

Love Them Anyway

**A paper presented
by Dr. Kent M. Keith
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Conference on Servant Leadership:
Serving, Leading, Growing**

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Good morning! Thank you for the honor of speaking to you today. This is an exciting conference, and I am delighted to be part of it. Let me add my congratulations to Viterbo University on the twentieth anniversary of its Master of Arts in Servant Leadership program. That's a wonderful accomplishment!

I am passionate about servant leadership. I have no doubt that it is the best way to lead, and the best way to be led. It is wonderful to see the results of empirical research on the effectiveness of servant leadership in the workplace. At the 2021 Servant Leadership Summit, Dr. Bob Liden, a highly respected leadership scholar, reported that there is so much research on servant leadership now that there are meta-studies, or studies of the studies. Dr. Liden said that the meta-studies show that servant leadership outperforms other leadership approaches in explaining key outcomes such as job performance, citizenship behavior, creativity, organizational commitment, and engagement. Servant leadership is a win-win approach in which employees flourish while at the same time revenue and profits grow. Servant leadership works in times of crisis, and it is effective in motivating even employees who are high in self-interest to also engage in serving and helping others.¹ In short, servant leadership works. It is encouraging to see what servant leadership practitioners and researchers are accomplishing all over the world.

Last month, much to my surprise, I turned 75. I guess I saw it coming. My wife mentioned that it was going to happen. All I can say is that the years have gone by quickly. I am now at that stage of life in which it feels natural to look back and reflect on what I have learned about life and leadership, and what might be worth passing along to others. I am grateful for the wisdom that has been passed on to me by family members, teachers, and mentors, and I would like to try to do the same for others.

I realize that you have your own valuable insights and experiences which may be different from mine. I simply hope that what I say this morning may be helpful in some way to each of you as you move forward on your own unique journeys.

The Paradoxical Commandments

When I look back, I look all the way back to the late 1960s, when I was a college student. The sixties were a time of conflict and confrontation, but also a time of idealism and hope. I was in favor of change, and I thought that we could work together to achieve positive and lasting change in our schools and society at large. So I flew around the country and gave more than a hundred speeches at high schools and high school student council conventions in eight different states.

What discouraged me was that many students went out into the world to bring about change, and then gave up too soon, because the change they sought didn't occur, or people didn't appreciate what they were trying to do. I had two messages for them. First, you have to love people, because change takes time, and love is one of the only motivations that is strong enough to keep you with the people and with the process until change is achieved. Second, I told them that if you go out into the world and do what you think is right, and good, and true, then you should get a lot of meaning and satisfaction. If people appreciate you, that's great, but if they don't, that's okay. You still have the meaning. That should be enough to sustain you. If you have the meaning, you don't have to have the glory.

In 1968, when I was 19, a sophomore in college, I published a little leadership book for high school student leaders. It was titled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*.² That was the book for which I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments of Leadership, which subsequently spread around the world and have been used by millions of people. They are on the bookmarks that are in your conference packets. The first Paradoxical Commandment is "People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway."

I had some strong words for student leaders back then. I told them that if they didn't care whether they helped or hurt people, they should resign. I told them that if they didn't have a deep feeling for the welfare of the people they were supposed to be leading, they should *stop leading*. I said that they should be interested in what others think, how they feel, what's important to them, and what they need. They should be sensitive to the people around them and want to help

them when they discover appropriate ways to do so. I called it brotherly love, a concern for all people, or people-consciousness.

That's what I said in 1968, when I was 19, a college sophomore. That was what I was taught by my family and my faith. That is what I believed, that is what I wrote, and that is what I said in more than a hundred speeches during my college years.

In the fifty-five years since then, I have worked for nine different organizations in the public sector, the private sector, the nonprofit sector, and the academic sector. I was an attorney, the head of a state government agency, a high tech park developer, a YMCA executive, president of two private universities, and CEO of two nonprofit organizations. Through it all, I have done my best to learn about leadership and grow as a leader. It has been a humbling process.

Based on those fifty-five years of experience, what have I concluded? I have concluded that my family and my faith taught me right. *They taught me right.* You gotta love 'em anyway. I am even more certain today than I was back then.

