

LEADER INTERVIEW: A PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN AS SERVANT-LEADERS

Amanda C. Kelly

School of Leadership Studies, Gonzaga University

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Dr. Josh Anderson

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Introduction and Purpose

“The servant-leader must constantly ask: How can I use myself to serve best?” (Greenleaf, 2002 p. 33). This summary of the responsibility of the servant-leader is compelling and simple. Greenleaf’s (2002) thinking of a business as a “serving institution” (p. 155), is a logical and engaging proposal – one could easily ask why organizational leaders *would not* want their business to serve and contribute to a greater good – be it for their customers, their employees, or their shareholders.

In this paper I will explore key themes which surfaced during my interview with a senior manager in a large technology company. Our discussion focused on leading from a place of service, impacting the greater good, and making contributions to the development of others. I will also discuss the influence of gender on leadership style and its potential impact on career development. Sparked by both this interview and personal observations of senior leaders in my company, I aim to further explore the barriers to developing Servant-leadership as an accepted (or even better, encouraged) form of leadership within an organization. Specifically related to gender impact, I question how women are perceived as leaders – are they held to a different standard if they lead from a place of bettering the community, empathy, and collaboration?

Background

The subject of this paper is Sarah F. Wagner, Senior Manager, Customer Engagement, US State & Local Government + Education, Amazon Web Services (AWS). Wagner has been with AWS Public Sector for 10 years and leads a team of strategic initiative leaders, business analysts, and communications professionals. Wagner is also member of the AWS Bar Raiser

Core – a group of senior individuals dedicated to maintaining Amazon’s high hiring bar and interrupting potential bias in hiring decisions. In addition, Wagner sits on the board of directors for The Ronald McDonald House Charities of Greater Washington, D.C. She is an inspiring leader who builds deeply trusting relationships with those she works with. She is not only a valued mentor, but also a dear friend who encouraged me to follow my own dream of pursuing my application into the ORGL graduate program. Wagner is a strong role model and embodies the kind of leader – and the kind of human – that I strive to be every day.

I specifically thought of Wagner as the desired subject to interview for this paper when I read an observation related to resistance to servant-leadership. In his text *Servant-leaders in training: Foundations of the Philosophy of Servant-leadership* (2018), Horseman states: "Servant-leadership sounds nice and it may work in some organizations, in some situations – in churches, and non-profits perhaps, but certainly not, for example, in the military, or *the shark pond where I work!*" (p. 26). In her current role, Wagner could be seen as swimming deep in the waters of the “shark pond” in an extremely competitive and challenging organization.

During our interview, I aimed to dive into Wagner’s specific experiences with women and Servant-leadership, and how those experiences have impacted her in her career to date. I wanted to specifically probe how gender may or may not influence the development of her own leadership style and of those around her.

Process and Findings

Sarah and I met over video chat, and I recorded our conversation with her permission. I began by providing her with a brief overview of the ORGL course of study I am pursuing and my interest in the Servant-leadership concentration. I chose to read from Northouse’s

Leadership: Theory and Practice (2022) to provide Wagner a brief summary of how Servant-leadership is defined, with a focus putting the development of others first and on leading “... in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large” (p. 253).

Wagner noted that she was familiar with the term Servant-leadership prior to our discussion. She defines the primary characteristic of Servant-leadership as “empowering people to do great things” (S. Wagner, personal communication, June 1, 2022). She believes that empowerment is developed by being a facilitator who supports people on their journey. Wagner’s thoughts are well aligned with Northouse’s (2022) description of Servant-leadership: “Servant leaders put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities” (p. 253).

Wagner was clear that her goal as a leader “... is for everyone to outgrow me. I am not doing my job if they stay with me forever” (S. Wagner, personal communication, June 1, 2022). Her focus on employee growth and providing an environment that contributes to the development of people reaching their full potential is aligned with a central theme that sets Servant-leaders apart from other leadership modalities. “More people will want to grow when the climate is encouraging... Motivation then becomes what people generate for themselves when they experience growth” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 158). In short, according to Greenleaf (2002) this self-generated motivation from employees will, in turn, generate positive “bottom line” outcomes which define a successful business.

This commitment to focusing on people development is a key component, noted amongst several well-known Servant-leaders. During an interview, Howard Behar (former President of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International) stated that the company’s strongest value lay in the idea that “we are in the people business serving coffee” (Anderson, 2019, p. 71). He

further notes that in helping to meet organizational goals and successful outcomes, “First comes your commitment to serve your people. You can’t expect your people to serve the organization if you’re not willing to serve them first” (Anderson, 2019, p. 74).

Wagner and I discussed how her style (which can be summarized in three words as genuine, empowering, and caring) may be misaligned with the values of the overall organization she is part of, and we discussed what that meant for her own growth and development, and of achieving her long-term goals for growth in her organization. Her direct manager, who was recently promoted to a Vice President role within the organization, is the complete antithesis of a servant leader. We probed this marked difference in styles during our conversation.

