

### Research Administrators as Servant Leaders

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#### Abstract

Within the sponsored research support offices in departments at research institutions, non-profits, and undergraduate institutions, research administrators are often perceived as servant leaders by their own membership organizations and those who work with them. This perception is influenced by survey results focusing on character. Parolini (2004) suggested that, "Servant leaders are defined by their ability to bring integrity, humility, and servanthood into caring for, empowering, and developing of others in carrying out the tasks and processes of visioning, goal setting, leading, modeling, team building, and shared decision-making" (p. 9). These research administrators serve and lead the external funding activities from the support offices in their institutions.

*Keywords:* sponsored research office (SRO), research administrator, servant leader

#### Introduction

The increasing competition in recruiting students and faculty puts predominately undergraduate institutions at a financial disadvantage. The external demands of graduate programs and the workforce are the primary cause. The demand is that undergraduate students have research and experience in their respective fields prior to a baccalaureate graduation. Both tuition-driven private and state-funded public predominately undergraduate institutions (PUI) suffer from tightening budgets. This restriction hinders a transformation from lecture-based teaching to a more desired global and experiential learning environment. Grant funding is a way for institutions to meet the external demands and recruit top tier faculty and students. Faculty can support the cultural transformation by generating grant funds for institutions. Proactive institutional leaders provide services that remove roadblocks and motivate faculty through professional development and student success. The implementation of a sponsored research office is a catalyst for increasing grant

submissions, appropriate budgeting, and fiscal oversight of successful sponsored awards. Research administrators are often referred to as servant leaders by their own professional society's staff-sponsored research offices. The faculty, students, and institutions all benefit from the fruitful results of grant awards.

### Research Administrators as Servant Leaders

The perception of research administrators as servant leaders by their membership organizations is influenced by survey results focusing on character. Parolini (2004) suggested that, "Servant leaders are defined by their ability to bring integrity, humility, and servanthood into caring for, empowering, and developing of others in carrying out the tasks and processes of visioning, goal setting, leading, modeling, team building, and shared decision-making" (p. 9). These research administrators serve and lead the external funding activities at predominately undergraduate institutions. Vargas and Hanlon (2007) described the primary goals of research administrators, "to both serve and lead our researchers (faculty), while still keeping in mind our responsibilities to our institutions, sponsors, and community" (p. 45).

Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) suggested that leadership is a key factor for engaged employees and innovative organizations. They further observed that servant-leadership was introduced by Greenleaf (1977) and has recently been rediscovered by scholars.

The term "servant-leadership" is a leadership paradigm introduced in an essay by Robert Kiefner Greenleaf (1904-1990). Greenleaf worked first as a telephone lineman and eventually moved into organizational management at AT&T, serving in that role from the mid 1920s to the 1960s. He became a lecturer at prestigious schools such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dartmouth College, and the Harvard Business School. Greenleaf is credited with the first continuing education program model used in colleges and businesses today (Ferch & Spears, 2011). Greenleaf's 25-year longitudinal study of managerial lives is credited with pioneering much of today's leadership practices. He described how he discovered the concept of servant-leadership through reading a book, *Journey to the East* (Hesse, trans. 1956). According to Spears (1998), Greenleaf believed the message of the story was that one must first serve society, then, through one's service a person, will be recognized as a leader. Leadership is about service.

The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant; first, to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: 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. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27)

The paradoxical expression, “servant-leadership,” is expansive of individual service to society irrespective of hierarchical position. This principle of a leadership-service blend differs from the hierarchical model of leadership. In hierarchical leadership the power of the leader was visible and obeyed by those lower in the organization (Crippen, 2005). In servant-leadership, through strategies of service and stewardship, a leader was identified by the people to be first among equals or “primus inter pares” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 84).