We don't use the word "love" very often at work. It seems to make people uncomfortable, perhaps because the word has so many meanings. The meaning I have in mind is an attitude of goodwill toward others, concern for the good of others, as well as benevolence and a commitment to others. But it's fine with me if we all use words like caring, compassion, empathy, and understanding to express the idea of love.³

In his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Robert Greenleaf said:

Love is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability! As soon as one's liability for another is qualified *to any degree*, love is diminished by that much.⁴

I believe that love is unconditional. Loving people does not mean agreeing with people or approving of their behavior. Love is deeper than agreement or approval. If it is *not* deeper than agreement or approval, it is not love.

I agree that loving people is not easy. Not everyone is lovable. Some people are remarkably irritating. Others are committed to being difficult. So what? You don't want to limit your life by limiting your love. You don't want to limit your

leadership by limiting your love. No matter how others behave, you can still love them. It is the right thing to do, and it turns out to be the place where effective servant leadership begins.

Why love is important

Why is that? Why is love the starting point for effective servant leadership? I can think of six reasons.

First, when we love people, we want to help them in appropriate ways. We want to be of service. Robert Greenleaf said that servant leadership begins with the desire to serve, and I believe that the desire to serve is generated by love.

Second, love is one of the only motivations that is strong enough to sustain us as leaders. Leading others can be stressful and draining. Our love can keep us going.

Robert Greenleaf wrote about the importance of *entheos*, which he translated as “possessed of the spirit.” He said that *entheos* is the power actuating the person who is inspired. He pointed out that we need the sustaining power of *entheos* because life has its ups and downs. He saw *entheos* as the force that can hold us together under stress. Greenleaf encouraged servant leaders to be “spirit carriers.”⁵

For me, love is that *entheos*, that spirit, that sustaining power. Love can motivate and energize us as we continue to identify and meet the needs of others. The servant leaders that I have been privileged to know truly love people. They find meaning and deep happiness by loving and helping others.

Third, when we love others, we want to get to know them. We want to connect with them. We want to build authentic relationships with them—the kinds of relationships that are so important when leading others.

Fourth, when we love others, we want to treat them right. We want to be ethical. We want to see them as people, not cogs in a machine or a box in the organizational chart. We look for ways to support them and help them grow and be productive.

Fifth, when we love people, we want to do *more*, and we want to do *better*. We adopt a higher standard of service.

One of my favorite stories is the story of Nurse Bryan, told by Peter Drucker in his book, *The Effective Executive*. Nurse Bryan was a long-serving nurse at a hospital. Whenever the staff came up with a decision on patient care, she would ask: “Are we doing the best we can do to help this patient?” Patients on Nurse Bryan’s floor did better and recovered faster. Over the years, the whole hospital adopted what came to be known as “Nurse Bryan’s Rule.” When the staff thought they had worked out a solution, somebody would ask: “Would this have satisfied Nurse Bryan?” If the answer was no, the staff would start the discussion all over again, keeping at it until they had a new and better solution to the problem.⁶ That’s what love does. It keeps pushing us to do better.

Sixth, when we love people, we become our best. We become more giving, more patient, more kind. We become a gift to others. We become the kind of person that others want to follow.

Bringing love into the workplace

So love is the starting point for effective servant leadership. The good news is that most of us *do* love people. We may not love enough people, or we may not love them well enough, but most of us *do* love people.

We know that love is important in our private lives. The challenge is to bring our love into the workplace. How do we do that in a way that is appropriate? I think the answer is simple. We do it through actions and decisions that help our colleagues and stakeholders to do and be their best. There is the old saying that people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. How much you care should be demonstrated in tangible ways that truly help people.

So that’s what I will be talking about this morning. I will suggest eight things you can do to demonstrate that you care about your colleagues and stakeholders. I am not always good at these things myself, but I do my best, because I have learned that they are very important.

