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Servant Leadership: Guiding Extension Programs in the 21st Century

Kirk A. Astroth

Interim Associate Dean

College of Agriculture & Life Sciences and

Interim Director

Cooperative Extension

The University of Arizona

Tucson, Arizona

kastroth@cals.arizona.edu

Jeff Goodwin

Director

Colorado 4-H

Colorado State University

Ft. Collins, Colorado

Jeff.goodwin@colostate.edu

Frank Hodnett

Director

New Mexico 4-H

New Mexico State University

Las Cruces, New Mexico

fhodnett@nmsu.edu

Abstract: A new set of leadership skills is required for Extension administrators for the 21st century. Past models and theories are reviewed and discussed. The old "power" model of leadership is no longer relevant. A relatively new model called "Servant Leadership" is reviewed and explained. Seven key practices of servant leadership are outlined, and the model is based on one of the oldest leadership models, Taoism. Five key steps are proposed for Extension administrators who want to lead from a new paradigm. Extension is challenged to adopt servant leadership as its model.

"There is always a new surprise just around the corner for the knowledge worker."

Conley, 2010, p. 59

Introduction

Since its formation in 1914, leadership has been a key element of Extension and Extension administration. Over the years, a number of people (Astroth & Robbins, 1984; Fehlis, 2005; McDowell, 2001; Osborne &

Gaebler, 1992; Patton, 1987; Smith, 1990; Talbert, 1922) have weighed in with their perspectives on the mix of leadership skills that would service Extension well. Some of these skills (such as flexibility, pro-active orientation, future orientation, a holistic perspective) have endured over time. Others skills have been shown to be dated, while still others have not survived the test of time (such as legal formality, command/control styles of leadership, hierarchical authority, unquestioning loyalty, leadership through fear, "carrot vs. stick" motivational strategies). As we leave the first and enter the second decade of the 21st century, a new set of leadership skills is required for successfully guiding complex and large non-profit organizations like Extension into the new frontier (Block, 1996; Johansen, 2009; Loeb, 1999; MacKenzie, 1996; Maxwell, 1999). In the current age, old models no longer apply or serve us well (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005; Glaser, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Lublin, 2010; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

Leadership skills for Extension administrators and agents have been at the forefront almost from the beginnings of the organization. Kansas Superintendent of Institutes and Extension Schools T.J. Talbert (1922) provided a detailed and entertaining list of critical attributes for Extension workers in Kansas. Among his advice were suggestions to "study and serve the people," "stick to the truth," and "forget yourself and boost for all." Among his more humorous tidbits were "Don't mail that sarcastic letter," "use discretion in telling jokes," and "smoke at the proper time and place."

Leadership Revisited

Since then, a variety of Extension leaders have added their own voices to this chorus. Patton (1987) suggested that Extension was an agricultural-age idea with an industrial-age bureaucracy and an information-age mandate. According to Patton, even 30+ years ago, Extension needed a new leadership model because the "role of leadership had changed." Leadership must of necessity focus on team work, group accountability, flexibility, and working on the cutting edge. As Patton stated then:

The university system of individual accountability and performance evaluation is in conflict with the team and matrix organizations of the information age, where individual contributions vary by the nature of the problem and outcomes are the joint responsibility of those involved.

Keith Smith, long-time Extension Director in Ohio, reviewed some of the thinking of Mueller (1984) and Campbell (1085) to arrive at his own suggestions of the leadership skills needed by Extension leaders in the futureâ organizational fluidity, a climate of entrepreneurship, employee mobility, and increased freedom and encouragement (Smith, 1990). Buford (1990) arrived at similar conclusions, stressing that Extension must become more characterized by a climate of entrepreneurship and become more market-driven. At the time, others observed that Extension was more concerned with "doing things right than doing the right things" (ECOP, 1987, p 1.). There were increased calls for a change in both leadership skills from top-down to more nimble, market-responsive approaches.

Following Patton, Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) sided with the notion that there needs to be a "post-heroic" model of leadership "based on bottom-up transformation fueled by shared power and community building." In their view, the new leadership model should be centered in the collective team, should be a fluid model that could adapt to content and context, and leadership should focus on relationship building.

