



A Different Kind of Assessment: Test your Leadership

**This new assessment will answer an important question:
How are you doing on the servant leadership journey?**

By Don M. Frick

Servant leadership has been practiced for nearly 50 years but, till now, there wasn't a way for organizations to measure it. Now there is. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (greenleaf.org) has introduced the first-ever assessment to give organizations insight into how their servant-leaders support individual growth.

What Is Servant Leadership?

Servant leadership is based on a simple but profound idea: Leaders whom we trust and want to follow achieve moral authority by being servants to followers and organizations, not by wielding titles or using coercive power.

Moreover, entire institutions can act as servants. Every organization has a chart that shows who we are to each other, but servant leadership turns the chart upside down by focusing on *how* we are for each other.

Servant leadership, however, isn't a shallow feel-good philosophy. It calls for radical personal and organizational accountability, deep inner work, and an effort to develop capacities like systems thinking, persuasion, intuition, foresight, and listening with presence.

As servant leadership has shed light on the problems of old models based on ego and raw power, organizations have begun to implement its principles and, by necessity,

**“Now, finally, there is a way to
measure servant leadership.”**

change internal cultures. Some servant leadership based outcomes, like profits and retention, aren't that difficult to measure (incidentally, research shows that both markers are improved in servant-led organizations), but others, like the growth of people and an organization's impact on a more caring and just society, are more difficult to get a handle on. Luckily, Robert Greenleaf gave us a test for servant-leaders and servant-led organizations. He called it the Best Test:

“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?” Greenleaf's Best Test™ is a road map of a real inner and outer journey, not a one-time evaluation of knowledge or inventory of future intentions.

What Is the “Best Test”?

For the first time, Greenleaf's Best Test™ has been operationalized with an assessment tool powered by SMD

(smdhr.com), a leader in survey and assessment technology. The assessment helps people and organizations answer an important question: How are we doing on the servant leadership journey? And make no mistake: The quest to look inward and align with the spirit of servant leadership is an ongoing journey, not a destination. Think of this assessment as a beacon that will make visible some of your organization's neglected corners and make it safe for open, healthy dialogue around vision, policy, and even contentious issues. Think of it as a framework for organizational life, a declaration of intent to move forward and be held accountable to a very high standard of interdependence.

Sometimes, if we pay attention, we find that the flutter of the smallest wings makes the biggest difference:

- **policies that use feedback** to support and develop persons rather than to judge
- **fair standards** of accountability
- **a culture that celebrates** its employees and teams
- **thoughtful practices** that honor suppliers, investors, and other stakeholders.

These strands represent how an organization treats its people and those it serves. They weave a lovely tapestry to create a distinctive institution, a joyful place to work, a force in creating a better world. They are realities that are cultivated by people, not processes, and lie at the heart of sustainability, accountability, trust, interdependence, and growth.

Greenleaf's assessment can be used as a baseline assessment for organizations just beginning the servant leadership journey or as a reality check for those that have some experience with implementing Greenleaf's ideas. The assessment follows Greenleaf's Best Test™ from principle to practice by investigating three categories of inquiry:

1. What are the outcomes for those who are being served? Included are items that correlate support for:

- physical and emotional health
- opportunities to gain and integrate knowledge
- avenues to express heightened autonomy
- opportunities to continue the cycle of service.

2. Are the organization's leaders following servant-leadership behaviors? (The goal of servant leadership is to create an organization full of leaders, but it's a good idea to choose a few people as "designated leaders" to lead



the process. The questions in this part of the assessment focus on the behavior of these designated leaders.) For example, do these leaders:

- help others manage challenging situations to minimize any negative impacts to the individual?
- coach the team to help them learn from each other's success and failures?
- build relationships by seeking ways to help others?

3. How well does the organization address matters of heart, spirit, joy, and community? These human experiences give juice and meaning to work, yet they aren't often discussed, much less measured. Included here are such questions as these:

- Is your work personally meaningful?
- Does this organization foster a joyful environment?
- Does your work contribute to the well-being of others?

