

Why Does Servant Leadership Work So Well?

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In workshops and presentations, I tell people that servant leadership is the best kind of leadership for both the leader and those who are led. That's because servant leaders focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. They help their colleagues to perform at their highest levels, and they provide customers with the programs and products they need. They not only get results for their organizations, they get results for society at large. Servant leadership not only works, it works *very well*.

That's what I believe, based on years of personal experience and the empirical research carried out by scholars. However, I am not surprised when people who have never heard about servant leadership are skeptical. It sounds too good to be true. What is servant leadership, anyway? How do we know it works? And if it works, why does it work so well? Skeptics have lots of questions. The purpose of this article is to offer some answers.

I. What Is Servant Leadership?

Servant leadership is built on some important assumptions. One assumption is that most of us love and care about others. When we care about others, we usually want to help them—to be of service in some way. That is why serving others is universally recognized as a fundamental human value.

Servant leaders have a bias, here. They think that serving others is not just one more thing on a list of daily activities. *It is what life is about*. It is why we are here. It is what we are called to do.

Servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, not the desire to lead. There are many ways to serve others, each with its own dignity and meaning. When a person who wants to serve others sees the opportunity to serve *by leading*, he or she assumes leadership responsibilities and becomes a servant-leader.

The idea that leaders should serve others is an idea that goes back thousands of years and can be found in a number of traditions. However, there is a modern servant leadership movement. It was launched in the United States in 1970 by

Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership.”

Greenleaf worked for AT& T from 1926 to 1964. During that time, AT&T had more than a million employees and was one of the largest corporations in the world. Greenleaf started by digging holes for telephone poles, and then became involved in teaching, training, and personnel assessment. Eventually, he became AT&T’s Director of Management Research. It was his job to train and educate the senior leaders of this huge corporation. What he concluded after thirty-eight years of experience was that the most effective leaders were focused on serving others.

In 1970, Greenleaf published his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*.¹ He revised it and republished it in 1973. The essay has been read by hundreds of thousands of people since then. In 1977 he published a collection of essays and speeches in a book titled *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*.² That book ranks high today on the Amazon.com list of most-purchased books on leadership.

This is how Greenleaf defined the servant leader:

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 difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”³

Greenleaf focused on growing people, because it is a triple win. When people grow, they benefit personally and professionally. Their capacity grows, so the capacity of the organization grows. When the capacity of the organization grows, it can do things better, or do things it was never able to do before. Individuals benefit, the organization benefits, and those served benefit.

Finally, Greenleaf was concerned about the impact that a leader's decisions have on the least privileged. He asked: "*And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

The most important characteristic of a servant leader is the desire to serve. Other characteristics highlighted by Greenleaf in his classic essay are listening and understanding; acceptance and empathy; foresight; awareness; persuasion; conceptualization; self-healing; and rebuilding community.

There are many theories or ideas about leadership. What is unique about servant leadership? Scholars have identified four elements:

- (1) The moral component. Servant leaders treat people right, and create an environment in which people can raise moral issues and engage in moral dialogue. Some leadership theories have no moral component—they are just about the skills of leadership that can be used for good or ill. By contrast, the moral component is embedded in servant leadership.
- (2) The focus on serving followers for their own good as well as the good of the organization. Some leadership theories allow leaders to exploit followers for the good of the organization. Servant leaders don't do that. They encourage the growth of their colleagues so that they can reach their fullest potential in serving the organization.
- (3) Concern with the success of all stakeholders, broadly defined. Servant leaders care about employees, customers, business partners, shareholders or members, communities, and society as a whole—including those who are the least privileged. This is the only ethical position a leader can take. Leaders should care about the impact that their organization has on *all* the people their organization touches.
- (4) Self-reflection, as a counter to the leader's hubris. Servant leaders know that the focus is not on them, it is on identifying and meeting the needs of others. As a result, servant leaders tend to be more humble.

