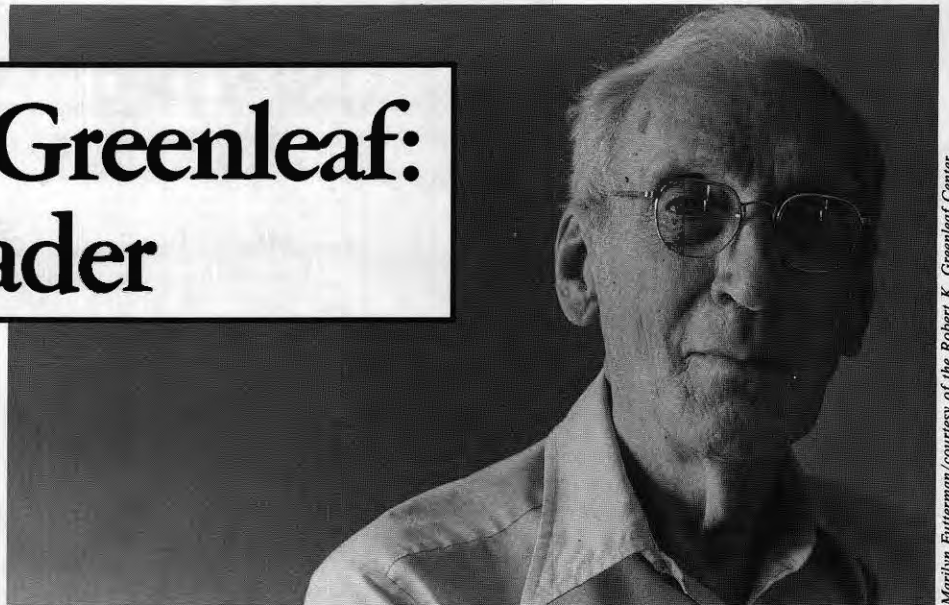


Robert K. Greenleaf: Servant-Leader



Marilyn Fatterman/courtesy of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center

by Larry Spears

**His attempts
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It is a rare occurrence for a Friend to become better known outside of Quaker circles than inside, but such is the case with Robert K. Greenleaf, who died Sept. 29, 1990, at Crosslands retirement community, in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, at the age of 86. A former member of Monadnock (N.H.) Meeting and Kendal (Pa.) Meeting, Greenleaf's pioneering work in developing the servant-leader idea continues to have a quiet, but powerful and growing impact upon people working within large and small institutions.

During the 1970s, a half-dozen articles by Robert Greenleaf appeared in the pages of *FRIENDS JOURNAL*. However, it was a series of essays and books on the paradoxical concept of servant-leadership, written during that decade and published by Paulist Press and the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, that brought him to the forefront in issues involving leadership, management, and the creation of a more caring society through promoting change in our many institutions.

Greenleaf spent most of his organizational life in the field of management, research, development, and education at AT&T, retiring in 1964 as director of management research. He subsequently held a joint appointment as visiting lecturer at M.I.T.'s Sloan School of Management and at the Harvard Business School. In addition, he held teaching positions at Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia. His consult-

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ancies included Ohio University, M.I.T., Ford Foundation, R. K. Mellon Foundation, Lilly Endowment, and the American Foundation for Management Research.

Upon his retirement, he launched a whole new second career, becoming a noted author, lecturer, and consultant on leadership and management issues. In 1964 he founded the Center for Applied Ethics, a not-for-profit organization which became the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in 1985.

Greenleaf's concept of servant-leadership encourages increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and sharing of power in decision making to build a more caring society. In 1970 he published *The Servant as Leader*, which was the first in his series of essays on the servant-leader concept. In the 20 years since, more than 200,000 copies of this work have been sold worldwide.

In this seminal essay, Greenleaf defined the servant-leader concept this way:

The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?

The practical applications of servant-leadership are of keen interest to people working within all kinds of institutions. A number of for-profit and not-for-profit corporations have jettisoned their traditional hierarchical models in favor of Greenleaf's proposed organizational model of *primus inter pares* (or "first among equals"). This model advocates a group-oriented approach to analysis and decision-making as a means of strengthening institutions and creating a better, more caring society. It emphasizes the power of persuasion and seeking consensus over the traditional "top-down" form of leadership. In essence, it reflects Greenleaf's attempts to put Quaker beliefs into action outside of the Religious Society of Friends.

Robert Lynn, former vice-president for Religion at the Lilly Endowment in Indianapolis, Indiana, has said, "Greenleaf had an important voice in the shaping and thinking about management of corporations and not-for-profit organizations. He was immensely appealing to people in both the business and private world who were looking for some way of combining their exercise of power with the understanding of their religious faith."

Servant-leadership cuts across all sorts of boundaries. It is an idea which has been embraced by both religious institutions and secular corporations; by non-denominational universities and by seminaries; and by trustees and staffs of both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations.

