Servant Leadership: Emphasizing the Greater Good  
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Good evening! I am honored to be here and to have the opportunity to talk with so many dedicated community leaders this evening. Thank you, Jo Ellen, for the opportunity. All of you here are committed to creating a better community, a more vibrant Winston-Salem—a personal pledge worthy of a strong round of applause.

Community is extremely important to me. I grew up on a farm in Iowa near a town of 500 where nearly everyone was German and Catholic (there were 13 different Tiefenthaler families). My maternal grandparents lived across the road, and my paternal grandparents lived a mile and a half away in town. Five of my eight great-grandparents were part of my life as were aunts and uncles and cousins. We knew everyone, and we went to every funeral and wedding and dropped off food (usually a casserole with Cream of Mushroom soup in it) when someone was sick or a baby was born. I often think of my childhood as growing up with arms around me—a big hug. I was part of a community. That meant love and support but also expectations and accountability.

My childhood experience has resulted in me defining my life and myself around the communities that I belong to—Tiefenthalers, Iowans, the alumnae of St. Mary’s College, academics, economists, Hamiltonians—members of a small town in upstate New York, this community of arts and innovation, and part of the close community of Wake Forest University.

Clearly you all share my value on community as you are here in this program to make a difference in your community. And even if you haven’t heard of “servant leadership”—our theme—before this retreat, you are well poised to be a servant leader because you see yourself as part of something, and you want to lend your talents and time to making that something, this community, better.

Robert Greenleaf, author of Servant as Leader, wrote that “The great leader is seen as servant first…and that simple fact is the key to his (or her) greatness.” Greenleaf first coined the term servant-leader in a 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader,” after reading Hermann Hesse’s Journey to the East. One of the main characters in Hesse’s novel is a servant named Leo, whose motivating spirit inspires “a band of men on a mythical journey.” Leo does their menial chores but also sustains them on their difficult trek. When Leo disappears, the group falls apart. Only many years later does one member of the party
encounter Leo again, and he discovers that Leo was not a servant but actually the “head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.”

As the story of Leo shows us, the best leadership is not about being above others or being in charge or sitting in a corner office giving commands or even being “the boss,” it is about being part of something and using that platform as one of a group to inspire others. So step number one to being a servant leader is about being a part and investing in something. As Greenleaf writes, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.” Congratulations to all of you—you have accomplished step one—you are willing to be a part, and you are invested in the success of this community.

This step has been a key to my role as provost at Wake Forest. As provost, I am the chief academic officer, the leader of the faculty. Imagine such a job… leading 500 people with tenure who have been trained to, as the wonderful Dr. Scales (WFU president in the 1970s) used to say, “think otherwise.” As a faculty member myself for many years before taking this job, I understood before I started that I could not lead the faculty with orders or commands.

When I took the job, my dad, who is still a farmer in Iowa, called me and asked “So, what does it feel like to be the boss?” I told him, “Dad, I am the boss of no one! The only way I get anyone to do anything is through persuasion.” I told him a joke I had heard from a fellow provost: Do you know what a provost and a cemetery caretaker have in common? Lots of people under you, but nobody is listening!

My ability to move the faculty forward is not about power or authority (because, as you can see, I have very little of either). I am successful when I am part of their community, understanding what they do, and finding ways to help them and inspire them to do their jobs—the core of our mission—even better.

This is a fundamental point I want to make about leadership. I strongly agree with Greenleaf that the best leaders—those who truly transform their organizations and communities—succeed because they make the people around them better. They are committed to the growth of people.

No matter how hard you work or how brilliant or clever you are, acting solo will have minimal effect. You can’t do it all; you can’t know it all; and you will immobilize those who work with you if you try. However, if you surround yourself with talented people, support them and mentor them, and give them latitude to act by delegating and empowering liberally, you will make a difference.
This is such an important part of my role as provost. Do you think any high school senior says, “I want to go to Wake Forest because they have a really great provost?” Of course not! It is primarily about the faculty. Students come to study with them. Their scholarship moves knowledge forward. They are the core of our mission. My job is literally to bring the right people to Wake Forest and then to support them—serve them—so that we can become an even better university.

So, how does that happen? How do you best support those you lead? How do you help them solve problems and become better leaders themselves?

Clearly, you need to listen and observe. That sounds so simple, but it isn’t. Why? Because listening is part of communicating (the hardest part for some people), and while communication is essential (I have often heard strong leaders say that there is no such thing as over-communicating), it is difficult work.

How can we communicate so that we hear how to serve our colleagues? First, don’t isolate yourself or surround yourself with “yes” men or women. We know how it happens. Leadership is hard and the only way to avoid criticism is to do nothing. Criticism is hard to take, especially in this technological age when so much of it is public. Some leaders respond by closing themselves off in the corner office or surrounding themselves with people who won’t tell them bad news. I hope you will not build these barriers to upward communication. Walk the halls, reward those who tell you what might be hard to hear, and make yourself available. This last part is hard because we are all very busy people. I have always had an open door policy. Anyone can make an appointment with me—faculty, staff, students, alumni. It drives my assistant crazy, but I see it as key to my success. I have learned so many important things by being available and listening.

Just as upward communication is essential to servant leadership, don’t forget about the importance of communicating back. This one was hard for me. It felt presumptuous to assume that people would want to hear from me. I thought someone who wanted to know would ask.

