

A Millennial's leadership perspective: reflections on a decade of mentorship from a servant leader

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Abstract

Purpose – This article illustrates the transformational nature of servant leadership and its capacity to empower and develop others. In it, I recount my close relationship with a high school mentor who embodied the key tenants of Greenleaf's (1970) servant leadership philosophy. I also advocate for others to provide mentorship and support in a similar fashion.

Design/methodology/approach – This *Origins* contribution was constructed as a reflective narrative in response to a mentorship experience earlier in my life.

Findings – A mentorship experience from my youth profoundly shaped my approach to leadership and teamwork that I still embrace to this day. Readers are asked to consider the power of servant leadership in their own lives.

Originality/value – Students of leadership can utilize this reflective essay as a touchstone for further classroom discussion.

Keywords BIPOC, Mentorship, Millennial, Servant leadership

Paper type Case study

Introduction

As Greenleaf first proposed in 1970, servant leadership emphasizes the care, growth and ethical leadership of followers above all else (Greenleaf, 1998; Yukl, 2010). Although serving and leading simultaneously might appear counterintuitive, Greenleaf argued that the future of a prosperous and healthy society relied upon large, complex institutions embracing an ethic of care and service to individuals above all else (Greenleaf, 1998).

For many years now, I have reflected upon my own personal journey through the “complex institutions” of PK-12 education in the United States of America. Growing up biracial in the 1980s–1990s primarily in the Midwest, I attended a different middle school in a different state for each grade level – seismic shifts in my early education that left gaping holes in my curricular progression along with equally sized holes in my self-confidence. It might have been easy to predict my future high school performance based upon my disjointed middle school experience had it not been for Mr. William (Bill) P. Bowman, my ninth grade English teacher, mentor and close friend for nearly a decade.

This article reflects upon the teachings, mentorship and wisdom imparted by my late teacher and dear friend, who devoted his life to empowering students like me to stretch far beyond anything I thought possible. What follows are several personal anecdotes from years past aligned with key themes and leadership qualities derived from Greenleaf's servant leadership philosophy. I conclude this entry by advocating for others to provide mentorship and support in a similar fashion.

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Servant leadership: key traits and qualities

A pioneer in rethinking corporate leadership after a long stint at AT&T, Greenleaf's servant leadership philosophy clearly aligns with Mr. Bowman's selfless nature and the approach he used in teaching and mentorship (Greenleaf, 1998). Although I did not recognize it when I was 14, it is now evident that he personified the seven key tenants of this leadership philosophy: honesty, selflessness, modesty, compassion, development of others, fairness and encouragement (Yukl, 2010).

Based upon my own experience, Mr. Bowman firmly grounded himself in the service of his students first and foremost. Like so many servant leaders before him, leadership itself was simply a vehicle that could further empower him to develop and cultivate students to reach their maximum potential (Greenleaf, 1998). His leadership philosophy placed student welfare squarely at the center of everything he did, even if it ran counter to conventional PK-12 bureaucracy, policy and procedure. Indeed, this leadership philosophy is perhaps more favorably aligned with education and nonprofit organizations; whereas this approach may be less appropriate in a for-profit context where prioritizing quarterly earnings might overshadow employee welfare and well-being (Yukl, 2010).

Fortunately for me and countless others, my high school generally allowed Mr. Bowman to do what he did best – nurture student potential and transform lives. As this narrative unfolds, please note that I have taken the liberty to integrate literary quotations drawn from some of Mr. Bowman's favorite scholarly authors and philosophers.

A decade of mentorship

When you want to hurry something, that means you no longer care about it and want to get on to other things. (Pirsig, 2006, p. 36)

Middle school is a challenging time for many students given the social, behavioral and biological changes that seem to converge almost simultaneously (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). My own personal experience was complicated by a series of employment-driven moves for my father's career, beginning with sixth grade in Indiana, seventh grade in Texas and eighth grade in Illinois. Developing meaningful relationships was difficult at best, and academics and coursework were fragmented by curricular misalignment and misinterpretation of course equivalencies by school counselors. By seventh grade, I surprised even myself with the occasional in-school detention for misbehaving in Spanish class and phone calls home about my poor math performance. I was unhappy and lacked confidence – a biracial Midwestern transplant adrift in Dallas, Texas.

