



Public Servant Leadership

A New Paradigm for Public Service

By John T. Hanson

The public servant-leadership approach combines the time-honored philosophy of servant-leadership with the new science of motivation in a way that improves service to constituents and accountability of workers.

The unwritten rules of public service in the United States are changing dramatically. The old public servant paradigm holds that government employees trade off lower wages for better benefits and job security, but this business model is crumbling. Many argue that compensation packages (including benefits) in the public sector have risen to make them comparable with those in the private sector.¹ And public-sector jobs are no longer as secure as they used to be; public employees are facing layoffs, furloughs, wage freezes, pay cuts, and benefit reductions. These changes necessitate new leadership styles, motivational techniques, and a new approach to public employment. As the psychological contract between employees and governments or municipalities is altered, a new paradigm will be required to motivate employees and deliver governmental services.

Governments create public value by providing services to constituents, which has typically been a labor-intensive process. Salaries, benefits, and other employee-related expenses comprise the largest component of most municipal budgets. Reduced tax collections and a struggling economy have engendered taxpayer anger and put tremendous pressure on governmental finances. As budgets shrink, voters are demanding that governments become leaner. Public-sector managers and

elected officials can no longer use salary and benefit increases to motivate employees. Public employees will have to adapt to the new realities of tighter budgets and increased scrutiny.

Public employers need to find innovative ways to motivate their workforce in this environment. In his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink posits that as new business models emerge, motivational systems must recognize “our innate need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and our world.”² Pink describes people as “purpose maximizers.” These ideas are some of the building blocks of a new leadership philosophy that stimulates intrinsic motivation within the workforce, an approach that is highly compatible with government service.

Governmental entities exist to fulfill a mission. They operate without a profit motive to keep order in our communities, educate our children, provide services for the public good, and serve as faithful stewards of public assets. Public employers provide staff with the opportunity to improve the lives of their constituents and make their communities better places to live. They offer purpose.

To survive and succeed in these difficult economic times, government leaders and their employees must work

together to replace the old-fashioned public servant paradigm with a business model that is aligned with the realities of current business conditions and constituent expectations. This new paradigm must reflect taxpayer's demands for more streamlined, lower cost government and recognize public employees' role as purpose maximizers. It should identify and institutionalize the core values that are the foundation of the new approach to public service and encourage employee engagement. By fully engaging their employees, governments can revolutionize the way they do business and transform their staff from public servants to public servant-leaders.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Robert K. Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive, introduced the idea of servant-leadership in a 1970 essay, "The Servant as Leader." He wrote, "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person 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."³ The concept is a paradox. Servants are typically thought of as powerless, yet Greenleaf avers that the desire to serve is what generates the strength to transform the humble servant into an influential leader.

The servant helps others with compassion and expertise. Those who are leaders first issue directives and are driven by ego. Servant-leaders guide others with caring and competence, not by force of personality. Servant-

leaders are acutely aware of the needs of their colleagues and other stakeholders, and they assert leadership through their desire to subordinate themselves to those stakeholders. Servant-leaders do not acquire power as a means to self-aggrandizement — they use it only when necessary to allow them to provide greater service. Public-servant-leaders carry out their organizational missions and add to the quality of life in their communities through the stewardship of public assets and the services they provide.

Larry C. Spears, President and CEO of the Larry C. Spears Center for Servant-Leadership, has distilled ten characteristics of servant-leadership from Greenleaf's original writings. They are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.⁴ These qualities form the foundation of the servant-leadership belief system. They are the hallmark of servants who make the choice to become leaders. According to Spears, servant-leaders focus on ethical behavior, rely heavily on teamwork, and involve others in decision making. He describes the philosophy as a holistic approach that improves our institutions, builds community, and promotes personal growth among employees. He writes, "...servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work — in essence, a way of being — that has the potential for positive change throughout our society."

Greenleaf stresses that the servant-leader must "make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test ... is this: Do those

served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

Servant-leaders focus on doing the most important things possible while serving others; they are highly effective. Servant-leaders encourage their charges to engage in personal development, and use autonomy to challenge them to become better — "healthier, wiser, freer." In this way, the servant leader places the responsibility for improvement on those he serves while inspiring them to offer even higher levels of service to others. This approach breeds a level of accountability that is possible among only highly autonomous workers.

