

A WEEK IN *Learning*

Kintsugi & the Art of Servant Leadership

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In 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf was credited with the distillation and definition of Servant Leadership. In this theory, Greenleaf asserts that a leader must be oriented primarily toward service to others, and lead with “a servant’s heart”. His concept of the modern Servant Leader is controversial; it rejects traditional hierarchical power and prioritizes meeting the needs of colleagues, customers, and communities.

In the 15th century, Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa shattered his favorite ceremonial tea bowl. As he reflected on the colorful breakage, his consorts urged him to discard it. "Better to procure a new tea bowl- one that is even more grand and more beautiful." they said. Instead, Yoshimasa shipped the fragments far away for repair. When his beloved bowl returned, it was again functional, but it bore thick metal staples where each break had occurred. He touched the fracture lines and wondered to himself if it were not possible to transform the marks of damage into joy. He hired an artisan to fill the breaks with a decadent golden epoxy and *Kintsugi*, the ancient art of golden rejoining, was born.

What could Kintsugi possibly have to do with Servant Leadership? I'd argue *everything*.

Do we lead with listening?

Robert Greenleaf's essay, *The Servant as Leader*, affirms that, "Only a true, natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first." Servant Leadership implores us to ask, instead of tell. Traditional leadership creates an environment where communication can be suppressive and fear-based. Servant Leadership acknowledges that a leader cannot hope to ignite the best of those they lead without doing the quiet, active work of observing, listening and showing respect. Knowing the motivations of those we lead allows us to be our best catalyst for leadership.

Kintsugi prescribes that before the artisan sets about reconstruction of the bowl, he must 'listen' to each broken piece. He must engage its unique truth with his heart's hand. For the pieces are no longer shards of the former whole - they exist as sovereign identities that be mindfully merged into a new creation. The most brilliant, durable creations result from an intimate understanding of our materials, whether it is pottery or people.

Are we here to serve or be served?

This is the primary question that Servant Leadership compels leaders to ask themselves. Traditional leadership makes leaders the focus of a rigid power equation; creating a system where those being led are expected to obey, follow, and have authority exerted over them. Servant Leadership, by contrast, sees leading others as a



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conscious decision that emerges from a natural desire to serve. A Servant Leader relies on prioritizing the well-being and development of others, and even sharing power, to achieve success. Where a traditional leader may feel compelled to "light a fire" under a team member to get a task achieved, a servant leader will seek *to light a fire within them* to create success.

Kintsugi acknowledges that as a first step, the artisan must accept his own duty to the bowl he is attempting to unify. He does not force his will; rather he is an instrument through which the vessel realizes its own re-creation. The reflexive process of repair is central to the theme of Kintsugi. As it is explained, the artisan repairing the broken bowl is as fortified by the process as the item he repairs. Similarly, Servant Leaders must first accept that they too are created by the process of leading. Whether we are managing teams, creating meaning, or repairing a broken vessel, we are *all* servants. When we bring our sincere efforts to serve, shape and perfect, we too are fortified by the process.

Are our efforts to lead motivated by wholeness/healing?

Robert Greenleaf acknowledges that leadership means necessarily encountering, "broken spirits and (those who) have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is part of being human, servant leaders recognize that they have the opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact." Servant Leadership contains an essential call to make whole and to heal - in ourselves as much as others.

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of Kintsugi is that failure need not be a hard stop. Wounds are seen as necessary companions to growth, not destruction. Traditional leadership would have leaders present themselves as infallible, unquestionable, and even unmoving. Think about the most impactful leaders in your own life. Did they not earn your esteem for their ability to leverage their full humanity? We are all irregular, marked by time and process. Those blemishes exist as evidence of the resiliency of our whole, authentic selves. Kintsugi reminds us that for all our experiences in life - our impulses, our traumas, and our failings - we have the opportunity to emerge *better than whole* (and even more suited to serve, to lead and to strive).

Kintsugi and Servant Leadership may or may not be concepts that are new to you, but I believe you've always known their principles, Goodwillian.

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