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# Servant Leadership Cultivates Grit and Growth Mindset in Learners

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## Abstract

*A servant leader has a growth mindset, and makes a conscious effort to develop self effectiveness in areas of listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. These are the characteristics of a servant leader as identified by Spears (2010). Empirical studies from Hays (2008) and Chan (2015) provided examples of these ten attributes in action, in the context of tertiary and secondary classrooms respectively. Servant leadership takes a developmental approach in meeting diverse learners' needs. It does not put its emphasis on the talents of individuals but focuses on learning as a journey. Learners' potential is actualized through effort and stamina, which is also known as grit, "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007, p.1087). It is argued that a servant leader is a learner and models a growth mindset. The practice of servant leadership in a learning community creates a supportive, respectful and demanding environment, which is conducive to cultivating learners with a growth mindset and grit.*

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Learners, Grit, Growth Mindset

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Spears (2010) characterizes servant leaders with ten attributes. They are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. Hays (2008) argued that the practice of these servant leader character traits can “make a profound difference on the impact of learning and in the learning experience of both students and teachers” (p.113). Chan (2015) conducted an empirical study with students and teachers in a secondary school in Hong Kong, and analyzed the servant leadership practice with these character traits. Chan concluded that the practice of servant leadership met learners’ cognitive, social and individual needs, and it built learner-centered classrooms through service, leadership, and community building.

The philosophy of servant leadership emphasizes a servant leader being and becoming more and more effective in serving the led (Greenleaf, 1970). In the context of education, it can be argued that a teacher, with a servant leader mindset, has a growth mindset and chooses to be and become, model and develop, in students the ten attributes of servant leadership. The practice of servant leadership creates a supportive, respectful and demanding environment, which fosters the development of grit and a growth mindset in learners. Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007, p.1087). Students with grit welcome challenges, pick themselves up from setbacks, and push themselves toward the next level of achievement. Servant leadership cultivates students with the essential elements for success, in school and in life.

This paper outlines the character traits of a servant leader, and discusses their applications in the teaching profession. It presents the importance of grit, and emphasizes how learners with a growth mindset have grit. The implications of servant leadership practices offer a different paradigm to evaluate the aim of education, the role of teachers, the creation of classroom dynamics, the process of teaching and learning, and the unchanging needs of students in the constantly changing world.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Characteristics of a Servant Leader**

Greenleaf (1970) coined the term servant leadership in the world of academia, and he portrayed a servant leader as one who “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p.13). Robert Greenleaf founded the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (2016), which was originally named as the Center of Applied Ethics in 1964. Larry Spears served as the president and CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (2016) from 1990 to 2007, and he surveyed and identified a list of ten characteristics which are deemed of “critical importance – central to the development of servant-leaders” (Spears, 2010, p.27). This list is adopted for this paper as it aligns with two empirical studies of servant leaders

who exhibited these qualities in classroom settings. Practical examples of teachers demonstrating these traits are discussed in the latter part of this paper.

A servant leader embraces a growth mindset, and desires to equip him/herself effectively in serving and leading others for their betterment. The path of servant leadership is a learning journey, and the following ten attributes are presented from a developmental and equipping perspective.

## **Listening**

Listening is more than a technique but a learning attitude and commitment towards understanding self and others. A servant leader pays attention to what is said and not said. “Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant-leader” (Spears, 2010, p.27).

## **Empathy**

A servant leader strives to become an empathetic listener. A servant leader believes in, and respects people’s intrinsic worth, even when they may fall short of performance expectations. Zhang-Negrerie (2016) described the components of empathy explicitly, including (a) the affective capacity to share the other’s feeling; (b) the cognitive ability to understand the other’s feeling and perspective; and (c) the willingness to communicate one’s feeling and understanding of the other verbally and nonverbally. Hence, the development of empathy stretches one to step outside of self, to focus on others and their context and to view self as a part of the whole. It broadens a servant leader’s perspectives.

## **Healing**

A servant leader acknowledges that people could be wounded by life’s occurrences and he/she extends helpful hands to mend their brokenness. The process of healing becomes a fulfilling search for wholeness for both the servant leader and the led. Spears (2010) stated that “the healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and integration” (p.27). Therefore, the intention, process, and outcome of healing allow a servant leader to gain the trust of the led, and the led are freed from perceived or self-imposed limitations, for a journey of growth and development.

