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Transforming Culture Through Servant Leadership An Interview with Carole Zegel

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Ms. Zegel is the Executive Director of the Office of the State Attorney, Eighth Judicial Circuit Florida. She has orchestrated both informal and strategic professional development initiatives over several years in order to promote the use of servant leadership. The following is her story of personal growth and organizational transformation based on the tenets of servant leadership.



- Servant leadership work is a different kind of work than more traditional approaches to leadership, and it is easily misunderstood. Some think that being a servant leader results in being passive, meek or un-opinionated. In reality, the servant leader is courageous, strong and values-driven. These distinctions regarding servant leadership are difficult to grasp at first. Last May, you and a team of co-workers attended the weLEAD Conference on Servant Leadership in

Orlando. This conference was led by Mr. Greg Thomas, Editor of the weLead Online Magazine, and Dr. Howard Baker, Former Editor of the E-Journal of Organizational Learning and Leadership. Why do you think servant leadership is important and how did you come to be interested in it?

Servant leadership is the way I instinctively “do” leadership. When I was with my team in Orlando attending the *weLEAD Servant Leadership Conference* last year, the team approached me and said, “Carole, what we are learning about servant leadership here is what you do.” That was actually the first time I recognized that what I was doing was considered servant leadership. I have had training in different areas, such as in mediation, but I don’t have formal degrees in leadership. Servant leadership seems to be natural for me; it is where my skill set is. I believe I am seen as a model in two areas: working hard and striving to achieve consensus through win-win negotiations.

- Can you explain your personal journey in implementing servant leadership? Does your journey match Greenleaf’s definition on becoming a servant leader, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” (The Center for Servant Leadership, 2002, Retrieved from: <http://www.greenleaf.org/>)

I learned about servant leadership gradually. As I began to have group experiences, I recognized my strengths. In 1968; I was invited to join the Junior League, a volunteer training organization for young

women. At that time I was a 27 year old stay-at-home mom. I decided to attend a leadership training weekend retreat sponsored by The Philadelphia Junior League. I was with some powerful, wealthy and highly educated women. While I have a degree in education, I was neither powerful nor wealthy. However, I found myself emerging as a leader in this setting because I have the ability to speak my mind with confidence. These were different times then, when social standing determined one's course in life. It was easy to feel inferior without the "right" background. I learned that in spite of one's academic training or social status, talking about theories and applying theories were two different worlds. I was able to apply ideas and make things happen. Over time, I found myself in similar situations, where I was relied upon as a stabilizing force and as someone who could pull ideas, resources and good intentions into successful results. I am direct and not afraid to challenge myself and others.

In 1975 we moved to Florida and I became involved in child abuse and neglect issues. It was evident that at risk children needed a voice in court and the state of Florida could not afford to hire attorneys to do this. Seattle, Washington, had developed a model whereby trained volunteers were appointed to represent children in dependency proceedings. A colleague and I decided that we would spearhead an initiative through the network of Junior Leagues to convince the Florida Legislature to fund a similar project. We were successful in being the first state funded Guardian ad Litem Program and to recruit and train volunteers to advocate for these children. Servant leadership principles were critical to this initiative. We convinced the stakeholders to fund and support this project and empowered volunteers (employees) to be effective voices in the court system. The quality of service is far greater than the monetary resources. This was the model for other states to implement. This effort led to my current executive position managing an \$8 million budget. My experience is that servant leadership functions with little resources or with abundant resources. I never worked to attain this level of management responsibility; I was not on a career path. I did not start off trying to be a leader. It was a natural progression.

- Servant leadership is a concept first packaged by Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) in the 1950's, although his writings from the 1970's are most well known. To date, forty to sixty years after Greenleaf's seminal work, there is much being done to better understand and promote this concept through various conferences, the servant leadership institute in Indianapolis, and even graduate study. Is servant leadership more difficult to "do" than it appears?

It is difficult; it does not work well for those who need personal power and control and tend to rely on traditional ways of conducting business. However, servant leadership is worthwhile because I see the impact it has on others. I find that I do not advocate for myself, but rather, I advocate for better business practices, improved resources and professional development training. I think a lot about the development of others and what needs to be in place in the organization to sustain the dynamics of effectiveness and servant leadership, including succession planning. A lot of the things that I have been doing in terms of developing a changed culture are not necessarily understood or encouraged. It involves introducing innovation and thinking about moving the organization to the next level, sometimes without support from other leaders in the organization.

- Servant leadership is a transformative leadership practice. What is it about traditional organizational structure and culture that does not match well with servant leadership and needs transforming?

There are several examples; one prominent example is the difference in value systems. For instance, I count competence more highly than loyalty. In traditional cultures, loyalty is adhered to in the sense that "someone owes someone something." I don't think in those terms. I also value win-win thinking. This does not match well with competitive approaches often prevalent in traditional cultures. Also, I want to change some of the organization's long-standing practices, such as the way performance appraisals are conducted. I would like to see the performance appraisal as a positive tool to encourage employees to perform better and to self-assess as well. I like to use principles, such as

being clear with people about expectations and then supporting them in obtaining them. This is different from more tacit approaches to traditional organizational culture, where it takes a while to figure out what the expectations are and then one has to “prove” their competence. Another principle that has worked well for me is that I do not fake it. I take credit where it is due, but I am very careful not to take credit as if I have done something myself when I have not. I think of the people I work with as essential members of a team, and I rely on their expertise in guiding my decisions. I publicly recognize the value that each employee brings to the job everyday.

- Why should an organization consider promoting servant leadership? What is the value in doing so?

Promoting servant leadership is a value-added process. The value I find is in the feedback I get from my employees in terms of their development and increased ability to perform well. I have had employees give me credit for facilitating their growth. First, it is wonderful that they are engaging in professional development and that they can identify that as “work” in this culture. Second, it is wonderful that they are examining the process of development and able to understand how that process has occurred. The value is that people tell me that they like what they are doing and that they are experiencing confidence, trust and respect from me. There is some confusion about what the value of this type of approach is. It is often misunderstood as “touchy-feely” work. It is not; rather, it is democratic and interactive work.

- Can you describe how you have worked to transform a traditional hierarchical office culture to one that more closely matches the tenets of servant leadership?



It requires getting over your own fears and developing clarity within oneself and with those you work with. I found that using a principle-driven approach is imperative. I have tried to develop trust and empower those I work with. I am productive and passionate about getting things done. Since it is easy for me to get caught up in the work, I take the time to critically examine my mistakes and improve my approaches in the future. There are times when I need to walk away from issues for the overall good.

Thank you Carole! (She is seated to the left in this photo)

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