The ultimate goal, for Greenleaf, is to make the world a better place. Servant-leaders help their organizations to become servant-institutions. Those servant-institutions truly serve their employees, customers, business partners, communities,

and society as a whole. As a result, the quality of our lives improves, and the world becomes a better place for everyone.

Servant leadership is not soft. Servant leaders can make hard decisions whenever necessary in order to serve others. Also, servant-leaders can exercise power. However, when they exercise power, they exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and they exercise it *on behalf of* others, not for their own personal benefit.

Servant leadership is not a single style of leadership. Servant leaders focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. Since those needs vary, servant-leaders use whatever style is needed to address each situation. For example, if the ship is sinking, the captain can serve others best by issuing commands and ordering people into the lifeboats. However, if the servant-leader is working with volunteers, listening and advising in a consultative role can be the best way to serve.

Servant-leaders also adjust their leadership behavior to meet the needs of the people they are leading. For example, some people need more direction; some need more encouragement; some need more coaching; some need more freedom. Servant leaders connect with people “where they are at” and help them to move forward, both personally and professionally.

Servant leaders get results. In fact, they get two kinds of results. They obtain the resources needed to continue and if possible expand the work of the organization. Obtaining resources is an organizational *need*. But they also serve their colleagues and customers and make the world a better place. That is the organization’s *purpose*.

II. How Do We Know that Servant Leadership Works?

For centuries, servant leaders have provided anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of servant leadership. About twelve years ago, leadership scholars began to conduct empirically rigorous studies of servant leadership in the workplace. The results have been very positive.

For example, research has shown that servant leaders facilitate effective teamwork. Servant leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization. Servant-leaders may inspire followers to serve the community in which the organization is embedded. Research has revealed that employees of servant-leaders are more helping and creative than those working with leaders who

scored lower on servant leadership. Servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction.⁴

Suzanne J. Peterson and her colleagues studied 126 chief executive officers in technology organizations in Silicon Valley. They interviewed the CEOs in order to classify them as founders, narcissists, or servant leaders. They found a positive relationship between servant leadership and firm performance. They concluded: "...CEOs may potentially improve their firms' performance through more inclusive forms of leadership, such as servant leadership, that take into account a broader number of stakeholders and that are more other-focused."⁵

Servant leadership principles are being implemented in the public, private, academic, military, and non-profit sectors. Every organization has its own culture and applies servant leadership principles in its own way. For-profit companies that have implemented servant leadership principles have been financially successful. Many have also been on the *Fortune* magazine list of "The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America." Those companies include Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, The Container Store, Aflac, and Synovus Financial. While surprising to some people, there are military leaders who promote servant leadership. They focus on taking care of their troops.

III. Why Does Servant Leadership Work So Well?

Empirical research and anecdotal evidence make it clear that servant leadership works. But why does it work *so well*?

The short answer is that servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They identify and meet the needs of their colleagues so they can perform at their highest levels. They identify and meet the needs of their customers so that they will be truly served. Colleagues perform well, and customers get what they need.

The longer answer is that servant leadership works so well because servant leaders live the service model of leadership, not the power model; they rely on Theory Y assumptions instead of Theory X assumptions; they get beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation; they promote meaning at work; and they utilize a series of effective key practices. All of these things contribute to the success of servant leaders. Let's look at each of these ideas in turn.

The Service Model of Leadership

I see two major models or ideas about leadership in the world. I call them the power model of leadership and the service model of leadership. They are very different. The power model of leadership is about acquiring and wielding personal power. It is about using people. The service model of leadership is about making a difference in the lives of others. It is about serving people.

Servant leaders live the service model. The service model arises out of love for others and the leader's desire to serve them. It assumes that the leader doesn't know it all; the leader consults with others, and works with teams. The focus is not on the leader, the focus is on identifying and meeting the needs of others. Power is only a tool; it is a means and not an end.

The service model is good for the leader because the leader is not isolated, but is "first among equals" on a team. Leadership is shared, reducing the hazards and burdens of the individual leader. The leader finds meaning in helping individuals and organizations to grow.

