

The Servant Leader

The concept of “servant leadership” is a unifying strand that can be found in much of the recent writing and thinking about life in the workplace. Robert K. Greenleaf, onetime management researcher at AT&T, is credited with introducing the idea in his 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*.

Greenleaf built his philosophy on the idea that **the leader exists only to serve his followers; they grant him their allegiance in response to his servant nature.** Greenleaf credits Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East* with providing his inspiration (although an earlier source, the gospel of Luke, also defines a leader as one who serves). “**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 best test is: do those served grow as persons;** do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

On this foundation, Greenleaf builds his philosophy. According to his essay, servant leaders embody these characteristics:

✳ **They are servants first.** Servant leaders are motivated by a natural desire to serve, not the lead. They must make a conscious choice to aspire to lead. People who are leaders first are responding to an innate drive to acquire power or material possessions.

✳ **They articulate goals.** A servant leader gives certainty and purpose to others by clearly articulating a goal or, in today’s leadership parlance, a vision.

✳ **They inspire trust.** Followers are confident of leaders values, competence and judgment. He has a sustaining spirit (enthoes) that supports the tenacious pursuit of a goal.

✳ **They know how to listen.** The true, natural servant leader responds to any problem by listening first. You can discipline yourself to learn to listen, and thus become a natural servant. Here, Greenleaf draws on the prayer of St. Francis, “Lord grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand.”

✳ **They are masters of positive feedback.** The servant leader always offers unqualified acceptance of the person, although she doesn’t necessarily accept the person’s effort or performance.

✳ **They rely on foresight.** No leader ever has all the information necessary to make major decisions. But servant leaders have an intuitive sense that they use to bridge information gaps. Their ability to detach from day-to-day events allows their conscious and unconscious to work together to “better foresee the unforeseeable.”

✳ **They emphasize personal development.** A servant leader views every problem as originating inside, rather than outside, himself. To remedy any “flaw in the world,” the process of change starts in the servant, not “out there.” Notes Greenleaf: “This is a difficult concept for that busybody, modern man.”

The Library Director

The library director works closely with the library board to realize the public library mission, develop long-range plans, and implement policies for the library's operations. The director works at the nexus of community and staff. Directors are expected to handle numerous responsibilities, such as the following:

- ✓ lead the planning cycles
- ✓ organize human resources
- ✓ represent the library in the community
- ✓ oversee financial operations
- ✓ interact with local, state, and national library entities
- ✓ develop the library's fiscal base through development and fund-raising
- ✓ manage facilities and technology
- ✓ plan, design, and evaluate services

Don Sager, president of an executive search and management firm, summarizes the knowledge and skills required by public library directors. They include these characteristics:

People skills. Participation in a wide range of community, social, and professional organizations. Experience with collaborative activities and team-centered projects and proficiency in working successfully with diverse groups.

Vision. Insight into the role the library will play in the future and ability to lead the organization in that direction.

Marketing Ability. Someone who can sell a new vision of library service to the community.

Communication. The ability to articulate vision to governance, staff, the public, and funding authorities. Superior writing and public speaking ability and effective use of new technology, as well as creative promotional techniques including representation of the institution in the broadcast media.

Collaborative Skills. Strength and experience in partnering with a variety of different institutions and groups; skill in forging coalitions with other influential groups in the community; political savvy in gaining the trust of elected officials; team users; and results-oriented collaborations.

Technical skills. Skill in recommending policies for effective use of computers, the Internet, and other, newer resources such as e-books. How to evaluate the impact of new information formats, how to train staff and the public in the latest hardware and software, and how to fund and prepare for the next generation of technology.

Customer Service Skills. Listening to library users and potential users and seeking feedback.

Problem-Solving Ability. Faced with challenges to Internet access, diminishing budgets, and an increasingly diverse service base, public library directors with a track record of tackling difficult issues will be sought.

Risk-Taking. Integrity, courage, and a thick skin are required for the director who must be increasingly innovative.

Self-Renewal. Astute candidates recognize that the demands of leadership require a personal plan for professional growth. Those who acknowledge this are likely to endure.

Does your library director have these skills?

- **Participates.** Library leaders belong “at the table” with other local government decisionmakers, involved in overall planning for community betterment and service provision.
- **Shares your mission.** Libraries and other service providers should know and share the strategic mission of your local government. They should find areas of commonality and ways to share resources and efforts with other departments.
- **Builds partnerships.** Partnerships with public agencies, nonprofits, and the private sector strengthen programs. Effective partnerships require time and effort to establish, but they are worth the effort if they support the vision of the community.
- **Appreciates diversity.** Differing cultural norms (organizational and community norms, for example) should be recognized, understood, and respected; and adjustments should be made as needed in program planning and execution. Flexibility and adaptability are key characteristics, needed by all involved in joint ventures.
- **Communicates.** Communicating with partners, stakeholders, and the larger community is important to grow and nurture partnerships.
- **Fosters champions.** Champions and advocates are important to make programs successful and sustainable. Library champions have a clear understanding of library services and the role the library plays in the quality of life of a community. They can contribute support in any number of ways, including time, funds, influence, services, goods, and related items.
- **Embraces innovation.** Reinforcing the library’s transformational nature and having it viewed as a great place to help change people’s lives is critical during tough budget times and when local government must be constantly changing how it does business. The library should be an engine for innovation in a community.

- from “Public Libraries Daring to be Different” by Molly Donelan and Liz Miller.
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International City/County Management Association.

<http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9208/public/cover.cfm?author=Molly%20Donelan%20and%20Liz%20Miller&title=Public%20Libraries%20Daring%20to%20Be%20Different>