DePaul University
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Vincentian Heritage Journal

Volume 19 | Issue 1 Article 7

4-1-1998

Servant Leadership in the manner of Saint Vincent de Paul

J. P. Murphy C.M., Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj

Recommended Citation
Murphy, J. P. C.M., Ph.D. (1998) "Servant Leadership in the manner of Saint Vincent de Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol19/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu.

Servant Leadership in the Manner of Saint Vincent de Paul

By
J. Patrick Murphy, C.M.

Steve is a DePaul University graduate student and friend. He told me his story about hosting three MBA students from Hong Kong. It seems DePaul asked for volunteers to host students arriving in the U.S. for their first visit. Steve met the visitors at the airport and settled them in a Rogers Park apartment. He returned later to learn they had already been robbed while wandering around their new neighborhood. Steve took them to dinner, since they had no cash, and then brought them back to their apartment, which had been burglarized while they were at dinner. During breakfast the next morning, an intruder startled the students by breaking through a window. In the ensuing scuffle one of the students suffered cuts from broken glass. They called Steve, of course, who took them to his one-bedroom apartment for the next night and to his friend, a physician, for medical attention.

It is sad that so much tragedy came to these first-time visitors to the U.S. But it is a great DePaul story because it is rooted in (Vincent) DePaul values of respecting the dignity of others and serving the poor and unfortunate. It is also a serviceable example of servant leadership in action. Steve set out to serve the visiting students. His service was also leadership. The students are likely to offer similar service and become servant leaders as well.

Introduction

Our purpose here is to discern similarities between Vincent de Paul and Robert K. Greenleaf regarding how they approached service and leadership. Their core values are nearly the same, as I see it, although they lived centuries and continents apart and wrote in different languages. We begin with the writings Greenleaf, especially the 1977 edition of *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness.*[1]

---

[1] Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

Vincent's own style, "He acted with much prudence and circumspection, a characteristic of leadership in which he excelled. All who knew him realized how careful and considerate he was in what he said and did, especially when it had to do with directing others."[2]

Greenleaf provides three foundational questions to check the servant leader:

Do those served grow as persons?

Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

What is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?

We can imagine Vincent concerned about the growth of those he served: his confreres, the Daughters, the Ladies of Charity, even the Council of Conscience. He would strike a fire in their hearts to see Jesus in the face of the poor even as he did. He would transform them into servant leaders and send them out to serve and evangelize. All this servant and transformational leadership[3] flowed from Vincent's love of the poor—the least preferred in Greenleaf's society. This person-centered core value shared by Greenleaf and Vincent manifests itself among followers of both. Vincentian institutions are rooted in this person-to-person care (as found among members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society) and in respecting the dignity and diversity of others in the Vincentian educational and health care institutions.[4]

Vincent wrote to the Ladies of Charity, "The liberty and dignity of the person helped must be respected with the greatest sensitivity. The aid contributed should be organized in such a way that beneficiaries are gradually freed from their dependence on others and become self supporting." Greenleaf believed nothing of substance will happen in society unless people inside institutions are able to (and want to) lead them into better performance for the public good.

The idea of the servant as leader came to Greenleaf from his reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*. Leo, the main character, is the stable boy who takes care of a group on a journey. Only after

---

[2] Ibid. 295.

[3] For more information on transformational leadership, see Tichy and Devanna, *The Transformational Leader*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1986).

[4] See also Louise Sullivan, D.C., *The Core Values of Vincentian Education*, (Chicago: DePaul University, 1997).

losing their way and finding Leo as the leader of a monastic order does the narrator understand that Leo was leader—as servant boy—without whom they lost their way. For Greenleaf the story clearly says that the great leader is seen as servant first, and that simple fact is the key to greatness. For Leo, leadership was a by-product of service. Leadership could be taken or given away, but service and the servant nature was the real person—not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away.

