

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

THE SERVING LEADER

Five Powerful Actions
to Transform Your Team,
Business, and Community

KENNETH R. JENNINGS

JOHN STAHL-WERT

Foreword by KEN BLANCHARD

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More Praise for *The Serving Leader*

“Our organization’s mission centers on serving patients and partners. The lessons shared in *The Serving Leader* showed our executive team the importance of leading by serving our employees. This was a new orientation for many of us, and it has transformed both how we work together as a leadership team and how we lead our individual teams. This approach has made us better leaders and I believe better people.”

—**Bill Valle, President, Fresenius Medical Services**

“*The Serving Leader* is a great book. I encourage you to not only read and pay attention to this book but also embrace it, as it will change the way you think about business. The principles outlined in this book will make you succeed as a leader. Through upending the corporate pyramid, true leaders become servants who are willing to serve employees. Serving Leaders get obstacles out of the way, help employees do their jobs, help meet employees’ needs, and hold people accountable.”

—**Billy Ainsworth, President and CEO, Progress Rail Services Corporation, a Caterpillar Company**

“We recognize a tradition of leadership at Johns Hopkins from great physicians like Sir William Osler, who said, ‘We are here to add what we can to life, not to get what we can from it.’ The principles of Serving Leadership are strong reflections of the link between our tradition and future vision. The core tenets of shared leadership, asset-based thinking, and leveraging of strengths are integral to the success of departmental strategic planning.”

—**Colleen Koch, MD, MS, MBA, Clinical Director, Anesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine**

“My leadership practice was greatly strengthened by the teaching I found in *The Serving Leader*. I have applied its lessons at the bank as well as in the other areas of my life. I highly recommend this book!”

—**David S. H. Wong, Chairman, Halftime Institute, Hong Kong, and former Deputy Group CEO, Bank of China**

“*The Serving Leader* provides a new road map for leaders looking to achieve outstanding results. The principles are applicable to any organization and can transform the way people relate to one another in service to the greater goal.”

—**Richard Lovering, Vice President of Human Resources and Organizational Development, AtlantiCare**

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"*The Serving Leader* has become must reading for leaders across our region. Many business leaders, as well as nonprofit and elected leaders, are using this book to give us a common language and discipline across Greater Rochester as we work together to strengthen the culture and economy of our region."

—**Mark Peterson, President and CEO, Greater Rochester Enterprise**

"The principles of *The Serving Leader* will resonate with everyone who desires a better outcome: a stronger and more engaged team, a sense of direction and purpose, and the ability to leverage strengths to achieve a greater goal. This book will challenge you to rethink how you serve your family, your team, and your community."

—**Roseann Kobialka, RN, MBA, Corporate Director of Organizational Development, AtlantiCare**

"Having engaged personally and deeply in a study cohort of *The Serving Leader*, the experience was nothing short of transformational for my life and leadership. I recommend this book and the opportunity to thoughtfully participate in a cohort to all the great leaders in my circle."

—**Chris Lowery, Chancellor, Columbus/Southeast Region, Ivy Tech Community College**

"The powerful yet simple concepts of *The Serving Leader* create not only a common language but also impactful team and productivity results. I have been delighted to share the power of *The Serving Leader's* principles with my teams and executive partners."

—**Craig Stambaugh, Vice President, Human Resources, Health Services Division and Talent Acquisition, UPMC**

"In an ever-changing world, the need for great leadership is consistent. Great leadership is the difference between success and failure in all business endeavors including significant changes. *The Serving Leader* is a foundational text to help leaders who want to be great leaders and create a workplace and a community where people flourish. It provides clear guidance on the steps to be a Serving Leader and make a difference. This is all about leadership that matters."

—**Donna Brighton, CEO, Brighton Leadership Group, and President of the Board, Association of Change Management Professionals**

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“The leadership development course ‘The Serving Leader’ led to fundamental changes in how our executive team showed up and engaged with one another. It also had a profound effect on our entire corporate management team.”

—**Thomas J. Weider, Senior Vice President, Sales and Account Management, Fresenius Medical Care**

“In our company, we have taken *The Serving Leader* in as our central text. It impacts our culture, values, and spirit, for sure. But equally, it impacts our results, growth, reputation, and profitability. We have never found a more powerful leadership model than what has been given to us in this book.”