In their classic work on leadership, Kouzes and Posner (1995) described a world that still applies today for leadersâ power has shifted, we're all connected, knowledge is the new currency, the world is fragmented, there is a new social order on the table, and there's a renewed search for meaning and purpose at work. The goal of an effective leader is to liberate the leader inside all of us and then "extraordinary things [would]

happen." For these authors, leadership was viewed as a value-added processâ the leader demonstrated competence, inspiration, commitment, encouragement, modeling, and enabling, and got these in return from employees.

In advocating for a new paradigm for Extension administrators, Patterson (1998) suggested that the 100-year-old workplace assumptions of a classical model of management no longer applied and that new approaches were needed. These approaches would be found in an understanding that administrators could no longer "control people" but would rather need to take control of the systems of work. A leader's job, in Patterson's view, was to learn how to manage and improve systems, and the rest would take care of itself. Rather than focus on bureaucracy and compliance, Patterson recommended that leaders in Extension should focus on "customer satisfaction" as the ultimate value and goal. According to Patterson, "leadership supplants bureaucracy" (p. 2). As Maxwell (1998) succinctly observed: "The true meaning of leadership is influenceâ nothing more, nothing less" (p. 11).

What becomes evident in a rereading of past works about leadership skills is that there are several ways that people have approached this topic. Some see leadership as a competency- or subject-matter-related skill. Others see leadership as a motivational or soft skill. Still others see this as an accountability skill. Many focus on relationship skills. Some focus on vision and foresight. But in nearly all cases, the old "power" model of leadership has been roundly rejected as ineffective. Cynically, Block (1996) states that "all we really need from bosses is tolerance or indifference" (p. 37). Yet, it is the old "power" model that remains pervasive beneath the surface in Extension organizationsâ how do I get ahead, how do I beat our rivals, what will help me get ahead, what will get me in a better light with my superiors?

Servant Leadershipâ A Call for A New Leadership Model

One of the recent pioneers in organizational leadership is the Greenleaf Center on Servant Leadership based in Indianapolis, Indiana <<http://www.greenleaf.org>>. This modern leadership movement began with Robert Greenleaf's (1977) essay, "The Servant as Leader," which went beyond just customer service. The true leader, in Greenleaf's view, attends to the staff he or she is trying to lead and, in doing so, serves. True leadership is about service. Why does servant leadership work? Keith (2008) outlined seven key practices of servant leaders.

1. Self-Awareness

Servant leaders are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and know that they are not perfect. They are less likely to judge and more likely to encourage because they know of their own limitations and understand their own emotions and biases. Servant leaders are in touch with their abilities and limitations, and use this knowledge to help surround themselves with people who can fill in the missing skills.

2. Listening

Servant leaders know how to listenâ first. This characteristic is key and one of the more important attributes of effective leaders. Servant leaders take time to sincerely listen to those around them and give thoughtful responses that acknowledge that they have heard the feedback they sought. Less effective leaders use power, authority, and commands first and refuse to listen, especially to any discordant information that does not agree with their pre-conceived notions.

3. Inverting the Pyramid

Traditional or classical (e.g., power) leadership models are represented by a pyramid with the leader at the top and the many at the bottom, with a few middle managers in between. Greenleaf suggested early on that the pyramid be broadened so that the leader is "first among equals" (Keith, p. 40). In a truly enlightened organization, a strong conviction exists that when the time comes, everyone canâ and indeed has the responsibility toâ lead. Servant leaders works for the people who work for them. In traditional hierarchical organizations, everyone is focused on pleasing the next person above them, while no one is focused on pleasing the customers, the clients, the members, the workers, the participantsâ "the people who will ultimately decide if the organization succeeds" (Keith, p. 42). Servant-led organizations are mission-driven rather than rules and regulations driven.

4. Developing Your Colleagues

Under servant leadership, the leader makes sure that other people's highest priorities are satisfied and met first. Thus, the litmus test of a servant leader is whether those served grow, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servant leaders. In servant-led organizations, younger managers get the experiences they need to continue growing professionally. The servant leader takes great pride in seeing others grow and blossom and does not try to hoard the best experiences for him or herself. In a servant-led organization, work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work.

