

Servant-Leader Assessment of Adam Gierlach

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I sat deep in the throws of a personal, professional, and relationship crisis at this time two years ago. I had been passed up for multiple jobs I believed I should have received. As a young assistant coach in Division-I men's college basketball, I relied on the advice of those above me in the hierarchy, who laid out the path to walk to achieve my dream of advancing in the profession and becoming a successful college basketball coach. The scripted path was to work hard, keep your head down, and remain loyal. The sacrifice was my hard work and sense of self for the good of the organization, winning games, and hopefully future rewards. But when the time came for that loyalty and sacrifice to be repaid, as they had foretold, that repayment was not made. I was left to ponder my career choices and sense of self, while scrambling to reconcile the choices I had made with where I found myself at the time. Meanwhile, as I threw myself deeper into a circle of self-doubt, and hustling to prove my self-worth and earn a promotion in college basketball, cracks in a long-term and long-distance relationship turned into deep cuts that left me separated from a woman with whom I had planned a future. Both of these events initiated a transformational shift in values and priorities that ultimately led me to where I am today, but my journey did not have to take the turns it did. I could have very easily chose to remain in college basketball, operating how I had for most of my career. After all, my hard-driving and competitive nature did bring me some level of success. But over the course of a year-plus spent in self-reflection with many long walks exploring the gorges, woods, and waterfalls of Ithaca, NY, I could not shake the question: Have I been a good person? A good son, brother, boyfriend, friend, and coach (basketball coach)? The answer I slowly arrived at was that while I hadn't consciously been a bad person, I certainly hadn't been a good one.

The questions I considered that helped me to arrive at my definition for goodness, aligns with Robert Greenleaf's definition for servant-leadership: "The servant-leader is servant first...it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead," (2002, p. 27). This definition for servant-leadership is bolstered by Greenleaf's best test: "The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: 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?" (p. 27). Greenleaf later amended his best test to include additional provisions against harm to others and the least privileged in society: "No one will knowingly be hurt by the action, directly or indirectly," (1998, p. 43).

To be a servant-leader in training, to be human is to know that we may inevitably hurt others. As we seek to be more compassionate or more patient or more creative, often times we will fall short of those goals and may cause harm to others. As I considered my path and who I became along the way, I could no longer accept that causing harm to others was a legitimate cost of personal achievement. There is indeed great difference in acting with the intent for others to become wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants and causing harm versus acting without that same intent and causing the same degree of harm. The degree of physical harm may be the same, but the emotional harm and the path to reconciliation between the two are very different. As he elaborated on his expansion of the best test for servant-leadership, Greenleaf expressed similar sentiments:

I know that, in the course of my life, I have caused some hurt. But, as my concern for servanthood has evolved, the scars from these incidents are more prominent in my

memory and self-questioning is sharper: Could I have been more aware, more patient, more gentle, more forgiving, more skillful? The intent of the servant, as I see that person now, is that, as a result of any action he or she initiates, no one will knowingly be hurt. And if someone is hurt, there is a scar that henceforth will endure to be reckoned with.

Hurting people, only a few, is not accepted as a legitimate cost of doing business. (p. 45).

Thus I formulated a definition for goodness as connection to one's essence, one's nature, one's soul. As we develop goodness in ourselves and others, we allow others to be the most natural expression of themselves. I lay at a point in my life where the scars from the hurt I had caused were more prominent, and the self-questioning was fundamentally sharper. This is the difference between acting with the intent of servanthood and acting out of self-interest. In *Stewardship*, Peter Block poses additional reflections to highlight the difference between service and self-interest:

The obligation of accepting a position of power is to be, above all else, a good human being. Not to be a good leader, not so much to maintain order and fight back chaos, not know what is best for others...Stewardship is the willingness to work on ourselves first, to stay in intimate contact with those around us, to own our doubts and limitations and make them part of our dialogue with others. Our humanness is defined more by our vulnerability than by our strengths. (2013, p. 53).

As I transitioned from college basketball coach to Leadership and Personal Development Coach operating my own practice, my fundamental mission and purpose grew into the creative process of developing goodness in myself and others, in alignment with Greenleaf's best test. John Horsman further adds, "becoming a servant-leader in training involves the conscious

development of a profoundly relational, creative, holistic, and integrative worldview,” (2018, p. 12). This worldview encompasses continuous internal searching for harmony and clarity as we seek to bring forth the great values in ourselves and others that help us all to become wiser, freer, and more autonomous, in a way that aligns with a systems perspective where we seek to bring forth what life may be requiring from us. It is from this perspective, and those offered by Greenleaf, Block, and myself that I seek to assess where I can become a more effective servant-leader. Concrete and specific actions, may help us as we walk along the path to more effective servant-leaders, but unless they are grounded in a larger way of being in alignment with servant-leadership, we only attempt to build from the outside-in, rather than the inside-out. Building from the inside-out works to ensure the foundation supports the skills and capacities we desire.