—**Rick Newton, President and founder, Newton Consulting**

“*The Serving Leader* provides a framework for leading and developing other leaders that works in both the nonprofit and for-profit arenas. From healthcare to financial services to the local church, I have seen *The Serving Leader* uniquely equip leaders to serve their people and their great purpose.”

—**Mike McCormick, Lead Pastor, Calvary Christian Church, Lexington, Kentucky**

“The teaching and the story I encountered in *The Serving Leader* both underscored and strengthened the core commitments I hold as a leader. This book is a blessing to me at work, in the community, at church, and at home!”

—**Kristy Williams Fercho, Senior Vice President, Head of Customer Management (West Region), Fannie Mae**

“This developmental model works. Jennings and Stahl-Wert nail the fundamental necessity that leaders embrace service to others, especially their staff, to achieve their mission and vision. We have seen the Serving Leader approach pay dividends in the development of our staff members. The narrative of *The Serving Leader* beckons the reader with the question, ‘How can I find the same significance in my work that Mike finds through these practices?’ This is a must for HR professionals who want to change the game in their organizations.”

—**Rev. Lee R. Scott, Director of Staff Services, Coalition for Christian Outreach**

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"*The Serving Leader* makes practical and simple the foundational principles of great leadership. At World LEADERS, we are great fans of what Stahl-Wert and Jennings have given the world through this book."

—**James Davis, President, World LEADERS Group**

"In our work in strategy, we use *The Serving Leader* as a powerful tool to establish the essential leadership foundations required for real progress. Whether leading strategy, execution, or change, Serving Leadership sets the culture that makes enduring progress possible."

—**Chris Hafner, Board Chairman, Strategic Planning Society, and member, Diploma and Accredited Programmes Committee, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford**

"Both as a great business book and as a very moving human story, *The Serving Leader* captures the heart of what I have given my lifetime in service to at Kodak, at Hillside, and in my daily life with family and friends. This is a powerful book that every leader should read!"

—**Augustin (Augie) Melendez, President, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, Hillside Family of Agencies**

"The ThirdRiver Partners team is grateful to be among those whose lives have been changed on the journey to Serving Leadership. We look forward to this new edition of *The Serving Leader* and to the collaboration this work will inspire."

—**Heather Hyde Jennings, cofounder of ThirdRiver Partners, LLC, and coauthor of *The Greater Goal***

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THE
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Five Powerful Actions
to Transform Your Team,
Business, and Community

KENNETH R. JENNINGS
JOHN STAHL-WERT



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
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The Serving Leader

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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*This book is dedicated to the colleagues
and clients around the world who
practice the Five Powerful Actions—
the practical, measurable, masterable
behaviors of Serving Leadership—
revealed within this brief story.*

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Foreword

In the foreword I wrote for *The Serving Leader* when the book was first published in 2003, I called it “the most practical guide available to implementing servant leadership in your life and work.” My passion for the book came from the deeply moving story and rock-solid action steps the authors laid out for men and women who wanted to uplift people with their leadership.

So I’m delighted to write the foreword to the second edition of *The Serving Leader*, which has become an international bestseller and changed countless lives around the world. When they wrote this book, Ken Jennings and John Stahl-Wert not only captured the essential leadership practices that are foundational to all extraordinary leaders but also provided a practical pathway for learning and growth that we can follow to improve our day-to-day leadership.

The years that separate the first and second editions of this book have been marked by the burgeoning field of servant leadership. Thankfully, the world is coming to recognize the need for Serving Leaders.

Foreword

What I love about this updated second edition is the way it shows how the authors have continued to learn and grow over these past twelve years. They've travelled the globe in their service to owners, executives, senior leaders, and aspiring up-and-comers. They've crawled down into the organizations of some of the world's greatest companies and have validated their findings many times over. By spending thousands of hours in the presence of exceptional business and organizational leaders, they've enriched their understanding of how great leadership works.

Those who have already read *The Serving Leader* will find in these pages the story they loved so well, along with the bonus of a completely new chapter that brings the story right up to the present.

Those picking up this book for the very first time can look forward to the joy of encountering a touching story filled with rich teaching about the kind of leadership that leaves a lasting impact.

