

## How Young Professionals can develop themselves into the Servant-Leaders of the future

*By: Rainier Kruisheer*

*The world around us is changing, and therewith changes the composition of organizations. Globalization and internationalization lead to an increasing diversity of nationalities and cultures in the workplace. Diversity is more the rule than the exception. Apart from diversity in terms of nationality and culture, there are differences within organizations in terms of age, gender and hierarchical levels.*

Diversity involves opposing values, or dilemmas, which can generate tensions. This requires a new leadership model that offers practical tools for reconciling these dilemmas. As a Young Professional, I am one of the leaders of the future who increasingly has to deal with diversity. Reason to delve into this so-called 'servant-leadership'. I conversed with **prof. dr. Fons Trompenaars** and **dr. Sylvia van de Bunt**, founders of the [\*Servant-Leadership Centre for Research and Education\*](#) at the School of Business and Economics of the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* and specialists in the field of servant-leadership. In this two-part blog series, I will discuss the meaning of servant-leadership and how Young Professionals can develop themselves into the 'servant-leaders' of the future.

### **Servant-Leadership: what is that?**

At first, 'serving' and 'leading' seem to be fundamentally different concepts. Someone is either 'leader' or 'subordinate'. Leadership is associated with power, whereas serving is associated with a *lack* of power. The concept has existed for over thousand years; since the emergence of world religions and philosophies. Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) introduced servant-leadership in business. But what is that exactly; a servant-leader?

Fons: "Servant-leaders are always concerned with enabling others to perform better, whatever that performance may be. By doing so, the servant leader gets attributed more authority to himself over time. In turn, he must use that authority to serve others."

*But as a Young Professional you have not yet acquired this authority, right?*

Fons: So, you may have to serve a lot before you gain more authority. And for some Young Professionals this may take a deep breath. You may have to serve a lot before you get

attributed more authority. It is a bit of *karma*. But this also means that it is important for Young Professionals to gather around servant-leaders. Otherwise they risk being mistreated."

Sylvia: "Ten years ago, when we founded SERVUS, we were in a period when there were many scandals around greedy, dollar-driven leaders. This also gave young people the feeling: we want this differently. But how? Then we noticed that there was more hearing for a new paradigm. The symbolism of serving and leading is very beautiful and also offers room for history. Confucius, Mandela, but also great religious leaders and icons were servant-leaders. We try to translate this into developable competences."

However, this is easier said than done. Servant-leadership is contextual: you have to work on the context to facilitate servant-leadership. An example of this is Motorola. Motorola had a program called 'Individual Dignity Entitlement'. Each manager had a conversation about five questions with his 'subordinate'. For example: "Is the work you do at Motorola meaningful to you?". If the answer to this question was 'no', then it was up to the leader to ensure that this question would be answered with a 'yes' in the future. Hereby the system around the leader allows nothing else but servant-leadership.

### **The relevance of servant-leadership in the organizations of the future**

In addition to globalization; digitization, technological developments and innovations such as Robotizing and Gamification have an influence on the form of organizations. Companies such as Uber are entering the market. In these organizations, there is no such thing as direct contact between the leader and his 'subordinates'. Instead, employees are led by an app. But if there is no interaction between leaders and employees; where exists still a need for servant-leadership within these kinds of organizations?

Fons: "Uber is a great system for the passenger. You know exactly when they arrive and you can cancel shortly in advance. In that respect Uber serves better than a 'normal' taxi. However, there are also dilemmas within the organization that you have to take into account, such as: do you focus on serving the customer, or serving the drivers? Uber-drivers live from low salaries. Recently, Uber devised a new tipping system. This makes a big difference for many drivers. My point is: servant-leadership should be processed in the software. The app should not be used as a façade for leaders to no longer be addressed."

Sylvia: "Uber attributes increasing value to feedback from their drivers, and uses the feedback to improve their organization. This month, for the first time, Uber organizes a meetup in San Francisco for Uber-drivers from around the world to give advice. We also conducted research within SBE and SERVUS on the welfare of Uber-drivers. There are striking results. If you communicate the wishes of the driver and possibilities of the company better with each other, a more favourable working climate is established."

