

**The Collective Servant: Primus Inter Pares and the Rejection of the Lone Wolf**

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When Howard University's board of trustees failed to detect nine years of financial aid misappropriation or when the Hershey Trust Company required repeated legal intervention simply to navigate a portfolio diversification decision, the root cause in both cases was not a shortage of authority. Instead it was a failure of collective governance. These are not anomalies. They are predictable consequences of institutional structures that concentrate decision-making in ways fundamentally incompatible with servant leadership. Robert Greenleaf, in his essay "The Institution as Servant" from *Servant Leadership*, challenges the dominant assumption that institutional strength derives from a singular, authoritative leader. Greenleaf (2002) argues instead for a collaborative governance framework grounded in the principle of *primus inter pares*, or first among equals, in which trustees and administrators share authority as functional partners rather than operating within a rigid hierarchy. This paper examines two dimensions of that argument: how trustee engagement within a flattened organizational structure builds durable institutional trust, and how collective deliberation equips institutions to navigate ambiguity more effectively than any lone executive can. The evidence from governance failures and Greenleaf's theoretical framework leads to a single conclusion: institutions that distribute authority not only perform better but also endure.

### **The Conventional Role and Legal Mandate of the Trustee**

Before exploring the servant leadership model, it is critical to understand the legal and historical baseline of governance. Trustees are legally and morally responsible for the institution, no matter what its structure is (Greenleaf, 2002). They are the last word on whether it will

survive, follow the law, and be financially sound. This legal mandate ensures that even in the flattest organizations, the accountability for the institution's actions rests with the board.

But the traditional role of a trustee often carries significant structural limitations. In many traditional organizations, trustees often act as mere endorsers of executive decisions or primarily focus on financial oversight, rather than actively safeguarding the mission. Greenleaf (2002) contends that this normative passivity constitutes a deficiency in leadership. When trustees are not connected to the organization's mission and activities, or actual "service," they are more likely to be incompetent and make decisions based on abstract metrics rather than the institution's lived operational reality. To be truly effective, the trustee must go beyond these conventional boundaries of financial oversight and become an active, servant-led member of the organization's collective governance.

### **Building Trust through Collective Governance**

The lone wolf leader is often praised for decisiveness, but this model is fundamentally incompatible with servant leadership. A singular leader is susceptible to the "disability of competence," wherein expertise impedes listening and genuine understanding (Greenleaf, 2002). When trustees and administrators operate as equals, they build institutional trust through shared accountability rather than deferred authority.

The consequences of abandoning this model are well-documented. Howard University's 2018 financial aid scandal exposed a nine-year pattern in which employees misappropriated funds by collecting both university grants and tuition remission simultaneously, going undetected due to insufficient board oversight (CNN, 2018). The board had functioned largely as a ratifying body rather than an active governance partner, allowing administrative misconduct to persist

unchecked. In the years that followed, Howard University's Board of Trustees (2021) undertook a comprehensive governance restructuring. They engaged an external firm and consulted more than 40 institutional stakeholders as a direct acknowledgment that passive trusteeship had failed the institution. This case illustrates precisely what Greenleaf (2002) argued: trust is not a byproduct of strong individual leadership; it is the product of collective accountability. Spears (n.d.) calls this stewardship, which means taking care of the institution for the benefit of society as a whole. Trustees proactively share stewardship, replacing the isolation of the lone wolf model with a durable foundation of mutual accountability.

### **Overcoming Ambiguity in a Flatter Organization**

Organizational ambiguity frequently originates from poor communication or the hoarding of information at the executive level. The lone wolf leader often projects certainty even in the absence of clarity, a posture that compounds institutional confusion rather than resolving it.

The Hershey Trust Company's prolonged governance disputes illustrate the cost of fragmented deliberation in ambiguous circumstances. When state officials encouraged the trust's board to diversify its concentrated holdings in Hershey Foods, the board voted to explore a sale, a process that immediately triggered public opposition, legal intervention by the Pennsylvania attorney general, and years of unresolved fiduciary conflict (Wealth Management, 2002). A 2013 settlement ultimately required the trust to reconstitute its board, impose term limits, and grant the attorney general approval authority over new board members to restore sound governance (ProPublica et al., 2021). The repeated external interventions required to stabilize the institution demonstrate what happens when trustees lack a shared deliberative framework for navigating ambiguity. Greenleaf's (2002) model addresses this issue directly by distributing the "seeking"

function across a group. In a flatter organization, trustees and administrators contribute multiple perspectives, employing what Spears (n.d.) terms "conceptualization," which is the capacity to think beyond immediate operational pressures toward long-term institutional purpose. A collective of equals is better positioned to hold uncertainty until a clear, mission-aligned path emerges (Greenleaf, 2002).