### *Not Much Happens Without a Dream*

Greenleaf (1977) suggested that, “. . . for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams” (p. 30). The dreams of faculty developed into a proposal and eventually supported financially by a sponsor is one area in which a research administrator perceived as a servant leader is valuable at institutions. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) stated, “Given the central role of leaders in the social setting of most organizations, the behavior shown by leaders towards their followers plays an important role as to how supportive a work setting is perceived” (p. 13). Moreover, it is believed that leadership is an increasingly acknowledged factor for follower well-being. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten cited abundant evidence that a controlling, less supportive leadership style, with vague responsibilities and lack of feedback, is related to lower levels of well-being (Cartwright & Cooper, 1994; Van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill, & Stride, 2004). Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) explained that, “A supportive environment provides positive effects, a sense of predictability, and recognition of self-worth. As such, it is likely that servant-leadership behavior is beneficial for follower engagement, job satisfaction, and performance” (p. 13).

### *Ten Characteristics*

Ten qualities of a servant leader have been identified by Spears (1998), Ferch and Spears (2011), van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010), and Crippen (2005), as follows:

#### *Listening*

This quality refers to a profound obligation to listening to others. There is a need for reflection, silence, meditation, and active listening, in fact hearing what is said and is not said. Servant leaders are skillful communicators and excellent listeners, to themselves (through their inner voice), as well as to others, specifically their followers (Spears, 1998). Ferch and Spears (2011) emphasized that, “Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one’s own inner voice and seeking to understand what one’s body, spirit, and mind are communicating” (p. 11). Greenleaf (1977) stated, “In saying what I have in mind, will I really improve on the silence?” (p. 31) He further stated that only true servant leaders automatically react to problems by listening first.

### *Empathy*

A good servant leader strives to empathize with others through supportive understanding. Greenleaf wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy:

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted. (Greenleaf as cited in McGee-Cooper, 1998, p. 81)

Ferch and Spears (2011) stated, “The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners” (p. 11).

### *Healing*

A servant leader should first have an understanding of personal health, institutional health, or both. Greenleaf was a lifelong mediator (Crippen, 2005). Crippen viewed the action of mediation as a service because one is taking time to think about things and to reflect. Schinkel, van Dierendonck, and Anderson (2004) observed that feedback defined as a given response to an action or situation entails two functions: providing information on the particular situation and regulating a person’s behavior. It might be assumed that feedback about selection processes such as reviewer comments on a declined grant application lead rejected applicants to feel less negative about themselves and the organization than if no explanation were offered. They continued, “However, prudence in this matter is called for. In a meta analysis of feedback studies in a diversity of research fields, researchers stress the fact that feedback has highly variable instead of merely positive effects” (p. 198). A servant leader will understand that the detailed disclosure of data to rejected applicants may risk their self-esteem.

### *Awareness*

Crippen (2005) and Ferch and Spears (2011) explained that the servant leader has a general awareness, especially self-awareness. Self-awareness strengthens the servant leader, and aids in the understanding of issues involving ethics and values. This quality is developed through self-reflection, listening, continually being open to learning, and forming a connection from what we know and believe to what we say or do. Greenleaf (2003) noted, “As awareness opens, one of the measures one takes of the contemporary society is the number of elaborate and seductive devices lurking about that serve no other purpose than to waste time” (p. 120). He further identified a popular illusion that one must reach a high-status position to achieve one’s goals. He maintained that, “Whatever your work is, make something out of it that enriches you” (p. 121). He asserted, “I know it is an old truism, but the only place to achieve one’s personal goals is where one is. Looking for a greener pasture for this purpose is almost certain to seal off the opportunity for achievement” (p. 120). He further considered that a sense of unity, a pulling together of all aspects of life including, job, family, recreation, church, and community, all unite into one total pattern.

