



A Voice for the “Least of These:” Eleanor Roosevelt’s Servant Leadership

Christy Tabors, Hardin-Simmons University

Abstract

Greenleaf (2002/1977), the source of the term “servant leadership,” acknowledges a lack of nurturing or caring leaders in all types of modern organizations. Leaders and potential future leaders in today’s society need servant leader role-models they can study in order to develop their own servant leadership. In this paper, the author explores Eleanor Roosevelt’s life using Spears’ (2010) ten characteristics of servant leadership as an analytical lens and determines that Roosevelt functioned as a servant leader throughout her lifetime. The author argues that Eleanor Roosevelt’s servant leadership functions as a timeless model for leaders in modern society. Currently, a lack of literature exploring the direct link between Eleanor Roosevelt and servant leadership exists. The author hopes to fill in this gap and encourage others to contribute to this area of study further. Overall, this paper aims at providing practical information for leaders, particularly educational leaders, to utilize in their development of servant leadership, in addition to arguing why Eleanor Roosevelt serves as a model to study further in the field of servant leadership.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Leadership, Educational Leadership, Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt, often remembered as Franklin D. Roosevelt's wife and an American First Lady, embodied servant leadership throughout her life. While many would not consider an American First Lady as a "leader," Eleanor Roosevelt broke the stereotype and became a major political influence throughout the twentieth century. Using her position of First Lady as a means to share her political views, Eleanor fought for the rights of others. Additionally, Eleanor utilized journalism as her political platform by writing a six-day-a-week newspaper column from 1935 to 1962 to keep the general public informed politically. Through these means, she became a voice for the "least of these" in her time period. Posthumously, people remember Eleanor Roosevelt as one of the most prominent and influential First Ladies in history. Today, she remains a model for First Ladies who aspire to make a difference in politics and people's lives.

Throughout Eleanor Roosevelt's life, she exhibited the characteristics of a servant leader identified by Spears (2010), which allowed her to make a difference in many people's lives. Eleanor listened to people, showed empathy in her actions, served as a healer for the masses, maintained awareness of people's struggles, used persuasion in her politics, utilized the skill of conceptualization in her leadership, became a steward for human rights, committed herself completely to others, and helped toward building a global community (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017; Glendon, 2001; O'Farrell, 2010; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2017). Today, aspiring servant leaders may look to Eleanor as a model for serving others in their organizations, as well as outside of their organizations on a global scale. By studying Eleanor Roosevelt through the lens of Spears' (2010) servant leadership characteristics, leaders can learn how to develop these characteristics to serve as servant leaders in their organizations and work toward improving their followers. Eleanor utilized these specific characteristics to improve the working conditions for men and women, encourage women to become involved in politics, and lead a group of world leaders to develop the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017; Glendon, 2001; O'Farrell, 2010; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2017). All leaders can develop these 10 characteristics to become servant leaders so they may lead effectively and make a difference in their followers' lives. This paper will explore Eleanor Roosevelt's biography and servant leadership characteristics, apply them to contemporary leadership and examine Eleanor's experiences through Biblical scripture as well as tie them to related servant leadership concepts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to analyze Eleanor Roosevelt from a servant leadership perspective, one must first explore her life from a historical context. Eleanor Roosevelt was born, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, on October 11, 1884 in New York, New York (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). Her parents, Elliot and Anna Hall Roosevelt, both came from wealthy families. Her father was brother to Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States (U.S.). Eleanor's parents both died before her tenth birthday. Upon their deaths, Eleanor and her two brothers went to live with their maternal grandmother,

