

# **Training in Franciscan Servant Leadership for Business Leaders**

**KAREN SPEAR AND MARCY RIPBERGER**

## **Introduction**

As I write this article, gallons of oil are gushing out of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded in April, 2010. A financial reform bill targeting Wall Street's financial institutions is making its way through Congress – the aftermath of a global financial disaster sparked largely through questionable and risky financial practices. Pharmaceutical companies are recalling medicines that carry too many and too risky side effects. Often, these side effects are not being reported in the scientific literature because scientists developing the products have received millions of dollars in funding from the product manufacturers.

American business is in a moral crisis. It seems that maximization of profit has become the only value Corporate America recognizes. Even shareholders don't fare very well these days. What has happened to our country? When did we become so obsessed with money, image, and status that we lost our soul? When did we become so afraid to tell the truth or to challenge unethical actions for fear of damaging our careers? When did our sense of stewardship toward our work collapse? What can the Franciscan tradition teach us about good stewardship and care for that most human creation: the American workplace? Can St. Francis show us the way to a healthier approach to business conduct and relationships?

Most business folks would probably just roll their eyes and say "It can't be done. It's not efficient." Indeed, listening to some of the stories of the life of St. Francis, it does seem that he is among the least practical and worldly of the saints. Yet, I think there is much to be learned from the Franciscan tradition. Perhaps it is also time for the business community to listen to some godly "folly" if it is to revive its soul.

A servant model of leadership, especially a Franciscan model of servant leadership, may be a response to many of the ethical problems seen in much of American business today. This paper will not only examine the correlation between servant leadership and Franciscan values, but it will also articulate the character traits and practices of the Franciscan servant leader. The correlation between the values of Marian University and servant leadership will be presented and two skits will show different approaches to a difficult work situation. "Character First" will be presented as a helpful tool to reach a conclusion which utilizes the principles of servant leadership.

## **Servant Leadership: Can It be Franciscan?**

Robert K. Greenleaf developed the philosophy of servant leadership and coined the term "servant leadership" in 1970. Greenleaf understood servant leadership to emerge from a person's deeply felt desire to help others. The servant leader focuses on serving the needs of others. Indeed, an essential part of formation of the servant leader is to refocus one's attention away from one's own needs to those of others. Furthermore, the model is based on leading with a sense of stewardship, rather than leading to gratify the leader's ego. The servant leader, according to Greenleaf, is characterized by "the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization in service, rather than in control, of those around us." (Keith, 1968, p. 11). The ultimate test of servant leadership is whether those served grow as persons and whether the least privileged in society benefit.

In an essay on servant leadership, Greenleaf noted:

**Can St. Francis show us the way to a healthier approach to business conduct and relationships?**

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions - often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (Greenleaf, "What is servant leadership?" <http://www.greenleaf.org/whatiss/>)

This quote seems remarkably Franciscan in tone which supports my conviction that a servant model of leadership, specifically a Franciscan model, might correct the usual power model that is practiced in most American business. The four practices of Franciscan servant leadership which also uphold the four Franciscan values embraced by Marian University provide a guide to ethical leadership in American business while demonstrating that servant leadership and Franciscan values are congruent.

### **Four Practices and Four Values of Franciscan Servant Leadership**

The four Franciscan practices that I will focus on as exemplifying servant leadership are prayer, dialogue, shared leadership, and discernment of gifts. The four practices can also be seen in the four values of Marian University: dignity of the individual, peace and justice, reconciliation, and responsible stewardship. While I have chosen only four practices, others could also be applied to servant leadership; however, those of Marian University are most familiar to me.

