sports Representative etc.).

2. *Mentorships*, in which the gifted and talented students tutor weaker peers or younger students. This could be in the areas of academic or Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs).

3. *In-school leadership projects*, where student leaders are given the responsibilities to brainstorm, plan and implement projects to improve the school facilities or solving problems related to curriculum selection, students’ behaviour or safety.

4. *Community project*, in which students tackle neighbourhood problems, organize fund raising activities for the needy or raise awareness for charitable organizations or social causes.
5. *Simulations*, which involve establishing a legal system or financial institution and provide the opportunities for students to role-play.

The above activities teach leadership and followership, including the notion that there are menial tasks that must be carried out for the activities to be successful. The students also learn to listen and communicate with others and have opportunities to put their diplomacy and patience to the test. In short, students learn to serve and to lead others.

Maker (1982) suggested that leadership training should provide practice in leadership and the teaching of component skills. Student leaders should progressively be given more leadership responsibilities. She also noted that teachers can raise the understanding and appreciation of leadership via discussion of leadership traits.

The above could provide insights in helping one to craft one’s servant-leadership training programme. Below are some recommended activities that could be used to develop each of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership. These activities have been carried out by four secondary schools in Singapore, either as part of their school curriculum programmes or leadership camps. The schools, whose activities are reproduced here, are a representation of the various types of secondary schools in Singapore. For example, the schools include an all boys Independent school, an all girls Independent school with a comprehensive gifted programme and two mixed gendered Government schools.
1. **Listening**: Allow the students to watch a scene from a movie (e.g. *I Not Stupid* produced by MediaCorp Raintree Pictures Pte Ltd) whereby the students learn to appreciate the importance of listening. This movie is centred around the theme of increasingly difficult relationships between parents and their children today, due to a lack of communication. Parents often think they understand their children based on the reason I gave birth to you so I know. The importance of listening and communication could be discussed after the show. For lower secondary students, the teachers could lead and facilitate the discussions. However, the teachers could appoint a school leader to lead the discussion within his or her class.

2. **Empathy**: Before embarking on a simple Community Involvement Project (CIP) like flag selling, teachers should take time to explain the nature and mission of the organization they are raising funds for and the plight of the people the organization is caring for. Students are encouraged to conduct a small scale research on the organization and share their findings with their peers.

3. **Healing**: Selected student leaders are assigned as buddies to younger at-risk students in the school. The student leaders will help the younger students to overcome either their academic or behavioural problems. In the process, they also try to heal the broken spirits or emotional problems of their peers. This arrangement requires close monitoring from the teachers and school counsellor. The adults must be at hand to assist the student leaders should the need arise.

4. **Awareness**:

   (a) Involvement in CIP can help to raise awareness on the presence of the less fortunate in our society. However awareness should also extend to understanding the
challenges the less fortunate face in society, the assistance and help they get from the society and how they can contribute to the society despite their handicap or challenges faced.

(b) Reflection is a good exercise to raise self-awareness and is commonly conducted at the end of an activity. Participants are encouraged to pen their thoughts in journals to allow them to internalize their thoughts. During reflection, the participants are encouraged to examine their actions and how to further improve themselves or avoid the same mistakes.

5. **Persuasive, Conceptualization and Foresight**: It is common to invite speakers and performing groups to school assemblies. Instead of having the school staff organize these events, student leaders can be tasked to take over the invitation and planning of the assembly activities. The student leaders have to use their persuasive skills to invite speakers or performing groups, conceptualize the event and have the foresight to find solutions to anticipated problems (e.g. booking of school facilities to host the talk or performance, accommodating the needs of the guests, provision of refreshments etc.).

6. **Stewardship**: The different roles of players in a team (the teachers are advised to select a game or sports that is popular with the class e.g. English Premier League) and their contributions can be used to illustrate stewardship. The success of the team depends on all players, including the reserve players, and not just on the captain or strikers of the team.