Here are my eight suggestions. First, get to know the people you lead, and let them get to know you. Second, try to understand their work, and what their daily work life is like. Third, be ethical. Treat people right. Fourth, create strong communities at work. Fifth, help people grow. Sixth, help people find meaning at work. Seventh, look beyond the workplace for ways to help your colleagues. And eighth, care about everyone the organization touches—all of its stakeholders. In

my experience, these ideas will help your colleagues to be more productive and will make you more effective as a leader.

1. *Get to know the people you lead*

The first thing you can do to demonstrate that you care about your colleagues is to get to know them, and let them get to know you.

Whatever organization you are leading, it is likely that you will be leading people of different backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, ages, genders, abilities, skills, preferences, personalities, hopes, dreams, wants, and needs. Who are they? How do you get to know them?

You can get to know people through social events, or occasional chats in the coffee room. You can ask people to share about themselves at staff meetings. At one organization where I worked, each meeting would begin with a colleague sharing a favorite poem or story or event in the life of the colleague that was meaningful to him or her.

In addition to informal ways, you may be in a position to review their personnel files and learn about their educational backgrounds and work histories. You can also sit down with your colleagues, one-on-one or in small groups, and chat. Ask them about themselves. Are they willing to tell you about their families, their hobbies, their hopes for the future? What brought them to the organization? What do they like the best about their jobs? What would make things better? What would they like to learn?

I did this once when I was the director of a state agency. There were 185 of us in the department, and 180 were willing to sit down and chat with me for fifteen minutes each. One result of our chats was the creation of individual learning plans which made sure that each colleague had a learning opportunity during the year. The learning opportunity might be as simple as attending a lecture or seminar, or participating in a book club, or travelling to a conference. The chats I had with my colleagues also helped me to create task forces within the department that brought together people from different divisions and offices to focus on a specific issue or opportunity. Many of them had never met before, even though they had been in the department for many years.

You can also hire independent consultants to survey your colleagues and report the aggregate findings. How do they feel about their work? Their working

conditions? Their pay? Their benefits? Their leaders? Anonymous surveys can provide insight. There are some things that people will be reluctant to tell you in any other way.

Fortunately, we know some basic things about people in organizations. Most people want to be respected, included, consulted, and informed. They want the time, training, equipment, and resources to do their jobs well. They want a positive work environment. They want to be treated fairly. They want appropriate pay and benefits. They want to do work that makes a difference.

People also want their efforts to be noticed. It doesn't have to be a big public award. It can be as simple as a message or a phone call to tell a colleague that you appreciate his or her work. It can be a nod to a colleague in the hallway, or stopping for a quick chat. We can do what has been referred to as "managing by wandering around." We can go to meet people in their offices instead of ours. The photos and souvenirs in their offices can lead to conversations.

Many years ago, I was a project manager on a construction project. I had a secretary, and I worked with a team of engineers and consultants. When it came time for me to do the annual evaluation of the team secretary, I took the time to do more than check the boxes on the form that the company provided. I wrote paragraphs about things I thought she did well and areas in which I thought she could grow and do better. Overall, I thought it was a very positive evaluation. I handed it to her and went to lunch.

When I came back from lunch, I saw her sitting at her desk, holding the evaluation in her hands, with tears in her eyes. I felt awful. I told her I was sorry, I meant it to be a positive evaluation. She said no, you don't understand. This is the first time in all the years I have been at work that anybody took the time to really notice what I do and provide me with specific feedback. When she told me that, I felt even worse. She was a good person, doing good work, and she deserved to be noticed and appreciated.

Research suggests that our happiness depends less on how much money we make, and more on the respect we receive from others. Being recognized by others means that we belong. It makes us feel better. It improves our health. We feel less stress, we sleep better, and we recover more quickly from illness. We also feel more competent, which has a positive impact on our motivation to do a good job.⁷

In addition to knowing more about the people you lead, you should help them to know more about you. As a leader, you need to connect with people. In their book, *A Leader's Legacy*, Kouzes and Posner point out that you can build a resonant connection with your colleagues if you are willing to share your values, beliefs, goals, hopes, and dreams. What are you like as a person? What motivates you? What makes you happy, and what makes you angry? Do you have a family? Do you have hobbies? Do you have any unusual habits or idiosyncrasies?