It is from the Gospel imperative to love God and our neighbor in Luke 6: 26, “You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself,” that Christians are called by God to serve. The call is echoed in servant leadership and Franciscan values. This is evident throughout scripture, but the illustration is best seen in Mt. 20:26-28 where Jesus exhorts his disciples that the greatest among them must be servant to all:

*Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.*

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#### ***Prayer***

Prayer, the foundational practice for Franciscan servant leadership, is also the foundation of Marian University’s four Franciscan values. Just as prayer supports the Franciscan values at Marian University, so it is also essential to the other three practices of Franciscan Servant Leadership. If we are to engage effectively in the other three tasks of dialogue, shared leadership and discernment of gifts, we need to empty ourselves of our natural focus upon ourselves. Prayer is essential to self-emptying. As we engage in “deep, regular, meaningful prayer,” we open ourselves to be used by God to serve God’s will and not our will for others. In short, we need to decrease so that God may increase (National Commission, 2005, p. 9). How essential the role of prayer is will become evident in the descriptions of the other three practices.

#### ***Dialogue***

If the servant leader is to serve the other, she or he must understand the needs of those being served. The practice of dialogue with those being served is central because one cannot discern another’s needs without speaking and sharing deeply with the other.

The first task of dialogue is listening. In order to listen there must be silence so one can hear. This means not only finding a quiet place to talk, but also silencing the din of our own agenda. Often when listening to someone we are really focusing on ourselves: “Do I agree or disagree? How should I respond? Oh, that reminds me of . . .” We end up paying more attention to ourselves than to the other person. Dialogue, which sounds simple, is actually very hard. Dialogue is not just talk; it is also understanding at a profound level. Indeed, as we engage in dialogue we seek to understand the other as she understands herself.

The second task of dialogue is being vulnerable toward the other. Intimate dialogue can be scary and the servant leader must be willing to share. Sharing oneself is central to encourage others to self-disclose. Servant leaders need to be willing to risk taking the first step in vulnerability. One is essentially “disarming” oneself by taking this first step, dispensing with power and “ammunition” and establishing that the conversation is occurring in a safe place. Only by taking the initiative to be vulnerable can the servant leader welcome the other into a deeper conversation.

Nevertheless, conflict can arise even in the context of a “safe” conversation. In fact, conflict is necessary. It is by successfully working through conflict using dialogue that servant leadership is evident. Indeed, St. Francis insisted that such dangerous and scary dialogue, potentially filled with conflict, is also the doorway into what he called “perfect joy” (National Commission, 2005, p. 11). The community must go through the pain of conflict before achieving the joy of consensus. Through open and receptive dialogue, we can achieve a better understanding of one another even if we do not reach consensus. What is needed is skill in listening, mutual respect, and trust in the process of dialogue to bring peace and reconciliation.

### ***Discernment of Gifts***

Having established the nature of relationships within a servant-led community, we then assess the “tools” we bring to the tasks before us. God calls us to serve; we need to discern from God what resources we bring to the task God has given us to do. We begin with prayerful discernment – seeking God to show us our strengths and our weaknesses so that in recognizing our gifts we have the courage and willingness to use them.

Our work community can help us with this discernment. Asking others for input about where we excel and where we fall a bit short is also helpful for the work community. Persons in a community engaged in discernment of gifts work together in trustful dialogue to share what each has discerned and to help others as they discern. The group then works together to review tasks and assign leaders according to their gifts and talents.

The participation of the community in discernment of gifts is also valuable because of the external perspective others can bring to the process. We all need to see ourselves as others see us so that we have an objective perspective. We then merge that external perspective with what we have discerned within ourselves to yield an integrated assessment of our gifts and talents.

**We need to be patient with and open to what others tell us about our gifts.**

We need to be patient with and open to what others tell us about our gifts. They may be revealing to us that we have a gift which we may not value; however, it is a gift that God intends for us. We may reject a gift or talent because we fear it is pushing us out of our comfort zone. We may reject it because we think it is not a “good enough” gift. In short, fear and pride can close us to the gifts we have. We may need to face this in ourselves and be willing to allow God to use these gifts as God wills. We need to “understand and appreciate ourselves as God has created us” (National Formation, 2005, p. 15).