My hesitancy to set up a forum for communication to those who reported up to me caused some trouble. Last year at Wake Forest we did a staff climate survey. While there are many important and interesting statistics, I was most focused on what the experts call the “engagement index”—measuring being engaged as (1) knowing what to do, understanding the vision/goals, and (2) wanting to do it! Having both the vision and the commitment!

There was lots of good news for Wake Forest! People who are engaged, seeing the vision and having the commitment, are the majority of our staff—53 percent! But what struck me was that the next largest group was not the renegades or the disengaged (those who don’t
have the commitment whether they see the vision or not), BUT the enthusiasts—those who are very committed to the University but don’t quite understand the vision for the future or their part in helping Wake Forest achieve our goals. I realized that I could do a better job of communicating with my staff.

There is another important aspect of listening so that you can hear and serve. We have to be present, and this is incredibly difficult in our 21st century world because there is so much competition for what we are doing right now. All of us are wired these days, but the constant and immediate string of e-mails and text messages creates a sense of stressful urgency in leaders…a need to always be plugged in… and a notion that just because we can respond quickly, we must respond quickly. We have bought into the notion that the best leaders are those who are in constant demand and can multi-task. They read their Blackberrys and text on their iPhones in meetings or even in the middle of a conversation. But is it really true that we can listen and learn and support if we aren’t present? As President Hatch often says, “We live in a world where we are constantly plugged in, but never really tuned in.”

Those that know me say I over-schedule myself, fail to say no when I should, and work way too many hours in a day. All true. But when I am with someone, I am present. I don’t read e-mails or text in meetings. I focus on the people who I am with. People won’t bring you their problems or their ideas if you seem too busy or don’t care. Put down the Blackberry and be present.

People also won’t bring you their problems if they think that asking for help is a sign of weakness or failure. You can make it clear that this isn’t the case by asking for help yourself!

Servant leaders create a culture where colleagues seek help with problems because they have confidence that the leader will help, and they believe she cares. So while giving advice is key, don’t forget to also (and now I quote Wake Forest faculty member Michael Hyde) “give the gift of acknowledgement.” Give praise when it is deserved, give credit where it is due. I set aside some time each week to write cards to faculty to acknowledge their achievements and recognize staff members who have gone above and beyond for our students. Don’t underestimate the importance of such acknowledgement. As I said at the beginning, great leaders surround themselves with talented people, listen to them, support them, give them latitude to act by delegating and empowering liberally, and acknowledge their contributions.

Before I end, I want to give you two notes of caution. First, don’t mistake being a servant leader for being a pushover. Leaders must be courageous. You have to make hard and unpopular decisions. As Colin Powell says in his book, My American Journey, “Being
responsible sometimes means pissing people off.” You should also give people respect and empathize with them, but don’t shy away from doing the best for your organization or community. Keeping in mind your responsibility as steward of your institution will guide you when you must make these tough decisions. Strive for respect and doing the right thing not for love or popularity.

Lastly, I hope that you realize that leadership—even servant leadership—can be lonely. I started by telling you how important it is to me to be part of a community and that I believe the best leaders see themselves as “part of” rather than “above.” The best leaders create an informal, open, collaborative culture, but it can be lonely even if you don’t lead from the top. So take care of yourself and build the outside relationships that you will need to recharge your engines.

I want to close with a story about a servant leader—you find them, like Leo in Hesse’s book, in the most unexpected places. This fall, Wake Forest University made a commitment to Habitat for Humanity. Almost every day, members of our staff and groups of our students helped hammer nails and lay drywall for a new home in Kernersville. Their commitment was admirable, but there was one volunteer who stood out—a six foot five inches tall 21-year-old named John.

With quiet poise, John helped many of our less-experienced staff members drill, spackle, and paste. He motivated the group to complete tasks and inspired many staff members to return for a second day of work.

Only during this second day did our Wake Forest folks realize John wasn’t just another volunteer. John was the house leader, charged with supervising the completion of the home. Everything from the drywall to the electricity fell under John’s command. And when he wasn’t helping volunteers each day, John was a full-time evening student at Forsyth Tech, working toward a degree in architectural technology.

John’s inspirational attitude came not from his technical knowledge or his position as a house leader, nor from the blueprints hidden in his back pocket. Rather, his respect as a leader grew from his willingness to serve others… and his personal dedication to servant leadership. Helping one of our older staff members hammer a single nail was not too menial a task—this ability to recognize the needs of others and serve others, made him a leader our staff wanted to follow.

Your task over these next nine months is not easy. Developing an Action Learning Project that will have a positive impact on our community will be both a difficult and delicate undertaking. Even Robert Greenleaf knew the bumpy road before you. “Show the way,” he writes, “and expect the rough and tumble.”
But one of the wonderful opportunities that this project offers is the chance to step away from the pressures of your daily career, consciously slow down (maybe even unplug), and consider how your actions are inspiring and encouraging others.

Remember, being a servant leader is not about the clothes you put on… you cannot don or shed a layer as the occasion permits. A servant-leader is always a servant. His attention to the community is authentic, and real human interaction fosters his creative spirit.

Look no further than the recent graduates of Leadership Winston Salem to show the power of thoughtful reflection and human connection. Over the last few years, your colleagues developed a Senior Power Think Tank, bringing together advocates for public policy to assist our aging community; they helped Head Start contact speakers to broaden the horizons of underprivileged children; and they increased Cancer Services communication to our Latino Community.

Thank you for continuing their good work and for your commitment to being a part of this community and this program. I wish you an inspiring, productive, and enjoyable nine months together!