

# Christian School Management The Servant Leader Principle

*“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”*



## Christian Management / Leadership: The Servant Leader Principle

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them” (John 13:3-4, 12).

Christian school leaders are servant leaders. They have the following obligations:

- Serve the mission of the school – everything else is a subset of this.
- Serve the children of the school as the primary client.
- Recruit and support mission appropriate teachers and staff.
- Support those employees:
  - provide resources,
  - be present for them and know each one,
  - be in an ongoing conversation with them,
  - help them grow throughout their careers,
  - hold them accountable, and
  - let them go when they are unable to fulfill their task with excellence.
- Partner with the Board for effective strategic planning and strategic financial management.
- Execute the plan and be accountable for it.

Authority and service seem to always be in tension. If I am in authority, how can I at the same time be in service? As the Principal / Head of School or Academic Leader or Business Manager, where is authority and where is service? How do they link?

Authority is not to be denied. It is there for 3 important purposes: to know and do a job in such a way that people follow; to hold others accountable; to bring a key guiding perspective to conversations and thus enrich decision making. Each of these purposes is part of leadership.

To be obvious, you can't be a leader unless you have followers. Gaining followers happens in a variety of ways, as history shows: the “strong” individual, the mystic, the rich person, the visionary, the person of power, and so on. Most of these are not servant leaders. It is important to know that – servant leadership is only one of many ways to lead. CSM considers it to be the highest form of leadership. Authority can simply degrade into the exercise of power. True authority lies in the willingness to set power aside and serve. It is a Christian paradox.

In a school, servant leadership operates at every level. The teacher serves the children through building relationships, listening deeply, demonstrating competence, teaching with passion, and understanding when to direct and when to grant autonomy. The Principal / Head of School

serves teachers and staff through demonstrating competence, valuing and maximizing their strengths, holding them accountable, and leading them as members of a productive team. The Board serves the Principal / Head of School by attending to their holistic needs as real people, demonstrating strategic foresight as partners, providing the needed resources, and pulling their philanthropic weight i.e. not from a position of power but from a kneeling position.

Gallup, the polling organization, found that the 4 needs of followers were trust, compassion, stability, hope. In the Christian school, these words have resonance as well. We imagine their fulfillment in this way:

Gallup	Christian School
Trust	Competence and making and keeping promises
Compassion	Love – desiring always the best for the other
Stability	Knowing that Jesus is the Rock and standing securely there
Hope	Mission, planning, execution

Leadership does not always operate according to the organization chart. Formal leadership is often supported by informal leadership in the organization – the exemplary teacher who leads conversations, presents at conferences, and chairs committees has an authority far beyond her title. Informal leadership is the place where we discover those who have the servant’s heart. While we may hire those who already have titles and / or reputations, we see in the everyday interactions of each person much more clearly what his or her impulse to action is – whether to power or to service.

Robert Greenleaf of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership wrote: “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. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions ... The leader-first and the servant-first are 2 extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and one that is difficult to administer, is: **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? (emphasis added)” We can easily substitute the phrase ‘our children’ for the phrase “least privileged in society”.

This leads to the key observation that for the Christian school, servant leadership has an objective that is clear and non-negotiable. At the heart of the word “service” is the person of

the child. We are not in our schools to serve everyone equally. Far from it. First is the child, who is the reason for the school, its mission outcome, and the most vulnerable person in the school community. Servant leadership is thus not even-handed. Within the context of the school, each servant leader serves first the child. Both the adult leader and the adult follower must know that their contract obligation to fulfill their responsibilities in return for various benefits is the legal mirror for their moral obligation to deliver the mission to the child. “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Matthew 25:40 cf. verse 45)”.

The practical issues that arise seem difficult in practice, while clear in theory. What happens if adults do not do their jobs well? How do we hold adults accountable for that mission delivery, irrespective of whether that is in the Business Office, in the classroom, on the playing fields, on field trips or in the Annual Fund? What about that beloved member of the church community who happens to be a mediocre teacher or administrator? Or the incompetent but loving spouse of the rockstar coach? Or the 25 year veteran who loves the school and is not growing? Is rocking the boat being a servant? Should we overlook adult misconduct because we genuinely do care for every member of the school?

This would suggest that “servant” is a soft term with no substance. To the contrary – when we recognize that the mission center of our attention is the child (cf. the Child Principle), to serve the child implies that we are all accountable in the most demanding ways, both personally and collectively. In that collective sense, it is the school that takes on the responsibility for mission delivery to each child. Thus, the school must corporately take on the characteristic of servant leader to fully develop each child’s God-given gifts and fulfill God’s purpose in each child’s life. Adults thus operate in two ways. The first is as an individual where the servant leader seeks to deliver the mission to the child and support, enhance, and develop the skills of each employee. The second is as a school body exhibiting corporately the servant leader disposition. Here, the requirement that each individual be a contributing element to that corporate identity is key.

If we are committed as servant leaders merely to the individual employee, it would be possible to imagine the needs of the adult becoming, as often happens in our schools, equivalent to or even greater than the needs of the child. Where, however, we are committed as servant leaders institutionally to the child, now each adult has a critical role to play and for which to be held accountable. Being a servant leader is thus not just an individual but a corporate responsibility. Note that 1 Corinthians 12 is implacable that we all play a part in the body of Christ and, implicitly, in whatever station of life we have been led to. “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many” (v. 14).

The Principal as servant leader primarily for the child must therefore root out adult incompetence and ensure that the child receives the best mission-centered education. Similarly, the Board of Trustees must hold the Principal accountable. Once the highest needs of

the child have been taken care of, and in order to achieve that goal, the adult is also nurtured and fed. First the child, then the adult.

“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Matthew 20:25-28).

The Christian school is an exemplar of servant leadership. We give our lives as a school body to deliver the mission to the child. We are held accountable for the excellence of that delivery. I individually deliver the mission and am held individually accountable. When the Christian school functions in this healthy way, it can achieve excellence. The authority of the leader includes power; the Servant Leader Principle states that the servant-leader willingly lays it down for the child (cf. John 10).