At the heart of the servant-leader concept is the importance of a leader to nurture both the institution and individuals affected by the institution. As Greenleaf said in *Institutions as Servant*:

Caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions—often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

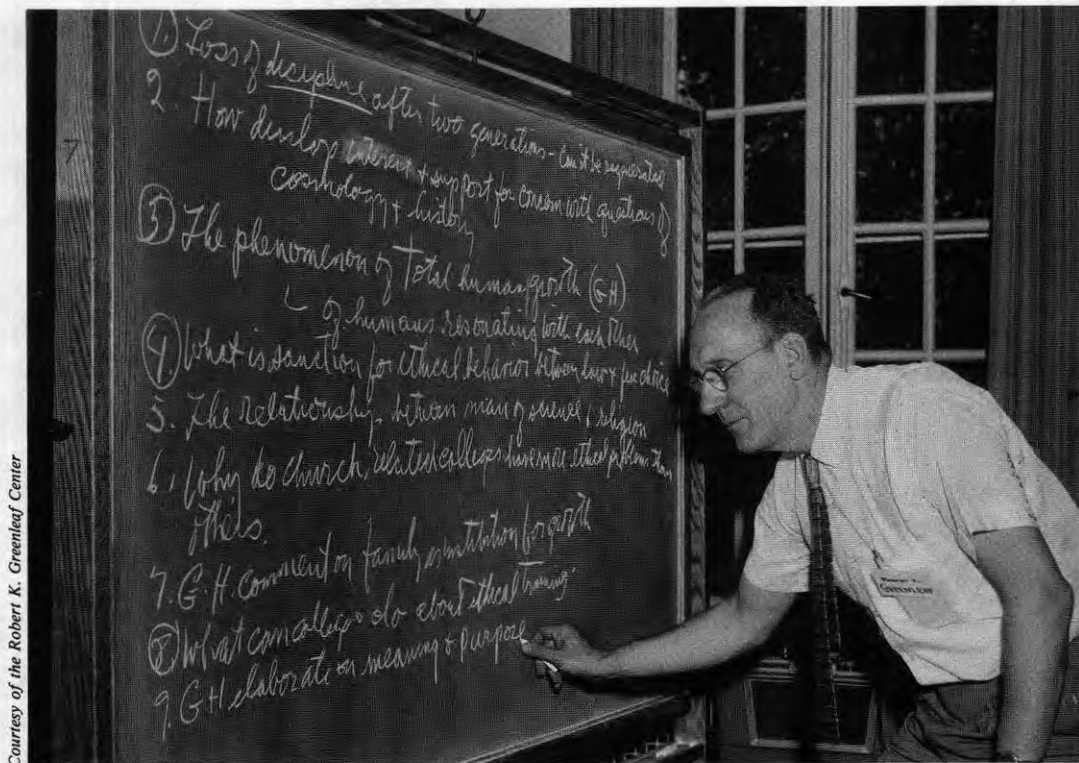
Another important aspect of Greenleaf's writings on servant-leadership involves the roles of boards of directors and trustees within institutions. His

essays on these applications are widely distributed among directors of profit and non-profit institutions. Greenleaf urged trustees to ask themselves two questions: "Whom do you serve?" and "For what purpose?"

In *Trustees as Servants*, Greenleaf writes:

We live amidst a revolution of values, some good, some bad. . . . And one of the good consequences, in my judgement, is a greater disposition of able people . . . to work in

ly published essays. His impact on the wider world grew out of his embracing Quaker beliefs and attempting to put them into action within institutional environments. His writings have a growing influence on countless readers. His work is increasingly quoted by other authors; in fact, more has been written about Greenleaf and servant-leadership during the past year than ever before. Most importantly, the practical applications of his ideas continue to pop up within a



Courtesy of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center

Page 20: Robert K. Greenleaf in a 1988 photo. Above: Greenleaf leads a discussion group, about 1960.

teams rather than to strive to be *prima donnas*—not so much for idealistic reasons as because the word is getting around that it makes a more serene and fulfilled life.

The power of persuasion by servant-leaders was of great interest to Greenleaf. He frequently cited the example of John Woolman's successful efforts, over a period of 30 years, to individually persuade 18th century Quaker slave-holders to abandon the practice. Woolman's method, said Greenleaf, was one of gentle, clear, and persistent persuasion. Greenleaf used this example from Quaker history to emphasize the power and influence individuals can have upon society.

Robert K. Greenleaf authored two books, *Servant-Leadership* and *Teacher as Servant*, published by Paulist Press. Additionally, he wrote many separate-

variety of large and small institutions worldwide.

In a 1975 article, "On Being a Seeker in the Late Twentieth Century" (*FJ* Sept. 15, 1975), Greenleaf addressed modern-day seekers: "There is a theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all of the time." Greenleaf, himself, continues to speak to all of us with power and clarity through his encouraging notion that each of us should strive to be both servant and leader. □

For more information on servant-leadership, contact the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, 1100 W. 42nd St., Suite 321, Indianapolis, IN 46208; (317) 925-2677.