Although digitization and robotizing increasingly have impact on leadership in organizations, the relevance of servant-leadership is not lost. On the contrary, it has become more relevant. Digital innovations are devised by humans. It is important that also people in an online work environment develop themselves into servant-leaders, and thereby become enabled to process elements of servant-leadership into the innovations that they develop.

### **Dilemmas for Young Professionals**

In addition to the dilemma of serving and leading, Trompenaars (2009) distinguishes at least six other dilemmas of servant-leadership. In this regard, there is not one dilemma that is more important than another dilemma. "It is the combination of the dilemmas that is important", according to Fons. What dilemmas will Young Professionals likely face in their future career?

Fons: "One of those dilemmas could be economic growth versus quality of life. For example; take Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. But the dilemma of Tesla is also relevant. Tesla develops electric vehicles, but we should not pretend like we are completely carbon-neutral."

Schiphol Airport wants to expand to remain competitive with other major European airports, and to maintain its position as mainport. Although the growth of Schiphol has positive effects for the Dutch economy and employment, an increase in air traffic results in more air pollution and a polluted living environment for local residents. To reconcile this dilemma and other dilemmas, it is important to be able to view things from a different perspective. This 'flip-thinking' is also part of servant-leadership:

Sylvia: "Flip-thinking is also part of servant-leadership. However, Young Professionals must be practiced in this. For example, we should start seeing mistakes as something positive. Take for example the Dutch Cito-test: our system is mainly focused on what you do wrong. Young Professionals should learn to see the world from a different perspective; that you learn from mistakes. Atalay Uslu, CEO of the Dutch travel corporation Corendon, recently expressed in

an interview that he learned the most from his setbacks. When other tour operators prevented Corendon from purchasing plane seats in the 1990s, Corendon started its own airline. When there was a shortage of hotel rooms, Corendon started its own hotel chain."

### **How do I become a servant-leader myself?**

In this blog series, the meaning and relevance of servant-leadership is discussed for Young Professionals, and the dilemmas that servant-leaders can face. Servant-leadership is context-dependent and therefore difficult to develop. Hence, you cannot start early enough with this. Fons Trompenaars and Sylvia van de Bunt give four tips for how Young Professionals can develop themselves into the 'servant-leaders' of the future:

Fons: "I would say: become a dad first! In your case."

Sylvia: "That is not very sustainable. Ha-ha. But it certainly is the biotope in which you learn the most about simultaneous 'serving' and 'leading'."

Fons: "So to speak. It is so human when you do it out of love for what you are doing. With children that is obvious. And then it is very easy to serve. A child will therefore also see you more as a leader. So, create your own baby metaphorically. The baby is a metaphor for your career choice. Follow your heart in what you choose as a job. That is really important."

**Tip 1:** Follow your heart in your career choice.

In addition to career choice, Fons and Sylvia recommend young professionals to choose a leader with whom you share the same connection:

Fons: "Furthermore, find a boss with whom you share the same connection. A first boss is so important. Because he sets out certain patterns that are important for the rest of your career."

Sylvia: "This is very important for Skyscrapers. The first year is so shaping. It can determine the agenda of your life."

**Tip 2:** Choose a boss with whom you share the same connection.

To find out exactly what serving leadership is, it is also important that Young Professionals start their career in a servant-leader-like organization, where there is space for coaching and InterVision. This coach does not always have to be the boss, but this can also be a colleague:

Fons: “So make sure you start working in a servant-leader-like organization. And also allow yourself being coached. I think it is very important that you see what servant-leadership is. It has so many faces. Sometimes it means being very strict on your people. But always to be less strict afterwards. So, you might have to be coached in this. This coach can also be a buddy who is a colleague of yours; it does not always have to be a boss.”

