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10 Leadership Maneuvers: A General's Guide to Serving and Leading

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ONE

THE GREATEST IS THE SERVANT



The one who serves best will lead best.

No matter the reason you might want to be a leader, or the circumstances that led to being one, or any agenda you may have inherited, the place to start is service. Being a servant is an underlying theme of this book, and it is not exhibited often in today's culture.

I define service as subordinating yourself to a larger mission with disciplined, hardscrabble self-sacrifice. Followers who aspire to be leaders deliberately put others before themselves. Sometimes leadership calls us to painful servitude; other times

it means keeping our word even when it hurts. Service is neither easy nor convenient, but it does mark one for leadership.

Serving *toward* the Top

Show me a person who has been exalted, and I'll show you one who started out as a servant. This is exactly what happened with a co-pilot I knew at my first operational assignment in the Air Force in the mid-1970s.

I was a navigator in a C-130 squadron in the western Pacific. Naturally, we relied on charts and books with frequencies, approach plates, standard instrument departures, and other necessary information. The pilots and the navigator had a set of these publications for each mission. We carried all these documents in a naugahyde bag that was at least two feet long, one foot wide, and one foot deep. There might have been 100 charts, books, and supplements inside. It must have weighed fifty pounds. The bad part of this helpful and essential bag was that the contents had a shelf life; each book or chart expired at a different time. To fly with an out-of-date publication was asking for trouble. It could result in being decertified by a flight evaluator at the least, or it could result in a mishap and even loss of life at the most. It was serious business.

Keeping these documents current and ensuring that the bag had three sets of each item the crew required was a thankless job, and it wasn't always done well. Checking them all before "stepping" to the aircraft was a protracted, laborious process.

We had a co-pilot who volunteered to do this thankless job for the entire squadron. He didn't just volunteer to do it for one day; he took it on as a permanent additional duty. But like everything else he did, he did it very well. The publications were always well organized, current, and there in the right number—every flight. He came in on weekends and holidays to make sure the bags were ready for the next day's missions.

He would stay late into the night while others were relaxing at off-duty activities, just so there were no surprises for the crews.

He performed this job so well that we forgot how hard it was and how poorly it had been done before. This lieutenant co-pilot chose to be a servant. No one was surprised when, thirty years later, he became the top general in the US Air Force. He served his way toward the top.

On other occasions, I have seen a link between being a servant and being exalted. I knew another lieutenant in that first assignment who volunteered for another thankless job.

One tropical summer afternoon, a lieutenant colonel came into the squadron asking for a volunteer to sit in the unair-conditioned control tower the next day and record the times aircraft started engines, taxied, took off, landed, parked, and shut down their engines. Hoping to elude the favor seeker, people dove for cover as the uncomfortable monotony of such a task sunk in.

One lieutenant stepped forward and volunteered. He arrived early, kept precise notes not just to the minute, but to the second, for each event and sweated in the tower perch through the entire day. When the flight line was again still, he descended the long stairs and went back to the squadron where he typed (before computers) a full report with all the times, along with some other observations and explanations. He slid the report under the door of the lieutenant colonel's darkened office in another building and went home much later than most did that night.

Less than a week later, the colonel wing commander asked for that same lieutenant for an extended, special, and high-visibility job. The lieutenant colonel had recommended this specific lieutenant because of his willingness, precision, and over-and-above performance in a small matter; the wing commander knew that would be useful in larger matters. The lieutenant went on to a long and successful career in the Air Force.

He traces his successive higher positions and rank to that day in the control tower.

This lieutenant was willing to be a servant when others dove for cover, and it was an indication of his heart. The heart of the servant was even more attractive to the wise lieutenant colonel than was the report.

Serving at the Top

While serving is an important indicator of leadership ability for the future, it is also an indication of a leader's effectiveness in the present. I have observed that the best leaders do not stop serving after they are promoted. Continuing to serve informs the leader of needs, feedback, capacity, and high-potential individuals not always visible from the ivory tower. As the well-traveled path to the top in any organization is along the servants' trail, so the entirety of the organization is familiar territory for the effective senior leader. When leaders are done serving, they are done.

I will cover nine other leadership maneuvers in this book, and there are hundreds more that others advocate. But in my view, none is more important than remembering that the greatest leader is a servant, though this is not an original idea.

The Greatest

There are several places in the New Testament where Jesus makes clear who is the greatest. Speaking to the multitude and his disciples, Jesus said in Matthew 23:11,

But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.

Though often interpreted to mean something different, I think it is saying clearly that Jesus is the greatest among the disciples and the multitude and that He is going to be their servant.

The act of service He was going to perform was a salvation: dying for them. He was going to serve them in this way. But He continued in the next verse talking about them:

And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

This is consistent with what James wrote in his epistle:

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. (4:10)

On two other occasions, the disciples argued among themselves who would be the greatest. Jesus replied in Mark 9:35:

If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all.

In Luke 9:48, Jesus puts it this way:

For he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.

Clearly, there is a link between serving and being great. Leaders do well to remember this.

The Leader-Follower Link

When leaders remember to serve, they bring much from their days of following. Consider the forty years that Joshua served Moses. He was aide-de-camp for the leader of the children of Israel on their trek from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. Serving Moses, Joshua was a spy, a warrior, a minister, a mountain climber, and a close observer.