### ***Shared Leadership***

Shared leadership begins with the recognition that all are called to servant leadership. The “leader” must understand that those whom she or he serves must likewise be cultivated as servant leaders. This awareness reshapes the essential nature of the community, the department or division of a workplace. Everyone in the community is expected to step up and take responsibility, especially in those areas where he or she is particularly gifted and capable. The corollary to this is that the “leader” must recognize the need at times to step down and allow other leaders to step in where appropriate. In this way, everyone contributes to the common good and the burden of leadership is shared. Servant leadership of all in the community safeguards the burnout of the single leader and provides a check on the tendency of the single leader to dominate through power and control.

## **Four Franciscan Values of Marian University**

The four Franciscan values of Marian University - Dignity of the Individual, Peace and Justice, Reconciliation and Responsible Stewardship - support the concept of servant leadership as an integral part of a community rather than just one leader.

### ***Dignity of the Individual***

Respect for the individual is achieved through dialogue that treats the other as a fellow person – not as an object. The true needs of the other are heard and responded to in dialogue. Others are empowered as the servant leader seeks in turn to nurture them as servant leaders.

### *Peace and Justice*

Sharing leadership and nurturing all in the community to be servant leaders democratizes the workplace and flattens the usual hierarchy. Of course, most workplaces structure the workforce in a hierarchical manner, but the “leader” is often free to shape working relationships at his or her own discretion. A servant leadership model flattens out the de jure hierarchy into a more democratic de facto working unit. Peace and justice is also served through dialogue when the needs of all are met and all are empowered to meet the needs of the working group.

### *Reconciliation*

As noted above, St. Francis observed that it is only through conflict that “perfect joy” can be achieved. The practice of dialogue, working together to share leadership and discern gifts, praying together for mutual self-emptying – all these practices contribute to reconciliation as the working group comes together to resolve the inevitable conflicts that can arise. Cooperation, trust, listening, dialogue, recognition of gifts and limits of gifts – these are hallmarks of Franciscan servant leadership. A community built on these virtues must necessarily be one that mends fences when feelings are hurt and violations occur. Reconciliation must be ongoing. Having the good of all as the focus will aid in transcending petty squabbles and foster the healing of broken relationships.

### *Responsible Stewardship*

Franciscan servant leadership is a model of leadership that builds upon the sense of stewardship of those who would lead. Intentional listening to the needs of others exhibits a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others. Using our gifts for the good of community as we are called by God reflects good stewardship of those gifts. Shared leadership enables us to be stewards of good works as well as being stewards of one another in achieving our good works.

### *Prayer*

Prayer is the foundation of the four Franciscan values at Marian University. In the center of the university campus is a fountain surrounded by the four values carved into the marble. The stem of the bowl is engraved with prayers of St. Francis. The symbolism is a reminder that the four values must be supported by prayer – a fifth value, if you will. Franciscan servant leadership provides a model whereby these four values can be upheld.

## **Character Traits of the Franciscan Servant Leader**

**As leaders,  
we may possess  
positional authority  
and often  
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as well;  
as servant leaders,  
we exercise  
moral authority by  
having good character.**

Having considered the practices and values of Franciscan servant leadership, it is also necessary to examine the character traits needed in the servant leader. True success in anything will come with a lifetime commitment to having, exhibiting and continually developing good character. Good character is necessary if the servant leader is to care about the needs of others and relinquish self-centeredness.

So what difference does character make? It makes all the difference in the world! As leaders, we may possess positional authority and often relational authority as well; as servant leaders, we exercise moral authority by having good character. In fact, we are only truly successful, even as servant leaders, when good character is the foundation of all we do. A servant leader with good character does not need to remind others of his or her positional authority since those around are aware of this without having to be constantly reminded of it.

