

Starfish

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This week Barry looks at Mary's first trait – her belief that her first role as a leader is to serve others and how it translates in to her feeling that she is doing truly important and worthwhile work which gives her, and those she leads a sense of purpose and the belief their work is meaningful. This trait is one I could really identify with when I was introduced to Barry's *Lead Like Mary* material.

As far as ambitions go, saving life on earth has got to be up there with the biggest motivators, especially given the current urgency to turn things around. As conservationists we are intrinsically aware that we are contributing to a truly worthwhile mission, overcoming an ecological crisis is after all, no mean feat. We are fortunate that we can easily justify our work on many levels, from local to global, from a wildlife perspective and a people one. It is easy for us to explain why our organisations exist, why we set out to achieve what we do, and why we manage habitats and species in the way that we do. It shouldn't be difficult to convince others of the importance of our work, its reasoning is backed up by decades of science, evidence and observation and our very lives depend on it. However, no matter how firmly rooted our belief is in the overall mission, how this transpires into our everyday lives as our sense of perspective shifts from the wider issues to the day to day ones is another challenge. Because let's face it, working in conservation is hugely rewarding and a real privilege, but like any other job it comes with its downsides and bad days that distract from the feeling you are doing meaningful work in the here and now. It can be difficult to ensure that both ourselves and those that we lead don't lose that all-important sense of perspective.

In Barry's podcast he tells the starfish story, and to me this completely epitomises our everyday work as conservationists.

Old man: "but there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up.

Surely you cannot expect to make a difference"

Youth: "I made a difference to that one"

The bigger picture for us is vast, our challenges certainly feel too big to overcome in a short space of time. However we can make a difference one species, one habitat, one nature reserve, one person, one community, one country (...you get the idea) at a time.

We all have our own "starfish" – the things we have the strongest emotional connection to and provide us with the feeling we are making a difference when we achieve them. My starfish are those "potential conservationists" I mentioned in my welcome piece and hoping that they join the grassroots movement as a member, volunteer, enthusiast etc. or go on to pursue a career in nature conservation. Every now and then I'm reminded that its all worthwhile when I receive a thank you and I know I made a difference to "that one".

Below is a message I received from a young person I mentored through work experience and youth groups whilst working at Rutland Water Nature Reserve. He has gone on to pursue a career in conservation and I am hugely proud to have been able to help him achieve this and also of how much his confidence has grown and his knowledge and enthusiasm for the natural world continues to thrive.

"As I was driving home I thought about how the day I first met you has to be one of the most important days of my life so far. You are honestly one of my biggest inspirations because you help young naturalists to overcome their demons and give them the opportunities, they need to fulfil their potential as conservationists"

It was truly humbling to receive such a heartfelt thank you. It meant the world to me as it completely sums up what my role as a conservationist is all about. What may seem a simple thank you made all the downsides* to the job that distracted me from the feeling I was undertaking meaningful work feel worthwhile. I keep this message, along with a few other lovely thank you cards in a box with some photos of work achievements and proud moments. When I'm having a "what's the point" moment I get them out and remind myself of all the great reasons to keep going.

(*dealing with the Bill's and the Sidney's, the many longer-than-they-should-have-been days, the making the best of the minimal resources and support, the office politics, pointless meetings, countless emails that could have been phone calls, I'd rather be outside days, too much admin days, I don't like this part of my job days)

This thank you also rather nicely sums up the idea of servant leadership – helping others to overcome their demons and give them the opportunities they need to fulfil their potential as conservationists. I genuinely want those around me to succeed, so it comes fairly naturally to me to do my best to help others reach their potential.

As a volunteer coordinator the key aim of my job was to help volunteers succeed in their roles, and to collaborate with my co-workers to achieve this. Rutland Water Nature Reserve has a really admirable ethos towards volunteering – appreciation is demonstrated by creating a welcoming atmosphere and a feeling of being part of the team, saying thank you and a positive attitude every day and also through thank you events, investment in training and development, social events, and a number of other great initiatives to ensure volunteers felt valued and equipped to undertake their roles successfully whilst enjoying themselves at the same time! I'm sure this sounds familiar to you if you've volunteered or work with volunteers.

Our relationship with volunteers is much more emotive than it is with our paid co-workers. We prioritise their wellbeing and job satisfaction in order to ensure they continue to gift their time and skills to our organisations. The best examples are a great model of servant leadership in conservation. But what has always baffled me, is that we often think of managing volunteers as being at odds to the way we would treat our co-workers. In my opinion, if someone is paid for their work it shouldn't mean they are treated with any less respect or empathy or value or as though they are less deserving of job satisfaction or improved wellbeing. In fact, I believe that if you value the skills and time of someone for them to be paid for them, you should do your very best to make sure they feel valued and treat them as an investment. If you think about it, we shouldn't treat those around us any differently – we're all there for the same reason, to apply our skills and time to get the job done.

In conservation, many of us will practice our leadership skills on volunteers from the very early stages of our career. However, very few of us will have undertaken training on how to manage others and so we are learning on the job, often subconsciously, to create a positive emotional attachment between our volunteers and our work/organisation (this also applies to other people we engage with). And we're pretty good at it! It's amazing the difference it makes when the way you treat someone is focussed on creating this positive relationship, and genuinely wanting others to feel they are contributing to something worthwhile.

There is so much to be learnt from volunteer management and applied to leadership of paid workers. I listened to a great piece on volunteer management recently on BBC world service in which Dr Jenna Ward of Leicester University School of Business talked about the findings of her research with the National Trust on management of volunteers. I can highly recommend listening ([link below](#)), but the following quote was particularly relevant:

"If you can manage volunteers well, you would be a fantastic manager of paid staff because these relationships, these human connections, understanding the power of emotion, is what makes a good manager..."

To be able to demonstrate servant leadership, you must keep in mind that if you want others to follow you because of who you are, not what you are, you must also see others in this light. If you can get the best out of unpaid workers you can definitely get the best out of those who have an employment contract. For others to believe they are undertaking meaningful and worthwhile work, you must too – so don't get bogged down by the bad days and focus on those starfish moments and helping to create them for others too.

If you have time I recommend listening to the programme below – it's not based on conservation but it highlights how volunteer management is often overlooked and makes some great points I think you will be able to relate to:

BBC World Service

Managing volunteers: Free and easy?

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3csy822>