



An Unsung American Hero: A Case Study of Frances Perkins' Servant-Leadership and its Modern Impact

Jeffrey H. Coats, Appalachian State University

Abstract

Francis Perkins was one of the most influential servant-leaders of the 20th Century and may be considered an “unsung hero” for her trailblazing efforts to help marginalized groups: the poor, senior citizens, laborers, the unemployed and children. So much of American’s daily lives and what millions of Americans utilize and depend upon (e.g., a 40-hour workweek, overtime pay, unemployment insurance) is a direct result of her life’s work. Yet, she has often been omitted from History books and many Americans may have never heard of her. This article examines her servant-leadership characteristics and the actions that resulted from her being a servant-leader.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Social Safety Net, Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, Child Labor Laws, Minimum Wage

Greenleaf’s (2015) theory of servant-leadership suggests that the major difference between a leader and a servant-leader is that the servant-leader serves first and leads second, putting the highest priority on people and others’ needs being met. Russell (2001) continues Greenleaf’s theory that leadership is based on values and specifically servant-leadership is based upon the value of trust, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Individuals are not born servant-leaders, but cultivated through their experiences and being taught what being a servant-leader entails. According to Ferch (2003),

The idea of the leader as servant is rooted in the far-reaching ideal that people have inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but beneath this striving a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human. Philosophically, if one believes in the dignity of the person, the ideas of servant-leadership and the experience of leading or being led from a servant perspective not only make sense, they contain the elegance, precision, and will power necessary for human development. (p. 15)

Greenleaf (2002, 2015) and Spears (2010) identified servant-leadership as being comprised of ten characteristics, which include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Frances Perkins may have demonstrated many, if not all, of Greenleaf's servant-leader characteristics; however, six of these servant leadership characteristics are addressed in this article: Awareness, listening, empathy, conceptualization, persuasion, and a commitment to the growth of others are addressed in this article (Beasley, 2010; Glendon, 2001; O'Farrell, 2010).

According to Greenleaf (2008), a servant-leader is always mindful that peoples' needs are being served. The servant-leader continually asks oneself and others, are the least privileged in society being served; are they becoming more autonomous, healthier, wiser, and freer? This pervasive mindset was exemplified throughout Perkins's career of pushing for and developing reforms and programs that not only asked these questions, but also lifted the lower socio-economic individuals of our American society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Frances Perkins was one of the most dynamic servant leader social change-agents of the 20th century. She was the conscience behind President Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) New Deal, a massive series of government programs that helped improve the lives of people suffering from the events of the Great Depression thus, creating the first government social safety net in the United States. Perkins served for 12 years as the United States Secretary of Labor on the conditions that she institute with FDR's support many social reforms that came into fruition better known as The New Deal. They were: a forty hour workweek, minimum wage, workmen's and unemployment compensation, social security, universal health care, and a federal law banning child labor. Her initiatives represented the entire revamping of the national social structure. Roosevelt knew Perkins could help him implement these goals; thus, Secretary Perkins began a program of radical social change of the aforementioned with the exception of universal health care not becoming a reality (Downey, 2009); an issue that we as a country are still grappling with 90 years later in this country. She led the effort working with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to institute revolutionary reforms that improved and changed the lives of millions of Americans then and her programs continue to have ramifications for millions of Americans to this day.

Perkin's family believed in helping the less fortunate and Francis was taught this at an early age. Her family believed in education for both males and females.

Perkins attended and graduated from Mount Hoyke College where after college she served as a schoolteacher in Chicago at the Hull House, a settlement that helped impoverished immigrants. However, the most defining moment in Perkins's young adult life was witnessing The Triangle Shirt Factory fire where 147 women were locked inside the warehouse and either jumped to their deaths or burned alive because the factory doors were locked from the outside and old rusty fire escapes collapsed. This catastrophic disaster made a life-long lasting impact on Perkins. She became an advocate for social justice and for societal change (Newman, 2016).

