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Serve First, Lead Second

“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve” (“You Must Serve”). This quote was said by one of America’s greatest servant leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr., during the civil rights movement. He sacrificed so much for the good of the people, and that is exactly what a servant leader values. Servant leadership is the philosophy and practice that seeks to improve the lives of individuals, build quality organizations, and substantially create a more benevolent world. Although it dates back at least two thousand years, this type of leadership was first coined by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader.” Greenleaf describes that a servant leader must serve first and then aspire to lead. These leaders can be some of the most successful and beneficial; therefore, it is important to know what characteristics a servant leader possesses and why they are important to society.

An average leader uses their opportunities as an exercise of power; however, this is not the case for a servant leader. Servant leaders intend to serve first. They attempt to help others by satisfying their highest priority needs before anything. To be a servant leader, one has to be selfless and be able to put the people first. Not only do they focus on the well being of people in their communities, but they also concentrate on their growth. They want to see their people thrive, develop, and be able to perform to their full potential. If they are able to achieve this goal, they can then move on to leading. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus” (Inam). Servant leaders listen to their people,

and they intend to share power with them. This is the best way to satisfy followers and be able to move forward.

It is important for our elected officials to exhibit servant leadership, but why? It ties in with all of the characteristics that this leader possesses. Although other types of leaders can be powerful, successful leadership will come from those who are guided by a spirit of service. Service leaders listen to citizens and aid the community in growth rather than using strictly their own ideas. For example, think of a mother bird. She risks everything in order to keep her babies fed. She first tends to their needs, and then she takes care of herself. Her responsibility is first to those in her charge. This could be the same with multiple other animals like spiders or even wolves! In a wolf pack, the leader must think of the pack and be able to make the best decisions for them rather than for himself. Servant leadership is all about sacrifice, but what exactly is sacrifice? Sacrifice is giving something up that you value for something more significant. In leadership, people have to make crucial decisions based on the overall good of the people in their charge, and this sometimes means sacrificing something of value to them, such as their time. It is working alongside of them instead of expecting them to do the work by themselves.

As responsible citizens, it is up to each one of us to hold our elected officials to the standards of servant leadership. The role of these officials is to represent the people who elect them, to put their people's needs above their own. Much like the mother bird, servant leaders will first "feed" the people in their care before thinking of themselves. Similar to the mother: "As a servant leader, you're a 'servant first' - you focus on the needs of others, especially team members, before you consider your own. You acknowledge other people's perspectives, give them the support they need to meet their work and personal goals, involve them in decisions where appropriate, and build a sense of community within your team. This leads to higher

engagement, more trust, and stronger relationships with team members and other stakeholders” (“Servant Leadership”). It was this philosophy that shaped Martin Luther King, Jr., and others like him into leaders who bring about positive change, and it is the same characteristics of servant leadership that today’s elected officials must embrace in order to continue propelling our world forward.

Works Cited

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