

A brief primer on Servant Leadership

Envisioned by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 after a forty-year career as AT&T's first director of management research, servant leadership has its conceptual basis in the teachings of many of the greatest philosophical minds in history, including Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Jesus Christ, and Lao Tzu. Although its priorities share many commonalities with world religions and philosophies, Greenleaf did not see it as, nor did he position it as, an exclusively religious mindset. Instead, he theorized and hypothesized a particular style of management which could lead to meaningful benefits for the organizations being led, the individuals being exposed to servant leadership, and the communities in which those organizations and individuals were based.

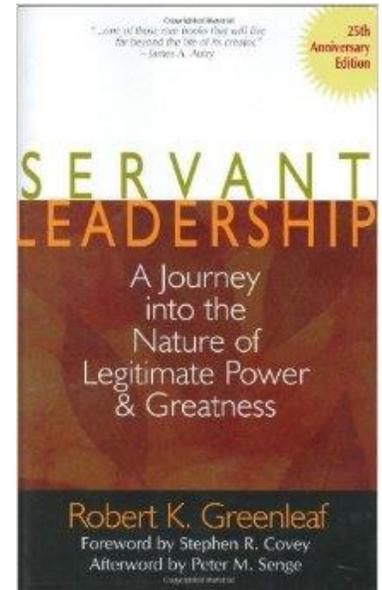
Servant leadership can be understood as humble and ethical influence within relationships, oriented toward follower development, empowerment, and meaningful and continuous improvement for all organizational stakeholders. The servant leader is not just out to benefit him or herself, or even just his or her organization; the servant leader works for the betterment of the organization, team, employees, customers, and the greater community. Empirical research on hundreds of major CEOs across the globe has found that when leadership focuses on profits *alongside* the needs of stakeholders such as employees, customers, and communities (rather than focusing on profits to the exclusion of these other stakeholders), such companies ironically develop higher performance and profitability than those which focus on profits alone.

Seven very specific leader behaviors and characteristics have been identified as falling under the servant leadership umbrella:

- Servant leaders put others first, postponing their own needs and desires for the good of their teams, customers, and organizations.
- Servant leaders help others to grow and succeed, developing and training them to lead richer, fuller lives, both within and outside the work context.
- Servant leaders demonstrate conceptual skills, without which they cannot be taken seriously, hold others accountable, and strive for effective organizational stewardship.
- Servant leaders act with empathy and build strong relationships, knowing their employees and knowing what motivates them.
- Servant leaders empower others by practicing participative management, sharing power, delegating, and encouraging others to solve problems in the way they think best.
- Servant leaders act ethically, honest and fair, not so concerned with rules and traditions as they are with how they positively impact others.
- Servant leaders are champions of the community, volunteering to help others and encouraging their colleagues and teammates to do the same.

Our research indicates that servant leadership is related to a wealth of positive outcomes for organizations and firms, above and beyond those we've measured for typical goal-focused or ethically-neutral leadership. These outcomes of servant leadership include individual and team performance, employee retention and learning, customer satisfaction, and overall organizational performance and return on assets.

Some tips for servant leaders:



#1: Put others first.

- You want your employees to put the company first, you want them to put each other first. They're only going to do that if you set the example. It's easy to become an accidental hypocrite. Make sure rules that apply to them also apply to you, so that you're living the example.
- Putting others first also means prioritizing their needs. It means being flexible (as reasonable and appropriate) with personal problems, schedule needs, and even in some cases your teams' goals.

#2: Help others to grow and succeed.

- Arguably the most important thing you can do as a leader is to make sure that your people have all the knowledge and skills they need to succeed... in this job, and their next. This means mentoring, coaching, training, and modeling. It means taking an active role in learning your employees' strengths and weaknesses.
- It *doesn't* mean *you* have to do all of this mentoring and coaching – letting teammates who are strong in a specific area help those who are weak in it, is a good way to develop *their* skills.

#3: Demonstrate conceptual skills and be a good steward.

- If something's going wrong, you should be the first to know... because you're out in the thick of things, not tucked away in your office.
- Hold people accountable. Servant leadership doesn't mean just being nice and letting people get away with things.

#4: Build strong relationships and act with empathy.

- Realize that each employee is different. Not just different skills, but different desires and motivates. Understand why each of your team members works, and what motivates them.
- Demonstrate empathy. If you open up to employees and demonstrate that you care about their problems, they will come to trust you. And trust in a manager has huge impacts on performance and retention. Prioritize one-on-one time with employees. When possible, spend an hour, or even a day, doing each employee's job with them. Learn exactly what they go through and deal with, and you'll both be better equipped to handle challenges.

#5: Empower others.

- The traditional charismatic leader says, "I'm the leader because I'm the best, so I should do this." The servant leader says, "If I let my employees do this, I might learn something from them."
- Research shows that even as simple a thing as telling an employee, "I'd like you to take the lead on improving this" has huge impacts on their motivation and effectiveness. Always stand by in case someone gets in over their head, and don't blame them if they try something new and it doesn't work. Treat it as a learning opportunity.

#6: Be ethical.

- Understand that ethics doesn't just mean following the rules and standard procedures: it means caring about the impacts of decisions on all stakeholders.
- Coach employees to keep stakeholders in mind as they make decisions with you. Just asking "Is this good for the company?" is only part of the question.

#7: Be a good citizen and champion of the community.

- How does your organization make the community / region / world a better place? If you can't answer that, neither can your employees.
- Take a prominent role in advocating for community involvement within the organization. Model for employees how support for the team and organization is good for everyone, not just the stockholders.