PUBLIC-SERVANT-LEADER

The transformation of the public servant paradigm starts at the highest levels of government. Elected officials and government managers need to reflect on their original motives for getting involved in the public sector and examine their personal commitment to serving the public. They need to decide if they are prepared to resist the flattery of sycophants and opportunities for personal gain, as well as the trappings of hubris and ego that sometimes present themselves in public life. This will allow them to rededicate themselves to improving our institutions and communities, and to set an example for their subordinates. By identifying service to others as the highest value in government, and taking actions congruent with that ideal, these leaders will

encourage their subordinates to do the same; they will inspire them to become public servant-leaders.

The next step is to communicate honestly and openly with employees about changes in the prospects of public employment. The realities of tight budgets and taxpayer resentment must be carefully explained. Officials need to listen attentively and empathetically to staff concerns, while continuing to reinforce the message. This will give staff the chance to reconsider their decision to seek employment in the public sector. As elected officials, public-sector managers, and their staffs all reflect on the changes in the environment, they must confront the impact of these new developments on the roles and economics of public employment. This will afford them the opportunity to connect with the desire to serve, or to direct their energy elsewhere. Those who choose to remain will be the pioneers who begin the shift to the new public servant-leader paradigm.

Public servant-leaders are committed to personal growth — their own and that of their employees, their supervisors, and their constituents. Through this commitment, they increase their capacity to serve the organization's stakeholders. As they facilitate the personal improvement of those they encounter through the course of this work, public servant-leaders listen carefully to their ideas, suggestions, complaints, and fears. Consequently, a high level of rapport develops, enhancing the levels of awareness and empathy among all of those involved (see Exhibit 1). This allows public servant-leaders to identify the most important needs of their communities so their jurisdictions

Exhibit 1: Instant Empathy Technique

Empathy — the capacity to participate in the feelings and thoughts of others — provides public servant-leaders with the ability to develop rapport with people and the context to understand them. The instant empathy technique is a series of questions designed to help aspiring public servant-leaders see things from someone else's point of view. Apply the questions to the behaviors you are trying to understand, and reflect on your answers.

- What would I have to believe to behave that way?
- If I behaved like that, what would I be trying to accomplish?
- If I said something like that, what would I be thinking and feeling?
- What would I have to feel in order to act that way?
- If I were behaving like that, what would I be thinking?
- What would motivate me to act like that?

To make this technique even more effective, try to adopt the body language and facial expressions of the individuals you are trying to understand while you are reflecting on the behavior. Breathe the way they breathe. With a little practice, you will find that this technique will help you develop tremendous empathy for others. No matter how unusual or irrational someone's behavior is to you, it makes sense to them. If you practice this technique, you will find yourself beginning to develop the context to understand their actions and needs.

can have the biggest impact possible. They take responsibility for creating the results that the community demands.

This heightened understanding of the high priority needs of the community guides public servant-leaders; they require less outside direction. As they become more autonomous, they make better decisions and courageously encourage subordinates, supervisors, and constituents to participate in the decision-making process. Differences of opinion are resolved by persuading others with the relevant facts, not through autocratic, ego-driven methods.

Public servant-leaders' ethics are rooted in stewardship. They recognize that that they hold important public

assets, institutions, and even their own position in trust for the community. As faithful stewards, they do not enrich themselves at the public's expense. They act as trusted caretakers for those they serve, for future generations, and for the people who succeed them.

THE FUTURE

The servant-leadership doctrine predicts that "in the future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led."⁵ Our existing public institutions employ a motivational system based on rewarding desired behaviors and punishing those who are considered undesirable. Indeed, the concepts of reward and punishment are at the heart of patron-

age employment systems that still exist in government service. If government is to surmount the challenges it currently faces, employees will need to be more creative and develop non-routine solutions to providing constituent services. With these goals, the old carrot and stick method does not work and will likely make things worse.⁶ Public servant-leadership paves the way for implementing more efficacious motivational systems in the public sector.