Kouzes and Posner say: “This isn’t about prying. This is about learning to trust. We are just more likely to trust people we know, and the more we know about our leaders the more likely we are to trust them as human beings.”⁸ You can set your own boundaries, but make sure you share information about yourself so that others can get to know you.

Of course, everything you say and do gives people clues about who you really are. I think the best advice here is pretty simple. If you want to build trusting relationships, don’t stand on a pedestal. When you make a mistake, admit it and correct it. When you unintentionally hurt somebody, apologize and try to make it right. When people are helpful, say thank you. Above all, don’t take yourself too seriously. Be willing to laugh at yourself. Be teasing. When people tease you, it can be a sign of affection. Let the joke be on you. Then you can enjoy the joke along with everyone else.

Basically, be a real person, not a cardboard cutout. Love the people you lead, and give them the opportunity to love you, too.

2. *Understand your colleague's work*

The second way to demonstrate that you really care about your colleagues is to do your best to understand the work they do and what their daily life is like at work. When you learn more about the work your colleagues are doing, you should use that feedback and insight to improve their working conditions. You may even be able to redesign the work so that your colleagues can be more productive.

As a leader, it can be easy to get too far away from the daily work of the people who actually create and deliver the programs, products, and services of your organization. It is easy to have no idea what your colleagues are doing. One of my favorite satirical *New Yorker* cartoons shows a manager walking through an office with dozens of employees working at their desks. He pats one employee on

the back as he walks past and says: “Keep up the good work, whoever you are, whatever you’re doing!”

A friend of mine, Dave Heenan, had the idea of being an undercover boss long before the TV show *Undercover Boss* was launched. Dave is a business leader, scholar, and author of a number of books, including *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships*.⁹ When his company acquired the Pizza Hut franchise in his area, he realized that he needed to learn about the pizza business. He got himself signed up as a new employee at one of the stores, where he learned to make the dough, serve the customers, and do deliveries. It went well for four or five days, until one of his co-workers figured out who he was. The gig was up, but Dave had learned a lot about the working lives of his colleagues.

Sometimes, you may not have the knowledge or expertise to truly understand what your colleagues are doing even when they explain it to you. But you can still show that you care about them and their work. That’s something that I learned from Dr. Daniel Frost Comstock.

When I was a freshman in college, I worked part-time for Dr. Comstock as his chauffeur. I was eighteen and he was in his eighties. His mind was alive but his body was no longer working well. He found it difficult to walk and could no longer climb stairs. His esophagus was not working, which made it hard for him to swallow and keep his food down. I drove the car and helped him go out to eat at restaurants. It was a challenge, because we had to find places with no stairs. It was before the Americans with Disabilities Act so there were few ramps.

We became friends, and he shared some of his experiences. I learned that he was the co-founder of the Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation. Technicolor was the most widely used color motion picture process in Hollywood from 1922 to 1952. We take color films for granted, but before Technicolor, movies were black and white. Technicolor was a big breakthrough.

Dr. Comstock said that he was the manager of the process when Technicolor was being developed. He didn’t understand everything the team was doing to create color films, but he dropped by the lab every day to show his support. “I just showed up to let them know their work was important,” he said. “I wasn’t calling the shots. I was just showing my support. I was just there to encourage them.”

Dr. Comstock was a physicist and engineer who had studied at MIT, Berlin, Zurich, Basel, and the University of Cambridge. He taught at MIT. He was a

highly qualified engineer, but he didn't understand everything the team was doing. So he led by encouraging instead of controlling.

He shared another lesson. He said that you can lead people who are doing technical work that you don't understand. How do you do that? You ask them what they need to do their work, and then you do your best to get it for them. You ask them: How can I help you to be effective? Maybe they need you to run interference with the internal bureaucracy, or maybe they need more resources. That was his second leadership lesson— you can lead by getting people the things they need to be effective.

3. *Be ethical— treat people right*

The third way you can demonstrate that you really care about your colleagues is to be ethical. When we love people, we don't want to hurt them. We want to treat them right.

