
Servant leadership: a learning experience

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I have been working in the field of education for just over three decades. Along the way, I have had the opportunity to travel different paths: primary, secondary and higher education. In doing so, I have served in different capacities: teacher, advisor, researcher and administrator. I am currently the Director of Socio-education and Evangelization at Marist Brazil.

My career has led me to become the educator that I am today, with the characteristics, limitations and hopes of my personal journey. As time has gone by, I have come to realize that the



greatest School of all is the road itself, and that we are all apprentices. On the road of Marist Education, I have met many administrators, coordinators and inspiring leaders. These leaders have made their mark, not only because of their ideas and their job performance, but especially because of their attitude. They know how to bring out the best in everyone around them. To me, these leaders do not seem to be concerned so much with



leaving a legacy for Marist history or education, but more so, with assisting each person they lead to give the best of himself or herself to the mission, and in that way achieve his or her own personal and professional fulfilment. Again, truly inspiring leaders place themselves at the service of bringing out the best in each co-worker, as distinct from themselves and their own concerns.

I believe that here we find one of the essential characteristics of servant leaders: they give daily witness to their conviction that the spaces and times of power that they occupy do not exist to fulfil their own will and ambitions. The will of a servant leader matters little in terms of what is required. Doing what is necessary in service to the mission means far more to them than merely satisfying their personal projects, even if, at times, the mission and their personal desires might seem to overlap. Along the road of servant leadership, one encounters a constant crossroads: the crossroads of power. Leadership cannot be exercised without power. For it is in the exercise of power where servant leadership can lose track of serving, or rather, serving its own ends and interests. The theme of authority, so dear to us educators, and also, to the world of religion, is crucial in the exercise of servant leadership. Authority as an exercise of servant leadership is an authority built upon one's outlook and attitude; by the constant effort to be coherent, for example, by being "the first to arrive," as Pope Francis exhorts us to do.

Reflecting on the theme of authority based on his studies in sociology, Professor Demo, a Brazilian educator, makes a very interesting distinction between the "discourse of authority" and the "authority of discourse." The discourse of authority uses position or authority to accomplish its will; the authority of discourse, on the other hand, makes use of example, practice and the recognition of leading.

Employing one's position of power to impose an authority that is not reflected in one's behavior and practice subverts true leadership and its ability to serve the mission. It is the opposite of how one needs to behave in his or her relationships when growing up and preparing to launch a career with the dream of building a better society by becoming an educator.

In this respect, I have encountered a great challenge in exercising my way of leading. I believe that in fact I demonstrate that I am more sensitive and sensitized to the practice of servant



leadership. However, as an educator I have been influenced by institutions and a society that continue to reflect notions of servitude (submission) with regard to others.

Sometimes our organizations and society still behave as if they are small overlapping kingdoms. At certain times and places, I might see myself as a king, while in other circumstances, I might tend to act like a “vassal.” Servitude here has nothing to do with servant leadership, which humbly places itself at the service of the mission and of others; rather, servitude is conditioned by a posture of submission, often natural to society and in our dynam-

ics of the alternation of power. These and many other challenges reinforce the need to exercise a leadership that is very keen to serve, to exercise a style of leadership that is the result of learning from experience. In spite of having rock-solid examples like Jesus and Mary, or in today’s world, people like Pope Francis, we still have a lot to learn about this special way of exercising leadership by placing ourselves at the service of others.

Servant leaders are leaders who learn, who learn from their experiences, who are okay with making mistakes and having doubts, who remain open to taking risks and being out front. They open up paths for others to make their own way in developing their careers. By ongoing learning, they end up teaching others (creating opportunities for them to continue their education). As servant leaders make room for new leaders, they make this their way of leading; they fulfil themselves by creating the conditions for others to offer the best of themselves, and thus make their mission an *apéritif*, a prophetic vision of the society and the life they dream of for all.

When it comes to servant leadership, what I have learned so far during career is that there are no ready-made paths nor lots of signposts along the road. However, there are ways for us to proceed: to experience each step in all its dimensions; to exercise presence and “wholeness” in everything we do; to not become enchanted by the rituals that surround the dynamics of the exercise of power. We need to concentrate on practicing the daily and hope-filled exercise of attaining transparency and coherence, a quest that will never be fully achieved, but which we must never stop pursuing.



The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Marist Institute.

If you would like to share your ideas, reflections, or experiences about servant and prophetic leadership with the Commission as a result of these reflections, write to fms.cimm@fms.it