

Servant Leadership: Helping People Come Alive by Viral Mehta

□ In an ancient parable, three masons are sitting in a row, all chipping away at large blocks of stone. A woman observing them is curious about what they're up to. She asks the first man what he's doing, to which he responds, "I'm chipping away at this block of stone." Indeed, she thinks. She questions the second man similarly, who says, "I'm working to feed my family." Also true, reflects the woman. Finally, she questions the third mason, who responds, "I'm helping to build a beautiful cathedral."

□ It's a powerful perspective -- holding within it a value for collaboration, agency, creativity, and meaning. What if we all could see our work in that way? What if our organizations supported us in holding that perspective, and to go one step further, how can we create institutions that release these core values? In his seminal 1970 essay "The Servant as Leader," Robert Greenleaf coined the term "servant leader" to describe someone who has that interest. For such a person, "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead."

□ A servant leader -- one who wants to serve first and lead second -- strives to create a work environment in which people can truly express these deepest of inner drives. Servant leadership entails a deep belief that people are the greatest asset any organization has, and to nurture their individual growth becomes the basis for all organizational development. That growth goes far beyond the limited dimension of financial benefit -- it dives into our core motivations as people.

□ In his book *Drive*, best-selling author Dan Pink talks about the evolution in our understanding of what really motivates people, especially in our professional lives. According to Pink, the latest behavioral science research points to three key drivers: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Another way to frame this is empowerment, perfectibility, and purpose, and servant leaders endeavor to create a culture that fosters each of these three intrinsic motivations:

□ Empowerment:

□ People want to be engaged and also have some level of control over their environment. A servant leader recognizes that the people doing the work generally have the best ideas about how to improve the processes they participate in. Through tools like rapid improvement events and PDCA (Plan Do Check Act) suggestion systems, servant leaders practice participatory decision-making, empowering employees to be innovators and co-creators in positive change. Such leaders are also enablers; they spend a significant amount of time at the workplace, making direct observations, and then striving to create

systemic improvements that add value to the work of their employees.

□For a concrete example of this kind of engagement, in "Improving Healthcare Using Toyota Lean Production Methods," Robert Chalice reports that Toyota Corporation employees globally generate 2 million ideas a year. And they come from all over -- more than 95% of the workforce contributes these suggestions, with each person submitting over 30 ideas each. Even more importantly, over 90% of these ideas are implemented. Leaders who understand how to unleash this kind of creativity build systems that support idea generation. But this kind of empowerment is also grounded. Servant leaders promote learning by doing and testing iteratively in a scientific way, and they demonstrate accountability. It's a great example of assuming value in all people, which soon translates into a scientific, transparent system for everyday improvement, which in turn fosters a culture of continuous perfection.

□Perfectibility:

□Perfect is a verb -- and every person can tap into an intrinsic drive toward perfection. A carpenter can strive to be a perfect craftsman, a nurse looks to provide perfect care at the bedside, and Michael Jordan was known to inexorably seek the perfect shot. The role of servant leadership is to create a culture and context in which that inherent drive toward improvement is channeled in a way that benefits the whole. If people are engaged in perfection as a journey and not a destination, then they are constantly looking for ways to innovate.

□This brand of innovation follows a very conscious design philosophy -- one that is inherently collaborative. All of us are smarter than any of us, as the adage goes. Far from being a cold, individual, strictly rational process, servant leaders design highly collaborative systems that balance the scientific method with in-depth engagement of people from all levels. They also actively break down silos and promote a shared view across functions and departments: in healthcare (where I currently work), that view is: "how can we maximize the real value to the patient, and as they move along the care delivery stream, what improves their well-being?" In that sense, servant leaders have a worldview of interdependence, and recognize that they have to own the entire value stream (including suppliers and partners), on behalf of the patient.

□Purpose:

□In the words of Picasso, "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." In healthcare -- and especially in serving the underserved population -- it becomes all the more important (and necessary) to create structures that enable us to give in concert. Atul Gawande, the famed surgeon-author, uses a sports analogy to urge modern healthcare (though it's easily generalizable) to evolve from "cowboy medicine" to "pitcrew medicine," referring to the unbelievable preparation, synchronization, and seamless way in which a pit-crew services a race-car in the thick of intense competition. If a pit-crew can deliver flawless results in less than 12 seconds, imagine what a team of people can do longterm in the service of better care for all.

□At the root of such collaboration is still each person's own connection to greater purpose. Civil Rights leader Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Perhaps that is the essence of servant leadership: to facilitate people in coming alive. Interestingly enough, when we support people in tapping into that part of themselves that is most alive, then their most selfless

motivations surface. So people who've come alive are naturally amenable to working in a collective.

□ In this way, by supporting people in finding purpose, servant leaders inspire true, collective service. And it's all done invisibly, such that people can truly feel that they are each "helping to build a beautiful cathedral." In the ancient words of Lao Tzu, "The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words. When his task is accomplished and things have been completed, All the people say, 'We ourselves have achieved it!'"