We have seen briefly how the four values at Marian University are related to the four Franciscan practices of prayer, dialogue, discernment of gifts, and shared leadership. To be effective in these four practices in servant leadership, certain character qualities are required. Character First, an organization committed to providing character training to workplaces, schools, and homes, provides tools for this training. An example of this will be found later in two different skits. A discussion of character qualities, as defined by Character First, is presented in quotation marks in the following discussion of the four practices that must be cultivated in the servant leader.<sup>1</sup>

### *Prayer*

Character First recognizes the need for prayer and forgiveness in the servant leader. Praying well requires faith, for without faith we are devoid of any reason to pray. Forgiveness, which Character First defines as “clearing the record of those who have wronged me and not holding a grudge,” is also required. Not only is forgiveness a biblical mandate (Mark 11:25), it also puts us in a position to pray for the very ones who sometimes are closest to us although they may also have wronged us. Gratefulness, “letting others know by my words and actions how they have benefitted my life,” honors God and puts us in a position of humility to prevent us from being self-centered so that our prayers can be effective.

### *Dialogue*

If the first task of dialogue is listening with attentiveness, “showing the worth of a person or task by giving my undivided concentration” is a must. Good listening is quickly becoming a lost art in American culture and even the science of listening is waning. That is, both listening well (the art of it) and even listening at all (the science of it) are rare. Servant leaders can only offer undivided attention once they have silenced their own agenda, as stated above. Servant leaders must be effective at being attentive in order to be good listeners.

If we are going to be vulnerable in dialogue, then sensitivity, “perceiving the true attitudes and emotions of those around me” and deference “limiting my freedom so I do not offend the tastes of those around me” are character requirements. This definition of deference is more than not speaking truthfully; it is also about foregoing my self-defined “rights” to lash out, only pay attention to my own agenda or act rudely in any way. It allows me to have courteous regard for the other’s opinions and ideas especially during times of conflict. Of course, truthfulness is always required in order for dialogue to be most effective.

### *Discernment of Gifts*

Discernment of gifts requires discernment and wisdom, which, when combined, allow us to see a bigger picture of how and why things are the way they are in relation to our own gifts and the gifts of others. Without a big picture view, the important external perspective of the community is lost. Discretion, “recognizing and avoiding words, actions and attitudes that could bring undesirable consequences,” allows each person in the servant-led community to listen patiently to others’ views on gifts in the group. Tolerance, “realizing that everyone is at varying levels of character development” is really about our own lack of judgment regarding where we think others should be rather than about allowing bad behavior. Not only might we have a tendency to doubt the importance of our own gifts, we may also have a tendency to belittle the gifts of others. Tolerance will not allow for this and the servant leader will work to understand where others are in their development and seek to meet them in that very place.

### *Shared Leadership*

The servant leader who shares leadership will exhibit availability, “making my own schedule and priorities secondary to the wishes of those I serve.” This is not about frivolous wishes, but again, about serving those around us. A servant leadership model presupposes that others will catch on to the example of servant leadership and follow it so that all are working for the good of the group and the business/community. Responsibility and initiative are also required so that everyone is stepping in to work toward goals in those areas in which they are most gifted and passionate.

Humility is also required of all in the business in order for everyone to see that success comes when the group is working together and the group itself is successful. Finally, meekness, “yielding my personal rights and expectations with a desire to serve,” will prevail in the servant leader who, at times, will need to step down or back so others can take the lead. The servant leader sets the example for others in the group to follow by demonstrating that leadership is not about power, but about serving others and seeking the good for the customer as well as the business.



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## The Appeal Process – A Business Tool

In the business community, everyone is constantly bombarded with the results and consequences of the decisions of leaders. Even where servant leadership with good character is the norm, decisions are made by humans capable of making mistakes. So what do we do when someone is making a decision with which we disagree? What if the decision-maker lacks full information or is not always good at seeing a bigger picture? Is there ever a place and/or time to make an appeal for the sake of the greater good? We would maintain the answer is a resounding “Yes!”

The Appeal Process, as taught by Character First, is an extremely useful tool that allows us to “push back” in an appropriate way.<sup>2</sup> Servant leaders can see the process as conducive to considering the good of all involved. Servant leaders will not use the tool to get their own way, but as a personal and professional development tool for both the person making the appeal and the person receiving the appeal.