7. **Commitment to the Growth of People**: Teachers should take the initiative, either in class or in CCA, to allow each and every student a participative role in activities and
events. This would nurture the students in all aspects of their development, i.e. emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually.

8. **Building Community:** School leaders should be roped in by the school to form committees to brainstorm ideas to improve the school facilities or solving problems related to curriculum selection, students’ behaviour or safety. Building Community can be a monthly session for members of the Prefectorial Board or Environment Club. Leaders in CCAs can also do the same for their members and should be encouraged to organize activities that bring the members closer together.

**Service Learning Projects**

There are numerous activities that can be conducted in schools that encompass all, if not most of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership. Below is an example of a project that schools can implement for their upper secondary students. Schools could begin with a reading and discussion of Greenleaf’s writings on servant leadership and use the ten characteristics as a framework for the development of their service learning projects. The concept of volunteering and the rationale for such projects could form part of the school culture. Care must be taken to explicitly explain the ten characteristics to the participating students throughout the service learning project.

Students from the same class or CCA are tasked to identify one charity that they would like to adopt for the academic year. In groups of five to ten students, they are given two weeks to conduct a research and present their findings to the other groups. They need to persuade the others to select their choice over the others. Voting would decide which
organization would be adopted by the students. At this time, voting for the main committee should be conducted. The committee should include a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary, Financial Controller, Group Leaders etc.

A visit to the organization would allow the students to find out the needs and the assistance the organization would require from the students. During the visit, the administrative staff of the organization and the people who are under the care of the organization (e.g. the old folks, orphans or the homeless) would be interviewed by the students. The information obtained will be shared with the rest of the students and as a group, they would generate ideas to find ways and means to help the charitable organization. The students must be told that fund raising should not be the main assistance rendered to the organization. If the organization is in need of financial assistance, then the students should find ways to help the organization overcome their financial difficulties in the long term and not resort to a one-off effort to raise funds.

The next stage involves the division of labour amongst all students. Groups are formed to look into different areas such as planning, fund raising, liaising with the organization, publicising the event to the rest of the school. A leader will be tasked to lead each group of students. It is important that every student is given the chance to indicate the group they would like to help in. The deployment would be conducted by members of the committee, preferably under the supervision of a teacher. It is crucial at this point for teachers to ensure that all students have a role in the project and no one is left out.
In planning the activities or programmes, the students should conceptualize their plans and anticipate all the problems that they may encounter. They could utilise tools such as the Six Thinking Hats by Edward De Bono, SCAMPER by Bob Ederle or mind maps to generate ideas. Consensus amongst members within a group must be reached before any decision is made.

At the end of the project, an evaluation of the project should be conducted for all groups. This is the opportunity for students to reflect on their actions during the project and to find areas for improvement. Student leaders should also be encouraged to express their appreciation to their members for their contribution towards the project either in writing or verbally. If possible, the staff of the charity should be invited to sit in at one of the evaluation sessions and present their opinions on the project.

It is important at this point to reiterate that servant-leadership cannot be nurtured with a single project. Instead, it is a life-long journey and schools should progressively give student leaders more responsibilities, with close teacher supervision. The latter should provide feedback to the student leaders and help the students to brush up their servant-leadership skills.

Throughout the project, students should also be encouraged to keep a journal to pen down thoughts and insights gained from their involvement. This will inculcate the habit of reflection which is an important trait of good leaders.
Conclusion

