Biz voices

The greatest leaders aim to be servants

Selfless leadership being embraced by management scholars.

It's about much more than customer service.

By **Pujan Roka**

People need leadership that can inspire them toward meaningful goals, Pujan Roka writes.

Toward the end of the 1950s, Robert Greenleaf, a management thinker working at AT&T, was drawn to the book "The Journey to the East," written by Herman Hesse.

This book led Greenleaf to develop one of the most profound management concepts called "servant leadership."

"The servant-leader is servant first," wrote Greenleaf in his 1970 essay titled "The Servant as Leader."

"It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead," he wrote.

Greenleaf was influenced by the story of selfless leadership in Hesse's book.

Hesse, a Nobel laureate, had written his book in the 1930s when the world was going through several wars and dictatorial rules.

In the fictional story, the lead character is a servant whose real identity of a leader does not get revealed until the end. Hesse used the story of selfless leadership as a plausible criticism of his country, Germany, and Adolf Hitler.

The German politicians understood the political connotations and expelled Hesse from the country. He later sought asylum in Switzerland.

As the title of the book suggests, Hesse was influenced by Eastern philosophy and its view of leadership.

The ancient Indian philosophical text "the Bhagavad Gita" calls out selflessness as the ultimate leadership quality. True leadership is leading without selfish attachments, it says.

Tao-te-Ching, the ancient Chinese philosophical text, says, "The greatest leader is the one whose existence is hardly known. When such leaders complete their tasks, their people take pride in the accomplishment as their own."

Selfless leadership, as defined by the Bhagavad Gita and Tao-te-Ching, was not a popular topic during Hesse's time that was menaced by autocratic leaders.

Robert Greenleaf was drawn to the topic of selfless leadership at a time when many management thinkers such as Peter Drucker had started questioning the prevailing principles and practices of management. Back then, leadership was a fairly unexplored topic in management studies. It was not until in the 1980s when scholars such as Warren Bennis started giving prominence to the study of leadership.

In his writings and lectures, Greenleaf argued servant leadership must be institutionalized before organizations could rise to greatness.

Leading management thinkers have embraced servant leadership.

A handful of organizations have made strides in institutionalizing servant leadership as a practice, while pursuing their core business objectives.

Management experts have recognized Southwest Airlines as a company that has institutionalized servant leadership. Southwest has implemented what it calls the Golden Rule, "to treat people the way that you want to be treated."

Synovus Financial Corp. of Columbus is another company that has been recognized by many scholars as a company that has used servant leadership as a code of conduct.

Synovus uses the philosophy of "act of kindness," which originally led to its establishment in 1880.

For many organizations, servant leadership remains an illusive topic. They mistake "customer service" as service required to be servant leaders, but such service is only a by-product of profit-making. True service is the work done to make a difference in people's lives whether they are customers or any stakeholder.

One of the main obstacles of servant leadership is the traditional organizational structure, according to Dr. Keith Kent of Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.

He says many organizations are not designed to unleash the energy and intelligence of its people, which is required of servant-leaders.

As the world becomes more connected, informed and democratized, people need leadership that can inspire them toward meaningful and larger-than-life goals.

This is where servant leadership comes in.

Pujan Roka writes on topics of management and technology. He can be reached at pujanroka.com.