Today's marketplace is hungry for books and guides that can support leaders with practical advice on how to grow their influence, engage their people, drive superior results, and add greater value. What sets John Stahl-Wert and Ken Jennings's book apart is that it shows how to achieve all the above—and at the same time serve the highest good.

KEN BLANCHARD
January 2016

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Introduction

This is a story about leadership: leadership in teams, businesses, and communities. It is also a story about personal growth and how good leaders become great leaders through their willingness to face and be changed by the greatest challenges of their lives.

The story comes out of our friendship with Mike Wilson. Mike is a man we both know well. He shows up everywhere in the businesses and neighborhoods we serve. The circumstances of place and vocation vary, but Mike is always there. As a leader, he's professionally talented and highly motivated to successfully reach his business and financial goals.

But Mike wants his life to be about more than success. He's searching for the deeper significance of his leadership and for the satisfaction of living a life of real purpose. In this deeper search, however, Mike often feels very unsuccessful; sometimes, he feels completely lost.

As we've shared this story with our friends, these questions usually arise: "Is Mike's story real? And if it is, where can I find him?" Here's the best answer we have: Mike's

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story is real. And the chances are reasonable that you'll find someone like him occupying the office next to yours. She rides on the train with you each morning. You pass him in the hallway every day. Glance up from your reading and look around; she might be sitting right there in the room with you now.

Perhaps it would be helpful to say a brief word here about the friendship out of which this story was born. We two at first glance appear to have little in common. Ken is a business consultant who resides in the flight matrix that connects the great urban centers of America, Europe, and Asia. John is a community leader who resides and works in one great city. By strategic design, he leaves that city and his citywide colleagues as infrequently as possible. Ken works with bottom-line business leaders, John with frontline community leaders. Ken's work focuses on the corporate sector, John's on the faith-based sector. In terms of space and time, Ken's work is space expansive and more time limited; John's is the other way around.

These differences aside, our lives are much the same. We both work with men and women like Mike Wilson every day. In whatever airport Ken lands and on whatever street John walks, Mike is there, trying to close the painful gap between his hardworking day and his persistent sense of unfulfilled purpose.

Since we're making introductions here, we may as well go one step further. We, too, are Mike Wilson. While the details may be fictional, at its deepest level Mike's story is real—and very true.

Introduction

Perhaps you will recognize yourself in parts of this story, too. If so, then you are already on your way. We hope these pages will offer you some guidance as well as encouragement as you continue on the journey of both professional and personal growth that great leadership requires.

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**Mike Wilson's
Journal**

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The Fast Track Diverted

Why am I sitting on this train? If I had taken a flight, I'd already be there. Instead, I've got four more hours to sit here and fume about what I've gotten myself into.

I feel like I'm eight years old again. Dad says, "Why don't you ride down on the train, Son! It'll give you a chance to think." And so I just *do it*. Like I've got time to sit for hours, thinking. Like I actually enjoy trains.

The thing about trains is this: trains only show you what you're passing, not where you're headed. Whatever you can see out the window is already old news. Been there. Regularly, the track bends enough that you can catch a glimpse of the journey ahead, but as soon as the train straightens its aim for the goal, you're left sitting in the back just watching stuff go past. An hour into this trip and I'm way past bored.

Scratch that last sentence. I'm not bored. And, truthfully, being stuck on this train is not what I'm really troubled about. What upsets me is the fact that I don't know what's

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waiting for me at the end of this track. And I'm afraid to find out. I'm deeply worried about Dad. I don't know how I'm going to pass so much time sitting here just with myself.

And more truth: I used to *like* trains. A lot. It's one of the memories I *do* have with Dad. One of the too-few memories. And that's what this is *really* about. Sitting here reminds me of so much that I've lost. So much!

There you have it, boss: a journal entry. I'd say I'm well on my way!

All right, Mike, enough time on the therapist's couch. Here's a thought: scratch it all out. I doubt Charlie wants to read the sorry ramblings of a lost son.

Please let my dad be okay!

Okay, new start. Official sounding.

Journal entry: "Background and Orientation."