In 1910, she moved to New York and took the position of executive director of the New York branch of the National Consumers League, where she was immediately put to work investigating labor abuses in New York City bakeries and lobbying in Albany for a fifty-four-hour workweek for women and minors. Perkins' work for the Consumers League had taken her into factories much like the Triangle, where she witnessed dangerous and unsafe working conditions; also, witnessing children as young as 6 years old working in factories. Perkins later became involved with the New York City Committee on Safety later serving in the chief role of Secretary of the committee. Under Perkins' leadership, the commission investigated over 3,000 workplaces and personally visited fifty plants. "It was an astonishment for them to see the filthy conditions and obvious fire hazards," (Petrash, 2021, p. 21)

Her career and influence on the working conditions of laborers continued to grow during the 1910s and 1920s, where she served in a number of positions. Perkins most influential position during this time was serving as a Commissioner on the State of New York Industrial Board, the first woman having been appointed to this position, by two different Governors of New York who both had presidential aspirations. Al Smith and then Franklin D. Roosevelt. Commissioner Perkins was particularly appalled that young children worked in factories as early as the age of 6 with little or no pay. Additionally, they were often injured because their small hands and bodies could fit in machines that needed repairing often resulting in a life-long injury to the child. She worked tirelessly for those that had no voice or power and took on the big corporations to create better and safer working conditions for factory workers, railed against child labor, and advocated a fair wage (Thompson, 1975).

Despite FDR's familiarity with Perkins and her accomplishments she was not considered a serious candidate for the United States Secretary of Labor until Eleanor Roosevelt became involved. Eleanor Roosevelt's determination for women to be considered as more than wives and mothers resulted in the appointment of the first female Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins (Downey, 2009). Perkins's long list of accomplishments in the labor movement proved to the American public that women were just as capable of leading and qualified as men (Coats, 2022).

Leadership facilitates human behavior in reaching common goal(s) and achievements (Northouse, 2016). Social accomplishments require complex group efforts, making both leadership and followership necessary in the pursuit of a common purpose (Chaleff, 2009). How a leader chooses to lead and how his or her

behavior impacts an organization and its people determines the accomplishments and purposes.

An exemplary leader feels and displays passion and enthusiasm for the role and the general purpose to which his or her leadership is directed, whether he or she is a general defeating an enemy or a business leader getting the best work performance out of his or her team members. Exemplary leaders empower people to feel strong, capable, and committed. Leaders enable others to act, not by hoarding the power they have, but by giving it away. Exemplary leaders strengthen everyone's capacity to deliver on the promises they make (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

According to Ferch (2003), the idea of the leader as servant is rooted in one's inherent worth. A desire to be connected to the reality of being human. If one believes in the dignity of the person, the ideas of servant-leadership and the experience of serving and then leading will give one the will power necessary for human development.

Tilghman-Havens (2022) states the social problems that plague our local, national, and global societies are increasingly the result of the divisive tribes: racial, socio-economic, gender, political, that constrain us from communicating with one another. Song and Ferch (2022) describe that the loss of human connectivity in contemporary society coinciding with the loss of joy that is caused by these discordant groups. Pervasive power and privilege by a few has produced great loneliness, degradation, and desolation in the human community. These current issues and pervasive power dynamic also existed during Frances Perkins's time. The constant battle of correcting the social ills of society is directly related to those who have power and privilege not wanting to share it, or not thinking of the ramifications of their decisions on the poorest, and most effected individuals and groups.

Frances Perkins experienced challenges to her servant-leadership throughout her life. The primary challenge she faced emerged from the dominant patriarchal society of her historical period (Tabors, 2018). Frances Perkins broke stereotypes to become a major influence, not only at a time when many would not consider a female United States Cabinet member as a "leader," but throughout the twentieth century. She proved that women were just as capable as leading as men.

The social safety net and gains in the empowerment of the women that many take for granted today would not exist without Frances Perkins's revolutionary reformation of society and supported by President FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt. Throughout the 1930s Perkins transformed the lives of millions of Americans by creating sweeping social reform (Coats, 2022).