## **Awareness**

A servant leader aims to develop insight through evaluation of situations from complementary and contradictory perspectives. “Awareness helps one in understanding issues involving ethics, power, and values” (Spears 2010, p.27). A servant leader develops general awareness and self-awareness, through spending time in solitude. Developing a habit of quietness and reflection yields inner serenity.

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### **Persuasion**

A servant leader develops relational authority and referent power. A servant leader convinces (not coerces) others to reach consensus within teams. A servant leader does not accuse, but persuades others with his/her non-judgmental arguments. A servant leader is assertive in his/her beliefs and core values, but he/she is not aggressive in his/her interactions with others.

### **Conceptualization**

A servant leader needs to develop “a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach” (Spears 2010, p.28). The urgency of day-to-day realities can consume all the energy and time of a leader, and distract him/her from casting, firming, and sharpening vision for an organization. It is vital for a servant leader to cultivate his/her conceptual thinking ability, which takes discipline and deliberate practice.

### **Foresight**

“Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future” (Spears 2010, p.28). Foresight allows a leader to project further than the others. Greenleaf (1970) argued that foresight is the “lead” element of a leader. With foresight, a leader knows where he/she is going and leads others with confidence toward the next step. Without foresight, a leader is a leader in name only.

### **Stewardship**

A steward in the medieval period had responsibilities to prepare the prince for his reign (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2002). A servant leader takes on the role of a steward who seeks the best interests of the people, institution and society. This requires a servant leader to develop and sustain his/her dedication and commitment to serve others.

### **Commitment to the Growth of People**

The conscious choice of being and becoming effective in serving others requires a servant leader to embrace a growth mindset. A servant leader believes that everyone can gain new understanding and skills, as well as produce greater achievement. A servant leader encourages and facilitates others to extend beyond their comfort zone and make new growth personally and professionally. It can be argued that this quality is the antecedent of servant leadership and a servant leader teacher models and instills a growth mindset in students.

## Building Community

Human beings have social and communal needs and a servant leader takes an active role in building communities among people. In a community, individuals find their sense of belonging and identity, and they give and receive support from one another.

In summary, a servant leader is characterized by ten traits, and develops these traits along their journey, serving and leading others. Greenleaf (1970) stated that “the best test is: do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 13). Servant leadership is a viable model for education, which implies preparation of learners to be and become responsive and responsible citizens, serving the society. In the context of classrooms, servant leader teachers meet students’ needs with their actions, and they model servant leadership for their students.

## Students’ Perception of Teachers as Servant Leaders

Hays (2008) and Chan (2015) conducted empirical studies of students’ perceptions of their teachers exhibiting servant leader traits, in the context of higher education and secondary schooling respectively. Table 1 depicts servant leadership in action, from the lenses of students.

| <b>Servant Leader Attributes</b> | Hays’ findings with university students                                | Chan’s findings with secondary school students                   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Listening                        | Invite and listen to students’ opinions                                | Listen even when the topic is not related to the subject matter  |
| Empathy                          | Recognize multiple perspectives  | Show understanding of students’ struggles and offer them support |
| Healing                          | Equip students with knowledge and skills to cope with their challenges | Proactive and observant of students’ verbal and non-verbal cues  |
| Awareness                        | Capsulate what the learning moment requires and what is                | Connect new knowledge with students’ personal                    |

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|                                    |  |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
|                                    | relevant and beneficial for that situation   | experiences, prior knowledge, and interests                                   |
| Persuasion                         | Help/let students develop their own belief, values, priorities, and opinions   | Allow students freedom to explore and express their individuality             |
| Conceptualization                  | Help students to not be satisfied with the first and simplest solution but find better solutions though it may require more work | Provide structured lesson plan and give clear instructions                    |
| Foresight                          | Help students to project the implications of given decisions   | Explain explicitly how students can move forward in their learning path       |
| Stewardship                        | Accept responsibilities to protect the rights, property and welfare of others  | Employ a variety of ways to help students to learn                            |
| Commitment to the Growth of People | Reflective of the course progress and students' needs, and encourages students to be reflective (e.g. journal writing)           | Invest time with students beyond regular class time to support their learning |
| Community Building                 | Provide vision and direction for the community and guard its focus and unity   | Expect students to share responsibilities, to care for their classmates       |

Hays (2008) concluded that “servant teaching is not only possible, but desirable. Servant teaching offers a richness of experience, and permits and promotes learning to occur that may be virtually impossible to achieve through other means” (p.130). Chan (2015) echoed that “the imminent quality of a servant-leader establishes legitimacy for transcendental leadership, and the practices of servant-leadership in the classrooms bring mutual benefits for all parties and wholeness for the leader and the led” (p.137). One of the mutual benefits of servant leadership practice is creating a supportive, respectful and demanding environment, where teachers and students are encouraged to view their circumstances with a growth mindset and develop grit, an important quality and predictor for success in school and in life.