The effectiveness of Adam Gierlach as a servant-leader lies not in the number of clients gained or the status of those clients, but it lies in the ecosystem he helps to create in all the areas he touches. Are those around him better off? Does he leave people, circumstances, and physical places better off than when he found them? Are those with whom he comes into contact wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants? Is this done in a way harmonious with the larger community and system? Is this done in a way that participates in the great unfolding of the universe? What is the harm created by his actions? And what is the reflection and change in behavior as a result of those actions? Is he, in essence, a good person?

It seems that in many ways, Adam Gierlach has created a way of being that results in developing goodness in himself and others, where others are more connected to their essence, their nature, and their souls. This way of being is similar to the dynamic proposed by Shann Ray Ferch, as featured in *Conversations on Servant Leadership*:

If I'm going to live in a way that that person says of me I've made them more healthy, it changes the whole dynamic. That means I'm going to be searching for what's most meaningful in their life, as one part of it, and then also probably what's most meaningful in life in general, in life above just our own mutual existence. And then that also is going to call me to what I might need to change that hampers or takes away from a healthy, meaningful, and loving progression. Servant-leadership in my family calls me to change my character so that I'm not blocking the progression of health, goodness, beauty, mercy, justice, and love in my loved ones, but rather enhancing these. (2015, p. 235)

For this, there are a number of measures of success, inside and outside of Adam's business, Adam Gierlach Coaching. He has established an ecosystem of sorts where people from all different areas of his life seek his presence. The classes he attends at CrossFit Industrious have grown in number and in consistency of those attending. He was recognized with a Community award at CrossFit Industrious and promoted as an Ambassador, someone the gym recognizes as living out their values. Similarly, lululemon, a company recognized as investing in the growth of their employees, and built upon the pillars of Sweat (health and wellness), Grow (the practice of personal development), and Community (being in relationship), has signed Adam as a store ambassador, to be a partner and extension of the brand and represent his values, and the values of lululemon, in the community, while furthering authentic servant-leadership. The client roster for Adam Gierlach Coaching has increased steadily since the launch of the business in January, 2019 and those clients have seen growth in a long-term and sustainable manner, consistent with the best test for servant-leadership. Perhaps the greatest measure of success for Adam is the number

of friends and colleagues who reach out for a listening ear or for perspective on their personal development and growth.

Larry Spears identified Ten Characteristics of the Servant-Leader based on Greenleaf's original writings. At least two stand out to me as I view Adam's effectiveness as a servant-leader: Building community, and listening. Peter Block defined community as the culture and experience of belonging. Block states, "the real challenge is to discover and create the means for engaging citizens that brings a new possibility into being. To state it more precisely, what gives power to communal possibility is the imagination and authorship of citizens led through a process of engagement. This is an organic and relational process. This is what creates a structure of belonging," (2008, p. 79). It seems that on many levels, Adam has worked to create a structure of belonging, where others are engaged and can bring a new possibility into being. Similarly, his work as a Leadership and Personal Development Coach, has a fundamental level of listening. Joseph Jaworski highlights the power of listening for a servant-leader in his work, *Synchronicity*: "Just being able to be there for others and to listen to them is one of the most important capacities a leader can have. It calls forth the best in people by allowing them to express what is within them. If someone listens to me say what I am feeling, then my feelings are given substance and direction, and I can act," (2011, p. 66). Adam may fail many times to listen at his highest capabilities, but his work as a Coach is fundamentally about providing the time, space, and opportunity for people to learn about themselves. Perhaps his work as a Coach is less a marker for success in this area than his work as a friend. By being someone who listens and those gives substance and direction to others feelings, he is able to form closer, deeper, and more reliable relationships with those around him.

Despite the areas where Adam may be walking along the path as a servant-leader in training, there are many areas in which he comes up short. He often lacks patience and is sometimes dismissive of the opinions and perspectives of others when he perceives they are not walking along the path. This is especially prominent in interactions with his parents and brother, those closest to him. This highlights a lack of compassion, a lack of patience, and a lack of forgiveness. Perhaps this implies unresolved conflicts and feelings inside Adam. Perhaps more healing still needs to occur. In many areas, Adam falls short with his clients as well. He fails to generatively listen and communicate directly while helping to persuasively influence.

The question to return to as we judge a servant-leader in training might be: Is he walking along the path? Meaning, is he doing to best to nurture a consciousness that is profoundly relational, creative, holistic, and integrative. Stumbles and missed turns along the path are inevitable, for we are all human. But is one walking along the path, and how quickly does one return to the path after a misstep or a wrong turn? Margaret Wheatley offers some valuable perspective in her work, *Who Do We Choose To Be?*: “We can’t trust ourselves to be perfect; we can’t trust ourselves to be the best at anything; we can’t trust ourselves to succeed; we can’t trust ourselves to never cause harm and hurt. What we can trust is our disciplined effort to get to know ourselves. We can learn to know our triggers, our habitual reactions, our strengths and weaknesses,” (2017, p. 274). While growth remains in many areas, it is quite clear that Adam is doing his best to walk along the path of servant-leadership.

Works Cited

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