

The Contribution of Robert Greenleaf and The Society of Friends to Modern Management

Theory

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Author Note

Although I earned my MBA at George Fox University, a school associated with the Society of Friends, (Quakers), I am not a member of their faith, or any other. During my time at George Fox I became interested in the history, philosophy and theology of the Quaker church and did a great deal of independent study. (There were no required classes on the Society of Friends and very little classroom discussion about it). This paper is not an attempt to proselytize, but instead to point out the contributions of Robert Greenleaf, Servant Leadership and the Society of Friends to modern thinking about leadership and organizational management.

Hundreds of books on management, leadership and business administration come out every year, and it seems, are forgotten a year or two later. Servant leadership is one of the more enduring ideas about leadership. Its roots are in the Quaker church, but like many things inspired by Quakers or influenced by their philosophy they remain uncredited. In this paper I will trace the origins of Servant Leadership to its Quaker roots, and show how its influence on many management theories popular today.

The Society of Friends was founded by George Fox, (1624-1691), who at the age of 19 had an epiphany from God and began preaching to Protestant churches throughout England. The philosophical cornerstone that makes the Society of Friends distinct from other Christian faiths is the belief that all living things have been touched by God and therefore possess an inner Divine light. That is not to imply that humans are demigods, but rather that we all possess the remnants of Divine contact. This a major departure from many other Christian faiths that believe humans are conceived in original sin and can achieve redemption only through a lifetime of piety and Divine salvation.

One of the things that makes Quaker philosophy so significant is the implication of equality in the eyes of God it gives to all humans. If God touches all humans without distinction of race, gender or other characteristics it becomes difficult to argue that some have a favored place in Gods eyes, and by extension, in the society of man. Treating others with disrespect is also treating what God blesses with disrespect. Consequently, Quaker churches were the first to recognize women as equal to men, and make no distinction between gender in their services or organizational roles within the church. Quaker churches also welcome all races, classes and other religions into their services. This reputation for fair treatment based on equality was well

established in the United States by Colonial times, and extended into the early days of the new nation. For example, in 1790 Quakers were the first organized group to petition Congress for the abolition of slavery. A few years later, in 1793, the Iroquois Confederacy requested that a Quaker delegation monitor treaty negotiations with the United States government to ensure fair treatment.

In *The Quiet Rebels*, Bacon (1999) describes the Quaker concept of equality this way in the context of unusually good relations Quakers enjoyed with Native Americans:

The secret of these good relations was a simple one. While many of the other settlers believed that Native Americans were heathen savages, the Quakers saw them as children of God, and treated them with consequent respect. According to Calvinist doctrine of the time, people who were not Christian were depraved, therefore nothing but depravity could be expected of the pagan Native Americans. According to the Quaker, every person bore within an Inner Teacher, whether or not he or she had had the opportunity to learn about the life and teachings of Jesus. (Bacon, 1999, p. 47)

Another implication of the belief of an active hand of God present in every person is the reputation Friends have as honest business people. Quakers believe that honesty in business is another way in which one honors the Light that burns within each human. To take advantage of another for business gain is both a crime against a person, and a crime against the blessing of God. This extends to customers, of course, and also to employees, investors, shareholders and all others with whom one has business dealings.

The most significant implication of the Quaker philosophy for business is how the concept of equality affects social and business hierarchies. Because Quakers believe that all humans share “that of God” within them they consider all people part of an extended family of

God. As a matter of conscience they refuse to recognize social stratifications and draw a fine line between showing respect for government or organizational officials and being subservient to them.

This is why traditional Quaker churches do not have ministers, and services do not include sermons. Instead, the congregation sits quietly, allowing themselves to be “led by and to the Light”. If someone feels compelled to speak, they rise and share their divinely inspired insights, commentary or question. A clerk manages the congregation, but only to the extent of keeping comments orderly. However, speaking is rare, and long periods of silence usually separate incidents of speech. For the most part congregants sit quietly contemplating the thoughts marching through their minds. Quaker services are probably the earliest form of organized meditation in the Western world.