## Grit – the Key to Success

Duckworth (2015) has researched the motivational aspect of learning for years, conducting studies on grade point average among Ivy League undergraduates, retention in two classes of West Point cadets, and ranking of the National Spelling Bee contestants. Her findings consistently showed that “gritty” paragons overcome setbacks and arrive at a new break through, in these various situations. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as the “perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over a year’s time despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (p.1087-1088). They elaborated that perseverance is about stamina instead of conscientiousness, and passion refers to commitment rather than intensity. Hence, Duckworth et al.’s definitions of perseverance and passion overlap partially with two servant leadership traits: stewardship and commitment to the growth of people.

In a series of six different studies, Duckworth et al. (2007) found that people with grit obtained higher levels of education, earned higher GPAs in universities, completed demanding programs of study, and ranked higher in competitions. They positioned that “grit, may in fact matter more than IQ to eventual success in life” (p.1099).

Duckworth (2015) ascertained that any achievement is a combination of talent and effort. She rationalized that:

Talent is how quickly your skills improve when you invest effort. Achievement is what happens when you take your acquired skills and use them... But effort factors into the calculation *twice*, not once. Effort builds skills. At the very same time, effort makes skill *productive* (Chapter 3, 670).

Duckworth further elaborated that there is a gap between one’s potential and its actualization. She cited William James (1907) that “men the world over possess amounts of resources, which only very exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use” (p.323). She argued that the key to extend from one’s current state, and reach further toward his/her potential, is dependent upon the amount of effort one puts into (a) discovering, developing, and deepening his/her interest, (b) committing to deliberate practice, and (c) a compelling other-centered purpose. To sum this up, it can be distinguished that talent is what one can do and grit is what one will do in pushing toward the achievement goals.

If grit is as important as, or even more important than, talent, and it has predictive validity of success, it is argued that educators should invest time and resources strategically, in fostering grit among learners. Certainly, curriculum rigor, teacher qualification, standardized testing, and many other parenting and schooling factors are external contributing factors to education excellence. However, a person’s internal drive and resilience grit is a pivotal factor in overcoming adversity in life and in learning.



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### **Growth Mindset and Neuroplasticity**

Yeager and Dweck (2012) argued that students' mindsets make a big difference in their interpretations of and responses to, challenges at schools. Students with more of a fixed mindset emphasize performance which results from natural talents. Therefore, they view effort as only necessary for the "dumb" people. When setbacks come in, students with a fixed mindset tend to give up, cheat, or become defensive. Generally, they are cautious of taking risks outside their comfort zone. On the contrary, students with more of a growth mindset are learners who are interested in learning. They perceive effort (a) in practice, (b) in seeking alternate strategies, and (c) in seeking others for assistance, as necessary for their progress. They are adventurous, and setbacks do not disappoint them for a long time. They are able to bounce back and make attempts again.

In separate studies, Yeager and Dweck (2012) found that students, who believe and/or are taught that intellectual abilities and social attributes can be changed with effort, have (a) higher achievement during school transition years, (b) a greater course completion rate in challenging math courses, and (c) lower aggression and/or depression in response to peer victimization and/or exclusion. The authors advocated that students should be taught that the brain is not hardwired and fixed, but adaptable and plastic. The brain changes throughout one's lifetime and new habits of thinking, feeling, and doing can be engineered with repeated directed attention towards the desired changes. Therefore, failure is not seen as a detrimental occurrence because it is not permanent and it can be overcome. A person with a growth mindset has a positive outlook on life and is optimistic about the future.

In sum, Yeager and Dweck (2012) concluded that "students' mindsets can be changed and that doing so can promote resilience" (p.303). Duckworth et al. (2007) advocated grit which focuses on stamina in pursuit of one's long term goals. In the context of education, it is argued below how the practices of the ten servant leadership traits create a supportive, respectful and demanding environment for students to foster a growth mindset and grit. A servant leader models a growth mindset and grit, in developing the led to become the next generation of servant leaders.

### **Building Grit and Growth Mindsets through Servant Leadership**

First and foremost, a servant leader is a learner who possesses a growth-mindset. He/She makes a conscious decision to serve others by developing and improving his/her qualities of listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. Developing self and others does not take days or weeks, but years. A servant leader models a growth mindset and grit in his/her interaction with others.