### **The Functional Framework of the Trustee**

Trustees must perform four essential functions as service partners in order to transition from theoretical service to tangible impact (Greenleaf, 2002). Each function reveals not only what collective governance requires but also what its absence costs.

The first is goal-setting (Greenleaf, 2002). In a *primus inter pares* model, institutional objectives are not handed down from a single executive but developed through collaborative deliberation between trustees and administrators. Howard University's nine-year failure illustrates the cost of getting this wrong. When goal-setting is a passive or unilateral function, the board loses its grip on the gap between stated mission and operational reality. Employees were able to exploit overlapping benefit structures for nearly a decade precisely because no shared ownership of institutional objectives existed to flag the drift.

The second is executive selection (Greenleaf, 2002). The board's task is not simply to hire a capable manager but to identify a *primus*, someone who can lead a collective of equals with humility rather than someone who consolidates authority. At Hershey, the repeated need for attorney general intervention suggests a governance culture in which leadership operated without adequate accountability to a deliberative board. A selection process grounded in servant

leadership would have prioritized candidates whose instinct was toward transparency and collective input, not unilateral portfolio decisions made ahead of board consensus.

The third is performance evaluation (Greenleaf, 2002). In a collective governance model, evaluation moves beyond narrow financial metrics toward a broader assessment of whether the institution is advancing its service mission. Both case studies expose what happens when boards evaluate performance too narrowly. Howard's board monitored financials without scrutinizing operational integrity. Hershey's trustees focused on portfolio performance while fiduciary conduct eroded beneath the surface. Greenleaf's (2002) model demands that evaluation ask not only whether the numbers are healthy but also whether the institution is serving well.

Finally, when intervention is necessary, action is taken collectively, ensuring that every member of the leadership structure understands and is accountable for the direction the institution takes (Greenleaf, 2002). Howard University's 2021 governance restructuring, which engaged an external firm and more than 40 institutional stakeholders, is a model of what effective governance looks like after the fact. The goal of the *primus inter pares* framework is to make that level of collective deliberation the default, not the emergency response.

Together, these four functions define the structural conditions that the following recommendations are designed to establish. Trusteeship, properly understood, is not oversight from a distance but active, embedded participation in the institution's governance.

## **Recommendations**

Organizations seeking to move beyond lone wolf leadership should take two concrete steps grounded in the *primus inter pares* model. First, governance structures should be

deliberately flattened to distribute decision-making authority across trustees and administrators as functional equals. This means revising board bylaws, redefining trustee roles beyond financial oversight, and creating regular mechanisms for collaborative deliberation, ensuring that the passive ratification dynamic that failed Howard University is structurally impossible. Second, institutions should establish shared deliberative frameworks specifically designed for periods of ambiguity. Rather than relying on individual executive judgment during high-uncertainty decisions, boards should adopt formal protocols that require collective input before major strategic commitments are made. The Hershey Trust's repeated need for external legal intervention illustrates what is at stake when no such framework exists. Together, these recommendations operationalize Greenleaf's (2002) vision of the trustee not as a distant overseer but as an active servant-leader embedded in the institution's governance.

## **Conclusion**

The cases of Howard University and the Hershey Trust Company are not isolated governance failures; they are predictable outcomes of institutional structures that concentrate authority in ways incompatible with servant leadership. Where passive trusteeship and fragmented deliberation prevailed, both institutions required external intervention to restore what collective governance should have sustained from the outset. Greenleaf's (2002) *primus inter pares* model offers a structurally sound alternative: an institution governed by a collective of equals, where trust is not assumed but built through shared accountability, and where ambiguity is met not with executive projection but with deliberate, mission-aligned deliberation. The trustee, properly understood, is neither a figurehead nor a financial guarantor but an active servant embedded in the institution's life and accountable to its purpose. Organizations that

internalize this model do not merely avoid the failures documented here; they build the institutional legitimacy that Greenleaf (2002) identified as the foundation of lasting service.

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