All for One & One for All: Understanding servant leadership

Michael E. Cafferky
Southern Adventist University, mcafferky@southern.edu

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Understanding Servant Leadership

by Michael E. Cafferky, School of Business and Management

Nurse manager Susan* stood in my office doorway, question marks sprouting from her eyes. She had just reported to me what some of her employees had proposed and was unsure whether their idea was good. Their idea: instead of Susan doing the scheduling, let the nurse aides take responsibility as a team for scheduling as well as for making last-minute adjustments when employees call in sick.

I encouraged her to give it a try. She provided the team with a regular meeting time to hammer out details. Shifts were negotiated and assigned to front-line employees.

Individual vs. Group

You may have experienced the same tension as Susan did—that of meeting the needs of the individual at the same time as meeting the needs of the group. Sometimes called individual-community tension, this is a problem that exists in every organization and at every level of society around the globe.

What Susan witnessed is that the essence of leadership is not leadership from a manager to front-line employees but leadership with front-line employees.

In the Bible, Moses faced this tension point when the tribes Reuben and God came to him with a proposal: let them settle on the east side of the Jordan River but only on the condition that these two tribes would first assist the other 10 tribes in securing their new homeland.

Paul was a proponent of freedom in Christ (Romans 6:18; Galatians 5:1), but freedom does not mean license to become a burden to the group. Instead, it means to be made in the image of God, which means to be fully human and fully divine, Christian leaders can be fully individual and fully members of the group. As such, a leader has personal interests as well as group interests. In following Christ’s model, leaders will humble themselves toward both the individual and the community as a servant.

What’s a Leader to Do?

Here are some guidelines to help you balance the tension between the individual and the group.

1. Pray for God to give you wisdom from thoughts others have to share as well as your own thoughts.
2. Take each situation as a process that is unfolding, and remain open to consider the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual as these come to be understood.
3. See in every complicated leadership situation the opportunity to explore your own humility by sharing leadership with followers.
4. Recognize that in every complicated leadership situation, God is calling you to participate with Him as co-creator of innovative solutions that will help both the individual and the organization.

Individuals and the needs of the group.

What affects one affects all, and the commitments made in the covenant are commitments made to all who are affected.

The Incarnation Model

Through the incarnation, when Christ became both fully human and fully divine, an example was given on how we should relate to each other.

“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 very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:4-7, NIV).

Just as Christ was fully human and fully divine, Christian leaders can be fully individual and fully members of the group. As such, a leader has personal interests as well as group interests. In following Christ’s model, leaders will humble themselves toward both the individual and the community as a servant.

A Calling Like No Other

As a servant, your work is to encompass the mind, heart, and soul of the company as well as that of the individual employee. Only in this broader context of creation, covenant, and incarnation can true servant leadership in an organization be understood.

Sometimes you, like Susan, let front-line employees take the lead. You become follower. This does not require that you give up authority. It simply means sharing leadership with followers. At the end of the day, it’s not your authority that makes the difference; it’s through sharing both the leadership and followership process with others in the organization that the most effective means can be found to manage the needs of individuals and the needs of the group.

The calling of the Christian leader is like no other calling. True, many can serve in leader under particular circumstances and as follower in many circumstances, but not everyone is cut out to be a covenantal leader. Not everyone can be humility serve both the individual and the organization (especially when the goals of each conflict) over the long haul across many issues.

When you accept the call to lead, like Solomon your prayer lift takes the journey toward wisdom because you know that you don’t have all the answers to the big questions. This is truly a spiritual work. The work of leaders watching out for the needs of the organization and at the same time caring for the needs of the individual, will- ing to lead and willing to follow, is the same kind of humble ground upon which Moses and Joshua stood when God called them to serve.

*name has been changed