The service model is good for the organization because individuals grow in their capacity to serve and perform at their highest levels. Research shows that teams led by servant leaders are more effective. Servant leaders create environments in which there is more commitment, creativity, and voluntary "pitching in" to get the work done. There is greater job satisfaction.

The service model is good for society because servant-led institutions identify and address real needs. Servant-led institutions respect all stakeholders, and strive to make a difference in the lives of those they serve. Servant-led institutions promote a more just, caring, productive, sustainable society.

So this is the first reason that servant leadership works so well. Servant leaders live the service model of leadership, which results in higher performance for individuals and greater good for society at large.

Theory X and Theory Y

Another reason servant leadership works so well is that servant leaders hold Theory Y assumptions about people in the workplace. These assumptions draw out the best in their colleagues.

Douglas McGregor was a Professor of Management at MIT. In 1960 he published his classic book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*.⁶ He noted that our assumptions about people affect how we try to lead them. He coined “Theory X” and “Theory Y” to describe two sets of assumptions about people in the workplace.

Theory X assumptions are that most people dislike work and will avoid it if they can. Because they don’t like work, most people must be coerced, controlled, or threatened with punishment to get them to work toward the achievement of organizational objectives. Most people want to be directed, and want to avoid responsibility. They have little ambition. They just want to be secure.

Theory Y assumptions are very different. Theory Y assumes that work is as natural as play or rest. The threat of punishment is not the only way to get people to work. People will exercise self-direction and self-control in working toward organizational objectives when they are committed to them. Commitment to objectives is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement, and those rewards can be intangible. Most people learn not only to accept but to seek responsibility. A lot of people have the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in solving organizational problems.

McGregor said that unfortunately, under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potential of most people is only partially utilized. That’s because Theory X managers hold people back. Theory X managers think employees are lazy, indifferent, unwilling to take responsibility, uncreative, and uncooperative. As a result, managers don’t let employees contribute their best work, and then they blame employees for not contributing their best work. They say that poor performance is the employees’ fault.

Theory Y managers see things differently. They think that employees have a lot of potential. If employees are not contributing their best work, it is management’s fault. Managers need to help employees contribute and realize their full potential. That’s management’s job.

Servant leadership works so well because servant leaders have Theory Y assumptions about people at work. They respect their colleagues, believe in their potential, and help them to contribute their best work.

Meaning, Motivation, and Productivity

Another reason that servant leadership works so well is that servant leaders focus on intrinsic motivation. People who are intrinsically motivated perform better than those who are extrinsically motivated.

Extrinsic motivation is about what you *have* to do, not what you *want* to do. The task needs to be done, but it is not fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. Managers therefore offer incentives or threats of punishment to get the task done. They tell people that if you do *this*, you will get *that*. And *that* is a reward not related to the work itself.

Intrinsic motivation is the opposite. It is about what you *want* to do, not what you *have* to do. People are intrinsically motivated when they do something because it *is* fun, interesting, fulfilling, or meaningful. When you are intrinsically motivated, the work itself is your reward.

One of the most-read articles in the history of the *Harvard Business Review* was an article by Frederick Herzberg published in 1968 titled: “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?”⁷ Herzberg argued that some factors are “hygiene factors” and others are “intrinsic motivators.”

Hygiene factors are company policy and administration, supervision, relationship with the supervisor, work conditions, salary, relationships with peers, personal life, relationships with subordinates, status, and security. These factors are the primary cause of extreme *dissatisfaction* on the job. Employers need to get these factors right so that employees will not be *dissatisfied*.

However, more and better hygiene factors will not produce extreme satisfaction—only intrinsic motivators will do that. Those intrinsic motivators include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth. The hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators are *not* the opposite of each other; they represent different needs.

In his research, Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas identified four intrinsic rewards at work: a sense of choice, a sense of competence, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense of meaning. He said that “a sense of *meaningfulness* is the opportunity you feel to pursue a worthy task purpose... that you are on a valuable mission, that your purpose matters in the larger scheme of things.”⁸ People who find meaning in their work are intrinsically motivated.

