

# Servant Leadership as a path to communitarian action<sup>1</sup>

Hans Rudi Fischer im Gespräch mit Amitai Etzioni



Amitai Etzioni

Amitai Etzioni, Prof. Ph.D., wurde 1929 als Werner Falk in Deutschland geboren und ist US-amerikanischer Soziologe. Er promovierte 1958 in Soziologie (University of California, Berkeley) und lehrte 20 Jahre an der Columbia University New York Soziologie.

Er ist Direktor des Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies der George-Washington-University und gilt als Vordenker des Kommunitarismus. Als Autor hat er mit zahlreichen Büchern die Debatte über eine Wiederbelebung des Gemeinwesens (*Communitas*) maßgeblich mitbestimmt. Im Jahre 1990 gründete er das Communitarian Network. Im Jahr 2001 wurde Etzioni, gemessen an akademischen Zitationen, zu den Top 100 der amerikanischen Intellektuellen gezählt, erhielt im selben Jahr den John P. McGovern Award und wurde mit dem Bundesverdienstkreuz ausgezeichnet. 2009 erhielt er den Meister-Eckart-Preis.

**HRF:** These are turbulent times. Established traditions can no longer ensure success, and alternating values have replaced the canon. Accordingly, executives need guidance in negotiating the »terra incognita« they are embarking on. Are new ethical and social rationales for leadership (the German word »Führung«) necessary in this changing landscape? In you – Amitai Etzioni – we have found a guarantor supportive of our perception of management as a social system, a perception from which we also derive a new understanding of the role of management.

You have identified and described the possibility of a middle ground between collectivism and radical liberalism, where relationships between individuals, rather than the individuals themselves (i.e. the monad, the ego, the ME), are at the heart of your social philosophy. These are relations between people developed in and through social systems by way of bonding, shared traditions and shared values (*communitas*).

You refer to fundamental relations between the ME and the WE and ask whether and how it is possible for the individual, the ME, to be protected from diffusion or from disappearing in the collective, the WE?

If I understand you correctly, you do not subscribe to the either-or logic of neoliberalism, through which the ME, the individual, is played off against the collective (the WE, the larger framework). You appear to be in favor of a possible coexistence between the two,

an attitude that is also central to our understanding of Servant Leadership.

From your point of view – as a communitarian and academic – why has Servant Leadership once again become so important for corporations/organizations today?

**AE:** The central responsibility of any person leading a corporation or organization should be to the *wellbeing of all people* affected by their business practices – the *stakeholders*. Stakeholder theory holds that *all* people invested in a corporation should be extended rights and entitlements. Employed correctly, Servant Leadership can advance such a goal.

While corporations affect a range of people who often have divergent interests, needs, and values, they also have some significant shared goals and bonds, akin to a community. Often, the communal aspect of such formations is overlooked in favor of prioritizing the bottom line. In this sense, the well-being of the *shareholder* is elevated above the *stakeholder*. Shareholders are easy to identify; stakeholders constitute a larger group but are typically the employees, the community or communities the corporation exists in, the creditors, and sometimes, the clients.

It is reasonable for leaders to want to ensure their endeavors bear fruit for investors, and raise their own prestige in turn, but increasing dividends should not come at the stakeholders' expense. Employees, for instance, often invest years of their life laboring for an organization. Having a voice should be a right, not a

<sup>1</sup> In leicht veränderter Fassung ist dieses Interview in deutscher Übersetzung erschienen in: Dienende Führung als Weg zu gemeinschaftlichem Handeln, in dem Buch: Dienende Führung. Zu einer neuen Balance zwischen ICH und WIR (2019), hrsg. von Fischer, H.R. et al., Berlin, ESV.