Vincent came to servant leadership through prayer and scripture. He was inspired, for instance, by the passage from Luke: "Earthly kings lord it over their people. Those who exercise authority over them are called their benefactors. Yet it cannot be that way with you. Let the greater among you be as the junior, the leader as servant."[5] When a confrere superior wrote to complain that he would prefer to "take care of a flock of animals rather than the men," Vincent replied:

> What you say is true for those who want everyone to bow before them. They want no one to resist them, and want everyone to act according to their own viewpoints. They want to be obeyed without hesitation, and in a certain way, want to be adored by them. This is not so for those who seek contradictions and contempt. They look upon themselves as the servants of their brethren. They seek to walk in our Lord's steps. He endured from his own followers crudeness, rivalry, lack of faith and so on. He even said that he had come to serve and not to be served.[6]

Greenleaf takes a similar approach:

> The natural servant, the person who is servant first, is more likely to persevere and refine a particular hypothesis on what serves another's highest priority needs than is the person who is leader first and who later serves out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations. My hope for the future rests in part on my belief that among the legions of deprived and unso-

---

[5] Luke 22: 25-26.

[6] Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul,* Vol 3, (New York: New City Press, 1993), 306.

> phisticated people are many true servants who will lead, and that most of them can learn to discriminate among those who presume to serve them and identify the true servants whom they will follow.[7]

Vincent and Greenleaf both realized that followers are incomplete creations and the only way to accomplish anything through them was to serve them. If we are servant—either leader or follower—we are always searching, listening, expecting that a better solution is in the making. Greenleaf's notion of continuous quality improvement, a concept popularized by recent authors, was also shared by Vincent. Vincent constantly sought new and better ways to serve the poor—in parishes, seminaries or on the street, with Lazarists, Daughters or Ladies or Charity. Greenleaf suggested we take a fresh, critical look at issues of power and authority. Vincent turned the church upside down (we truly can think of it as in inverted pyramid) to put the poor on top with the rest of us in service and support, evangelizing them. The principle lives on in the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission: "the Congregation of the Mission should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal."[8]

Greenleaf suggested a new moral principle:

> The only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions, rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants.[9]

Who is the servant-leader?

For Greenleaf, it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to

---

[7] Greenleaf, 15.
[8] Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, 2: 27.
[9] Greenleaf, 10.

serve, to serve first. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. This is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care by the servant-first to make sure to serve other people's highest priority needs. Vincent wrote to a superior: "Live together cordially and simply, in such a way that in seeing you together, it could not be guessed who the superior was."[10]

It All Begins with Initiative

Greenleaf notes that the quality of civilization will take shape because of the actions of individuals born of inspiration. The very essence of leadership, going out ahead to show the way, derives from more-than-usual openness to inspiration. Too many who presume to lead do not see clearly. Rather, too many leaders argue to preserve the system—what Greenleaf calls a fatal error. The leader, he says, needs more than inspiration. The leader initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and takes the risk of failure along with the chance of success. The inspired Vincent told his priests, "Let us go forth and work with renewed love in service of the poor. Let us seek out the most poor and abandoned. Let us realize that the poor are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our small service."[11] Vincent's vision and goal was strong and clear.

What are we trying to do here?

For Greenleaf this is the hardest question to answer. What is our mission, vision or goal? Leaders dream the dream and show the way. We may arrive at this goal by group consensus or by inspiration of the leader. But the leader knows it and casts it in a creative way. Every achievement starts with a goal, a yearning for something that is currently out of reach. Leaders state it in such compelling ways that it challenges people to work for it.

---

[10] Abelly, 294.

[11] Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), "On love for the poor" conference of 1657, 11: 392-393. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

Vincent derived his inspiration from prayer, reflection, his friends and the poor. He attributed it all to Providence. Most of his successful endeavors derived from others—Madame De Gondi sent him to Folleville, Madame Goussault nudged him to found the Ladies of Charity, the bishops of Paris and Beauvais asked him to offer retreats for ordinands, another priest began the Tuesday Conferences. But mostly he listened to others and then, on fire with the idea and his overwhelming compassion for the poor, he organized for practical action.