### *Persuasion*

Rather than coerce compliance, a servant leader seeks to convince. Greenleaf (1996) wrote:

One is persuaded upon arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one's own intuitive sense, persuasion is usually too undramatic to be newsworthy. . . . Significant instances of persuasion may be known to only one or a few, and they are rarely noted in history. Simply put, consensus is a method of using persuasion in a group. (p. 136)

Ferch and Spears (2011) stated, "This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant leader is effective at building consensus within groups" (p. 12). Greenleaf (2003) insisted that, "Either you persuade them or you coerce them" (p. 148).

### *Conceptualization*

Servant leaders seek to nurture their own abilities to dream great dreams (Ferch & Spears, 2011). Managers who wish to be servant leaders must stretch their thinking to a broader-based conceptual thinking. Ferch and Spears noted that "Servant leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day focused approach" (p. 12). Greenleaf (1991) stressed that "The ability to see the whole in the perspective of history -- past and future -- to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, to foresee contingencies a long way ahead" (p. 217). Through this idea of conceptualization, the leader is going out ahead to show the way as a persuader and relation builder.

### *Foresight*

Greenleaf (1977) suggested that foresight is the ability to foresee or know the likely outcome of a situation, the "lead' that the leader has" (p. 40). He further observed:

Foresight is seen as a wholly rational process, the product of a constantly running internal computer that deals with intersecting series and random inputs and is vastly more complicated than anything technology has yet produced. Foresight means regarding the events of the instant moment and constantly comparing them with a series of projections made in the past and at the same time projecting future events with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite future. (p. 39)

Ferch and Spears (2011) described foresight: "One knows it when one sees it. Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequences of a decision in the future" (p. 13). They indicated that foresight is also deeply rooted within the intuitive mind and concluded that this might be a trait with which servant leaders are born.

### *Stewardship*

Greenleaf (2003) observed:

We believe work exists as much for the enrichment of the life of the person who so does it as for the service of the person who receives the benefit of it or the reward to the investors who put up the money to do it. (p. 168)

He continued, “This attitude leads us to make a great effort to organize all of our work so that teams of individuals can have discrete parts of it” (p. 170). He further stated, “In truth, we are able to maintain our level of ethical practice, imperfect as we admit it is, only because . . . we refuse to pay off.” Servant leaders play a significant role in holding their institution or organization in trust by caring for the well being of the institution and serving the needs of those in the organization (Ferch & Spears, 2011). Further, servant-leadership presupposes a commitment to serving the needs of others and highlights openness and persuasion. Block (1993) suggested that stewardship is accountability without control or compliance.

### *Commitment to the Growth of People*

De Pree (1989) noted that the sign of outstanding leadership appears primarily among the followers. He asked, “Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving?” (p.12-13). Greenleaf (1977) suggested that when we accept the human condition, its sufferings and its joys, we will “work with its imperfections as the foundation upon which the individual will build wholeness through adventurous creative achievement” (p. 26). Greenleaf (2003) stated, “I have to say that we can operate as we do in the present climate only so long as our people do more for us than other companies people do for them” (p. 171).

### *Building Community*

The servant leader seeks to identify some means for building a community of followers. Three concepts often referred to in the literature include giving back through service to the community, investing financially into the community, and caring about one’s community (Sergiovanni, 1994). The servant leader seeks to identify means for generating community among those who are within a given institution. Greenleaf wrote:

All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant leader demonstrating his own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group. (as cited in Ferch and Spears, 2011, p. 14)

Ferland and Richie (2010) explained that inspiring a shared vision for the institution is part of being a leader, as is mentoring one’s employees and coaching them in their development as research administrators. Equally important are providing opportunities to grow, both personally and professionally, and celebrating success along the way. Ferland and Richie stated, “These are all what we used to call the ‘soft skills’ of management, but nothing proves to be harder” (p. 19).

