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Nurturing servant-leadership



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PARADOX OF ROLES: In being a leader, power is not absolute and service must be selfless

In an increasingly crowded and confusing world, the lay person and the highly educated alike need leaders who can guide them steadfastly, upholding virtues. One of the enduring virtues of leadership is servant leadership. The notion of servant leadership has been in existence for thousands of years.

In Abrahamic faiths, Man is simultaneously regarded as the servant of God and has the responsibility of vicegerent or stewardship of the universe.

In contemporary society, the term servant-leadership was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in a 1970 essay titled "The Servant as Leader". The term creates a powerful paradox in balance, so that power is not absolute and does not corrupt, service is selfless.

To some leaders, the notion of being a "servant" is akin to the notion of being a "slave". Such people want to be the "master". They would like others to be their servants, "maid servant", or "manservant". Servants are expected to serve their master in every way, obsequiously and to die for their masters. This was so in feudalistic and aristocratic societies.

Elements of these practices were transferred to contemporary society. In some ways, blue-collar workers have been regarded as "servants" of the company or employers. The shift from authoritarian, aristocratic, and feudalistic society to a democratic and equalitarian society where citizens have inalienable human rights, with employees as knowledge workers, has shifted the notion of "servant hood". The public and civil services have accepted the philosophy and principle of "service" to the people. The business world focuses on "customer service", while education

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focuses on service to students and other professions focus on service to passengers, patients, clients, and stakeholders.

However, the worldwide political landscape of civil strife and continuing destruction indicates that those in power in many ways are reluctant or refuse to respect the rights of their people.

The letter of the fourth Rashidun caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, to Malik bin Al Haris Al Ashtar on the latter's appointment as governor of Egypt is a lesson for all: "Develop in your heart the feeling of love for your citizens, so that love becomes the source of kindness from which they receive benefits and blessings... Do not be barbaric towards them and do not appropriate to yourself what belongs to them. Do not say, 'I am in power and all must bow to my rule,' for that stance will destroy your soul, weaken your faith and create disorder in your land. If you are proud and arrogant with your power, even in small quantum in your heart, do reflect on the power of Divine Governance of the universe over which you have absolutely no control. It will restore the sense of balance to your wavered intelligence and give you the sense of calmness and affability. Through your actions, let your mind respect the rights of God and the rights of Man, and likewise persuade your companions and relations to do likewise."

People in the civil service used to sign off official letters with "Your humble servant".

Luxury hotel chain Ritz-Carlton puts into practice its motto: "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentleman." Just imagine if all political leaders uphold the motto: "We are servant-leaders serving the citizens in authentic and genuine ways."

There are those who support and those who oppose or are indifferent to the notion of servant-leadership.

Throughout history, across civilisations and nations there are many examples of servant-leaders who were humble, relentless, and inspirational. Among them were Lao Tze, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and countless others.

In Malaysia, there are many who have a track-record of being servant-leaders. Among them are Tunku Abdul Rahman because of his love for the people, while S.M. Mohamed Idris and Lee Lam Thye are champions of consumer and social justice, and many others.

It is getting more evident that more and more servant-leaders from non-governmental organisations, the professions and voluntary organisations are being more respected and more loved than leaders who are self-styled as lords, arrogant intellectuals or bureaucratic king-makers.

Multiracial and multicultural Malaysia upholds beliefs in religious and philosophical teachings that nurture servant-leadership. Servant-leaders embark on the journey of leadership with soul. Awareness of the historical and contemporary role models of servant-leaders and profound understanding of the meaning of servant-leadership will grow a critical mass of such leaders, who can ensure the attainment of a values based servant-leadership society.

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