Greenleaf suggests that leaders must first elicit the trust of those who strive for the goal. Followers accept the risk along with the leader. Leaders earn trust only when we have confidence in their values, competence and judgement and when they have a sustaining spirit. By the time he died Vincent had earned the trust and confidence of most of church and society of Europe.

Listening and Understanding

Greenleaf believed that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first. This helps others see the leader as servant first. Vincent wrote to the superior of one of the houses of the Congregation: "It is not a fault to seek the advice of others. On the contrary, it is helpful, and sometimes even necessary to do so when the matter is important, or when we are not well informed about it. As for myself, I often ask the brothers, and take their advice in matters pertaining to their work."[12]

The lesson here is that if we want to become a servant leader, a good place to start is by honing our listening skills: to be servant leader, be a listener-leader. This works because true listening builds strength in others. Do we respect others so much as to give them our complete attention so they feel they are the most important person in the world to us? There may be another lesson: to identify servant leaders seek those who listen well.

An example of active, servant listening may help illustrate the point. George was a Vincentian priest nearing the end of his career. He came to DePaul University and, after a while, landed a position in the financial aid office. George had been a high school teacher who knew nothing of financial aid. I asked him what on earth he was going to do.

---

[12] *CED* IV: 35-36.

He responded that he had the best job in the university! He was to sit at the front desk and be available to students after their appointment with their counselor—after learning that there was no more aid—and listen. He offered each student his undivided attention and for the few minutes the student sat there, the student was the most important person in the world for him. George listened in service and often enough transformed those who came to him to become more like servant-listeners themselves. Saint Francis said it best, "Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand."

Greenleaf reminds us of another axiom about listening: "One must not be afraid of a little silence. Some find silence awkward or oppressive, but a relaxed approach to dialogue will include the welcoming of some silence."[13]

Withdrawal—Finding One's Optimum

Greenleaf says we can view people who attempt leadership as two types. Some like pressure by their nature— they seek it out—and they perform best when they intensely pursue goals. Others do not like pressure, but want to lead and are willing to endure the pressure in order to have the opportunity. The former welcome a happy exhaustion; the latter are in a constant defense against it. For both the art of withdrawal is useful. For the former withdrawal is a change of pace, for the latter it is a defense against an unpleasant state. Greenleaf offered the example of Jesus confronted with the woman caught in adultery. When asked for his opinion, Jesus withdrew by drawing in the sand. This allowed him time to reflect, to calm himself and to fashion an answer remembered for millennia. Jesus also withdrew for forty-day vacations in the desert to salve his spirit and to sort out the important from the urgent.

Vincent sent his people into the streets and among the poor, but he also brought them home to withdraw and regenerate. He never wavered from his purpose of evangelizing the poor. Pacing oneself by appropriate withdrawal is the classic approach to making optimal use of one's resources. The servant-leader constantly asks, "How can I use myself to serve best?" Vincent withdrew to consult his own advisor: "He held it as a principle that any advice given too quickly was an expression of one's own personal judgement rather than the inspira-

---

[13] Greenleaf, 17.

tion of the Holy Spirit, whom he preferred to consult before responding."[14]

Acceptance and Empathy

For Greenleaf acceptance is receiving what is offered, with approbation, satisfaction, or acquiescence. Vincent might call that humility. Empathy is the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness into another being. The opposite of both—rejection—is to refuse to hear or receive, to throw out. The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects. The servant leader always accepts the person, while sometimes refusing to accept some effort or performance, as good enough. Great leaders, regardless of their exteriors, have empathy and an unqualified acceptance of those who go with their leadership. Acceptance of the person requires a tolerance of imperfection. Anybody could lead perfect people—if there were any. There are none. Parents who try to raise perfect children raise neurotics.