This tradition of silent worship is ground in the idea that truth can be found in contemplation of Gods works. This concept focuses Quaker based education on pragmatic learning, rather than theory. To be clear, Quaker educators endorse theory but only as a means to discover pragmatic truth and not as an end in self. This also leads to the concept of simplicity. Quakers do not tend to see the world as a complex interplay of esoteric or metaphysical forces. Instead, truth and simplicity are seen as synonyms – one leads to the other, and without one the other cannot exist. This is not to imply that Quakers see the world in rigid terms, with no capacity for nuance or ambiguity. Rather, truth and simplicity are spiritual or philosophical goals that help illuminate the way the world works.

These concepts of silent reflection, truth, simplify and pragmatism leads to the Quaker philosophy of service. The Quaker sayings, “Let your life speak”, and “Work is love made visible” are reminders that faith and purpose is not a Meeting Day only activity. Quakers tend to

integrate their religious philosophy into their daily lives, including their business activities. The Obama daughters currently attend Sidwell Friends School a private Quaker academy in Washington D.C. Alumni include children of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Clinton, Nixon and Vice Presidents Gore and Biden. Here is what Robert Lawrence Smith, the former headmaster of Sidwell says about integrating faith into life:

Friends who made their living in business always considered themselves Quakers first and businesspeople second. Yet I believe that the model of business practice they adhered to, whether they were small tradesmen or major industrialists, offers a simple but profound example for anyone who hopes to run an ethical and profitable business today. Friends organized their workplaces as an expression of the way they conducted their lives, treating all people as equals-employees, customers, business associates-and adhering strictly to the truth in all transactions. Generations of these business people prospered without compromising the best interests of their staff or their customers, letting their lives speak by making the supply of goods a true service to the community. (Smith 1998, p. 124-125)

Quaker influence on social changes throughout American history cannot be overstated in spite of a lack of common knowledge about it. As early as 1669 George Fox formally advised the Society of Friends to “provide for them that is distempered” (Bacon 1999, p. 137). This was a radical, even subversive, idea occurring concurrently with the infamous Bedlam Hospital, which was little more than a medieval torture chamber for those assumed to be afflicted with the devil.

Because Quakers believe that all humans are touched by the hand of God they have a well known penchant for nonviolence and principled refusal to participate in wars. This led to imprisonment for many Quakers during times of war, and more recently, service in mental health

facilities as an alternative to military service. The exposure of Quakers to the horrors of prisons and mental institutions in the late 19th and early 20th century led Quakers to organize reform movements for these institutions. The organization now known as the National Association for Mental Health began with four young men working in the Quaker Unit of the state hospital at Byberry Pennsylvania following World War Two.

The America Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is the umbrella organization under which much of the Quaker social initiatives are managed. AFSC might be best known for its efforts in helping young men attain conscientious objector status during times of war, but the committee has been active in a range of social movements and relief efforts. It was recognized in 1947 for its efforts to find alternatives to war and organize relief for those affected by war with a Nobel Peace Prize (Bacon 1999).

Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) is considered the most significant Quaker business spokesperson, and originator of Servant Leadership. He spent 36 years working for AT&T, first as a lineman apprentice stringing telephone cables through the swamps of Michigan, then worked his way up the corporate ladder as a manager, management analyst, and finally as an internal management educator. He retired from AT&T in 1964 to pursue writing, consulting and teaching. He cofounded the Center for Applied Ethics in 1964 which has evolved into the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.

Greenleaf was born into the Society of Friends, and although he described himself as a “backsliding member” (Greenleaf, Frick, and Spears 1996, p. 290), he asserted that his Quaker background was the foundation of many of his basic assumptions supporting Servant Leadership.