Greenleaf calls foresight — the ability to project the past and present forward to predict the future — the “central ethic of leadership.” With regard to public employment, the future is unlikely to include the steady increases in compensation and benefits that were the norm until recently. Public managers will no longer be able to approach employee motivation by simply dangling a carrot. They will need to adopt the public servant-leadership philosophy, which recognizes that money is usually not the most effective motivator.

The new science of motivation asserts that the keys to producing employee engagement — leading to high performance — are autonomy, mastery, and purpose.⁷ This aligns with the imperatives of servant-leadership: helping others become more autonomous, promoting personal growth, and recognizing service to others as the highest value. Public-servant-leaders motivate by creating a purpose-driven, results-oriented culture. They hold public workers accountable for outcomes, but allow great flexibility in how they are produced. They provide employees with the opportunity to improve their communities and ensure that they have the appropriate tools and training to

achieve this result. They emphasize the importance of the mission of their agency or municipality and the role it plays in society.

CONCLUSIONS

Governments draw power from their citizens and exist to provide service to them; they are inherently suited to operating as servant-led institutions. They perform functions on behalf of their constituents that the private sector cannot handle or that are best not left to privately owned organizations. Public policymakers have often determined, for instance, that responsibility for important public assets and matters of security should not be entrusted to companies with a profit motive. In addition, private-sector companies would quickly abandon unprofitable activities and business lines (e.g., public transportation). Conversely, governmental entities exist to provide services related to their mission and create public value, not to make a profit.

Public value is determined by answering three questions: How sound is the mission? How effectively is the mission performed? How efficiently is the mission accomplished? Metrics can be developed to measure effectiveness and efficiency based on benchmarks developed internally by the organization. They will indicate how well the mission is being accomplished and the cost of doing it. These tools facilitate the management of expenses and quality of service. The soundness of the mission, however, must be measured against a higher order vision that comes from the community. It is the standard against which organizational priorities are assigned.

Public servant-leaders divine the vision from the community by listening empathetically, becoming aware of its deepest needs, and conceptualizing them into the mission. This vision must be evaluated based on the criteria set forth by Greenleaf: A sound mission improves the health, wisdom, freedom, and autonomy of the citizenry while carefully considering the effect it has on those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. If these criteria are met, the mission will recruit others to the cause and inspire them to service.

The current political and governmental environment is charged with anger and finger pointing. Voters blame elected officials and government employees for budget deficits and high taxes. Politicians blame each other. Public employees resent the way they are treated by elected officials, taxpayers, and the media. Our leaders have run out of carrots, and many have resorted to using sticks: More rules, more regulation, more oversight, and more vitriolic diatribe. These actions conflict with the latest thinking on human motivation and with the public servant-leadership philosophy. Greenleaf admonishes, “The healthy society, like the healthy body, is not the one that has taken the most medicine. It is the one in which the internal health building forces are in the best shape.”

Organizations in the public sector must invite the people who actually do the work to join the dialogue about how to perform it more effectively and efficiently. Introducing process improvement programs such as Lean and Six Sigma taps into the creativity of public employees and produces engagement. They also instill discipline

and accountability by employing measurement techniques and metrics. The customer focus of these business management strategies, combined with the public servant-leader's commitment to service, creates a powerful approach to meeting the community's needs while reducing costs.

Can public-servant-leadership be effective in these turbulent times, or is it too "warm and fuzzy"? The public-servant-leadership philosophy is not a feel good approach that abandons rules and tough decisions in favor of platitudes and lofty ideas. It combines innovative thinking on employee motivation with the time-honored principles of servant-leadership in a way that shares the responsibility for creating solutions

among all stakeholders: public employees and managers, elected officials, taxpayers, and voters. Public-servant-leadership encourages a collaborative approach to problem solving that recognizes that we all have a stake in the success of our public institutions. ■

Notes

1. Michael Powell, "Public Workers Face Outrage as Budget Crises Grow," *New York Times*, January 1, 2011.
2. Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
3. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002).
4. Spears, Larry C., "The Understanding and Practice of Servant-Leadership," in *Practicing Servant Leadership: Succeeding Through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

5. Greenleaf
6. Pink
7. Pink

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