How Do You Flatten the Hierarchy?

By Dr. Kent M. Keith
President Emeritus
Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership
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In his essay, *The Institution as Servant*,[1] Robert Greenleaf described a flat organizational structure. There is no pyramid with only a few people at the top, more in the middle, and most at the bottom. Yes, one person is *primus inter pares*, or first among equals. He or she has additional responsibilities for the team or group, but Greenleaf pictured that person on the same level as the others.

Greenleaf suggested something very different from our usual view of organizations. What he said is obviously counter-cultural. After all, we live in a culture that is hierarchical. We take hierarchy for granted. Our culture encourages us to aspire to be at the top of the hierarchy so we can tell other people what to do, and acquire power, wealth, and fame for ourselves. We want hierarchies so it will be easy to identify who is in charge, who is accountable, and therefore who will get the credit or blame.

We think that this is natural. This is the way things are. There is no other way. The idea of leading with a flat hierarchy sounds like chaos to us. How does one do it? Can you really lead the way Greenleaf taught us to lead?

The answer is yes. If you are servant leader, you can do it. This essay will review what Greenleaf said, and suggest some practical ways to flatten the hierarchy with teams, networks, and chains of coaching.

The disadvantages of the pyramid structure

Greenleaf worked for AT&T when it was the largest or one of the largest companies in the world, with more than a million employees. He knew what a pyramid organizational structure was like, and he knew that leading from the top of a pyramid had disadvantages. He said:

> To be a lone chief atop a pyramid is *abnormal and corrupting*. None of us are perfect by ourselves, and all of us need the help and correcting influence

of close colleagues. When someone is moved atop a pyramid, that person no longer has colleagues, only subordinates.[2]

In the traditional pyramid hierarchy, it is hard for the chief to get good information. There are some things that the chief doesn't know because nobody will tell the chief. Greenleaf said: "Even the frankest and bravest of subordinates do not talk with their boss in the same way that they talk with colleagues who are equals, and normal communication patterns become warped…"[3]

It is also hard for the chief to test out new ideas. As Greenleaf observed:

> The pyramidal structure weakens informal links, dries up channels of honest reaction and feedback, and creates limiting chief-subordinate relationships which, at the top, can seriously penalize the whole organization…
>
> A self-protective *image of omniscience* often evolves from these warped and filtered communications. This in time defeats any leader by causing a distortion of judgment, for one's judgment is often best sharpened through interaction with others who are free to challenge and criticize.[4]

Every time the chief suggests something, everyone agrees. The chief doesn't get honest feedback. Nobody challenges the chief. As a result, the chief thinks he is brilliant.

And then there is that old saying that it is lonely at the top. Greenleaf agreed. He said:

> Those persons who are atop the pyramids often suffer from a very real *loneliness*. They cannot be sure enough of the motives of those with whom they must deal, and they are not on the grapevine. Most of what they know is what other people choose to tell them. They often do not know what everybody else knows, informally.[5]

Because it is hard to get good information or test new ideas; because it is easy to succumb to the image of omniscience; and because it is lonely at the top, it is hard for the chief to know what is going on. Who is doing what, and why?

The answer is teams

For Greenleaf, the answer is teams. He called them "councils of equals." He said: "No man or woman is complete; no one of them is to be entrusted with all. Completeness is to be found only in the complemental talents of several who relate as equals."[6]

The simple fact is that no one person can *know* all that needs to be known to make good decisions in complex organizations. No one person can *do* all that needs to be done to carry our decisions in complex organizations. And no one person can *monitor* everything and fully understand what is happening in complex organizations.

It takes a team to do all that. Teams can gather a wider range of information than individuals. Team members can bring to bear a variety of different backgrounds, skills, and experiences to interpret information. Team members can offer a variety of points of view regarding the decisions to be made. So good teams can make better decisions than individuals can make on their own.

Greenleaf argued for teams at all levels, but he was especially interested in the benefits of having a team at the top. A good way to flatten the hierarchy and achieve more effective decision-making is to flatten the top of the pyramid. You can do that by bringing together senior leaders from more than one level—senior leaders who are committed to the organization and to each other. Invite them to share information and ideas from all their sources, discuss and deliberate issues from different points of view, and work toward a common understanding of the issues and the preferred policies or courses of action. The chief is still the chief, and can make the final decision, but it will be a better decision because there was more information, broader analysis, and the benefit of different points of view.

Actually, what often happens in a good team process is that, as a result of all the sharing and discussion, the right decision eventually becomes obvious to everyone. At that point, the chief doesn't make the decision, the chief *announces* the decision that has achieved team agreement and support.

A team is different from a work group. Work groups are hierarchical. They have a strong leader, individual accountability, and individual work products. The work group leader is responsible for the group's results. By contrast, teams are not hierarchical. Teams are characterized by shared leadership roles, individual and

mutual accountability, and collective work products. Everybody on the team is responsible for the team's results.

Work groups are often used for routine tasks such as collecting information and coordinating activities. Teams are best at solving problems and seizing opportunities. When you need a breakthrough, a new paradigm, or a creative solution, you need a team.

Team members are equal in that each member of the team is equally important to achieving the team's task. Servant leaders choose individuals for teams based on their backgrounds, experience, expertise, or insight, not because of their titles or positions in the organization. Teams are most effective when they consist of people with *diverse* backgrounds, experiences, expertise, and points of view who are willing to listen to each other.