5. Coaching, Not Controlling

As Kouzes and Posner (1995) noted, the more leaders try to control others, the more likely they will rebel. Effective servant leaders let their people go, giving them the freedom and support to excel and plow new ground. Block (1996) observed that "partnership is a commitment to dialogue, not an act of concession. Stewardship is based on reciprocal commitments" (p. 34). In the servant-led organization, fewer pep talks occur. More attention is devoted to creating a place in which people can excel, find meaning in their work, and bring their passion to the workplace so that it can blossom. Leaders need to connect with the people in their organization to make things happen. As the old adage goes: "A good leader is a guide on the side, not the sage on the stage."

6. Unleashing the Energy and Intelligence of Others

Servant leadership unleashes the inner passion and intelligence of colleagues. Rather than talk in terms of empowerment, which is limiting, servant leaders coach, mentor, and teach so that others can use their skills, knowledge, and abilities for the good of the organization and those the organization serves. "It doesn't make any sense to have lots of people in an organization, but let only a few peopleâ those at the topâ use their full potential" (Keith, p. 51). In the current age, both "management by walking around" and "mortuary management" (if I don't hear any complaints, everything must be okay) are inappropriate and outdated. Not only is it dated, but also this style of leadership actually harms the organization. When asked why he was so interested in empowerment, the head of Northeast Utilities put it bluntly: "When I noticed that the people in Eastern Europe were shooting their leaders, I started to pay attention" (Block, 1996, p. 38).

7. Foresight

The central ethic of servant leadership is foresightâ the ability to have a better-than-average guess about what might happen in the future. Good leaders have an intuition about the past and present, and what it all means for the future (Fehlis, 2005; Johansen, 2009). Failure of foresight puts an organization at risk of

failure, and this purpose is the leader's primary responsibilityâ keeping an organization viable. "Leaders hold the future of their colleagues and customers in their hands. Foresight is needed to form the vision and support the momentum that will make that future a good one for everyone" (Keith, p. 55).

The result of these seven key practices is the development of trust. As Lencioni (2002) has observed in his ground-breaking book, trust is the foundation of effective organizations and is built by leaders who are authentic in word and deed. An absence of trust undermines everything else an organization tries to do. Leaders who cannot establish trust fail as leaders because they are afraid to appear vulnerable to their co-workers and colleagues. Trust embodies the confidence among team members that their colleagues' intentions are good and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. Without a foundation of trust in an organization that is built by the servant leader, there is also fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and lack of accountability, and results and outcomes become unachievable (Lencioni, 2005). By focusing on these seven key practices, a servant leader builds trust in the organization that can lead to excellence.

Where to Now?

Much of Extension is still mired in the classical model of leadership based on command and control; unidirectional memos; the language of laws and policies, contracts, and RFPs. Changing times and a post-modern world demand a new perspective on leadership. The authors of this paper challenge Extension administrators and all Extension workers to consider the following action steps to promote and practice the concept of servant leadership in Extension.

1. Hone Your Skills

Flying by the seat of one's pants has never been effective, and that is especially true for administrators. Few among us can be great administrators or leaders by relying on intuition and "gut" feelings. Shoot from the hip, "cowboy management" leadership styles (Kanter, 1989, p. 71), and go-it-alone approaches have never worked effectively in any organization, and our 21st century world requires that leaders work at being effective leaders (Astroth, 1991). Thus, leaders are not born, they are self-made. Those trained as front-line workers who are then promoted into administration have to be just as aggressive in pursuing educational opportunities relevant to their own professional development as they did when trying to earn tenure or continuing status as an agent or specialist. Fehlis (2005) counseled:

A positive future for Extension depends upon having visionary leaders at all levels. It depends upon selecting individuals as director, vice-president, president or chancellor not just on their professional vitae of past accomplishments, but upon the careful analysis of their visionary leadership skills. (p. 2)

Being an effective administrator means keeping up on the field of organizational leadership just as you did when you were focused on content subject matter.

2. Elevate Servant Leaders in Hiring Practices

Enhance the level of servant leadership of your organization through the hiring process. As a search committee member for a state-level administrative position, you have the opportunity and an obligation to elevate genuine servant leaders through the search process to a successful placement. Administrators have a responsibility to listen to the input provided by search committees and other processes involved with a search.

