

A Review of John J. Sullivan's

Servant First! Leadership for the New Millennium

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Pessimism is the prevailing mindset at the beginning of the new millennium among discontented intellectuals, the media, and those who seek a utopia on earth (Johnson, 2003). We can do nothing in the face of economic stagnation, business corruption, global warming, and international terrorism, according to pessimists. But there is a viable alternative: the optimism of those who can adopt the leadership example set by Jesus Christ to serve others.

John Sullivan's book, *Servant First! Leadership for the New Millennium*, sets forth this optimistic alternative in a lucid and practical manner. Drawing from scholarship on management and leadership, especially Deming's (1982) total quality management and Greenleaf's (1991) servant leadership, his own diverse experience, and biblical examples, Sullivan develops a practical model for Christian leadership.

Servant leadership differs from trait, behavioral, situational, and contingency leadership approaches by its focus on human persons and relationships. This normative paradigm involves recognition of the leader and the followers as spiritual as well as material creatures, ones worthy of dignity and respect unconditionally, not merely for their instrumental contributions. As Robert K. Greenleaf and his followers (e.g., Spears, 1995) note, a genuine servant leader puts the needs and desires of her followers before her own needs. Her preferred methods are use of persuasion and example rather than command and control or manipulation. She measures success by manifest growth in the people served and the positive effects on overall society.

Critics, such as Craig Johnson (2001), argue that servant leaders can be unrealistically naive, too passive and too tolerant of followers, pursue the wrong ends, and ineffective in some situational contexts, such as prison administration. Even admitted advantages of servant leadership, including its altruism, simplicity, and self-awareness, can be viewed as weakened through naivety. According to Norman Bowie (2000), a servant leader can be too subject to manipulation by followers.

John Sullivan, while not directly refuting such criticism, presents a strong positive case for servant leadership, describing and explaining how the biblical Christ led and mentored his disciples. Sullivan's book indeed demonstrates that proper servant leadership need not be limited by the above objections. Moreover, Sullivan argues that the leadership model exemplified by Christ is not beyond ordinary human capability, but it may be studied and applied effectively within a variety of contemporary organizations.

Sullivan identifies character traits, competencies, and leadership types exemplified by Christ as leader. He describes how Christ built a values-driven organization based on principles honoring the dignity and worth of each imperfect individual. Drawing on his military experience and management education, Sullivan offers a five-phased strategy for preparing, deploying, and growing an organization. Especially helpful are the suggested questions that the contemporary leader can address at each phase. Examples, often blending the methods of Deming with biblical accounts, explain specific tactics that have been used successfully to implement the strategy in military, educational, and business

situations. The concluding example, that of Chris Heuertz, Executive Director of Word Made Flesh, shows how servant leadership has been used in organizing and implementing a program for serving the poor in many of the most underdeveloped regions of the world.

Sullivan does not argue ideologically, but seeks to persuade the reader by using numerous examples that a person who adopts the nature of a servant leader, applying the principles and behaviors exemplified by Christ, can lead well. His book thus presents a positive alternative for anyone interested in moving away from the naysayers toward a culture of personal, corporate, and societal optimism. Sullivan explains how it has worked well and can continue to do so. His book is recommended reading for anyone searching for an optimistic and practical stimulus for more effective leadership.

References:

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