Although 6 characteristics identified by Greenleaf (2002, 2015) and Spears (2010) awareness, listening, empathy, conceptualization, persuasion, and a commitment to the growth of others are addressed in this article. Perkins may have demonstrated many, if not all, of Greenleaf's servant-leader characteristics including healing, stewardship and building community. However, for the purpose of this article, stewardship and building community are not addressed (Beasley, 2010; Glendon, 2001; O'Farrell, 2010).

Awareness

According to Spears (2010), awareness strengthens a servant-leader. Awareness helps one better understanding one's surroundings and the world in which they live. It offers an opportunity to view most situations from a more holistic position. Perkins made the public cognizant of the unsafe work conditions for labor workers first as per position in New York and then later on a national scale as the United States Secretary of Labor. She campaigned against the corporations' abuses of laborers for the long hours they worked, often 12-16 hours a day, and the deplorable poverty of many laborers because they were not paid a minimum wage.

Perkins also during her New York State Commissioner of Industrial Relations had a deep concern for the working families whose primary bread winner was injured. During the early twentieth century unemployment compensation did not exist and Frances once battled the corporations, factories, and unscrupulous doctors who denied injury claims to help insurance companies find ways to deny legitimate claims to injured workers (Josephson & Josephson, 1969).

In her position as President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR)'s Secretary of Labor she rallied against millions of Americans being out of work, penniless, many homeless, and no social safety net being there to assist them. Furthermore, she made the public aware that millions of older, often retired, Americans had lost their life's savings due to the thousands of banks that had closed leaving retired Americans penniless and dependent upon family and the kindness of their community. However, many of the said families and communities did not have the resources to help these individuals leaving them destitute (Petrash, 2021).

Due to FDR and Perkins lobbying Congress, the Social Security Act of 1935 was passed to aid older Americans and give them an income. Moving forward, working Americans would contribute to the system to receive benefits upon the age of retirement. Social Security has provided millions of older Americans an income and raised them out of abject poverty. Currently in 2023, 67 million people monthly depend on Social Security. It is projected that by 2035, 76 million Americans will depend on Social Security (The OASDI Trustees Report, 2022).

Perkins did not stop creating awareness of the plight of millions of older individuals with the American public and Congress. She also made them aware of the abuses of laborers, children, and the unemployed.

Listening and Empathy

Spears (2010) defines, "Listening Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision making skills. Although these are also important skills for the servant leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid. Listening also encompasses hearing one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant leader" (p. 27)

Throughout Perkins' life from listening to oral history from her summers at her grandmother's house to fighting against the abuses of laborers and children in New York City; continuing her listening to the plight of the elderly, down trodden, and unemployed during The Great Depression Perkins listened intensely to

understand the circumstances that many suffered. Additionally, she listened during World War II that her primary focus had to change to help mobilize women on the home front to support the war (Newman, 2016). “The servant leader strives to understand and empathize with others.... The most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled empathetic listeners” (Spears, 2010). Perkins understood from listening intently to people the context of from where they were coming with current economic and sometimes health maladies of the time. She truly empathized with them and their plight in society and was determined to correct these injustices her entire adult life.

Conceptualization

According to Greenleaf (2008) servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to dream big. The ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. The traditional leader is consumed by the need to achieve short-term operational goals. The leader who wishes also to be a servant-leader must stretch his or her thinking to encompass broader-based conceptual thinking. Servant-leaders are called to seek a delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach.

Perkins with the support of President FDR also conceptualized a system that would give unemployed workers and their families’ relief until work could be obtained, thus Unemployment Insurance (UI) was born. Similar to social security, employed workers paid into the Unemployment Insurance program (UI) (Roosevelt, 1938). At the height of the Great Depression unemployment was 25 percent or 1 in 4 adult individuals. According to the United States Department of Labor (2023) there are 1.67 million currently on unemployment. Unemployment insurance given by the federal government and administered by the states is a program that is still in use today by almost 2 million families. However most recently during the height of the COVID Pandemic 16 percent were unemployed and had to rely on unemployment insurance. Without the conceptualization of Perkins and support of FDR and Congress what would have happened to the millions of people who lost their jobs during The Great Depression, but also in 2020 with the COVID pandemic?