Wagner and I discussed that many female leaders in her organization fall into a "traditional" leadership style. They are autocratic, extremely outspoken, expect things to be done their way, and often focus on process and results, not necessarily on people and their growth or engagement. They lead from a place of inspiring fear and adherence to their agenda, instead of collaboration and empowerment. Wagner noted that the prevailing leadership style which tends to be rewarded by promotions and additional responsibilities is in sharp contrast with her own. As a woman, she observed that she does not have any role models who are female servant-leaders in the organization who have successfully climbed the ladder in their career. For a moment Wagner seemed to question her own development opportunities, and said that “I'm actually meeting with one of my mentors to ask this very thing – do I need to change my style to go any further? I don't want to change who I am” (S. Wagner, personal communication, June 1, 2022).

Wagner notes that in her own experience, she has received feedback that she is too nice, which may indicate a lack of backbone or ability to make tough decisions. In her organization,

nice is considered synonymous with weak. She further states that “Women in this organization are not Servant-leaders - I am not the norm here” (S. Wagner, personal communication, June 1, 2022). In a supplemental document for this class, *Module 1 Servant Critics*, Horsman (n.d.) suggests a critical view of Servant-leaders is that they could be viewed as weak or indecisive. He responds that “... it is not soft leadership; it is however compassionate and moral leadership” (p. 1). This leads me to consider the question – is this view that kindness or “niceness” as weakness evaluated the same way in a male leader? Furthermore, what is the impact of gender role in developing one’s leadership style - considering this perception of “softness” and the negative connotations that accompany it, which is often considered a female attribute.

In the critical evaluation *The Myth of Servant Leadership: A Feminist Perspective* (2005), Eicher-Catt discussed the influence of gender perceptions on leadership behaviors. The article provides compelling reasoning why women who want to advance their careers may feel it necessary to adopt an authoritative, autocratic style. Female leaders may fear they could be perceived as “weak” should they lead with qualities which may be considered as inherently female:

... these qualities entail empathy, awareness, commitment to the growth of people, healing, stewardship, and community building. While feelings and emotions are socially-sanctioned characteristics for women in the workplace, men do not typically endorse such behavior for themselves. Many of these apparent soft skills are qualities contradictory to traditional, masculinized modes of organizational behavior. For years, men have practiced authoritative styles of leadership and many women, wanting to advance in the corporate world, have necessarily followed suit. (p. 20)

In contrast, in their study on *Servant leadership, leader gender and team gender role: Testing a female advantage in a cascading model of performance*, Lemoine & Blume (2019) call out that there is evidence to support a shift in organizational culture which supports leaders who value relationships, and they note that “... female managers engaging in servant leadership behaviors have a significant advantage in affective performance through the leadership behaviors of their employees” (p. 18).

I believe that their findings demonstrate room for optimism and suggest that Wagner’s experience with the current lack of female servant-leaders in her organization has potential for improvement. Wagner herself dives deeper into her commitment to servant-leadership each day as she is expanding the scope of her own team. Every day she gains more trust, empowers others to feel connected to their work and the organization’s growth and helps her team and those she mentors develop their own strengths. In doing so, she will potentially grow more servant-leaders herself - through her example and commitment to empowerment, development and support. I for one am eager to continue to be mentored by her and learn from her commitment to serving first and impacting the organization by concentrating on the greater good – for each other and the work we do together.

Conclusion

The subject of this interview is a mentor and friend who I speak to regularly. I learned a great deal during our conversation. First and foremost, Wagner solidified my own thoughts on what makes a great leader, which is one who leads from their heart and consistently applies their own values to their role as a leader and mentor. During our conversation, Wagner made a very powerful statement that has stayed with me. She stated very clearly that “I do not *choose* to be a

Servant-leader, it is *who I am* at my very core” (S. Wagner, personal communication, June 1, 2022).

This calls to mind Greenleaf’s recollection of Leo (who we were introduced to in Hesse’s (2013) *The Journey to the East*): “... *the great leader is seen as a servant first...* Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, *deep down inside*” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 21). Those of us who consider ourselves Servant-leaders in training can identify with this observation that although we are still learning, the desire to serve is who we are deep down inside. Despite headwinds that we may experience as a result of our gender, age, ethnicity or other influences, this interview has helped me confirm the belief that staying true to who we are at our core is possibly the most important decision we can ever make as leaders. Every single day.

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Appendix

Interview Question Bank

1. What does Servant-Leadership mean to you?
2. What is your primary goal as a leader?
3. Can you summarize your leadership style?
4. How do you think your leadership style fits in with your current organization?
5. Do any leaders in your organization embody Servant-leadership ideals regularly?
6. Have you always had the same core values in your leadership journey?
7. Was being raised in a military family particularly impactful to developing your leadership style and values? If so, how?