Mary Hall (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). Eleanor stayed with her grandmother until she reached 15 years old. In 1899, Eleanor’s grandmother sent her to Allenswood, a boarding school for girls in London. While attending Allenswood, Eleanor met Marie Souvestre, a French headmistress at the school. Marie Souvestre, a known feminist and positivist, supported trade unions and legislation for the working class (Beasley, 2010; O’Farrell, 2010). The two formed a bond that would influence Eleanor’s early political views directly. “Encouraged to be independent and to think for herself, she was exposed to new, liberal ideas” (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 7). Three years later, in 1902, Eleanor returned to New York to prepare for her debut or “coming out” in society, required of debutantes at the time. As her family tradition required, Eleanor began engaging in community service activities through the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements. From 1903 to 1904, she taught calisthenics and dancing to immigrant girls on Rivington Street, located on the Lower East Side. This served as Eleanor’s early exposure to the living and working conditions of the working class and immigrants. During this time, she asked her cousin, and future husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt to accompany her to the area. The couple began courting shortly after Eleanor’s return to New York. This was Franklin’s first exposure to the slum conditions in New York, which would influence him greatly. Additionally, Eleanor joined the National Consumers’ League, which also played a role in her political views (Beasley, 2010; O’Farrell, 2010; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). Through her membership, Eleanor gained direct knowledge of sweatshop conditions and factories. She utilized this awareness throughout her life in her attempts to improve work legislation. On March 17, 1905, Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt married in New York City. During their marriage, Eleanor became preoccupied with raising a family and managing the household.

Political Beginnings

In 1910, Franklin began his political career with his election to the New York Senate, which required the family to relocate to Albany. During her husband’s term on the senate, Eleanor engaged in traditional political wife responsibilities, entertaining and attending debates. In 1913, Franklin was appointed as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, which required the family to move once more to Washington D.C. Again, Eleanor took on the traditional role of calling other officials’ wives for social events (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001). She hired a social secretary, Lucy Page Mercer, to help with meeting social requirements. In 1917, due to the United States’ entry into World War I (WWI), Eleanor returned to participating in community service and volunteer work. She started visiting wounded WWI soldiers and volunteering with the Red Cross to serve meals to soldiers passing through Washington’s Union Station. In 1918, Eleanor discovered that Franklin was engaged in an affair with her secretary, Mercer, since at least 1916. She offered to divorce Franklin; however, Sara, Franklin’s mother, threatened to withdraw her financial support if the couple divorced (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). Franklin and Eleanor came to an agreement, and Franklin claimed he would stop seeing Mercer. This event greatly influenced Eleanor and became the catalyst for her own political career. “Eleanor would never again trust Franklin on a deeply intimate level, nor

would she allow her identity and sense of worth to merge with his..." (Burns & Dunn, 2001, p. 156). While she faced turmoil in her personal life, Eleanor focused outward on helping make improvements to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a federal mental institution. Using her influence in the Red Cross, Eleanor helped to establish therapy programs for soldiers experiencing "shell-shock," considered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) today (Burns & Dunn, 2001).

In 1920, Franklin ran as the selected Democratic candidate for Vice-President. During the campaign, Eleanor rode the campaign train with him and stood by him as he gave speeches (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001). Franklin did not win the election; however, the campaign proved successful in arousing Eleanor's interest in politics. Upon the Roosevelts' return to New York, Eleanor joined the New York State League of Women Voters. The league provided Eleanor an opportunity to meet professional women engaged in political action. She began writing political articles proposing changes to New York's primary election law. In 1921, as Eleanor's political activities began to grow, the Roosevelts experienced a personal and professional setback; Franklin developed polio, which required Eleanor to become his full-time nurse. In an effort to prevent Franklin from retiring to a private life, Eleanor became a political surrogate to continue his political career. In 1922, Eleanor joined the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and developed close relationships with many political women at the time. (Beasley, 2010). "They not only sought better jobs and working conditions but also negotiated for better housing and health care and provided apartments and banking service" (O'Farrell, 2010, p. 19). Eleanor would continue to work with the WTUL for many years. In 1929, Franklin was elected the governor of New York, which required the family to return to Albany. During his governorship, Eleanor taught at Todhunter, a private girls' school in Manhattan and hosted educational luncheons for the WTUL. Eleanor felt that education would assist the working class by strengthening them as trade unionists and citizens (O'Farrell, 2010). Additionally, Eleanor advocated for women to receive government appointments as well as encouraged women to use their right to vote. During this time, Eleanor's journalism career flourished. From 1928 to 1932, she published 20 articles in women's magazines.

