Leadership in Economic Development: A Look at Servant Leadership

by Joy Wilkins, CEcD

Servant-leaders differ from other persons of goodwill because they act on what they believe. Consequently, they “know experimentally” and there is a sustaining spirit when they venture and risk. – Robert K. Greenleaf

In his pioneering 1970 essay “The Servant as Leader,” Greenleaf coined the term servant-leader, and in doing so launched one of the most impactful and ageless conversations regarding leadership. To put it simply, leaders who believe in the principles of servant leadership broadly answer the “leadership for what” question with the basic response that leadership exists to serve – period.

The servant-leader, explained Greenleaf, is someone who is naturally inclined to serve first, and then determinedly chooses to be a leader for the purpose of acting on their compelling desire to serve. The critical question for the servant-leader is “have those I served become better through the shared experience of my serving them?” This question is more often than not the driving motivation for the economic development leader.

Whatever strategy employed, economic development leaders – whether they are paid professionals, elected officials or volunteers – desire to make the world around them a better place. Improving the living conditions for those they serve is at the very heart of why they do what they do. Therefore, economic development, by its mission, is a highly illustrative practice of servant leadership.

This desire to help others is clear in many economic development functions. For example, economic developers work to attract new industry and investment in order to help those they serve become gainfully employed. Through entrepreneur development strategies, they seek to help people become their own means of production while potentially employing others. In business retention and expansion endeavors, economic developers work to help local companies sustain and grow their enterprises, which, in turn, enable them to employ current and future workers. Workforce development is perhaps economic development at the most personal level, as economic developers seek to help individuals reach their optimum productive potential. Each of these approaches preserves or increases a community’s tax base for services which help community citizens.

Dimensions of servant leadership

About this article

Economic development leaders are true change agents for their communities. Therefore, the dividends of their leadership in terms of impact on those they serve are untold and often cumulative in nature. This article is the first in a series that will focus on the application of leadership principles in the practice of economic development. How do we respond to the call for dynamic and adaptive leadership given the ever-evolving economic, social, environmental and political considerations affecting our communities and organizations? This series aims to contribute to the conversation.
Stephen Covey, in his foreword to the 25th anniversary edition of Greenleaf’s “Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness,” identifies some key dimensions at the core of servant leadership. A review of these dimensions (paraphrased below) further exemplifies how economic developers are truly servant-leaders.

- **To be a servant-leader involves some sacrifice of self.** Covey discusses the subordination of one’s self to a higher purpose, cause or principle. Economic developers often subordinate their time, energy and talents – beyond what they are compensated to do – to help others develop, sustain or grow their livelihood.

- **Servant-leaders are inspired to become part of a “worthy” cause commensurate with their commitment.** According to Covey, such persons focus on what is being asked of them, rather than what they want in life. For example, many economic developers recognize that they are an important cog – with the potential to be a highly impactful cog – in helping the communities they serve reach their ongoing potential. They see what they do as a privilege, one which enables them to serve current and future generations.

- **For the servant-leader, the “ends and means are inseparable.”** The servant-leader, explains Covey, understands that the ends do not necessarily justify the means. Instead, citing the work of Immanuel Kant, he shares how “the means used to accomplish the ends are as important as those ends.” Sustainable and effective economic development efforts are based on trusted relationships in which members can count on each other for their integrity, commitment, honesty and genuine care for others in each interaction.

    The focus on “means,” not just “ends,” is so critical that IEDC has adopted a [code of ethics](#) for members in an ongoing effort to promote ethical behavior in the practice of economic development.

- **In a world of relationships, servant-leaders recognize the interdependent state of the human condition.** Covey recognizes the importance of shared vision and shared values among the people being served. Beyond this is a shared passion, which is critical for a community to realize its full potential in its pursuit of economic development. Understanding this interdependence is a prerequisite for building the type of strong partnerships and collaborative relationships which are essential in economic development. Indeed, one of the greatest detractors for new and existing investors is when they can observe community leaders not “singing from the same song sheet.”

Greenleaf called attention to community building as imperative to servant leadership. This call is inherent in the mind of the economic development leader. That is, it is commonly recognized that community development depends upon helping community members reach their productive potential through economic development, and economic development depends upon the availability of supportive community infrastructure made possible through community development. Enabling these interconnections, the economic developer is the quintessential community builder.
To summarize his description of servant-leaders, Greenleaf noted how they “care for both persons and institutions, and are determined to make their caring count – wherever they are involved.” With this said, it should be recognized that the act of serving others is not a “self-less act” per se. We’re not talking about martyrdom. In fact, many servant-leaders receive enjoyment and peace from knowing that their efforts have helped others. Likewise, they often have difficulty participating in situations which they view as having the opposite effect. Indeed, servant leadership ideally yields mutually beneficial impacts for the leader and those being served. The practice of economic development has proven for many to be a meaningful way to exercise servant leadership.

**Greenleaf’s ongoing influence**

Greenleaf’s thoughts have served as a source of inspiration for many later writers on the subject of leadership. Author of “The Fifth Discipline,” Peter Senge argues that there is no need to “bother reading any other book about leadership” until you first read Greenleaf’s thoughts on servant leadership. Similarly, James Sipe and Don Frick observe in the “Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practicing the Wisdom of Leading by Serving” that “most organizations that have implemented servant leadership because it was the right thing to do have enjoyed benefits others can only dream about.”

In “Servant-Leadership Across Cultures,” Fons Trompenaars and Ed Voerman point to “Good to Great” author Jim Collins’ description of “Level 5 Leadership” (a “special mix of professional willpower and personal modesty”) as a form of servant leadership. In “The Servant-Leader Within: A Transformative Path,” Larry Spears builds on Greenleaf’s thoughts in describing ten characteristics of the servant-leader. These include capabilities in listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges say servant-leaders “look at leadership as an act of service. They embrace and welcome feedback as a source of useful information on how they can provide a better service.”

The conversation and thought-evolution regarding how to exercise effective servant leadership continues, and benefits from the insights of leaders young and old. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (www.greenleaf.org) is a key vehicle for joining in on the conversation, learning more about the resources available for servant-leaders and participating in a worldwide network for servant leadership.

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