For Greenleaf the typical person—immature, stumbling, inept, lazy—is capable of great dedication and heroism if wisely led. Many are disqualified to lead because they are unable to work with and through the half-people they have. But they are all we have. The secret is in welding a team of such people by lifting them to grow taller than they would otherwise be. Vincent, and Jesus too, worked patiently with whatever they had—the incomplete and unfinished men and women who shared their vision and dedication to the poor. (Remember the poor superior who wrote to Vincent that he would rather care for a flock of animals.) They knew their failings and weaknesses, but each worked with them building them into a whole greater than the sum of its parts, helping them to grow as persons to become healthier, wiser, freer and servants themselves.

What is empathy for Greenleaf is compassion for Vincent, a characteristic that guided and informed his life. "Compassion means to suffer with our brothers and sisters, to weep when they weep. Quite different from those who feel no sorrow for the afflicted or grief for the sufferings of the poor, compassion is that manifestation of love which enables us to enter into another's heart and feelings."[15]

---

[14] Abelly, 296.

[15] On Charity, conference of May 30, 1659, *CED* 12: 270-71.

Know the Unknowable—Beyond Conscious Rationality

Greenleaf tells us that "leaders need two intellectual abilities not usually assessed in an academic way: they need a sense for the unknowable and they need to foresee the unforeseeable." Leaders get ahead of others because they know things and foresee things others do not. Vincent did this by letting others come up with the initial idea, trusting Providence, then organizing like mad. A good example of this is Vincent's gradual realization that sending priests to preach the missions only to be replaced by corrupt local clergy was keeping him from his vision of evangelizing the poor. He realized that he would have to reform the clergy too. With the Council of Conscience he worked behind the scenes to bring about societal change to benefit the poor—change unimagined even by those who were making it.

Greenleaf reminds us that the art of leadership is to bridge the information gap with intuition. Leaders must be more creative than most. Creativity is largely discovery—a push into the uncharted and the unknown. Occasionally leaders need to think like poets, prophets, lovers or dreamers. Intuition is a feel for patterns, the ability to generalize based on what has happened previously. Leaders act on hunches, but calculated ones. Vincent was practical in all he did. He learned by doing, he was results oriented, and he was an effective change agent. He consulted widely and reflected in prayer with great deliberation, but his solutions were always practical, never theoretical. He even taught his confreres to be practical preachers through the Little Method. "Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be at the expense of our arms and in the sweat of our brows."[16]

Foresight–the Central Ethic of Leadership

For Greenleaf, prescience, or foresight, "is a better-than-average guess about what is going to happen when in the future beginning with a state of mind about now."[17] The prudent leader constantly thinks of now as the moving concept in which past, present moment and future are one organic unity. This requires living by a rhythm that encourages a high level of intuitive insight about the gamut of events from the indefinite past, through the present moment, to the indefinite future.

---

[16] On Charity, conference of May 30, 1659, *CED* 12: 261-62.

[17] Greenleaf, 24.

Vincent's musing are replete with notions of prudence and Providence. He would never talk about prescience, but he was unshakable in his faith in the Providence of God. Greenleaf and Vincent would never agree on language here, but we might understand the similarities of their core values—each rooted in faith.

> The good which God desires is accomplished almost by itself, without our even thinking of it. That is how our Congregation came into being, that missions and retreats for the ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was formed, that the Ladies of Charity for the assistance of the poor at the Hôtel Dieu of Paris and the sick in the parishes were established. That is also how the care of the foundlings began, and, in a word, how all the works for which we are now responsible came into existence. None of the above was deliberately undertaken by us, but God himself, who wanted to be served in such circumstances, brought them imperceptibly into being. If he made use of us, we had no idea, however, where this was leading.[18]

How do we learn this business of foresight? We need to live at two levels of consciousness. One is the real world—concerned, responsible, effective, value oriented. At the same time, we need to live detached, riding above the real world, seeing today's events, and seeing ourselves deeply involved in the events, in the perspective of a long sweep of history and projected into the indefinite future. Vincent and Greenleaf were masters of this—each living in the grunge of their worlds but seeing beyond them.

Servant leaders carry the burden of other people to show the way and take on the rough and tumble world in the belief that if we are prepared with experience, knowledge and intuition, then optimal performance will be forthcoming. Is there another way?

