

Servant Leadership and what you need to know about it

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What is servant leadership?

In simpler times in our small family-like hunter-gatherer tribes, we knew our leaders intimately. As we have evolved, we traded these simple tribes with large bureaucratic organisations in the global village (van Vugt, Johnson, Kaiser, & O'Gorman, 2008). With this change, leaders began to view people more as objects, with organisations considering workers as just another part of the machine. The sense of belonging that humans have always required began to fade. However, in the past 15 years, a growing phenomenon has emerged which has started to take us back to our comfortable roots. The rise of servant leadership has filled this gap by building a social identity and creating teams that are more like the kinship found in those simpler times as team members assist and build the capacity of others (Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst, & Cooper, 2014).

The basic idea of servant leadership is that it provides a holistic approach to work which emphasizes increased service to others whilst promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision-making. When followers' well-being and growth are prioritized, they in turn are more engaged and effective in their work. Servant leaders see themselves as stewards of the organizations (van Dierendonck, 2011), who seek to grow the resources, financial and otherwise, that have been entrusted to them. As such, they do not ignore performance expectations even though they focus on the personal development of their followers. Unlike performance-oriented leadership approaches that often “sacrifice people on the altar of profit and growth” (Sendjaya, 2015, p. 4), servant leaders focus on sustainable performance over the long run.

As defined by Greenleaf *"The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first; perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them, there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature."*

Servant leaders do not rely on charisma but rather rely upon service, and in so doing, they bind the followers to the leaders in reciprocal relationships. Servant leaders have motives that have the best interest of others in mind. Therefore, they should develop a positive form of reciprocation whereby they encourage followers to respond not by serving the leader or organisation but by serving others.

To be a servant leader, you need to have the following key characteristics:

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing

4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualization
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship
9. Growth
10. Building community

Benefits of servant leadership

Servant leaders invest in the development of their staff, resulting in several benefits for their company. They allow employees to achieve career goals while helping the organization meet its objectives. Here are some benefits of servant leadership:

- Boosts employee development
- Promotes staff loyalty
- Boosts productivity
- Builds trust
- Improves decision-making process
- Creates future leaders

The following are study results which support servant leadership:

1. Drury (2004) conducted a study in a non-traditional college measuring job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and servant leadership. She found that servant leadership and job satisfaction were significantly and positively correlated.
2. Hebert (2004) conducted a similar study in which the relationship between perceived servant leadership and job satisfaction from the follower's perspective was examined. A significant relationship between perceptions of servant leadership and overall intrinsic job satisfaction was found.
3. Harvey (2001) contends that the servant leader's primary objective is the workers and their growth, then the customer base, and finally the organizational bottom line. Real servanthood is a leadership style that relies upon the influence of self-giving without self-glory
4. Published in the Journal of Applied Psychology (2011), Jia Hu & Dr Liden studied 304 employees representing 71 teams in 5 banks. They concluded that servant leaders facilitate team confidence, affirming the strengths and potential of the team and providing development support. An interesting outcome was that servant leaders significantly produced higher performance teams.
5. Servant leaders create a culture which cultivates creativity and solidarity (employees that want to help each other). Employees of servant leaders are more helping and creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership. Source: Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, Journal of Applied Psychology, 2008
6. In a study at five-hospitals across 17 departments, 253 nurses who perceived that their nurse managers had a higher servant leadership orientation demonstrated significantly greater job

satisfaction. Source: Jenkins & Stewart, “The importance of a servant leader orientation,” Health Care Management Review, 2010

Servant leadership quotes to inspire you

1. “As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.” — Bill Gates
2. “A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a moulder of consensus” — Martin Luther King Jr
3. “It is high time the ideal of success should be replaced with the ideal of service.” — Albert Einstein
4. “...when you choose the paradigm of service, looking at life through that paradigm, it turns everything you do from a job into a gift.” — Oprah Winfrey
5. “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”— Winston Churchill
6. “A leader is best when people barely know he exists when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”— Lao Tzu
7. “The servant-leader believes that ‘my success is your success.’”? Anonymous
8. “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”? Mahatma Gandhi
9. “I’ll lift you and you’ll lift me and we’ll both ascend together.”? John Greenleaf Whittier
10. “But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”? Mark 10:43 ESV

Servant leadership examples from the global stage

Servant leadership might be able to deliver a leadership approach that can deal with challenges of the modern workplace while still delivering on our hunter-gatherer needs of belonging. This might be why organizations that implement servant leadership practices (e.g., Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Ritz-Carlton, ServiceMaster, TDIndustries, SAS, Zappos.com, Container Store, Intel, Marriott, Synovus Financial) continue to dominate their industries, propelling research into servant leadership.

1. The CEO of Starbucks, Kevin Johnson, is often referred to as a true example of a servant leader. According to him, as a leader, the best outlook to have for your company is based on one question: “How can I help you?” Meaning, how can I, your leader, help you to become the best you can be for this organization? And this is what they practice.
2. The Ritz-Carlton hotel franchise has proven itself to be one of the finest organizations in the service industry worldwide. Founded in 1983, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company has become a multibillion-dollar company, employing over 22,000 workers in forty hotels worldwide (Bacon & Pugh, 2004). The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company employs the principles of Servant Leadership, as described in Robert Greenleaf’s essay, *The Servant as Leader* (1991), and each employee is empowered to practice these principles to every guest.
3. FedEx was founded in 1971 by Fred Smith who still leads the company as CEO. He believes “*when people are placed first they will provide the highest possible service, and profits will follow*“. What emerged from this thinking is distinctive company culture. The

'People – Service – Profit' philosophy which has helped the company grow rapidly and remain competitive.

Conclusion

The beauty of servant leadership is that it can benefit any size of organization – even a business unit within a larger business, or a department within a business unit. Employees who feel appreciated by their superiors and who feel their leaders are serving their needs and not the other way around tackle every day of work with a different attitude than someone who feels like a part of the machine.

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