3 Reward Servant Leadership in Performance Reviews

As the yearly performance of Extension agents, specialists, and administrators are reviewed, let the seven servant leadership concepts described above by Keith guide the process. Reward and recognize the servant leadership qualities that are the core of the talented and dedicated Extension worker.

4. Ensure Servant Leadership Education

We are educators. Make sure that time is allocated at the many yearly educational and administrative meetings that Extension workers attend to promote and enlighten ourselves about the power of servant leadership practices and principles.

5. Demonstrate the Magic

When state level administrators' first priority is to serve county agents and county Extension programs, two things happen. First, county agents are appreciative of the support, and second, great things happen. Things happen in a big way. Things appear that have never existed before. Magic happens.

Servant leadership is about more than work. Servant leadership is also about how to live one's life. When happy and satisfied people are asked about the secret to happiness, the answer is never about the accumulation of material things or power. The answer always relates to serving others. If serving others is what matters most in how you spend your life, servant leadership will also probably be an effective guide to how you work with people at the office.

Servant leadership is a simple concept that many people have a difficult time seeing or understanding. Some question whether an organization like Extension that is publicly created and funded can apply the principles of servant leadership. Writes Keith (personal communication, October 4, 2010):

Our experience here at the Greenleaf Center is that servant leadership works in **every** sectorâ public, private, non-profit, and academic. Servant leadership is about identifying and meeting the needs of others. Servant-leaders listen to their colleagues, they help them to achieve at high levels, and they listen to their customers, clients, patients, members, or students, to help them to get what they need to succeed. The service model of leadership is so fundamental that it works in every kind of organization.

In addition, Keith goes on to note that servant leadership has been embraced by at least three federally mandated programs. During the Greenleaf Center's 2010 annual conference, Col. Steve Banach, Director of the U.S. Army's prestigious School of Advanced Studies, led a workshop on servant leadership in the Army. In addition, Rick Byrd, Commissioner of the Wage and Investment Division of the IRS, talked about his efforts to launch servant leadership in his federal agency. Finally, Linda Belton, Director of Organizational Health for the Veterans Administration, is scheduled to make a presentation at Greenleafâ s healthcare conference. All threeâ Banach, Byrd, and Beltonâ work for federally mandated programs, and they are convinced that servant leadership principles fit their structure. (K. Keith, personal communication, October 4, 2010).

Servant leadership is a concept that can transform many organizations, regardless of their past structure or experience: "Getting better at patriarchy is self-defeating" (Block, 1996, p. 46). The time is now to share and promote this proven and effective leadership concept.

Coming Full Circle

While servant leadership is a new model for 21st century organizations, the principles on which it is based are some of the oldest in existence. As Keith agreed (personal communication, March 2, 2010), servant leadership shares many similarities with Taoism as recorded by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching. Taoism rejects the power model of leadership, which is based on principles of winning, competing alliances, manipulation, and getting ahead personally at the expense of others and the organization. Both Taoism and servant leadership celebrate quiet virtue, selflessness, reliance on service to others, and developing a sense of humility. Perhaps one of the oldest texts on leadership (variously dated at around 400 B.C.), the Tao Te Ching (LaFargue, 1992) encapsulates best the enigmas of servant leadership:

One who shows off will not shine

One who promotes himself won't become famous

One who boasts of himself will get no credit

One who glorifies himself will not become leader. (p 4).

As Keith pointed out (personal communication, March 2, 2010), those who operate from a "power" model of leadership can never get enough power, so their appetite for power is insatiable. Those who operate from a service model of leadership always look for ways to develop others. The latter approach improves organizational effectiveness, employee retention, and overall satisfaction.

Our global world, the knowledge-based economy, and rapidly changing technological innovations require a different approach to cultivating organizational effectiveness. Power is out; service is in. All wisdom does not reside with the organizational leaderâ if indeed it ever did. Those who understand how to nurture, harness, and celebrate the wisdom and experience of others in the pursuit of organizational excellence will be truly leaders who serve a higher purpose. Extension's leadership would be wise to heed this advice as we work our way into the 21st century.

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