WHO WANTS TO BE FIRST?

In first century Palestine, authority and power were at a premium. The Romans ruled with pomp and authority. To see the centurions and their soldiers marching through the streets of Jerusalem or Capernaum, ready to enforce their will must have been an awesome sight. With authority came influence, prestige and position. By way of contrast, servants were on the opposite end of the social order. They were there for the benefit of others. On our own, who wouldn’t rather be a ruler than a servant?

Several times in the gospels, Jesus spoke of a different kind of leadership, usually ending with a poignant summary—"...if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all" (Mark 9:34).

To Jesus, greatness and power were not measured by the number of people serving a leader but the extent that the leader was serving the people under him or her. Oswald Sanders summed up this thought by writing, “True greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing men to one’s service but in giving oneself in selfless service to them” (Spiritual Leadership, Moody Press, 1980) John Stott has written, “Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.”

What servant-leadership is not

- It is not a refuge for those without the willingness, ability or courage to lead
- It is not an excuse for failing to give direction and to be accountable
- It is not passive
- It is not just doing what followers want to do · It is not necessarily keeping everyone happy

WHAT IS SERVANT-LEADERSHIP?

There are two components of servant-leadership. The first is that of being a servant. The second is being a leader. “Servant” defines the timeless, changeless style and attitude that must be present in our lives. “Leadership” defines the responsibility. As believers we are all called to be servants. When we assume the responsibility of motivating people to bring about purposeful change we must do so as servant-leaders. Servant-leaders who serve but do not lead may be wonderful servants but they are not servant-leaders. We are called to “lead with diligence” (Romans 12:8). Leighton Ford wrote in Transforming Leadership (IVP, 1999) , “The one who rules should be like the one who serves (Luke 22:26). He did not say the one who gives up ruling should be that way but the one who rules.” If God has asked you to lead, then you are responsible and accountable to lead. Leadership is not evil! Lack of leadership is chaos. The lack of leadership produces followers who are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). In God’s kingdom, leaders serve us best by leading us and lead best by serving us.

LEADERSHIP REVIEW

Good leadership does at least two things. First it accomplishes worthwhile goals. Secondly, good leadership develops and transforms those who are being lead. People are really better people and better off because they have served with that leader. They are more competent, confident and equipped. Leadership is needed to transform vision into reality.

There are three basic methods of leadership---autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire. Servant-leadership is not a different category of leadership but the style and attitude that pervades every method of
Christian leadership. At times leaders can best serve their followers by leading autocratically (as when Jesus told his disciples what to take, do and say on their first missionary venture--Matthew 10:5-16). At times the servant-leader leads democratically (as when Jesus solicited the input of the disciples in the feeding of the 5,000--John 6:5). At still other times Jesus led best by allowing the disciples to figure things out on their own (“Go make disciples of all nations...” Matthew 28:18-20). In each situation Jesus’ method varied but his style and attitude never changed. Whatever he did, he did as a servant leader.

**ATTITUDE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP**

The essence, style and attitude of servant leadership is found in Philippians 2:3-5. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature God, ...made himself nothing , taking the very nature of a servant.” Regardless of the mode of leading (autocratic, democratic or lassiz-faire), the focus of servant leadership is on the growth, success and welfare of the followers. The primary focus of a servant-leader is on his or her followers rather than on self. It is this singular characteristic which defines servant-leadership.

Whatever the “service,” the servant-leader looks not only at his own interests but to the interests of those he or she is leading and serving. Interests and needs are not necessarily pandering to the whims or pampering whimsy followers. The servant-leader Jesus served best at times by saying “no” to some who wanted to follow him (as with the Geresene demoniac), denied the requests of others (James and John in Mark 10:36-40) and even "fired" some who weren’t going where he was going (John 6:66, Luke 14:25-35). We must allow Jesus to define servant leadership. Everything he did was done in the style and attitude of being a servant-leader. This includes washing the disciple’s feet but goes way beyond that. He always acted on behalf of and for the good of those he served. Oswald Sanders wrote, “The true leader regards the welfare of others rather than his own comfort and prestige as of primary concern.”

Attitude is everything. If servanthood is merely a technique to advance yourself, you will fail. It’s like trying to fake authenticity. Although many Christian leaders like to be seen as servant-leaders, few want to be treated as servants. For this reason, servanthood must come from the heart. We are called to lead in different arenas--in our homes, on our jobs and in our ministries. If servant-leadership is genuine, there will be a seamless garment of servant leadership in every arena where leading and serving are required. Would your wife and children tag you as a servant-leader?