Life as First Lady

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected the 32nd President of the United States. During his campaign and for some time afterwards, Eleanor took a step back from public politics but continued to work behind the scenes. In 1933, she resigned from teaching at Todhunter due to the demands of becoming a First Lady (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). During the final month of Franklin's campaign, Eleanor met Lorena Hickok, a political reporter, who became a close friend. Hickok played a major role in helping Eleanor redefine the role of First Lady. "Hickok advised Eleanor on press relations, helping her establish White House press conferences for women reporters shortly after the inauguration..." (Beasley, 2010, p. 58). Due to Franklin's condition, Eleanor helped to serve him by going on tours and reporting to him about conditions, programs, and public opinions. This position gave Eleanor an opportunity to transform the role of

First Lady. “Previously, wives had not been pressed into service as conscious symbols of an administration’s attitude toward the public. Eleanor...acted as a personal representative of her husband, even in tense situations, thereby elevating the role of the first lady” (Beasley, 2010, p. 62). Additionally, Eleanor oversaw the White House, making sure that the household ran smoothly. She received a bulk of mail, of which she tried to read about 50 letters each day. This allowed her to know the concerns of the American public. She also worked within the White House to push for women appointees. She held her first press conference on March 6, 1933, inviting only women reporters (Beasley, 2010). Eleanor would host several press conferences throughout her 12-year tenure as First Lady. She also started writing for a news column in April 1933. Her most successful column, “My Day” started in 1935. This column ran from 1935 until 1962. Within the column, she articulated her daily activities, in addition to discussing issues such as race and women (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). From the funds that she earned by writing and giving speeches, Eleanor donated a portion to charity. One notable incident occurring in 1939, during her tenure as First Lady, revealed her desire to use her position to make a difference in social issues. She resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) upon their refusal to let world-renowned singer, Marian Anderson, sing at the Constitution Hall due to the fact that she was African American. In response to the DAR’s decision, Eleanor arranged for Anderson to sing at a concert, which occurred on Easter morning at the Lincoln Memorial, where 75,000 people attended. Throughout the 12 years that Eleanor resided in the White House, she worked hard to defend the rights of women, African Americans, and the working class.

Life after Franklin

Franklin D. Roosevelt died in April 1945. Upon his death, Vice President Harry Truman was sworn in as the 33rd President of the United States. That evening, Eleanor flew to Warm Springs, GA to start arranging for Franklin’s funeral. After his burial, Eleanor moved out of the White House within a week. During this time, Eleanor worked on settling Franklin’s estate. She continued to write her column, “My Day,” as a private citizen (Beasley, 2010; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017). In May 1945, she gave a radio address on WNBC to commemorate the end of World War II. In her address, she made an appeal for ongoing peace. She was also nominated to serve on the board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where she worked toward fair employment practices for all Americans. In December 1945, President Truman appointed Eleanor as a U.S. delegate to the United Nations (UN). The U.S. delegation assigned her to committee three of the UN, which handled humanitarian, social, and cultural affairs. This appointment led to what Eleanor, as well as many others, viewed as her most significant contribution within her lifetime (Beasley, 2010; Glendon, 2001). During the Cold War, as a member of committee three, she worked for the rights of Eastern European refugees. This work resulted in her election as chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights. At the first committee meeting, the group decided that their first project would be to write a bill of human rights (Glendon, 2001).