### *Servant-Leadership and Research Administrators*

Anacharsis' (2008) views oppose those of Streharsky (1991) and Southwick (2006). He stated that sponsored research office leaders, "do not often seek replenishment, which is an extremely important aspect of leadership" (p. 12). Further:

The difficulty comes in accomplishing these higher order tasks when we are so hurried and harried by our daily grind that we lack the mental and emotional energy to practice leadership behaviors we know are appropriate. Because we [sponsored research leaders lack this reserve of positive energy, we sometimes fail to make allowances for the stress-related behavior of our colleagues, to rise above the fray in a heated meeting, or to lead calmly and efficiently under time pressure. (p. 12)

As Anacharsis (2008) pointed out, this flaw can be detrimental to an inappropriately staffed sponsored research office. He stated that the leadership within that office often must "seek, create, and move their staff toward a larger vision or mission" (p. 12). Shields and Mills (2008) argued that the personality and overall stress of research administrators, the people in a sponsored research office "can be difficult" (p. 14).

In a study by Shambrook and Brawman-Mintzer (2006) of 624 research administrators, 41.3% perceived their levels of work-related stress as high. The authors explained, "Research administrators endorse working in a high-stress environment, often feel under-appreciated for their contributions, fail to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and often feel they have neglected other important aspects of their lives in deference to the demands of work" (p. 1). In addition:

Sixty-percent reported having inadequate resources to complete their job in a forty-hour workweek. When asked why they continue to work in research administration, the prevalent responses were the challenge, variety of tasks, working with intelligent colleagues, job security, and feeling a sense of purpose. (p. 1)

Shambrook and Brawman-Mintzer (2006) further emphasized the servant-leadership of research administrators: "It is interesting to note that according to qualitative data from this study, participants reported that improving the health and quality of life of others is the primary motivator for staying in this field" (p. 2). McClellan (2008) wrote, "These pressures, which are amplified by the 'unlimited liability' of those who truly strive to serve others, likely combine with the inherent stressors of leadership to create uniquely stressful challenges for servant leaders" (p. 21).

Shields and Mills (2008) suggested, "Leaders influence the environment with which they lead. Their actions communicate their personal values and their vision for the organization. Leaders follow their 'Voice' as which is closely related to their own personal values" (p. 14). They further held that leaders affect behavior: "Leaders who model negative

behaviors are setting an unhealthy example and may cultivate bad behavior in others, thus creating an environment in which difficult people thrive and congenial people become difficult” (p. 14). Shields and Mills observed the importance of sponsored research office leadership as good communicators who understand themselves as well as the various “types of situations and personalities that trigger bad behaviors” (p. 15).

Kouzes and Posner (1993) argued that servant leaders do not seek the attention of people; they give it to others. Servant leaders, they observed, “do not focus on satisfying their own aims and desires; they look for a way to respond to the needs and interest of their constituents” (p. 185).

Porter (2007) advanced the idea that research administrators support faculty to make the adjustment from academic writing to grant writing. Research administrators lead this transformation for faculty behind the scenes by acting as editors and preparing the faculty for the proposal review. Porter emphasized:

Grant reviewers are impatient readers. Busy people with limited time, they look for any excuse to stop reading. Reviewers are irritated if it takes great effort to understand the writing. Worse, if the proposal does not intrigue them by the very first page, they will not read any further (unless they must submit a written critique, in which case they immediately start looking for reasons to justify why the proposal should not be funded). (p. 164)

Research administrators are trained to develop interesting proposal submissions and assist faculty in the transition from academic writing to grant writing. Porter described the characteristics reviewers believe make up good grant writing:

Senior reviewers put qualities such as “clear” and “concise” at the top of the list. Brevity is not only the soul of wit; it is the essence of grantsmanship. Or to cite Mies van der Rohe’s famous dictum about modern architecture: “Less is more.” (pp. 164-165)

Porter clarified the notion that proposals are awarded based on the merit of the project, program, or research: “While no amount of editorial polishing can save a weak idea, a seasoned grant writer can add value to a sound concept by judicious editing” (p. 166). Editing is labor intensive and must be done with communication skills that do not offend the writer. Once a faculty member understands the simpler, livelier style of grant writing, the need for personal attention drops off rapidly (p. 166).