By eighth grade our family relocated to the Chicago suburbs, and a sense of normalcy slowly began to return. I continued to struggle with math courses after I was accidentally placed in advanced algebra; however, the teacher admired my perseverance and generously awarded me a B-. In hindsight, it was a much-needed confidence boost that propelled me into my freshman year in high school and, more importantly, a lesson in the value of persistence and struggle.

On the first day of high school, I made my way to Mr. Bowman's first period English classroom at the end of the hallway. I would love to retrace that hallway again, partly because it felt like a five-minute walk from one end to the other. That small journey was made even lengthier as the bell rang and I realized I was late – as I entered the classroom, all eyes on the tall, introverted, half-Asian kid – I apologized, found a seat at the back of the room and promptly sat down.

I was typically a quiet kid who enjoyed reading books, playing story-driven video games and pulling the family computer apart to figure out how it all worked. I did not like being the center of attention, and so it was with great surprise that Mr. Bowman took an interest in me. He noticed that I rarely spoke in class, but I took great interest in the readings and the in-class

writing time. I would often find myself asking for feedback or his advice as we worked through writing prompts and short reflections related to *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Les Misérables* or whatever else was assigned from the Western literary canon.

There were only two grades possible in Mr. Bowman's classroom: A or A-. One reflected effort, interest and intensity while the other did not. By the end of freshman year, he pulled me aside after class one day and asked, "How would you like to join the yearbook team?" This was perhaps the most pivotal decision of my entire high school career, as yearbook entailed three full academic years of elective time with Mr. Bowman as the program supervisor. Reluctantly, I passed up the opportunity to run track and field and cross country with my friends for the yearbook elective.

I worked under the academic section editor my sophomore year, writing copy for academic department spreads and taking club photographs before and after school. I learned the delicate art of cropping photographs with grease pencils, copyediting and designing spreads on oversize carbon triplicate paper. At the end of my sophomore year, Mr. Bowman approached me once again, this time with a much bolder proposition: "I think you should serve as coeditor for your senior yearbook." I was shocked – why me? There were over 3,000 other students in the school. Why on earth did he want me to serve in a leadership role?

I thought over his proposal and readily agreed to the challenge, pouring all of my extracurricular time into working with the yearbook team to plan, design and budget the project over the next two summers. I was perfectly matched with a coeditor who was everything I thought I was not: confident, outgoing, personable and very intelligent. By the end of my senior year, it was clear that Mr. Bowman had guided me through a series of successive challenges to develop me for college and beyond. Nowhere in a freshman English course master syllabus does it say, "All English teachers shall identify and develop self-confidence and leadership in their students." But that was so clearly his aim with me and countless others who came before and after.

As I prepared my college applications my senior year, we had a conversation about where I planned to apply for admission. I told him I wanted to attend a large state school in Illinois with several of my closest high school friends. I remember that he looked at me quite seriously and said, "I have been teaching for over 30 years. Beloit College is a special place, and it is certainly not for many of our high school students here, but I think you should really look into it. It might just fit you perfectly."

He was right. It did fit me perfectly. My parents knew the moment I walked onto the campus that it was where I belonged. I knew it, too. Beloit really is "a college that changes lives," and it helped me plot my life's work and trajectory in so many meaningful ways (Pope, 2000). As for Mr. Bowman, he had a knack for encouraging and inspiring those around him with genuine authenticity. This was not trite advice passed along to the thousands of other students in my high school – it was a personalized recommendation that only comes from someone who can see potential in persons who cannot (yet) see their own.