Common sense tells us that if you find meaning in your work and you are intrinsically motivated, you will be able to do more, and do it better, for longer. Dr. Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, explored this issue in his research. He separated prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation to study their effects (if any) on each other. He defined prosocial motivation as the desire to benefit or help others—to serve a greater purpose. He said that intrinsic motivation comes from interest in the work or the enjoyment of doing the work.

Dr. Grant studied 140 workers at a telephone call center and 58 employees at a fire department. He focused on the issues of persistence, performance, and productivity. He concluded that “employees display higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity when they experience prosocial and intrinsic motivations in tandem.”⁹ His conclusion supports Greenleaf’s definition of servant leadership. Greenleaf said that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, to benefit others (prosocial motivation), and he emphasized growth and meaning (intrinsic motivation). Grant’s research supports the idea that servant leadership results in higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

Meaning at Work

Another reason that servant leadership works so well is that servant leaders enhance meaning at work. Meaningful work was central to Greenleaf’s business ethic. He said: “the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work. Put another way, the business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customer.”¹⁰

Fortunately, there is a lot of meaning to be found at work. When we go to work each day, we help people to get what they need— food, clothing, shelter, education, work space, equipment, information, recreation, healthcare, spiritual growth, and so on. When we help people get what they need, we make a difference in their lives—we improve the quality of their lives and may even save their lives. That should give us a lot of meaning at work.

How important is meaning at work? Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden interviewed 135 people who work in a variety of occupations in the United Kingdom and published their results in an article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* titled “What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless.” They said:

Researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions... Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction.”¹¹

Because meaning is so important, servant leaders do whatever they can to create an environment in which meaning is enhanced for their colleagues. Servant-leaders find meaning in the work of others and share that meaning with them. Servant-leaders seek to redesign work to make it more meaningful.

That meaning often comes from connecting work with the personal lives and values of the workers. Bailey and Madden said:

In experiencing work as meaningful, we cease to be workers or employees and relate as human beings, reaching out in a bond of common humanity to others... For organizations seeking to manage meaningfulness, the ethical and moral responsibility is great, since they are bridging the gap between work and personal life.¹²

One leader who focused on purpose and meaning as a way of lifting her colleagues and her company was Cheryl Bachelder, the CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen from 2007 to 2017. The restaurant chain had \$2.4 billion in sales and over 2,187 restaurants in 27 countries. Sales and profits had been declining for years. But six years after Bachelder assumed leadership, sales had climbed 25%, market share had grown from 14 to 21%, profitability was up by 40%, and the stock price was up 450%.

In her book, *Dare to Serve*, Bachelder said that one important step she took was to invite the company’s leaders to develop a personal purpose that gave meaning to their work. She said that it was the leader’s responsibility to bring purpose and meaning to the work of the organization. Popeyes conducted workshops that took team members through several exercises regarding their life experiences, values, strengths, and action plans. She said: “At Popeyes, leaders who have an action plan for their personal purpose are having more impact on the business. Personal purpose leads to sustained superior performance.”¹³

Servant leadership works so well because servant leaders enhance meaning at work. They understand that when people find meaning, they are intrinsically motivated, perform at higher levels, and find greater satisfaction in their work.

Key Practices

Finally, servant leadership works so well because of specific leadership practices. Those practices include self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight.¹⁴

Listening is a good example. Robert Greenleaf believed that listening is the premier skill of a servant-leader. Greenleaf said that “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*.”¹⁵ Servant-leaders don’t begin with their own knowledge, programs, products, or facilities. They begin by asking: What are your wants? What are your needs? What are your hopes? What are your dreams? How can I help?

Listening is how servant-leaders identify the needs of colleagues and customers so that they can address their needs. It’s how they link up and are able to solve problems and seize opportunities. Their listening activities can include observation, face-to-face conversations, interviews with colleagues and customers, surveys and suggestion boxes, discussion groups and focus groups, market research, and community needs assessments.