### ***Growth of Faculty, Wiser and Freer***

Research administrators acting as servant leaders are skilled at teaching faculty and potential principal investigators. Porter (2007) explained, “Research administrators are skillful at expressing to highly educated folk, who are justly proud of their intellectual achievements, the transition from academic to grant writing for successful proposals” (p. 166).

Proactive and tactful research administrators lead the faculty in the transition from academic writing to good proposal writing habits. Porter listed strategies of successful sponsored research offices:

- 1) Home-grown workshops.
- 2) Reading successful proposals.
- 3) Editing by a grants specialist.
- 4) Own institution red-team reviews.
- 5) Writing tips.

Porter noted that, for young faculty and others new to grant writing, on-campus workshops are an effective way to teach grant proposal techniques.

Sponsored research offices can call on the use of experienced faculty, principal investigators, and research administrators to teach the workshops. Porter (2007) suggested that basic grant workshops be offered on a regular basis, with funding agency workshops scattered in the schedule. His second suggestion, reading successful proposals, provides examples to investigators of the difference in writing styles between academic and grant writing. Third, a research administrator should edit proposals with a view toward teaching the faculty grant-writing skills. Eventually the time dedicated to editing can diminish. Fourth, Porter's red-team review brings together respected faculty to participate in the review and editing of multidisciplinary proposals. Once the red-team provides input, the review is used to unify the goals of the proposal into one voice. Finally, Porter suggested posting writing tips on the sponsored research office website. He recommended demonstrating the characteristics of a good grant proposal by contrasting a poorly written proposal with effective revisions.

### ***Research Administrators as Servant Leaders***

Within the sponsored research office are research administrators perceived as servant leaders by their own membership organizations. This perception is influenced by survey results focusing on character. Parolini (2004) suggested that, "Servant leaders are defined by their ability to bring integrity, humility, and servanthood into caring for, empowering, and developing others in carrying out the tasks and processes of visioning, goal setting, leading, modeling, team building, and shared-decision making" (p. 9). These research administrators serve and lead the external funding activities at predominately undergraduate institutions (PUIs). Vargas and Hanlon (2007) described the primary goals of research administrators "to both serve and lead our researchers (faculty), while still keeping in mind our responsibilities to our institutions, sponsors, and community" (p. 45).

Discussion

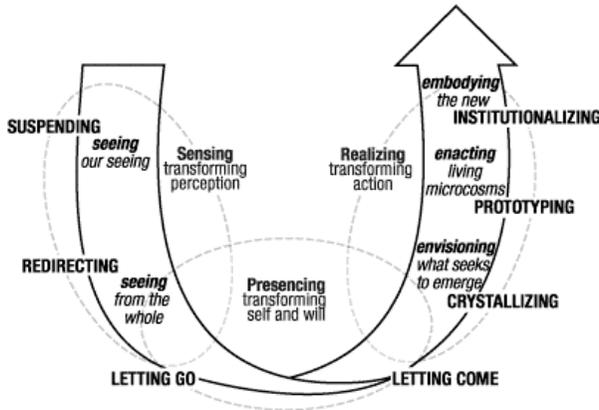
Table 1 describes a sampling of other options for leadership theories. These other theories might suit a particular research administrator and his or her institution. When given a choice, this author selects servant leaders to work in her research office. The multitude of tasks required today in a sponsored research office is far beyond those of even 10 years ago. The research administrator’s toolbox has expanded from one tool to an entire shop of peg-boards with tools handy for a moment’s notice. “If the future is going to be different, we have to go far beyond these little piecemeal gestures and begin to see the systems in which we’re embedded” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004, p. 24).