For Greenleaf the failure of leaders to foresee may be an ethical failure. A serious ethical compromise today, he would say, is sometimes the result of a failure to make the effort at an earlier date to foresee today's events and take the right actions when there was

---

[18] A letter to Philipe Le Vacher, 1651, *CED* 4: 122-23. Also see Coste, English translation, Jacqueling Kilar, D.C., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* (New York: New City Press, 1983), IV: 122-23.

freedom to act. Vincent lived his life with a great sense of urgency about serving the poor—so much to do, so little time in the day. He focused on his goal and fretted over needs unmet.

Awareness and Perception

Greenleaf frames all of this as awareness, opening wide the doors of perception so as to enable the servant leader to get more of what is available of sensory experience and other signals from the environment than people usually take in. This is risky, but it makes life more interesting. Leaders must tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness to better "see it as it is." For Greenleaf, "awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener."[19] Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They do not seek after solace; they have their own inner serenity.

Vincent occasionally used strong language to make his point. "At this time it seems as if it is the will of God that the Company should possess this virtue, because of the way in which the world is flooded with duplicity. It is difficult to find anybody who says what he thinks."[20] And from Abelly, "Among all the things that might hurt a community, nothing is more dangerous than that a community be governed by a superior who is too soft, who wants to please others, and who seeks to be loved. He added that just as a poor showing in a war is ordinarily laid at the feet of the general of the army, so the failings of a religious community can usually be attributed to the superior."

Conclusion

Vincent founded an institution—I do not mean here the Congregation of the Mission or the Daughters of Charity or any of the others, but the institution of service to the poor shared by so many. In a 1974 talk to the School Sisters of Saint Francis at Alverno College, Greenleaf defined institution in these words:

> An institution is a gathering of persons who have accepted a common purpose, and a common discipline to guide the pursuit of that purpose, to the end that each

---

[19] Greenleaf, 28.

[20] On the five fundamental virtues, conference of August 22, 1659, *CED* 12:303.

> involved person reaches higher fulfillment as a person, through serving and being served by the common venture, than would be achieved alone or in a less committed relationship.[21]

Vincent was the servant leader of his day. He was a disturber and an awakener. He planted his vision firmly in the mind of his followers and never wavered from it. "So then, gentlemen, it is most beneficial to strive unceasingly after perfection so that all our actions may be pleasing to God, and so that we may be made worthy to render assistance to others."[22]

In Vincent's eulogy Bishop Henri de Maupas du Tour said: "He almost totally changed the face of the church." Perhaps. He certainly changed the way much of society thinks about the poor. He was able to do this because he was a transformational, servant leader. This is the secret to what attracted others to his vision. In a recent study of Mexican-American Catholics in southern Colorado,[23] Dan Borlik, C.M., found that simple Mexicanos were more likely to follow the leadership of their pastors only when the pastors offered themselves as servants first. Only when they listened first and empathized humbly were the people able to become good followers. Vincent pioneered this approach to leadership. Greenleaf put words to experience.

Mostly I prefer to view Vincent's life story as a whole. As a whole it states the unabashed truth of a life in total service of others. His story lives on both in the lives of those served and among the Vincentians of all stripes carrying out his work today around the world. What is the effect on the least privileged in society? The hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the poor have the Gospel preached to them. They grow as persons, they become healthier, wiser, freer, more likely themselves to become servants.

---

[21] Greenleaf, 237.

[22] On the end of the Congregation of the Mission, conference of December 6, 1658, *CED* 12: 78.

[23] An outsider listens: a critical conversation about pastoral leadership with a Mexicano Catholic faith community. Dan Borlik, C.M., Unpublished dissertation from the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, June 3, 1999.

We must await from Providence along whatever God will be pleased to ordain.

(Saint Vincent de Paul,
letter to Firmin Get, 14 June 1658)

God's gifts vary and He distributes them as He sees fit.

(St. Vincent de Paul,
letter to Benjamin Huguier, 5 May 1658)