The Appeal Process involves seven basic steps which have a great deal of “common sense” or perhaps, good character, behind each step. When taken together as a whole, the seven steps become a profound way to seek good and lasting results. Each of the seven steps, in turn, requires specific character qualities in a servant leader. They are listed below:

- Right standing (forgiveness and availability) – I must be in good standing with the decision-maker. This means I am not a complainer and I am not constantly challenging all decisions.
- Right motives (deference and humility) – I must ask myself before making an appeal if I truly have the good of the company in mind.
- Right timing (sensitivity and honor) – I need to make sure I make the appeal at a time appropriate for the other person.
- Right information (truthfulness and faith) – I need to be sure to be fully informed of all aspects of the situation before I appeal for a different decision.
- Right attitude (meekness, gratefulness and attentiveness) – I must check a bad, indifferent or arrogant attitude at the door before approaching the decision-maker.
- Right words (discretion and discernment) – I must articulate well what I am trying to communicate.
- Right response (tolerance and wisdom) – I must have a good response, no matter what the decision-maker ultimately decides. This puts me in right standing (see number 1) for the next appeal.

Below is an example of what could be a typical situation in the business community. The purpose is to notice the ways people can interact and respond to a work situation; one response is appropriate and the other, inappropriate. This is not an actual appeal to the decision-maker, but a conversation leading up to the appeal. The first skit shows a scenario in which the practices and character qualities of servant leadership are lacking. The second skit presents the same scenario using the practices of servant leadership and the character of a servant leader. Noticing the difference between the two skits provides a deeper understanding of the value of servant leadership as it can be practiced by the servant leader as well as all in the business.

### The Appeal Process Skit: First Scenario

Chris: Hey Tracy  
Tracy: Hey Chris. Eating lunch?  
Chris: Yes, want to join me?  
Tracy: Sure  
Chris: Have you heard about what the boss is doing?  
Tracy: You mean buying the rest of the building and more than doubling our space?  
Chris: Yes, can you believe it?!  
Tracy: Well, I guess not. Seems like a pretty risky move to me, but I guess, I’m not the boss.  
Chris: No, but you have a lot to lose.  
Tracy: What do you mean?  
Chris: Well, they’re buying more than they need and more than we can produce and the higher ups are going to get in so deep, they will be over their heads soon and then some of us will get laid off. I am so sick and

tired of not having any say in the decisions around here. We're the ones who really know what's going on and what we can do? Why don't we get asked to be part of the decisions?

Tracy: Well, I guess you're right...

Chris: Of course I'm right!

Tracy: But someone told me they overheard our boss on the phone saying we were about to get a huge contract and we were going to need more space in order to fill the orders.

Chris: That's not what I heard. I heard the boss is tired of being crowded and wants more space and so is willing to lay people off in order to have more room.

Tracy: Hmm, I wonder which is true...

Chris: Well, don't you think we would know if we were getting a huge contract? Surely that would be on the grapevine somewhere. It must just be that Mr. Money Bags wants more space.

Tracy: Well, that's irritating. Someone ought to say something.

Chris: You're right and I'm the one for the job. I'm ready to give all the people over me a piece of my mind.

Tracy: Good idea. Someone needs to. You're certainly brave enough to do it and all but...

Chris: But what?!

Tracy: Well, the last time you disagreed with the boss, you got so loud and mean that he almost fired you on the spot.

Chris: Oh, that's not true. He just didn't like what I was saying so he made some empty threats.

Tracy: Doesn't that concern you?

Chris: Why should it concern me? He's the one responsible for all the bad decisions he makes. We just do all the real work around here!

Tracy: Well, if you think that's best...

Chris: Yes, I think it's best all right. And you know what? I'm going to do it right now too.

Tracy: That may not be a good idea. I heard the boss has a very important meeting with the mayor right after lunch.

Chris: I don't care whom he has a meeting with! This is important and he's going to have to face it sooner or later. Might as well be sooner!

### **The Appeal Process Skit: Second Scenario**

Chris: Hey Tracy.

Tracy: Hey Chris. Having lunch?

Chris: Yes, want to join me?