**Tip 3:** Let yourself being coached by your boss or by a colleague.

Finally, Fons emphasizes that it is important to gain experience in an international environment. Only then will you learn best to deal with diversity:

Fons: “Try to gain experience in a multicultural environment. Then you learn best how to deal with diversity. I also think it is a beautiful word: *Skyscrapers*. But also make sure that the Sky is scratched high. The Netherlands has very low clouds. Make sure you break through them. Make sure you keep your eyes open for more important things than just in the Netherlands, so that the Skyscraper not only scratches the clouds in the Netherlands, but also gains international experience.”

Sylvia: “Indeed. Thereby Skyscrapers can be more scope-widening, promoting an empathic attitude towards other worlds and cultures.” That brings us to tip 4:

**Tip 4:** Gain experience in an international, multicultural environment.

### **Sources**

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.

Parker, C. (21 November 2016). *8 predictions for the world in 2030*. World Economic Forum (2017). Consulted on: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/11/8-predictions-for-the-world-in-2030/>

Trompenaars, F. (2009). *Seven Dilemmas of Servant Leaders: A New Unified Model of Trans-Cultural Leadership*. Infinite Ideas Limited.

Trompenaars, F., & Voerman, E. (2009). *Servant leadership across cultures: Harnessing the strength of the world's most powerful leadership philosophy*. Oxford, Infinite Ideas.

More publications about servant-leadership can be found [here](#).

**Other publications:**

Bunt-Kokhuis, S. van de (2013), Talent Diversity in China; a Garden of Learning Opportunities, *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 7(1): 53-81, see <http://www.sunypress.edu/p-5303-the-international-journal-of-servant-leadership-volume-7-issue-1-annual.aspx>

Hampden-Turner, C. and Trompenaars, F., with Cummings, T. (2015). *Nine Visions of Capitalism, Unlocking the Meanings of Wealth Creation*, Infinite Idea Limited, Oxford.

Liden, R. Wayne, S. Liao, C. and Meuser, J. (2014). Servant Leadership and serving Culture: Influence on Individual and Unit Performance. *Academy of Management Journal*. 57(5) 1434-1453.

Liu, B. Hu, W., and Cheng, Y.C. (2015). From the West to the East: Validating Servant Leadership in the Chinese Public Sector. *Public Personnel Management*, 44(1): 25-45.

Mittal, R. and Dorfman, P. (2012). Servant leadership across cultures. *Journal of World Business*, 47: 555-570.

Parris, D.L. & Peachey, J.W. (2013). A systematic literature review of servant leadership theory in organizational contexts. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 113(3) 377-393.

Pekerti, A. and Sendjaya, S. (2010). Exploring servant leadership across cultures: comparative study in Australia and Indonesia. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(5): 754-780.

Sousa, M. (2014). Humble leaders most effective- especially when in power. *RSM Discovery*, Rotterdam School of Management. <http://discovery.rsm.nl/articles/detail/121-humble-leaders-most-effective-especially-when-in-power/>

#### **Video's:**

Interview with Prof. Edgar H. Schein by the Bertelsmann Foundation on his latest book *Helping* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc. 2009). On the challenges in today's world. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bknGdA\\_xdw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bknGdA_xdw), 11 March 2017.

NTR Series Grenzeloze Leiders, interview with conductor of Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra Yannick Nezet-Seguin, see minutes 2.40-9.35. Retrieved from [http://www.ntr.nl/player?id=TELEA\\_1059865](http://www.ntr.nl/player?id=TELEA_1059865), 11 March 2017.

TedTalk 'Riding the Waves of Culture' by Fons Trompenaars: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmyfjKjcbm0>

TedTalk 2016 by Rajeev Peshawaria <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6bTquxTC-c>

Isabel Rimanoczy, organizer of a Panel Symposium at the Academy of Management 2017 in Atlanta, *TEDx talk Sustainable Mindset*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0e-yIVkGzWY>

#### **App:**

<https://itunes.apple.com/nl/app/culture-for-business/id1025724721?mt=8>