Eleanor, the Humanitarian

The first official session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, consisting of 16 member states, was held at Lake Success, New York, from January 27 to February 10, 1947. During this session, members discussed how the commission would work together to achieve their goal of drafting the bill of human rights, later known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Glendon, 2001; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2017). Many members were initially concerned with the implementation process, a topic that would consistently emerge during the document's creation. They originally decided that the four officers presiding over the committee would write the preliminary draft during their second session: Eleanor Roosevelt, P.C. Chang, Charles Malik, and John Humphrey, as they lived near New York and could meet regularly. After the session adjourned, the four officers met and decided that Humphrey would prepare the preliminary draft due to his global research. After some consideration, Eleanor added five more members to the small drafting committee: Australia, Chile, France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. They met as a team in June 1947. Humphrey prepared materials for the draft and presented 48 rights for the group to discuss (Glendon, 2001). The group adjourned for two days to review the 400-page document that Humphrey presented. The committee reconvened and decided that four members, Rene Cassin; Charles Malik; Geoffrey Wilson; and Eleanor Roosevelt, would take Humphrey's identified rights and create a draft based on the suggestions of the entire drafting committee. The group of four decided that the document would be more unified if one writer wrote the draft so they chose Cassin as the writer.

From June 14 to June 15, Cassin created a new draft consisting of a preamble, six introductory articles, 36 articles under eight different headings, and two concluding provisions on the implementation. The drafting committee reviewed the draft and began editing. At the end of the session, the main features of the Universal Declaration were in place. On December 1, 1947, the complete Commission on Human Rights group met in Geneva (Glendon, 2001). The session opened with the committee in disagreement on implementation. The committee came to a compromise and split into three working groups: a drafting committee, a draft convention committee, and an implementation committee. The three groups came back together on December 12. The drafting committee presented their revised draft and the entire group discussed for the remainder of the day. The entire Commission on Human Rights approved the draft and it was sent to all member states for commentary before the next session in May. During the spring, work on the Declaration continued along the deadlines that Eleanor set. While tense relations between the U.S. and Russia caused some issues, the drafting committee met again in May 1948 (Glendon, 2001). Together, they reviewed the comments from the 13 member states. The group adjourned without completing its review of the social and economic rights. The full commission met to prepare their final submission of the draft. The session involved a heated discussion over the following social and economic rights: education, rest and leisure, adequate standard of living, and security in unemployment and old age. Once the members reached consensus, the commission could focus on the draft's preamble. On

Friday, June 18, the Commission on Human Rights approved the Declaration. With this approval, the Declaration was submitted to the Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC). After the ECOSOC review, the Declaration moved to the third committee for the next approval phase. Eleanor presented the draft to the third committee in Paris in October. The third committee debated for two months but ultimately approved the document on December 7 for submission to the General Assembly. On December 10, 1948, the Declaration received its final approval. From there, the Commission on Human Rights met annually. On May 9, 1949, the group met to discuss implementation (Glendon, 2001). Due to the political climate and tensions at the time, implementation proved challenging for the group. Eleanor remained chair until she stepped down from the position in April 1951. She served as an American delegate until December 30, 1952. Although she resigned, Eleanor continued to assist the UN by helping to build chapters of the association, speaking to the country on the UN’s behalf, and working two days a week in the office.

In the last decade of her life, Eleanor continued her work as a journalist and media personality. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed her as the chair of the Commission on the Status of Women. She worked on this committee until her death in 1962. Eleanor died at age 78 in New York City on November 7, 1962. More than 10,000 people attended her memorial service in New York City. Today, people remember Eleanor Roosevelt for being a transformative First Lady and humanitarian. She often serves as a “benchmark” for evaluating her First Lady successors.