In Christian service and ministry the only acceptable style and attitude of leadership is that of servant-leadership. A style which is not like Jesus Christ cannot be called “Christian.” There is no room for king-leadership, selfish-leadership, ruler-leadership and self-serving leadership. We never move on from servant-leadership to some other style of leadership. Position does not ever give us the right to lord over anyone...ever.

**AN EXAMPLE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP**

Beginning in Acts 6 we see how servant-leadership was expressed in the early church. When conflict arose between the Grecian and Hellenistic Jews over food service, the Twelve understood their priorities as servant-leaders. “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” It is not that they were too important to wait tables but to do so they would be poor stewards of what God and the followers had asked them to do. These men served best by leading. They lead best by serving and ministering the Word of God and praying (6:4). Servant-leadership cannot be separated from good stewardship. The first “deacons” (literally “servants”) were selected to take care of the task of waiting tables.

Now, for the rest of the story. One of these men, Stephen, had exceptionally high qualifications. Yet he faithfully waited tables as a servant. Because he was faithful in this little thing, God gave him the opportunity to serve again by preaching the gospel before the Sanhedrin, who eventually stoned him. His job description changed but his attitude of serving did not change. If you cannot or will not serve, then as a Christian you are not qualified to lead.

**TESTS OF SERVANT-LEADERS**

- Would subordinates again hire you to lead them.
  Would your staff and students say, “We want you to serve us best by leading us?”
- Do those under you feel valued and esteemed.
their contributions recognized and appreciated?
• Are you using people to accomplish your goals or working together to accomplish God's goals?
• Are you serving your followers or trying to impress your superiors or protect your position?
• Are you willing to do whatever needs to be done regardless of your position or platform?
• Are more followers becoming servant-leaders as a result of your servant-leadership?
• Are you developing those under you? Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving? Growing? Are you building leaders or followers? Who could replace you tomorrow?
• Are you and your followers accomplishing organizational goals?
• Are you sharing the credit and regularly saying “thanks”?

“Here are the questions he (Jesus) gives to measure our greatness. Not ‘How many people help me?’ but ‘How deep is my commitment to others?’ Not whom do I let into the circle of influence?’ but ‘How long and broad is my circle of fellowship? Not ‘How can I best develop myself?’ but ‘How intense is my passion to be pure and useful?’” Leighton Ford in Transforming Leadership, IVP, 1991).

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS
Leadership has to do with purpose and direction. Everything Jesus did from his baptism to the cross was laden with purpose. In being a servant-leader, his vision was clear. As a servant-leader he said to his potential followers “I know where I’m going. I want you to go with me and I’ll serve you by giving you what you need along the way.” As a servant-leader he understood each disciple’s giftedness, gave them work in line with their giftedness, held them accountable and helped them with their weaknesses. He took time to explain, time and again, where he was going.

To Jesus servant-leadership was not a program but a response. Yes, he washed the disciple’s feet one time in response to a real need but his primary duty was not foot washing. There was no task that he was too good for or too important to perform. Jesus also involved his disciples in the learning process. He helped them be more effective and get better at what they did. The disciples who could not cast out demons in Matthew 17:14-22 were pretty good at it in the book of Acts (5:12-15). He equipped his disciples to solve problems and make decisions in view of the stated mission. He was free to give the ministry away. The real test of his leadership was how well the disciples performed after his departure. It worked!

OBSERVATIONS FROM JOHN 13
Verse 1 “Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” You can serve people without loving them but you cannot love people without serving them.

Verse 3 “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; “ Jesus really understood his identity. Jesus understood that all things had been given to him by the father. There was nothing people could give him that the Father had not already given him. Many leaders are too insecure to serve because they feel they will lose the esteem of those they serve. The Lord knew where he had come from and where he was going.

Verses 12-17 Jesus ends this episode by explaining what he did, “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” Jesus’ servant leadership did not reduce him to a door mat. His service was with purpose. He was training, modeling and multiplying servant-leaders.

QUESTIONS SERVANT-LEADERS ASK
(by Ken Blanchard)
How’s it going?
What are you learning?
What are your goals?
How can I help?