Two months ago, Charlie gave me the assignment of building a new leadership development practice for our firm, working from our Boston headquarters. An MBA, ten years of management consulting assignments, experience with nearly fifty clients around the world—I had done it all with this in mind, the chance to take the lead. Thirty-eight years old. Heading the development of our firm's newest and most promising practice area. My life was right on track!

Our firm routinely gets involved with helping clients attack tough strategic problems, strengthen their operations, and improve profitability. Up until now, however, we have never directly focused our client services on building critical leadership capacity in organizations. As a firm, we have the access and reputation required to build a practice

The Fast Track Diverted

in the area, but I knew we did not have a good handle on the current best practices in leadership effectiveness. It became my mission to pull together a point of view on “leadership that really works,” as Charlie put the challenge to us.

So I buried myself and my crew—the colleagues who joined me—in the research available about leadership, including traits, models, value propositions. PowerPoint presentations were zigzagging back and forth between our offices like crazed bats. We interviewed some of the best CEOs in the country, scanned mountains of journal articles, met with professors and writers who studied leadership, and amassed our data. We felt like we were launching a major Himalayan expedition. It felt good!

In all our research, some threads emerged. And a few especially puzzling findings spurred us to go deeper.

A Boulder, Colorado–based “freelance professor” and rock climber, Jim Collins, along with his team, had found some unusually curious data. He observed that dramatic improvements in company performance were coming from leaders whose traits and practices broke the traditional leadership mold. This research described leaders who were personally humble (in some cases, almost shy) and totally devoted to the service of others but who were also fiercely and unwaveringly resolved to do whatever it took to improve organizational performance. Something was jarring about great results coming from a self-effacing style, but the data was compelling.

It occurs to me just now that it was this Collins research that got me thinking again about my own dad as a leader. All right, score a point for this long train trip. Back in

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business school, I took a fair measure of ribbing about my famous father. He was featured in one of the school's management case studies about leadership, ethics, and decision making in business. Honestly, I didn't put much effort into that assignment. Dad was well known, admired by many, so loved. And he gave me, his son, so little of himself. It was a sore point. Still is.

I didn't fare very well on that particular assignment, and my classmates rode me big time. Not that I really cared; I figured back then that some of them were better suited to social work than business, anyway.

But reading Collins had caused me to reconsider all of this. What I've always heard about my dad's way of working sounds suspiciously like the profile of the effective leader Collins described. The thought had even crossed my mind that if I was going to launch a new leadership practice, then my old man might be helpful. Just a week ago I was thinking about Dad and wishing I could get past my hurt enough to reach out to him and run some of these ideas past him.

I should be more careful what I wish for. Mom called me on the same day I was having those thoughts.

"Hi, Son," Mom said. "I'm glad I caught you. Do you have a minute to talk?"

Her words were casual, but her voice had none of its normal breezy character. A feeling of alarm began to creep up the back of my neck. Of course I had a minute to talk!

"It's about your father," she continued more slowly. She cleared her throat. "I've been putting this conversation off for a while, Mike. He's not been feeling that great lately." Mom's voice cracked, and silence filled the line.

The Fast Track Diverted

“Oh, just hand me the phone, Margaret!” My father’s voice broke the silence with that tone of impatience I knew so well. He sounded all right to me.

“Look, Mike, things aren’t too good right now. I met with my doctor this morning and there’s a problem. The bottom line is that I’m going to have to cut back on some things. He wants me to get a little treatment. Rest up.”

I was stunned. My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I had no words.

“I need your help, Mike,” he continued, his voice suddenly sounding like a badly scratched record. “I’m involved in some leadership projects here, and they’re all at critical points.” Now it was Dad’s turn to clear his throat. “I thought you could step in for me for a while, maybe a couple weeks,” he finished weakly.

I wasn’t processing any of this. My father, the master of understatement where his own personal issues are concerned, was saying that he had a problem! He needed a little treatment!

“I’ve talked about this with your boss. He told me you’re launching the firm’s leadership practice, so this should benefit both of us.” Dad plowed on with his pitch like a runner determined to hit the finish line. “While you’re helping us out, the team here will teach you what we’ve learned about a unique approach to leadership. Charlie suggested you keep a journal on your investigations while you’re here, and I’ve got some friends who can help you develop it into something useful later.” I heard my father take a quick breath.