Eleanor, the Servant Leader

Eleanor Roosevelt experienced some challenges to her servant leadership throughout her life working toward equality and rights for all people. The primary challenge that she faced emerged from the dominant patriarchal society of her historical period. Eleanor was limited in what she could do or say publically due to her role as a wife of a politician. One specific example of this occurred in 1933. Eleanor tried to work with Walter White, the NAACP Executive Secretary, to convince Franklin to support an anti-lynching bill; however, he did not support the bill and discouraged Eleanor from publically speaking out against lynching. “Since Eleanor refrained from openly showing disapproval of Franklin’s actions, she did not publically express support for anti-lynching legislation until 1939. It was only after his death in 1945 that she accepted a nomination to the board of directors of the NAACP” (Beasley, 2010, p. 28). As a wife, especially as the President’s wife, Eleanor had to limit some of her public action, in respect to her husband. Another example of this occurred nine years later in 1942, when Franklin signed Executive Order 9066, resulting in Japanese Americans living in relocation centers, similar to concentration camps. Privately, Eleanor tried to convince Franklin to overturn the decision due to a violation of rights but he did not change his mind. Once he decided, she never spoke against his decision publically and tried to downplay the consequences of this decision. Another challenge that Eleanor faced during her life as a servant leader involved her own pride. Due to her lack of parental affection and her husband’s affair, Eleanor struggled with depression and suffered from insecurity. Often, she receives criticism for the motives behind her good works, as

she devoted herself to others after she was hurt and betrayed by her husband. “Eleanor was not a plaster saint, but an individual in whom insecurities and personal misfortunes created her own ego needs to be loved and recognized” (Beasley, 2010, p. 5). In order for Eleanor to become a true servant leader, she needed to overcome pride as a hurdle, which she accomplished in her later years. Despite these challenges to Eleanor’s servant leadership, she worked tirelessly for others with the goal of improving people’s lives. She utilized her powerful position for good, which proved difficult to do at times. She overcame her pride and societal pressures with the use of servant leadership characteristics, identified by Spears (2010), which she possessed: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to others’ growth, and community building.

LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

Through examining Eleanor Roosevelt’s life, the author concludes that she exhibited the attributes of a servant leader. Each of Spears’ (2010) servant leadership characteristics emerge from various events and behaviors throughout Eleanor’s life. The concept of servant leadership originated from Greenleaf’s (1977) work, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Within his work, Greenleaf (2002/1977) acknowledges a lack of nurturing or caring leaders in all types of organizations. He explains that the concept of servant leadership originated from reading Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East*, where the main character, Leo, takes on the role of servant and leader. “The servant-leader is servant first—as Leo portrayed. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (Greenleaf, 2002/1977, p. 27). Spears (2010) built off of Greenleaf’s (2002/1997) work and identified 10 characteristics of a servant leader that prove crucial to their development: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Spears and Lawrence (2004) emphasize that the servant leader possesses the opportunity for personal growth, in addition to the ability to cultivate these attributes in themselves and others. “A particular strength of servant-leadership is that it encourages everyone to actively seek opportunities to both serve and lead others, thereby setting up the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society (Spears & Lawrence, 2004, p. 21).” Throughout her life, Eleanor worked toward seeking those opportunities, which Spears and Lawrence (2004) discuss, in order to serve as a servant leader for the country.

Eleanor’s 10 Characteristics of Servant Leadership

Eleanor possessed the 10 characteristics that Spears (2010) identifies, which holds evident from personal experiences throughout her life. For example, Eleanor *listened* to the American people and their concerns as First Lady. She received thousands of letters and tried to read as many as she could. In 1935, she visited the mines in West Virginia on an inspection trip (O’Farrell, 2010). She spoke with 300 miners about their wages and

working conditions. “Her penchant for listening to the concerns of ordinary people endeared her to many... (O’Farrell, 2010, p. 30).”

An example of her *empathy* and keen *awareness* involves her willingness to learn and observe the working conditions in sweatshops and factories. This world was far from her own, but she increasingly became involved in educating those of the working class to improve their conditions. Eleanor felt that education would make a difference in these women and children’s lives (O’Farrell, 2010). Eleanor also worked to become a *healing* force in people’s lives. She personally oversaw many planned communities, such as Arthurdale, designed for people to leave the slums and learn how to farm their own food. She became personally invested because she felt these communities could help people heal. “Here, she believed, was a chance to restore spirit and dignity to broken human beings by getting them off relief and helping them help themselves (Burns & Dunn, 2001, p. 273).”