Servant leadership works from the inside out, beginning with questions of identity and vision. Greenleaf's assessment is a tool to begin understanding how people and organizations are already making an impact in ways congruent with servant leadership, but the who and why of leading by serving begin with individual persons and groups.

How Will You Answer the Servant-Leadership Critics?

Greenleaf's assessment alone won't create a servant-led community. That transformation requires that common criticisms and questions about servant leadership be addressed. Here are some answers to the most common concerns:

1. Doesn't this sound too soft, weak, touchy-feely?

Answer: Those who use only the analytical capacities of the brain and ignore the brain cells around the heart and gut are neglecting two-thirds of their potential. Most leaders say they want to see passion, commitment, joy, and engaged teamwork in their organization. Every one of those qualities is "touchy-feely."

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“The assessment will shed light on your organization’s neglected corners.”

2. What would our return on investment be if we implemented service leadership practices?

Answer: Return on investment is an accounting term, unless you include investments in the growth of people. Still, organizations that follow servant leadership principles tend to average 20% to 40% better financial performance than those of similar size.

3. How does servant leadership drive results?

Answer: Servant leadership alone doesn’t drive financial results. It unleashes the engagement and commitment of people within the organization, and they drive financial results. As Jack Lowe, Jr., then CEO of TD Industries in Dallas said, “You don’t practice servant leadership to make more money. You do it because it’s the right thing to do. But you will make more money.”

4. Who would be in control of this process?

Answer: Although servant leadership may have internal champions, it is ultimately “controlled” by any and all individuals within the organization who decide to begin serving in order to lead.

5. How can results of this assessment change things beyond labeling people?

Answer: The assessment is simply a starting point, a source of fresh information. It isn’t designed to pigeon-hole individuals or organizations.

Prudence demands that such questions be asked and answered for a typical project. But as Robert Greenleaf might say, “That comes later. First, who do you want to be?”

Greenleaf also inspired us with these words: “Nothing much happens without a dream, and for something big to happen, there must be a really big dream.”

Servant leadership isn’t a project; it’s a philosophy of leadership that guides pragmatic outcomes, but it always starts with who we want to be, why that identity is important, and what grand vision guides the journey. **S**

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Take the Assessment

When you take the assessment, do so with mind and heart open. Greenleaf once wrote that “awareness is a disturber.” Be ready for revelations that may be in conflict with preconceived notions.

Don’t seek a bullet-point, one-size-fits-all system for implementing servant leadership in your life or organization. No two organizations do it the same way, even though the principles are timeless. This is good news for those who understand the profound, positive, customized cultural change that servant leadership can bring to an organization. The Greenleaf Center offers information and support for those who want to go deeper into the journey.

Organizational leaders and management researchers have spent years searching for the “secret sauce” of successful organizations. Servant leadership offers an alternative definition of success, based on multiple bottom lines that measure impacts on communities, market growth, the growth of people, shared achievements, and individual evolution. Plainly said, the sauce is in the people.

Join us on a journey to increase awareness of yourself, your organizational culture, and the generative process of servant leadership. For more information, contact us at info@greenleaf.org. To take the assessment, go to greenleaf.org/best-test.

Put the Philosophy into Action

For details on implementing the precepts of servant leadership, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org.

How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture (Vol. 31, No. 2)

Leaders as Midwives Who Birth a New World (Vol. 28, No. 5)

Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members (Vol. 18, No. 3)

The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer (Vol. 16, No. 2)

Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading (Vol. 24, No. 5)

Why Your Employees Are Losing Motivation – and What to Do about It (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Do You Have the Skills of a Servant Leader? (Vol. 28, No. 6)

Nested at the Heart: A New Approach to Nonprofit Leadership (Vol. 29, No. 6)

What Makes a Great Team? (Vol. 32, No. 6)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)