Ella Heeks was good at listening. When she graduated from Oxford University, she was invited to become the manager of an organic vegetable box delivery service in England. The company was struggling. Heeks had no business experience and had not studied business in school. However, she was able to increase revenues by forty times, and after seven years of her leadership, her company was recognized by the *Financial Times* as one of the 15 best places to work in the United Kingdom.

How did she do it? She listened. For example, she listened to the company drivers. She told the drivers that the company needed more customers, and they said okay, but first, why don’t we try to sell more to the customers we already have? She agreed, and the company grew. Later, when they were ready to add new customers, the drivers told her that they drove through a lot of neighborhoods and would recommend the ones they thought were most promising. She listened, and the company grew.

When the company grew to the point that it had thirty drivers, Heeks thought maybe it would be good for the drivers to have a foreman to make sure that their

needs were being met. She had somebody in mind, but decided to ask the drivers who they thought would be good in that role. In an anonymous vote, 29 of the 30 drivers voted for the same person. It was not the person Heeks had in mind. What she learned was that it was the person who spent time with new drivers to teach them the tricks of the trade. It was the person who took over the routes of other drivers when they were sick, or when they needed time off to see their children perform in a school play. In short, it was the person who was a servant leader. She appointed him, and the company continued to grow.

Juana Bordas explored the leadership ideas of Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans in her book, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*. She interviewed John Ecohawk, a member of the Pawnee Nation, who said: “Listening is what I do first... to reflect on what people are saying... to discern the meaning behind their words. Then I can see the common ground and unifying themes and bring people together.”¹⁶

Howard Behar was one of the three people who built Starbucks from about 28 stores to about 15,000 stores. As the company grew, he served as President of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International. During those years, he had two words framed on his wall: COMPASSIONATE EMPTINESS. That is how he tried to listen. The word “compassionate” reminded him how important it was to care about the speaker and what was being said, and the word “emptiness” to remind him to temporarily empty himself of his own thoughts and opinions so that he was fully listening.

Conclusion

We know from anecdotal evidence and empirical research that servant leadership not only works, it works *very well*. That’s because servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They live the service model of leadership, not the power model. They hold Theory Y assumptions about people, not Theory X assumptions, and they go beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation. They focus on meaning at work, and are meaning makers for others. They implement effective key practices like listening.

It is important that servant leadership works very well, because servant leadership works for *everyone*. It benefits not just individuals and organizations but society as a whole. Servant leaders make the world a better place for *all* of us.

Notes

¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Atlanta, Georgia: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1970/2008). See also, Kent M. Keith, ed., *The Contemporary Servant as Leader* (Atlanta, Georgia: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016). *The Contemporary Servant as Leader* is a lightly edited version of Greenleaf's original essay that is designed to be easier to read. It also includes comments on sections of the essay by leaders in the servant leadership movement.

² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

³ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴ Dr. Bob Liden, professor of management at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is a leading researcher and scholar on servant leadership. You can find his "highlights of scientific research on servant leadership" on the website www.toservefirst.com. An annotated list of servant leadership books, essays, and articles can also be found there.

⁵ Suzanne Peterson, Benjamin Galvin, and Donald Lange, "CEO servant leadership: Exploring executive characteristics and firm performance," *Personnel Psychology*, 65, 565-596.

⁶ Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960/2006).

⁷ Frederick Herzberg, "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1987.

⁸ Kenneth W. Thomas, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy and Commitment* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2000).

⁹ Adam Grant, "Does Intrinsic Motivation Fuel the Prosocial Fire? Motivational Synergy in Predicting Persistence, Performance, and Productivity," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93, No.1 (2008), 48-58.

¹⁰ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 142.

¹¹ Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden, “What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless,” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Summer 2016, 53.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³ Cheryl Bachelder, *Dare to Serve: How to Drive Superior Results by Serving* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018).

¹⁴ Kent M. Keith, *The Case for Servant Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: Terrace Press, 2012). Chapter 4 has a more complete discussion of the seven key practices.

¹⁵ Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, 17.

¹⁶ Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).