Eleanor utilized the skill of *persuasion* in her work serving others, especially when she chaired the drafting committee for the Declaration of Human Rights. She persuaded the members to divide into working groups in order to get the draft complete in an appropriate time. This use of persuasion resulted in the completion of a document that continues to shape the world today.

Throughout her political life, Eleanor used *conceptualization*. Most notably in how she manipulated the media and political arena to push for women becoming more involved in politics.

Eleanor was able to see that in the political arena it was essential to be able to rise above the desire for harmony and accept the inevitability of conflict; indeed, she began to understand that the very essence of politics was conflict and that she herself had the inner resources to engage in—and profit from—adversarial situations (Burns & Dunn, 2001, p. 186-87).

Additionally, Eleanor possessed *foresight*, which holds evident from the causes she pursued. She was ahead of her time in her push for more women appointees and politicians. She did not accept the status quo and urged Americans to be open to change for a better future (Beasley, 2010; Burns & Dunn, 2001; Eleanor Roosevelt, 2017; Glendon, 2001; O’Farrell, 2010; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 2017). In addition, Eleanor possessed the characteristic of *stewardship*. She urged others to hold the government and public officials accountable for a better society. She even tried to hold her husband accountable as often as she could. She worked to portray the fact that her husband made efforts to better the country when he physically could not demonstrate this himself.

In her constant traveling to observe conditions facing ordinary Americans battling extreme poverty, in her speeches and writings, and in her involvement with government programs that attempted to aid the unfortunate, she emerged as the conscience of the administration, even if her efforts, like those directed at Arthurdale, did not always meet with public approval (Beasley, 2010, p. 79-80).

Eleanor maintained a *commitment to the growth of people*, especially women, during her tenure as the First Lady. She often worked behind the scenes to place women in influential positions in government. For example, she insisted that Molly Dewson become the full-time director of the women's division of the Democratic National Committee. With Dewson as the director, they worked together to place women in high-ranking jobs (Beasley, 2010). Lastly, Eleanor *worked to build a global community* when she accepted the position as a U.S. delegate for the UN. She advocated for European refugees and their rights. In her role as U.S. delegate for the UN, she led the Commission on Human Rights to develop the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through these contributions, Eleanor held others accountable and made the global community comprehensively better. Overall, throughout various times in Eleanor's life, she utilized Spears' (2010) 10 characteristics to serve others and fight against the status quo of her time. While these examples reflect only a portion of her efforts, they illustrate the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt functioned as a servant leader who worked to improve America for all people.

One of the major moral challenges that Eleanor Roosevelt faced aligns with the servant leadership challenge identified previously: she had to work within the constraints of her society during the early twentieth century. This required her to reconcile her personal beliefs and her political, as well as marital, obligations. Often, privately, Eleanor disagreed with her husband's policies but appeared supportive in public. "In public Eleanor operated within the constraints of her position as an upper-class married woman of her era...her actions on the other hand belied her words and surface appearances, illustrating the complexities of social roles that she carefully finessed" (Beasley, 2010, p. 41). While many may view this as unauthentic, which does not follow the tenants of servant leadership, Eleanor proved her adaptability and resourcefulness to work for others' benefit and serve them effectively. Her approach could be considered immoral but her intent was to fight for the "least of these."

Overall, the view that Eleanor Roosevelt possessed Spears' (2010) characteristics of a servant leader is supported by the many biographies available detailing Eleanor's life and actions in the pursuit of human rights. The weakness of this thesis derives from the fact that a lack of literature tying Eleanor Roosevelt directly to servant leadership exists. Due to a gap in the literature, a need to study Eleanor Roosevelt from a servant leadership context emerges. This paper supports the argument that Eleanor possessed servant leadership characteristics throughout her life and utilized those characteristics for the betterment of society.