He did this for forty years! That is a long time to be serving, but it prepared him for what God had planned. Do you see his faithfulness in small things preparing him for bigger things? There are other examples:

- Joseph went from being a slave (Genesis 37:28) to number two in Egypt (41:40).
- David, the youngest in his family (1 Samuel 16:11), became king of Israel (2 Samuel 2:4).
- A captive in exile (Daniel 1:6), Daniel rose to the rank of first president in Babylon (6:2).
- Nehemiah, a lowly cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11), was later governor (5:14).
- Orphaned Esther (Esther 2:7) became queen of Persia (2:17).

The best example is Jesus: from creator (John 1:3) to Savior (Acts 4:12) to the coming King (Revelation 19:16).

What do they all have in common? They were servants and followers before they were exalted, even the God-man, Jesus, who:

Took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. (Philippians 2:7b–9)

The link between serving and leading is well documented and unmistakable.

A Phone Call to San Antonio

In early 1999, I was stationed at Tinker Air Force Base in Okla-

homa. I was on temporary duty in San Antonio, Texas, five hundred miles away, so I was in the right place at the right time when a medevac aircraft flew my wife, Karen, to the large military medical center there for surgery. Surgeons removed a giant cell tumor from her sacrum and inserted instrumentation to support that part of her spinal cord.

I balanced my work and family concerns well, working each day and visiting her each evening. Soon, however, the time came for her to return to Tinker to convalesce. I bid her good-bye as the medevac crew loaded her aboard the jet and flew away. I returned to my duties, five hundred miles from where she was going to be.

I really wrestled with this. I was uncomfortable being away from her when she needed me. It was my last thought before sleeping and the first in the morning.

I arrived at the office early the next day and one of my staff informed me I had just missed a call from my boss. I called him back immediately.

“What are you doing there?” he asked me.

I didn't understand the question; he knew exactly what I was doing. I was doing the job he had sent me to do.

He said that he knew that, but, “What are you doing there when your wife needs you here?”

It wasn't so much a question as a statement—an order. He told me to get on the next plane and he would find a replacement. He selected a close civilian friend of mine with whom I have remained close over the years. My two-star boss had shown his true servant colors.

To his own inconvenience and risk, he brought me back to Oklahoma. I was overwhelmed that he put my needs before his own. He, my boss, was the servant. Does that sound backward? It's not; it's the way it should be. Leaders serve. He took the initiative to do for me what was best, and he was willing to absorb

the consequences to the mission. Good leaders do that—they serve even at their own peril. That general (no surprise) went on to a higher position and has been a mentor, friend, and confidant to me over the years.

Stop, Go

When I was a lieutenant colonel, I was the chief navigator in a C-130 flying squadron. We were flying high as a squadron (pun intended). We did everything well. We had a great leader as our commander. He inspired us, and we excelled—most of the time.

On one night training exercise, I was navigating along a course to a point where we would make the airdrop. I was sure I had the right position and called for the “green light” drop signal at the appropriate time. The paratroopers went out the door. Soon after they were all in the air, I saw the aim point still ahead of us, and the paratroopers landed well short of the drop zone. The results could have been worse, but that did little to assuage my sense of failure. Appropriately, I was decertified, retrained, took a check ride, and returned to my duties well bruised.

Soon after this humbling event, I moved to command a maintenance squadron. My squadron commander had looked beyond my misjudgment in one case and saw a leadership opportunity that would help the wing in another area. I had failed on one night and had to stop navigating, but there was a big “go” just around the corner. Instead of in operations, I was now in support. Though I didn’t know it at the time, this change would take me to heights I would not have otherwise reached. My commander served the wing and this former chief navigator, who was now his peer and fellow squadron commander.

Serving is often better understood after the fact. Consider the mundane duties of a lieutenant who keeps track of flight publications or the sometimes boring duties of a tower officer.

Consider Joseph, David, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Esther in the Bible. Consider a phone call and a bad airdrop. Consider that the behind-the-scenes work you are doing now is both preparing you for the future but also demonstrating your real heart.

Some might say that an elevation in status sometimes comes to people other than servants. For example, royalty doesn't have to come up through the ranks (though monarchs do have to wait their "turn"), and some non-royal potentates misuse power in nonserving ways. But some present and future monarchs have found ways to serve their nation and people even before they ascend to the throne. Misusers of national power, however, who have little interest in serving, ultimately fail their people. I further observe that history ignores neither their means nor ends. As the Psalmist points out:

The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted. (Psalm 12:8)

The greatest is the servant, and he or she needs humility to balance two other leadership qualities that are apparent opposites—justice and mercy.

Discussion Questions

1. Remembering the two lieutenants who served their way to the top, what actions and what attitudes set them apart from their peers?
2. What do you think causes a leader "at the top" to stop serving? Can you cite an example of someone who did this? What was the result?
3. What is counterintuitive about a leader being a servant?
4. Tell about a leader you know who served before he or she was "in charge" and after. What strength(s) did a

- servant's heart add to the leader's effectiveness?
5. What is gained by a leader spending time following? What biblical and nonbiblical examples of success are there in this?
 6. In "A Phone Call to San Antonio," the leader showed great familiarity with the personal situation of a subordinate. What are things a leader can do to gain this insight?
 7. What examples can you give of a person who came through a failure and went on to great things as a leader? What can we take away from that experience?