 Mutual respect among team members is a requirement for effective teamwork. Teams do not function well when any team member considers himself or herself a star—a sole performer who doesn't need input or advice from others. The opinions and insights of all team members must be considered carefully. Team members can contribute ideas on any aspect of the task, even if it is outside their daily area of expertise or responsibility. No one individual has to be an expert in everything, because it is the team as a whole that is the expert. Leadership of the team can rotate as the tasks and issues change, allowing each member of the team to contribute in his or her area of strength.

Networks and a chain of coaching

Organizations need leaders, but leaders do not have to sit at the top of a hierarchical pyramid. Leaders can participate as "first among equals" on teams. They can also guide a network of people whose members respond to changes in the external environment by changing the shape of the network. You can lead through your relationships instead of a pyramidal organization chart.

Traditional management texts talk about the "span of control." What works better is a broad span of relationships within the organization. Those relationships can form a number of networks, all of which are based on mutual respect. When we respect people, we include them, listen to them, network with them, and team up with them.

Traditional management texts also talk about the "chain of command." What works better is a chain of coaching. Yes, organizations need rules and procedures. However, focusing on the chain of command does not bring out the best in others. We bring out the best in others by coaching them.

The problem with focusing on control is that we really can't control other people. We can influence them, but we can't really control them. When a leader makes a decision, people may not understand, or may not have the training or equipment they need to implement the decision. They can also decide to resist. They can drag their feet, or pretend they don't understand, or simply sabotage a decision. People who do not comply can be terminated, but they still have not done what the leader asked them to do, and the leader has to find their replacement, which can take time and money.

That's why making a decision or giving orders is not enough. The leader has to make sure that people understand what needs to be done, see the purpose of it, have the required training and equipment, have the time to do what is needed, and are willing and able to do it. That takes coaching. Coaching can help colleagues to better understand the organization's mission and their own role in fulfilling that mission. It can help them develop specific skills that improve their performance. It is a way to make sure that people have what they need to perform at their highest possible levels. Coaching can build the knowledge, experience, self-confidence, and performance of the individuals being coached. Control doesn't do that.

Focus on serving others

Because hierarchies are so embedded in our culture, it is hard for some people to shift to teams, networks, and coaching. We are used to someone being in charge—someone at the top of a hierarchy. It is hard to imagine any other way to get things done. But there is, in fact, another way, and it is a better way.

It helps to step back and acknowledge that we do not come together in organizations in order to create a hierarchy with a leader ensconced on top. We come together in organizations to get things done. That's why "who's in charge?" is not the most important question. There are more important questions, such as:

- Who are we here to serve? Why?
- How well are we serving them? How do we know?
- How can we serve them better? What resources would we need?

The practical questions that follow are:

- What specifically needs to be done? (Let's define our work.)
- Have all the tasks been assigned? (Let's allocate our work.)
- How can we measure our progress? (Let's monitor our work.)

Instead of focusing on a single leader who is "in charge," we should focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. That's what servant-leaders do. And a team of servant-leaders can do this very well. In fact, a team is likely to do a better job than a single leader, because a single leader cannot know as much, or do as much, as a team.

In order to get the work done, team members need to consult with each other, coordinate with each other, and cooperate with each other. There must be consultation when gathering facts and opinions and developing ideas. There must be coordination when making decisions and planning activities. And there must be cooperation when implementing a decision or activity. Teams can do all those things and produce excellent results without creating layers of hierarchical approval.

Of course, individual team members have specific responsibilities. They have tasks to complete and measurable goals to reach. They report to the full team, because they are accountable to the full team for achieving their individual results. This mutual accountability is one of the characteristics of an effective team.

Meanwhile, team leaders still have plenty of leadership responsibilities—the additional responsibilities that come with being "first among equals." Team leaders make sure their teams have what they need to be effective—time, resources, training, information, and opportunities to learn and grow. Team leaders coach, advise, set the agenda, and monitor progress. They work *for* their teams, so their teams can perform at their highest possible levels. Team leaders also do real work, as members of their teams. Team leaders do not just watch; they participate and report on their work, along with everyone else on the team.

Not machines but relationships

Does all this sound radical? Warm-and-fuzzy? A lot of wishful thinking? Something akin to anarchy?

Not to me. My experience is that a team with a servant-leader as a facilitator works far better than a hierarchical structure, with its layers of bureaucracy and approvals. Because it is a more open and fluid process, the team process can be messy and confusing. However, because it promotes sharing and learning, the team process is likely to achieve a better result. For team members, the process is more meaningful, more motivating, and more fulfilling. It allows team members to contribute their talent and ability at their highest levels, and to truly "own" the organization's mission and work.

Margaret Wheatley invites us to see our organizations differently. In her book *Leadership and the New Science*, she reminded us that a leader cannot control an organization's results through a rigid organizational structure. She argued that the universe can no longer best be understood as a machine, as in Newtonian physics. Rather, it is best understood in terms of relationships and connections, as in quantum physics. We should no longer look at our organizations as machines we can control, but as dynamic living systems in which we can participate. The issue for the servant leader is not how to control others, then, but how to build strong, positive relationships with others. Wheatley said:

> We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing, evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships… Those who relate through coercion, or from a disregard for the other person, create negative energy. Those who are open to others and who see others in their fullness create positive energy. Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available.[7] (Wheatley)

So how do you flatten the hierarchy? You can do it through teams, networks, coaching—and love.

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[1] Robert K. Greenleaf, "The Institution as Servant," in *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977/2002).
[2] Id., 76.
[3] Id.
[4] Id.
[5] Id., 76-77

[6] Robert K. Greenleaf, "Trustees as Servants," in *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness,* 125.

[7] Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1994), 38-39.