People come together in organizations to achieve things they cannot achieve alone. It's about getting the work done. Ethical behavior makes it possible for us to get the work done in productive, satisfying ways. It is important that leaders understand ethics and thoughtfully address ethical issues, because people look to their leaders as examples of how to live and work ethically. By their own behavior, leaders establish standards and expectations for their colleagues.

What are the characteristics of an ethical leader? Peter Northouse, in his book, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, says that ethical leaders respect others, serve others, show justice, manifest honesty, and build community.¹⁰ Leadership experts Kouzes and Posner asked 75,000 people around the world what they look for and admire in a leader. The top-ranked characteristic over a twenty-year period was honesty.¹¹ People want to follow someone who is truthful, ethical, and principled.

The good news is that doing the right thing is also the effective thing. What is ethical turns out to be practical.

For example, when you treat people fairly, they respond in positive, productive ways. Research by Mark Ehrhart that was published in *Personnel Psychology* in 2004,¹² and research by Fred Walumbwa, Chad Hartnell, and Adegoke Oke that was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2010,¹³ described how servant leaders encourage positive organizational citizenship

behaviors. Basically, servant leaders establish a fair workplace and create a service climate at work. The result is that employees are willing to give back. They go above and beyond their job descriptions by pitching in to do whatever needs doing.

This willingness to “pitch in to get the work done” is exceptionally important in light of the problem of employee disengagement. I think that this is one of the most extraordinary facts of organizational life— the fact that so many employees are disengaged. This greatly reduces organizational productivity.

The Gallup organization surveys employees worldwide, and divides them into three groups—engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged. Typically, the annual Gallup surveys indicate that about 20% of employees are engaged. “Engaged” employees work with passion and feel a proud connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward. Typically, about 60% of employees are “not engaged.” They are essentially “checked out.” They’re sleepwalking through their workday, putting time— but not energy or passion— into their work. Then there are the 20% who are “actively disengaged.” These employees aren’t just unhappy at work, they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers work against the organization, undermining what their engaged co-workers accomplish.

The cost of employee disengagement throughout the world is estimated by Gallup to be \$8.8 trillion per year in lost productivity.¹⁴ The cost in the United States alone may be anywhere between \$450 billion and \$550 billion per year.¹⁵ I find this astonishing. Gallup points out that converting employees into engaged workers is the most effective strategy that any organization can implement if it wants to increase performance and sustainable long-term growth.

There is another challenge, and that is employee turnover. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 5.7 million Americans left their jobs in the month of April 2023, and 3.8 million of those were voluntary separations.¹⁶ Not only is there a lot of turnover, the turnover can happen quickly. A survey of 1,500 employees in the United States in 2018 found that a third of the employees who were surveyed quit their jobs within the first ninety days.¹⁷

The cost of turnover is estimated to be very high. The cost to replace a salaried employee who receives \$60,000 per year is typically six to nine months of their salary, or \$30,000 to \$45,000. This includes the cost of hiring, onboarding, and lost productivity.¹⁸ It is estimated that in 2022, the overall cost of voluntary employee turnover in the United States amounted to over \$1 trillion.¹⁹

According to one survey, the most common reason that people give for leaving their jobs is the desire to earn more money, but other reasons include having frustrating co-workers and unhelpful management. Others say that the position didn't align with the expectations built during the job application process.

Positive factors for employee retention are a flexible work environment, adequate compensation, recognition for achievements, useful benefits, opportunities for career growth, and maintaining a proper work-life balance.²⁰ It's not surprising that higher levels of employee engagement can reduce employee turnover. One source reported that highly engaged employees are 87% less likely to leave.²¹ So these issues, engagement and retention, are closely connected.