Servant Leadership does not lend itself to a self supporting definition. Instead it is a philosophy based to a large degree on the assumptions of the Society of Friends about the nature

of human beings. Nevertheless, Greenleaf offers something of a definition, or at least a comment that captures the essence of servant leadership:

“[Servant leadership is defined by] the care taken by the servant -- first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf 1977, p. 13-14).

In 1970 Greenleaf published the first essay explaining the concepts of Servant Leadership. Called *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf 1991/1970), the essay generated a large amount of interest, was reprinted a many times, and served as the foundation for a number of books written by Greenleaf expanding on the topic. Part of the reason for its popularity was the tenor of the times in which it appeared. The late 1960’s and early 70’s were a time when social and cultural assumptions were under question. Greenleaf’s thoughts on Servant Leadership criticized management practices that violated basic human integrity, but articulated a vision that emphasized the sovereignty of the individual. In the historical context emerging at the time, this fit perfectly with the social trends focusing on the individual.

Historians Strauss and Howe (1997) described the zeitgeist of the times this way:

Late in the Awakening, the nation reeled from blows that would have been inconceivable in the High: gas lines, the Iran hostage crisis, and a plummeting dollar. As Jimmy Carter declared that America was suffering a national malaise, the World Symposium on Humanity declared a "Manifesto of the Person," proclaiming a "sovereign right of self-discovery" in which "the journey is the destination." Americans were now fully absorbed into what Christopher Lasch called the "Culture of Narcissism," feeling that the best way

to approach life was not (as in the High) to start with the community and move in, but to start with the self and move out. The Awakening's last act was for ideological conservatives to reach the same conclusion and thereby launch a huge political revival. During the tax-cut fever of the late 1970s and the rise of Ronald Reagan in 1980, conservatives at last gave up on the Establishment. Agreeing with the post-Woodstock view that, yes, the individual is infinitely more virtuous than the state, they discovered to their delight that a society full of autonomous individualists was the perfect soil for a reenergized Republican Party. (Strauss & Howe 1997, 174-175)

The Servant as Leader became a manifesto for academics and business leaders who were looking for alternatives to traditional management thinking. In an era in which institutions of all kinds were being questioned and undergoing rigorous criticism and changes the concept of Servant Leadership created a foundation upon which to build a new paradigm.

For example, Greenleaf emphasized the proper use of power in organizations. For Greenleaf the idea of authority and the use of coercive measures violated the fundamental Quaker assumption of equality and mutual respect that is inherent in Servant Leadership. In *Servant Leadership: Journey in to Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* he writes:

There are several kinds of power. One is coercive power, used principally to destroy. Not much that endures can be built with it. Even presumably autocratic institutions like businesses are learning that the value of coercive power is inverse to its use. Leadership by persuasion and example is the way to build everywhere (Greenleaf 1977, p. 85).

Greenleaf advanced the idea of moral authority as a replacement for traditional concepts of coercive authority. Motivation is not a function of threat or coercion, but rather recognition that the best interests of both the individual and the group are served by a particular course of

action. For Greenleaf leadership was the ability to motivate people with personal influence to willingly and happily perform tasks.

Greenleaf points to the life of John Woolman as an illustration of the concept of leading by example and persuasion. Woolman was a Quaker living in the latter half of the 18th century, who is famous within the Society of Friends for both his scholarly philosophical insights and his successful efforts to convince Quakers that slavery was inconsistent with their faith. For thirty years he traveled up and down the Colonies staying with Quaker families along the way, gently challenging the institution of slavery, and using the voice of quiet logic to make his argument.