Application to Contemporary Organizational Leadership

The study of Eleanor Roosevelt from a servant leadership perspective yields many insights for contemporary leadership as well as educational leadership. A major challenge that contemporary leaders face today in their development of servant leadership involves organizational culture. Organizations possess cultures that make servant leadership difficult to adopt. These cultures are often overly profit-focused (Greenleaf, 1977; Gibbons, 2009). Within this challenge, an opportunity exists—the need for a caring leader.

As people begin to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo, they are calling out for leaders who will help them find meaning in their work and help them reach their full potential as human beings by acknowledge and nurturing their spirit as well as their minds at work (Gibbons, 2009, p. 2).

Eleanor Roosevelt faced this challenge as a woman operating in a male-driven society. She provided nurturing leadership, in the place of her husband. From her inspection tours and other public appearances, she showed that the administration cared for the plights of the public. Leaders can develop Spears’ (2010) characteristics of servant leadership and transform their followers and work toward developing productive and safe environments with their organizations, just as Eleanor worked for better conditions for the American worker.

Eleanor saw the potential in people, regardless of their background. She worked hard to provide better conditions for the American people. This sentiment also aligns with Johnston’s (2014) notion of “become versus is.” Servant leaders look at their followers and see the potential of what they could become instead of seeing how they are in the moment. Eleanor’s views on people were ahead of their time. Her ability to see the potential in people and society as a whole is what led to the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which continues to influence the world today. Overall, Eleanor’s servant leadership functions as a timeless model for leaders in modern society. “A good public servant becomes so at a high cost of personal sacrifice (Roosevelt, 1960, p. 203).” This statement from Eleanor, herself, captures the true essence of servant leadership. Leaders must make sacrifices to serve their followers. “Leaders are the ones willing to look out for those to the left of them and those to the right of them (Sinek, 2014, p. 66).” Eleanor made sacrifices throughout her life, often due to going against societal expectations. She serves as an exceptional servant leader to model, as she embodied servant leadership.

CONCLUSION

Eleanor Roosevelt functioned as a servant leader during her lifetime. She possessed all 10 characteristics of a servant leader as identified by Spears (2010). She overcame several personal and professional challenges to work for the benefit of others. Through her efforts, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created and set a standard for the global community. She also transformed the role of First Lady from a social planner to a powerful political spearhead. Modern leaders may study Eleanor in order to understand the characteristics of a historical servant leader. By developing these characteristics, leaders may create environments for their followers to excel. Modern leaders can learn more about servant leadership in their study of Eleanor Roosevelt, utilizing Spears’ (2010) identified characteristics of servant leadership as a lens. A need for more research within this area emerges from the fact that little research exists which directly links Eleanor Roosevelt to servant leadership.

REFERENCES

- Beasley, M. H. (2010). *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative first lady*. Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas.
- Burns, J. M., & Dunn, S. (2001). *The three Roosevelts: Patrician leaders who transformed America*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Eleanor Roosevelt. (2017). In Encyclopedia Britannica.
- Gibbons, S. (2009). Spiritual formation: The basis for all leading. *Inner Resources for Leaders*, 1(1), 1-9.
- Glendon, M. A. (2001). *A world made new: Eleanor Roosevelt and the universal declaration of human rights*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (2002/1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of power and greatness*. (25th Anniversary Edition). Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Johnston, R. (2014). *The hope quotient: Measure it. Raise it. You'll never be the same*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- O'Farrell, B. (2010). *She was one of us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American worker*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Roosevelt, E. (1960). *You learn by living*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders eat last: Why some teams pull together and others don't*. New York, NY: Portfolio / Penguin.
- Spears, L. C., & Lawrence, M. (2004). *Practicing servant-leadership: Succeeding through trust, bravery, and forgiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and servant leadership: Ten characteristics of effective, caring leaders. *The Journal of Virtues & Leadership*, 1(1), 25-30.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (2017). In Encyclopedia Britannica.