Table 1: Leadership Theories

Leadership Theories	Weaknesses:	Weaknesses:	Personal Reaction
<b>Path-Goal Theory</b>	Using a Path-Goal Theory approach to leadership has several positive features. Firstly, this theory attempts to incorporate the motivation principles of the expectancy theory and second its model is practical and easy to use.	Although there are several positive aspects of Path-Goal Theory, it fails to explain the different roles of leaders and managers. The time constraints to effectively deploy are very narrow.	Although in an attempt to clearly visualize the vision, I sometimes get caught up in the overall progress and save little time to consider the individual.
<b>Situational Theory</b>	Situational leadership provides a straightforward approach and is easily used. Another strength of this approach, is the fact that it teaches leaders flexibility.	Situational leadership has been criticized for several reasons, one the lack of evidence in its reliability. Second, it does not fully address interaction of groups verse individuals.	The situational approach has flexibility and allows leaders to place individuals into a workflow where they will accomplish the most, or be most productive.
<b>Trans-formational Theory</b>	Transformational leadership theory provides a broader view of leadership; it places a strong emphasis on followers’ needs, values, and morals.	Some suggest that this approach treats leadership as a personality trait rather than a behavior. It is also unclear as to whether or not this leader is a visionary.	I am able to communicate the positive and the negatives about implementing new technologies. I offer to staff the reasons why we need to change and how it will affect them.
<b>Style Approach</b>	Style approach helps leaders distinguish when they need to be task orientated and when the need to be relationship orientated. What is the task and who is best fit to complete it, or what needs to be done and how to approach it.	Style approach suggests that most effective leadership styles are high-high style (i.e., high task, and high relationship).	Style approach has good qualities, and it is important to understand you type of leadership styles, I have often looked back at a situation the needed a direct and quick action to be taken. There was no time for input just action and a direct order from me.
<b>Trait Approach</b>	Trait approach gives us the ability to understand traits about leaders, if they obtain qualities like intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Focuses more on the leader rather than the follower.	Although there are perks to understanding one’s traits, how does it measure up to understanding the situation or task at hand? There has been no research conducted on outcomes and trait approach employment.	I believe that traits and personality have much to do with a leaders ability to lead, and also feel that understanding oneself will help when employing other leadership theories.

Introspection is important to determining your leadership style. How do you determine if you are a servant leader? Do you have what it takes to be one? Are you one

already and didn't have a name for it? Maybe another leadership theory from the chart below suits your style. To discover more about yourself, in this busy world, it is important to take some time to reflect upon how you manage your staff, the faculty, researchers, program officers, and your institution's administration. Determine how you react to stress and what drives you. Are these reactions or proactive choices? Authentically speaking, are you the same at home as you are in the office? Otto Scharmer (2009) invited us to discover our personal authentic leadership.



© Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. Cambridge, Mass.: SoL, Society for Organizational Learning, 2004. Page 225.

Figure 1: Moving through the U.

Theory U is one possibility for discovering your authentic leadership style or even a use as a style. This article is not the place to delve into the theory but a brief discussion is warranted. The Theory U process is pictured in figure 1. In Theory U there are three spaces: awareness, stopping, and calmness, which connect you to present reality, the essence of sensing, and moving down the U. Senge et al. (2004) suggested that the bottom of the U is a “place of true stillness” (p. 189). To arrive at the stillness you enter the U through the first movement, the “way in.” The second movement Senge et al. referred to as the return. This movement is about returning to an individual's normal levels of activity with new awareness and without losing the presence of the deepest point of awareness. This is much like redirecting, or re-orienting our attention to the flow of process behind whatever is immediately visible.

By exploring a new territory of personal leadership, moving through the U, Scharmer (2009) suggested that we can learn to connect to our originating self. For an individual a typical response occurs right after an action. Through discovering your leadership style, take a moment to observe, reflect, and then act. Through this process pay attention to what is driving your responses and then see if you can determine your leadership strengths. Can servant leadership be taught? Maybe through crisis but more than likely servant leadership is an intrinsic growth of relationships.

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