Duckworth (2015) suggested that a supportive, respectful and demanding environment is conducive for students to foster grit, and it is argued that the practice of

servant leadership creates such an environment for learners. A servant leader teacher serves and supports students by practicing listening, empathy, and healing. Chan (2015) suggested that a servant leader teacher takes a developmental approach to serving others. They consider the readiness of learners, and apply differentiation when meeting learners' cognitive, social and individual needs. Through listening, empathy, and healing, a trusting relationship is established between a servant leader and the led. The servant leader has developed legitimacy for his/her leadership, and the led is willing to take risks in learning and attempting new growth.

Furthermore, a servant leader teacher has high demands and expectations of students, who emulate their servant leader, and are becoming autonomous, responsive, and responsible servant leaders themselves. With this in mind, a servant leader teacher leads his/her students with practices of awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, and foresight. A servant leader is not merely concerned with serving the needs of the led, but also with nurturing the led with the philosophy, values, and practices of servant leadership.

The dual roles of a servant and a leader are equally important, to the identity of a servant leader. A servant leader serves to lead and leads to serve. The qualities of stewardship and commitment to the growth of people highlight the dedication and determination of a servant leader, which is argued in this paper as an expression of grit. With listening ears, an empathetic heart, healing hands, mindfulness, persuasive words, conceptual thinking and foresight, teachers serve and lead their students, to discover, develop and deepen their capability over a long period of disciplined practice. A servant leader teacher provides students with feedback and encourages them to reflect and make improvements. A servant leader teacher is by the side of the students when they struggle, fall and then pick themselves up from their disappointments. A servant leader teacher does not take away the students' responsibilities but mentors them with guidance and encouragement, and equips them with knowledge and skills.

One of the goals of a servant leader is to build community. Kaufman and Duckworth argued that increasing a sense of belonging among students lead to higher performances:

Five particular factors that have been shown to increase engagement and interest are: (1) introducing a certain amount of autonomy into the process, giving people some freedom to choose how they learn, (2) making tasks meaningful by drawing connections to personally relevant values and goals in the students' lives, (3) increasing a sense of purpose for learning that goes beyond self-serving concerns, (4) increasing a sense of competence and self-efficacy for the materials, and (5) increasing positive social relationships (Kaufman and Duckworth, 2015, p.4).

A healthy community has members who embrace a shared vision, develop shared values, practice service and leadership, respect and celebrate diversity, as well as persevere and develop stamina. Students are challenged to acquire new skills and collaborate with

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others who are different from themselves. Therefore, a learning community, operating with servant leadership principles, is a training ground for students to cultivate a growth mindset and to develop grit. A learner-centered community breathes life into the hardware of classrooms and schools, into human networks and social learning hubs. Community citizens develop their sense of belonging, purpose, and responsibility. They learn to be and become servant leaders, who are stewards, committing to their own and others' growth.

### CONCLUSION

In summary, Greenleaf (1970) stated that servant leadership is not a management technique, but a calling and a way of life. Its goal is to develop the led to become freer, wiser, healthier, and more likely to be servant leaders themselves. Table 1 presents exemplars of servant leadership in action, practiced by teachers, in the context of tertiary and secondary classrooms. The antecedent of a servant leader is a choice to grow in self-effectiveness, by continuous development of the ten character traits of a servant leader. A servant leader impacts life with life, modeling a growth mindset. The practices of servant leadership create a supportive, respectful and demanding environment, which fosters grit and a growth mindset in learners.

The incorporation of servant leadership theory and practice in education has powerful and promising implications. It is a different paradigm of education, aiming for collaborative success, instead of competitions and league tables. It clarifies the role of a teacher, first and foremost, as a servant. It promotes a growth mindset in teachers, and expects them to model character building in their capacity of leading students. Beyond the mastering of classroom management techniques, teachers establish classroom ecology. Learning is a journey which requires all sojourners to exercise their effort and celebrate diversity in their community. Success is not narrowly defined by a few types of performances. Servant leadership transforms the languages and behaviors of those in the learning community. Finally, researchers, educators, and policy makers are encouraged to support the philosophy and practice of servant leadership through curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular program reviews and designs. For example, resources for instruction can be purposefully selected to provide a platform for discussion of servant leaders and their legacy. Service learning projects are good avenues for students to practice servant leadership.

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