[The] burden of his approach was to raise questions: What does the owning of slaves do to you as a moral person? What kind of an institution are you binding over to your children? Man by man, inch by inch, by persistently returning and revisiting and pressing his gentle argument over a period of thirty years, the scourge of slavery was eliminated from this Society, the first religious group in America. (Greenleaf 1970/1991, p. 21)

This kind of Socratic inquiry is closely related to the Quaker philosophy to allow quiet contemplation and a “quiet mind” to lead one to greater truths. There is a democratic idealism inherent in this concept as well that is consistent with humanistic philosophy and a belief in the supremacy of the individual. Once the underlying truth of a matter is discovered its simplicity becomes obvious to others as well. Truth and simplicity become the lubricant for groups of people to achieve great changes – whether those groups are organized under the guise of a social movement or private company.

Servant Leadership emphasizes the importance of vision in leadership and motivation. The ability to articulate a goal in such a way that others share in the vision and are motivated to pursue it is fundamental to Servant Leadership. In Greenleaf’s words, “Why would anyone

accept the leadership of another except that the other sees more clearly where it is best to go?”
(Greenleaf, 1977, p. 15)

Innate in this skill is the ability to assemble a number of abstractions and unify them into one concrete concept. Again, Greenleaf's Quaker background is revealed in his emphasis on the simplicity and pragmatism of concrete goals as opposed to abstract theory. Using statements made by Nikolai Frederick Severin Gruntvig, who brought culture to the peasants of 19th century Holland, Greenleaf illustrates this ability. He quotes Gruntvig's exhortation that “Real life is the final test” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 15), to drive home the point that leadership is about identifying measurable and objective goals that followers can personally experience in their own lives as well as anticipate as the result of their collective actions.

One of the basic skills of a Servant Leader is to have an accurate sense of one's skills and talents, and where they are most effective. Greenleaf uses the example of Thomas Jefferson, who spent the Revolutionary War not on battlefields, but writing about the philosophy of liberal democracy and actively creating the political institutions that manage it. In Greenleaf's words, “He knew who he was and was resolved to be his own man. He chose his one role. He went back to Virginia and didn't leave the state for the duration of the war” (Greenleaf 1991/1970, p. 22).

This concept is intrinsic in the works of Stephen Covey (1990), who throughout the 1990s wrote about the importance of knowing oneself as a prerequisite for constructing personal mission and vision statements. It also is included in the fundamentals of Daniel Goleman's (1995) work on Emotional Intelligence.

In fact much of modern management theory sounds a lot like Greenleaf's original work on Servant Leadership. Larry Spears is the Executive Director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in Indianapolis Indiana. In 2005 he presented a paper to the Servant Leadership Research

Roundtable of Regent University in which he identified ten characteristics that he considered to be of vital importance in a Servant Leader (Spears 2005). Looking through them one is struck with the sense of familiarity; these characteristics, or ones very similar to them, seem to be included in most of the management book that have been written in the last few decades.

Listening	Empathy
Healing	Awareness
Persuasion	Conceptualization
Foresight	Stewardship
Commitment to the growth of people	Building community

This demonstrates the influence Servant Leadership has had on management thinking over the last few decades. Until 1970 dominate management theories were still being built on the results of the Hawthorne studies from the 1930's. Situational leadership theory, such as Blake and Moutons Managerial Grid, Fiedlers Leadership Contingency Theory and Houses Path-Goal Theory were all variations of transactional relationships between organizational authorities and workers. James Burns (1978) idea of Transformational Leadership comes closest to changing the management leadership paradigm, but his book was published in 1978 – eight years after Greenleaf first published *The Servant as Leader* (1970).

It is not my intent to hint at intellectual or academic impropriety. Science moves ahead by building on the work of others who have come before. That is as it should be, and exactly what is happening here.

The point of this essay has been to point out that the philosophical contributions of The Society of Friends, and the related intellectual contributions of Robert Greenleaf are not as well known as they perhaps should be. However, this is not unusual in the case of Quakers. Both individually and as an organized religion the Society of Friends are very humble and

unassuming. They do not promote themselves or showcase their significant contributions to social change because of that humble nature. They deserve credit however for much of the way we think about organizational management and leadership, however, and drawing attention to their contributions in this area has been the purpose of this paper.

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