

What Can Hunter-Gatherers Teach Us About Servant-Leadership?

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For most humans living today, it is hard to imagine life without technology. But on the scale of human history, the internet and mobile devices are recent inventions. Until just 10,000 years ago, we lived in small groups, hunting and gathering. While that life might seem to be ancient, it is also the life for which our bodies and our brains are adapted. So, we have something to learn from people who still live as we did for most of our history.

Every day we face endless choice points. As our technologies accelerate the speed and frequency of choices coming at us, the faster we feel compelled to respond to each choice. We can become overwhelmed by the emails, tweets, phone calls, text messages, voice mails, all piled on top of the basic life choices we must make in the course of a day. Technologies are eroding the natural rhythms of a healthy life.

The Hadzabe have early origins qualifying them as “original people” and, perhaps, original servant-leaders. They have likely been living in the Lake Eyasi basin in Northern Tanzania for thousands of years. This would mean that through cultural practices they have survived as one of the oldest and very “first” people on earth.

Is there another way? What can hunter-gatherers teach us about natural rhythms? We are not suggesting that we romanticize the lives of hunter-gatherers, or shape our lives like them. We couldn't even if we tried. We are suggesting, however, that we learn from them. For they have thrived – and still survive by living their lives in servant-leader ways. The Hadzabe provide a living glimpse of the evolution of servant-leadership.

Interestingly, the Hadzabe egalitarian society with its great individual freedom is at odds with the leadership and political organization required to assert control of their land and their cultural integrity in the face of great external pressures. With their strong cultural sanctions that improve equality and stress individual freedom, they find it difficult to find leaders from among them, leaders who will lead forcefully but from behind and by consensus for the good of all. Perhaps, this is the conundrum of leadership, today. Progress requires power. Progress also requires consensus. How do we balance the two! Servant first, leader second may be the answer. And, perhaps the Hadzabe are the living example of that balance.



Back to the Future

The hunter-gatherer is in all of us. For 90% of human history we were almost exclusively hunter-gatherers. Living in our technology-dependent world does not mean that we have totally severed our hunter-gather roots – the skills and intelligence learned from all those millennia of survival. One does not erase the souls of one's ancestors. Even if we no longer actively use those skills for daily survival, the untapped intelligence remains within us. Could it be that we could recapture the things we have forgotten and need to relearn today?

The Hadzabe don't recognize any leaders or any one person as having more power or influence than others. And even though they have clearly defined gender roles, men and women in their society participate equally in decision-making. Their traditional economy supports this equality because all people from an early age have the skills and knowledge to get what they need each day. To be a Hadza means that if someone asks, they have no option but to share. It is considered bad to hoard or accumulate more than what one needs. Everyone shares. Everyone serves. Everyone leads.

Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs & Steel*, writes that after thirty-three years of working with hunter-gathers, he believes they are more intelligent than his counterparts in America or Europe are. He concludes, "They impressed me as being on the average more intelligent, more alert, more expressive, and more interested in things and people around them than the average European or American is." Who among us would not like to be more intelligent, more alert, more expressive and more curious?

Hunter-gatherers, like the Hadzabe of Tanzania, embody ancient wisdom. That embodiment includes a grounded wisdom – a worldview which honors "sharing" (servant-leadership) as the implicate order of surviving.

Being with the Hadze for periods of time triggers a recalling, in our own memories and psyches, the core traits that Jared Diamond observed – intelligence, alertness, expressiveness, and curiosity. Can we recall and perhaps, recapture these traits?

Intelligence

Why are they smarter? Diamond feels it is the combined result of their lifestyle and the process of natural selection, which would promote genes for intelligence by weeding out those not quite savvy enough to overcome the inevitable survival challenges.

With no alphabet or writing, the upside would be that you develop a better memory, you do more storytelling, you are a keener listener, and you speak from the heart of experience. Your observational skills mean living or dying. You live in the now, since today's "immediate return" (survival) is the primary focus of your day.

Observations by students of the Hadzabe, like David (Daudi) Peterson show that the Hadze are like "walking encyclopedias" of natural history with names and detailed knowledge of thousands of plant, bird

and animal species and their characteristics, distribution, and potential uses. In his book, *Hadzabe: By the Light of a Million Fires*, Daudi details their lifestyle.

He observes that because they know with certainty that each day will provide them with food, they don't need to store food for tomorrow. They share whatever they have today with everyone. But to ensure that they have enough for tomorrow, they live a nomadic life that allows the land to recover in their wake. When they return, they find the land healthy and plentiful once again. They serve each other and they serve the land around them.

Alertness

The Hadza wake up every day to the reality that time is precious and limited; living close to life and death, they realize every one of us will die. The wise person seeks fulfillment in the present moment. The Hadza appear to experience more joy in a day than some of us do in a lifetime. Living in the now and living on the edge brings forth an infectious vitality that is passed on to the children who become equally alert.

"This takes a special view of the self," writes Greenleaf. "The sustaining feeling of personal significance is important. It comes from the inside. I am not a piece of dust on the way to becoming another piece of dust. I am an instrument of creation, unlike any that has ever been or ever will be. So is each of you. No matter how badly you may be shaken, no matter how serious the failure or how ignominious the fall from grace, by accepting and learning you can be restored with greater strength. Don't lose this basic view of who you are."