Tracy: Sure. Mind if we go to the corner so we can have a quiet place to talk?

Chris: Sure. (Move) So how are you doing?

Tracy: Fine I guess. But I'm tired. I've been working really hard. And I heard a rumor that the company may be buying the rest of this building, which would more than double our space. I'm kind of worried about it.

Chris: What are you worried about?

Tracy: Well, do we really have enough work to last and is the contract big enough to keep us all busy for a while or will it just be short term and then with all the extra cost of the space, will they have to lay some people off?

Chris: Those are fair questions I think if it is really true. Perhaps we should wait to see what is really true and what is just a rumor.

Tracy: Well I think someone in our spot should talk to the boss.

Chris: About what?

Tracy: I wonder if they know what bad shape that part of the building is in and how much it's going to take to get it to the point where we can work there and fulfill contracts.

Chris: Hmmmm.

Tracy: Maybe I should just walk into the boss's office and tell her what she doesn't know.

Chris: Perhaps before we do that, we should gather more information. It's hard for the boss, I'm sure. She has tough decisions to make and whatever happens, good or bad, the buck stops with her. Of course I want to keep my job, but I also want the company to succeed and I think we will all be better off if we help the boss make good decisions all around.

Tracy: Yes, so don't we need to talk to her?

Chris: That may be a good idea, but perhaps we should think through who would be the best one for that job.

Tracy: You're right again. I am definitely not since I tend to be pushy and harsh even when I'm not meaning to be. You, on the other hand, are really good at articulating facts and you're also sensitive and gentle when that is required. Because of that, will you consider going to talk to the boss?

Chris: I appreciate your encouragement. Yes, I will consider it, but I would definitely like to gather more information and think about it a bit. And I know the boss has a very important meeting this afternoon so I don't want to bug her with it now. I'll look for an opportunity to talk to her sometime after today.

Tracy: What should I do?

Chris: Let's see what the boss says and then we can ask her if there is anything we can do to help her. She knows you almost as well as I do and she might have some good ideas for how both of us can take some leadership responsibility with our co-workers.

Tracy: Good idea.

Chris: Ok. We'll talk again after I talk to the boss.

Tracy: Great. See you later.

Take some time to reflect on these two scenarios. Keep in mind what has been developed about the practices and character traits of the servant leader. What aspects of these scenarios demonstrate the practice and character of a servant leader? Which do not?

### **Conclusion**

A frequent critique of servant leadership is that it cannot be efficient. All of this navel-gazing and dogoodism cannot result in efficient profit-making. Having considered servant leadership in this presentation, especially as it applies to our Franciscan tradition, it is possible to look at servant leadership in a new way. The value of servant leadership was emphasized by Kent Keith, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, who is convinced that servant leadership IS efficient. A crowd of 90 business leaders at a panel discussion at Marian University in March 2010 also suggested that many in business are supportive of servant leadership as an alternative to the power model of leadership. It will be difficult; servant leaders will not be perfect. However, a servant approach to leadership can be tried and it just might work. If it does, it may bring forth a new era of ethical business – something we need desperately.

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## NOTES

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### About the Authors

Karen Spear is the director of the Center for Organizational Ethics and an assistant professor of philosophy at Marian University. In addition to directing the Center for Organizational Ethics, Dr. Spear teaches philosophy and ethics in the Theology/Philosophy Department and business ethics in the School of Business. Dr. Spear first presented on Franciscan Servant Leadership at the first annual Lead from the Heart event on Servant Leadership last March with Kent Keith, Richard W. Smith, and Marcy Ripberger. The event was sponsored by the Center for Organizational Ethics at Marian University.

Marcy Ripberger has a Master's degree in biology and worked for seven years in research and administration at the Indiana University School of Medicine. She has spent the last 12 years in non-profit work, working with business and professional men and women in the areas of personal, professional and spiritual development. For the last two years, Marcy has been the President of the Character Council of Indiana, a non-profit organization whose mission is to strengthen the personal character of individuals, with the goal of impacting families and the community.