Persuasion

According to Greenleaf (2008), servant-leaders rely on persuasion, rather than positional authority in making decisions. Servant-leaders seek to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. Awareness alone was not going to remedy the malady of labor abuses that existed in the United States. Perkins had to be persuasive.

With the support of FDR she lobbied Congress and got several innovative programs passed including the following: Social Security, The Fair Labor and Standards Act, a 40 hour work week, the outlawing of child labor, and unemployment insurance. Although some of these programs seem like a form of welfare today. Millions of Americans have paid into Social Security because in the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Roosevelt insisted on funding Social

Security through payroll taxes because it would give recipients “a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those [payroll] taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program” (Roosevelt, 1935). All workers pay into unemployment insurance so if they are laid off from their jobs they have this program to rely upon until they obtain gainful employment. Any American that is paid by the hour that exceeds 40 hours a week must be paid overtime and children under the age of fifteen are not allowed to work.

Perkins led the effort working with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress to institute revolutionary reforms that improved and changed the lives of millions of Americans then and her programs continue to have since ramifications of millions of Americans to this day. Perkins’s had a long list of accomplishments in the labor movement and proved to the American public that women were just as capable and qualified as men (Coats, 2022).

Her most significant achievements as Secretary of Labor was the establishment of Social Security, unemployment benefits (Roosevelt 1935 and 1938), a 40 hour work week, the abolishment of child labor, and the establishment of a minimum wage (Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938).

Commitment to the Growth of Others

According to Greenleaf (2008), servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. Servant-leaders believe that people have innate value and is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual. They recognize the responsibility to nurture individuals (Spears, 2010).

The modern women’s movement of having careers outside the home began with Eleanor Roosevelt’s campaign of Rosie the Riveter and was supported by Frances Perkins. The campaign was organized through the United States Department of Labor. This campaign encouraged women to learn new skills and put them to use in previously male-dominated industrial jobs including welding, assembly lines, and canning. These working women kept the country running while male troops were fighting overseas during World War II (Roosevelt, 1961).

Just as Perkins’s main focus during the last four years as her tenure as Secretary of Labor was focused on World War II she set the tone for others to follow her example as seen in the speech Secretary Elaine Chao gave in 2002 to the United States House of Representatives during the war in Afghanistan.

In a telling remark before the House of Representatives in February 2002, Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao extolled the following words spoken by her predecessor some sixty years earlier: “One of the things we have tried to do is to become very realistic about requests for any increases in this coming year’s budget. We know only too well that the great expenditures should be directly on the war effort.” Secretary Chao is a direct beneficiary of the rich legacy of Frances Perkins, the nation’s fourth secretary of labor and most often referred to as the first female member of the cabinet. But Secretary Chao is not alone in this regard (Newman, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Frances Perkins is an “unsung hero” often omitted from History books and most Americans have never heard of her. However, so much of our daily lives and what millions of Americans utilize and depend upon is a direct result of her trailblazing efforts to help marginalized groups: the poor, senior citizens, laborers, the unemployed and children. There is not a day that goes by where the working, unemployed, and retired American reap the benefits of her social safety net she worked to create.

Children cannot under the law be used as laborers; every laboring American enjoys the 40 work week or legally has to receive overtime; workers can go to work with the confidence that there is safety in factories; those who have lost their job may draw unemployment insurance to help them and those that depend upon them until employment is regained and millions of retirees depend upon social security for their income or part of their income. Perkins throughout her career advocated universal health care and introduced the concept as a model to be implemented in part years later by President Lyndon B. Johnson with the implementation of Medicare and later President Obama enacting The Affordable Care Act.

Perkins spent the last twenty years of her life, well into her eighties, sharing her knowledge of servant-leadership and how to enact those characteristics to help the common person. In 1996, Perkins was rated among the Top Most Influential of All Time (Felder, 1996).

All of the aforementioned examples illustrate how Frances Perkins was one of the most dynamic servant leader social change-agents of the 20th century. As Greenleaf (2008) wrote, a servant-leader is mindful of the least privileged of society and how their needs are served. Perkins worked to serve those who were least privileged, forever changing the dynamic of society. She serves as an example for all to emulate.

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