Never one to move swiftly or carelessly, his steadfast mentorship helped me find my way to a career in higher education and academic museums, where I could continue his legacy of serving students through teaching and mentoring. And like Pirsig's seminal work, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, he never rushed mentorship in an effort to simply move on to "other things" (Pirsig, 2006, p. 36). Rather, mentorship was a lifelong journey, and one that did not simply end when a student earned a piece of paper.

Facing the unexpected

Let it be a green field, with trees and flowers. Let there be paths that wind through the shade. Put out park benches where old people can sun in the summertime, and a pond where children can skate in the winter. (Ebert, 2001)

Mr. Bowman and I met throughout undergraduate and graduate school whenever we could. He had a penchant for off-the-beaten-path restaurants with unusual names like the Square Cow, and he had a very dry, very quirky sense of humor. He never let me pay for a single meal despite always trying to do so. One of his most prized possessions was his sports car, and – although he was protective of it – he gladly let friends take it for a drive, as he relished any opportunity to bring a smile to someone’s face.

His kindheartedness and genuine interest in others extended to our regular email exchanges; he was always there in the background, always willing to listen and offer advice whenever I asked. For instance, he kept me motivated and grounded when I wanted to drop out of a summer intensive Japanese language course – a program that I still maintain to this day was one of the most challenging academic experiences of my life. He extended his sincerest congratulations when I was offered an internship as a Boone Scholar at the Field Museum of Natural History. And he provided unsolicited encouragement and support in a way that was never intrusive or overbearing, particularly when I was navigating the complexities of graduate school during my first semester. His compassionate interest made the work I was doing feel important, and it made me feel valued as a human being.

He did the same for countless others, too. When he died far too young and far too unexpectedly in 2007, his Unitarian memorial service offered evidence enough to substantiate his servant leadership aptitude. Students spanning over three decades attended, paying tribute to a person who had put himself last while serving hundreds before himself. Many had a story like mine – Mr. Bowman had the uncanny ability to see the potential in others before they could recognize it in themselves. He had devoted his life to the selfless service of others and, like Ebert’s *Make it Green*, always sought simplicity and respect for individual life above all else.

Losing a mentor is not easy. The loss is painful, but the sudden knowledge that one is now “alone” in their journey is perhaps more terrifying than anything else. I realized in the years after his passing, though, that I was ready to start growing on my own. He had been placed in my path at just the right moment, to steady the instability early on and launch me forward with the self-confidence I needed to truly recognize leadership qualities in myself.

Paying it forward

A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his labor and his leisure; his mind and his body; his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing, and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always appears to be doing both. (Jacks, 1932, pp. 1–2)

After more than 15 years in higher education and arts leadership roles, I consider myself fortunate to engage in meaningful work that transforms lives and opens paths to new possibilities and new perspectives each day. So please, consider serving as a mentor in your field, your place of employment or in your community. The simple acts of kindness that Mr. Bowman embodied clearly change lives in a powerful way. I am living proof of this.

Mentoring does not imply taking on a cadre of new mentees. Make a conscious decision to invest in a meaningful relationship with a single person and bear witness to their growth and development over many years. Nudging, nurturing and investing in those closest to us can yield life-changing and dramatic results. I have personally practiced this to the best of my ability with several students and colleagues within the academic museum field, and I always try to stay focused on the mentee’s self-confidence and steady personal growth. By extension, this includes preparing well-researched, thoughtful and deeply personal letters of recommendation for

students and peers when asked. This was the essence of Mr. Bowman's life as a servant leader, and a service philosophy that is easy to explain in practice but difficult at best to implement.

In closing, Jacks's (1932) wise words about the art of living a full and meaningful life continue to embody the essence of servant leadership to this day. One does not seek leadership in this manner by placing their self-interests ahead of others. Rather, it is truly a leadership lifestyle grounded in the elevation and service of others before all else (Yukl, 2010). It was also the final testament to a good friend who unintentionally taught me more about the power of servant leadership in 10 years than I could have learned in a lifetime without him.

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