“Would you come and help me, Son? Please?”

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And just like that, my leadership sabbatical began. I can't adequately express how strange it is that I made such an abrupt move. I was in the middle of everything I had always wanted, on the threshold of a future I had always dreamed of. And I didn't like my father's unsolicited intervention with my boss in the least. Back to my earlier comment about feeling eight years old.

And yet I didn't hesitate. The sound of Mom's voice. What my dad said. What I felt in my heart. It all just went "click."

The next day, I handed off assignments to my crew. I decided to leave my techno-gadgets at home, packing three blank notebooks and an anxious mind. At the last minute, on an impulse, I dug back through my graduate school files and grabbed the case study on my pop. I was going to see him, yet I still didn't really know who he was.

My executive assistant booked me a seat on Amtrak to Philly for the very next day. She looked at me suspiciously, like I'd lost my mind. Amtrak! I explained myself by repeating my dad's explanation: "It'll give me time to think." Her frown worsened—it was alien possession, not mere mental distress.

And here I am. I spent the first forty-five minutes of my trip reviewing Dad's case study and have been writing ever since. I'm beginning to suspect that this investigation may well be as much about him as his projects. I'm actually glad. It's time.

Some notes from my reading:

The son of a coal miner, my dad grew up in tough circumstances. Like many of his generation, he went to war

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when called. On Robert Wilson's twentieth birthday, a cease-fire was signed in Korea's Panmunjom, and he was shipped home. The GI Bill took him to Princeton, where, according to the case study, he ran track. That reminded me of my favorite photo of him. A boyish Robert Wilson is straining forward, chest first, breaking the tape 100 yards ahead of the field in a 100-yard race! So fiercely determined was he to win that he false-started, failed to hear the recall gun, and ran the entire race alone. He explained to me, "I always expect to win and never look back to see the other guys."

That's the dad I know.

But the case study drew another picture that didn't fit this first-at-all-costs photo. Starting his career as a pharmaceutical salesman and rising quickly to management, he distinguished himself as a team builder. He always credited the team with his success, the file declared, and appeared to be genuinely surprised whenever he received recognition or promotions.

This just doesn't square with what I thought I knew about him. Honestly, I never felt that he gave me credit for much of anything.

Robert Taylor Wilson was described in the article as unique. When he became CEO of the company twenty-two years later, he hardly ever stayed in his office (or at home, I might just add). He spent a lot of time in activities that looked more like teaching than managing. He practically turned his company's entire senior team into teachers.

As a leader, he was known for setting high goals and standards. He was death on what the article called "mistakes

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of the heart,” poor ethical decisions like when managers shaded the truth, took credit when it belonged to others, or passed on unflattering remarks about their colleagues. Conversely, he was softer on other kinds of mistakes. He used honest missteps as teaching occasions. He encouraged risk taking, though he wasn’t afraid to remove people for persistent underperformance. His top leadership team actually got smaller in his first few years, even as the company doubled in size and profitability.

He avoided taking credit when things were going well; indeed, he went to great pain to attribute success to others. At the corporate annual meeting, he always showcased others’ accomplishments, not his own.

He called himself a “truth teller.” He was famous for plain talk, for going to great lengths to describe company performance accurately. This part, at least, I recognize. He also encouraged managers to honestly describe the reality of their unit’s performance.

Reviewing all of this from my dad’s corporate past, I am becoming very curious to see the leadership system he has helped build in Philly. Maybe more to the point, I think I’m ready to take a fresh look at my father, give us both another chance.

Robert Taylor Wilson. I know that he looks great on paper. I know he has hundreds of loyal friends. I know that people love working for him. I also know there are dimensions of this man that I’ve never encountered. And I think I’d like to.

While I’m chronicling things I know, here’s one more. I know why I’m sitting on this train. My father said “please.”

The Fast Track Diverted

It wasn't "Get down here, Son!" Just "please." I don't remember ever hearing that before.

Okay, time to put the pen down and watch America go past my window. The ride might not be too bad, really. I'm noticing the track bending out ahead. I can see the engine now, but even so, I can't see where it's heading. I suppose that if I were seated with the conductor at the head of this train, I would still be unable to see what's around that bend.

I wonder where this journey will take me.

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