

## Chapter 3

# THE HIGH COST OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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*“I stand before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of  
you, the people.” -Nelson Mandela*

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I have seen servant leadership described as prioritizing the needs and well-being of others. This requires authenticity, compassion, and empathy. These traits cannot be taught but are inherent and core to your person. Servant leaders can be the most transformative leaders. But the cost can be great. The cost comes from having a pattern of unrealistic, self-sacrificing behaviors. In psychology, self-sacrifice is defined as abandoning your personal interests for

someone else's well-being. We deny ourselves specific needs and personal wants, repress our emotions, or ignore our feelings, which means we give away an important part of ourselves. We value others much more than ourselves.

In May of 2020, while we were all conducting drive-thru graduations and commencements, a small group of our school team went to a student's home for his high school graduation. It was the end of a very long and emotionally draining school year. The strain for us working in alternative education settings was tremendous. What brought us to that young man's home was that he was recovering from gunshot wounds he sustained in a drive-by attempt on his life. The home was full of life. Three generations lived there, and while their economic resources were lacking, there was no shortage of love and caring.

The family furniture was rearranged to make room for the hospital bed. There were half-deflated balloons, greeting cards, and half-wilted flower arrangements. The family had tried to make the space comfortable and welcoming for their guests, but the fact that their son, grandson, nephew, and brother had nearly lost his life was not lost on any of us. There was our school counselor, a teacher, one of our community partners,

and me. It was crowded and hot but upbeat until we handed him his diploma and declared him a graduate. The weight of the event led to a flood of emotions. Celebratory cheers and tears filled the space. Other than the school staff members, he was the only person to have earned his high school diploma in the house that day. What it meant to him and the family was more than most could imagine. We had the fortune to be witness to an event and accomplishment that will be truly life-changing.

I have not followed up with him. More often than we had the emotional strength, students in my program did not survive. They became victims again, or the perpetrator, and faced many years of incarceration. I wanted to remember him in that moment. The joy of graduation. The promise of a bright future. The knowledge that he survived and will make the most of the chance he was given. The belief that God intervened because there were other plans for him. Not to die in the apartment building parking lot but to use his life to fulfill the aspirations of a community.

It was time to depart, and the gratitude expressed to us by the family was more than I expected or deserved. I can probably count the number of times I've cried as an adult. This was one of those times.

After the ceremony, I sat in my car for a long while, and the tears came uncontrollably. It wasn't just sadness but guilt. I would be on the freeway for my hour-long commute back to the safety of the suburbs. I was the beneficiary of a system that somehow failed him. I can enjoy a lifestyle provided by the same system that expelled this young man from school. He was shot at 1:30 on a Wednesday—a time when most kids are in school. The alternative school he attended had a dismissal time of 12:20 on Wednesdays. Had he been in school until 3:00, like most of his peers, would he have escaped the gunshots? My job was contingent upon students being expelled. Yes, some committed offenses on campus, but most were “pushed out” for various reasons. And yes, the vast majority were Black, Latino, foster youth, students with disabilities, or justice-involved youth. It was sadness and guilt.

I don't remember the drive home. But I do remember walking into an empty house. I remember comparing where I was to where I had been a short time ago. Both in physical location and point in life. How did I, the youngest child to a single mother, growing up in Los Angeles in the eighties, escape the fate of violence, incarceration, and abuse that statistically I was predestined to?

In the weeks before graduation and before the COVID shutdown, I talked with a high school principal about the number of students he referred to my program. He responded that now that I had taken over, he felt “better” about sending students because he knew I would “take care of them.” It was a compliment, but I did not want students to be “pushed out” of their comprehensive high school because ours was where they would receive compassion and care. This compassion and caring comes at a cost to those who serve.