Leadership, like all categories of giftedness, can be taught. Servant-leadership, one form of leadership developed by Robert K. Greenleaf, is people-centred. It stresses the need for a leader to be a servant first, i.e. serving the people who work for the organisation and the society. It also promotes a sense of community and the sharing of power in decision making. Many large corporations and institutions have adopted the servant-leadership concept. The survey in this study (for more details, see pp. 19-21) began with the selection of professionals in middle and upper management capacity. The upper management professionals are a retired partner in Ernst and Young as well as former President of the National Council of Social Service, the Country Manager of Accenture (Singapore) which is a global management consulting and technology services company, two school principals, a vice principal and lastly, a Major in the Singapore Armed Forces. The middle management professionals are a head of department, a number of teachers, an architect, retailers and trainers. Their response also indicates that they value servant-leadership in their organisations. The ten characteristics are ranked highly by the respondents. Not one of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership is deemed unimportant by the majority of respondents. There is no recommendation that any of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership has to be replaced. The implication of this finding is that servant-leadership is relevant and very much in demand. It is also a reminder for secondary schools to consider a structured programme to develop the ten characteristics of servant-leadership in their students.
Since the development of servant-leadership cannot be taught in an one-off event, schools should continue to nurture their students by having a structured programme spanning over two to three years, focusing on just a few characteristics every year. Schools may choose to introduce and develop some or all of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership in carefully planned activities and training. They may begin with simple tasks with the lower secondary students and progressively introduce more difficult tasks that encompass more servant-leadership characteristics to the upper secondary students. In so doing, students should progressively be assigned more responsibilities and their progress monitored closely.
References


Dear ___________

Servant-Leadership – is it in sync with the requirements of the corporate world?

The main focus of the leadership training in St. Joseph’s Institution since 2003 is servant-leadership. This servant-leader concept is based on Robert K. Greenleaf’s essay “The Servant as Leader” (1970). Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision-making. The ten characteristics (in the questionnaire on the next page) are central to the development of leaders that SJI focuses on in its leadership training programme.

We would like to find out from you whether these characteristics which we emphasize in school are also given its due importance in today’s corporations. As one of the leading leaders in your organization, we would like to hear from you whether these ten characteristics of a servant-leader are the much-needed skills that today’s leaders in top positions should be equipped with.

The questionnaire below lists the ten characteristics of servant-leadership. Please give us your views on how important each of these characteristics should be. When you decide on an employee’s promotion to a position of authority or recruit someone to a leadership position, which of these characteristics would you consider to be important?

Thank you very much for your time and patience.

Miss Lee Siew Lian
Mr Gary Sim Kang Kiang
Please put a tick in the boxes against each characteristic. Thank You.

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| 1. LISTENING  
He seeks to identify & clarify the will of a group by listening receptively. | 64% | 36% | - | - |
| 2. EMPATHY  
He accepts people for their special & unique spirits; assumes the good intentions of co-workers & does not reject them as people. | 43% | 36% | 21% | - |
| 3. HEALING  
He recognizes that he has an opportunity to “help make whole” those whom they come in contact. | 7% | 43% | 43% | 7% |
| 4. AWARENESS  
He keeps in touch with himself and others to understand the big picture of his organization and how each employee fits into this picture. | 64% | 36% | - | - |
| 5. PERSUASION  
He relies on persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions; seeks to convince others rather than to coerce compliance. | 36% | 50% | 14% | - |
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<td><strong>6. CONCEPTUALIZATION</strong>&lt;br&gt;He thinks beyond the day-to-day realities of the organization that often consume others; seeks to nurture the ability to “dream great dreams”.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td><strong>7. FORESIGHT</strong>&lt;br&gt;He anticipates the various consequences of his actions; seeks ways to create win/win situations which ensures that the leader, staff, organization &amp; customer survive &amp; thrive.</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<td><strong>8. STEWARDSHIP</strong>&lt;br&gt;He views his position as an act of stewardship rather than ownership; not possessive about his position; holds the organization in trust for the greater good of society.</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td><strong>9. COMMITMENT TO THE GROWTH OF PEOPLE</strong>&lt;br&gt;He believes that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contribution as workers; nurtures the personal, professional and spiritual growth of employees.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td><strong>10. BUILDING COMMUNITY</strong>&lt;br&gt;He seeks to identify some means for building community among those who work with him; gives back through service to the community; cares about his community and gives financial donation / investment into the community.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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