The cost was high. The literature on servant leadership is extensive. Being a servant leader is very attractive in education, where we are relationship-driven. What is less studied and reported on is the high cost of being a servant leader. “The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first” (Greenleaf, 2002.) Greenleaf goes on to describe the contradiction between leading and serving. As a leader, I have the organization’s priorities first. As a servant, my priorities are to those I serve. When the two priorities are incongruent, we get dissonance. In the most basic terms, it is when our actions do not align with our beliefs. The effects of this contradiction are more than just an uncomfortable state of mind. It leads to stress and anxiety. While this

is not meant to be health advice, we know through research that the long-term effects of stress on the body can lead to heart disease, depression, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other conditions that affect our daily quality of life. Digestive problems, insomnia, headaches, and muscle tension are common conditions that we struggle with regularly. For me, it was depression, anxiety, and a cancer diagnosis that I question whether it was a result of lifestyle, environment, vocation, or a combination. I've learned and have come to understand how our bodies respond to or are impacted by stress. How does a bridge crumble or a building collapse? Excessive stress occurs when the demands made on an organism or thing exceed that organism's or thing's capacity to fulfill them. My body could no longer sustain itself under those conditions. And rather than listen to our bodies, we push on in the service of others. Living in a constant state of disharmony was taking its toll. Only a few days after the individual graduation ceremony at the student's house did I face the real effect of not listening to my body. On the 90-minute commute home, I fell asleep on the freeway and rear-ended a semi-truck. The car was totaled, but no injuries. My body was giving signs that I chose to ignore in favor of tending to the needs of others.

The cost was high. I wasn't the best husband, son, brother, or father. Nor was I the best leader. I felt a sense of altruism in my work and commitment to others. However, the satisfaction of servant leadership does not transfer to the others in our lives. They are often left to pick up the pieces and forced to survive on the little affection, joy, and happiness left after we expend it on others. Partners, family, and friends love and support servant leaders, but they, too, pay the price— they unknowingly sign a contract to share their servant leader's most valued aspects with the rest of the world. We do not have an endless capacity for love, compassion, forgiveness, and grace, so sharing what we have for nothing in return is the true cost of servant leadership.

Early in my leadership journey, I relied too heavily on my positional power to influence others and drive and promote my vision for the organization. While we could see short-term gains, we did experience less collaboration, lower morale, and a reduced sense of agency among our team. Many leaders will default to this more traditional leadership style, as I did. Reflecting on those early experiences, I see that it resulted from my insecurities, self-doubt, and belief that I could exercise the traits necessary to be a competent servant leader.

While empathy has always been a trait present in me, it took time for me to present as authentic and exhibit the emotional intelligence required to build a sense of community, listen, and be aware of those around me. I also wonder if I had the mindset to serve others. Servant leadership requires a mindset where one can recognize that to be most effective; leaders need to serve the needs of their team members.

There was always comfort in knowing that I came to this work with a natural and genuine desire to serve. When I first embarked on formal leadership roles, I attempted to draw on my strengths without tending toward autocracy or traditional hierarchical leadership. At the time, I did not know the degree to which emotional investment in the work would lead to personal suffering and sacrifice.

As leaders, we are responsible for creating an organizational culture that prevents job stress, builds protective barriers for workers, and creates an environment where employees can achieve their goals. While the cost is high, the rewards are great. By helping to improve their emotional health, the work of a servant leader can help mitigate the high cost or at least provide a way for our servants to be restored.

I remember the idiom, “Don’t set yourself on fire to keep others warm.” The flight attendants are right: always wear always put your mask before helping others. Restoration is not reserved for our employees. Restoration of the soul and forgiveness are two gifts I have given to myself. The mistakes, the missteps, the times I have sacrificed my beliefs, and the moments I lost sight of why I chose to be an educational leader no longer haunt me. While embarking on the road to self-forgiveness, I have let go of the resentment toward those who have committed harm and returned as a more committed leader. I have returned as a stronger man.

## **Learned**

We sacrifice a lot of ourselves in the service of others. I have learned to prioritize my health and well-being to foster a more positive work environment and improve the outcomes for those in our communities.

The accolades, personal gain, and prestige may not be sufficient to mitigate the psychological and physical toll leadership requires.