Servant leadership can make a big difference here. For example, research on employees at a restaurant chain revealed that they were less likely to leave their restaurant if their leaders were servant leaders who created a serving culture at work.²² Other studies have shown that servant leadership is positively related to employee job satisfaction, which is an important factor in employee retention.²³ Research by Robert C. Liden, Sandy J. Wayne, Hao Zhao, and David Henderson that was published in the *Leadership Quarterly* in 2008 suggested that servant leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization.²⁴

Research on servant leadership and work engagement conducted by Dirk De Clercq, Dave Bouckenoghe, Usman Raja, and Ganna Matsyborska, published in the *Human Resource Development Quarterly* in 2014, concluded that "employees who perceive higher levels of servant leadership in their supervisor exhibit stronger work engagement."²⁵ Research by Emilie Lapointe and Christian Vandenberghe that was published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* in 2018 concluded that servant leaders provide employees with positive and satisfying work experiences. As a result, employees have a sense of emotional attachment to the organization, as well as feelings of obligation toward the organization and an awareness of the costs if they were to leave the organization.²⁶

So employee engagement is an area in which servant leaders excel. If you treat people right, you can engage them and lead them to much higher levels of productivity.

4. *Create strong communities at work*

The fourth way to demonstrate that you really care about your colleagues is to create a strong community at work. Communities provide “social inclusion,” and social inclusion is important to human health. The loneliness epidemic was underway before the pandemic, which of course made it worse. According to U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, a lack of social connections *in the workplace* has contributed to the loneliness epidemic.²⁷

Dr. Murthy believes that loneliness is as profound a public health problem as smoking and obesity. He estimates that half of all adults in the United States experience loneliness, which affects mental and physical health, including a greater risk of depression, anxiety, heart disease, stroke, and dementia. Loneliness can lead to chronic stress, which in turn causes inflammation that damages tissues and blood vessels. Social disconnection is similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is an even greater risk for premature death than obesity and physical inactivity. Loneliness is a killer.

In addition to the health risks, there are performance issues. When employees are lonely, they become disconnected from their groups, have trouble focusing, and have less desire to succeed. That means that they become less capable of doing their jobs.²⁸ So building communities at work can reduce the health risks and also improve the performance of your colleagues.

One of the best things you can do to build a community at work is to help your colleagues to develop workplace friendships. Dr. Ron Friedman, in his book, *The Best Place to Work*, cites the research that concluded that workplace friendships are a strong predictor of productivity. Friedman says:

Studies show that employees with a best friend at work tend to be more focused, more passionate, and more loyal to their organizations. They get sick less often, suffer fewer accidents, and change jobs less frequently. They even have more satisfied customers.²⁹

Years ago, I spent two days interviewing people at TDIndustries in Texas, a company known for applying servant leadership principles. They call their employees “partners.” What impressed me the most during my visit was the very high level of loyalty that the partners felt toward each other. They were friends, and they worked hard because they didn’t want to let each other down.

So make it easy for your colleagues to get to know each other better on a personal level. Create social events and community service opportunities. Celebrate special events in the lives of your colleagues such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations. Set up activities so that people can share hobbies, interests, and physical activities.

Studies show that with social support, people tend to be healthier both physically and psychologically.³⁰ Simon Sinek describes this kind of social support in his book, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Sinek says that the goal of leadership should be to create a culture in which people experience a Circle of Safety. He says that when you create a Circle of Safety around people, they feel valued by their colleagues and cared for by their leaders. They don't feel threats from within the group, and don't need to spend time and energy protecting themselves from each other. They feel that their leaders and colleagues are there for them and will help them to succeed.³¹

We need to create Circles of Safety in our organizations. Our colleagues will feel safer if they know that we are empathetic. Let's watch a portion of a talk given by Simon Sinek on empathy at work. [Simon Sinek- 7 minute video clip]³²

In *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf talked about the importance of acceptance and empathy. He said that great leaders have empathy and an unqualified acceptance of the people who follow them. He reminded us that there are no perfect people. However, people are capable of great dedication and heroism if they are wisely led. Greenleaf said that "people grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing."³³ Empathy and acceptance are fundamental to Circles of Safety and strong workplace communities.

5. *Help people grow*

The fifth thing you can do to demonstrate that you care about your colleagues is to help them grow. Greenleaf said that whatever business we are in, our most fundamental business should be the business of growing people. He said that the best test of servant leadership is this: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" Brene Brown, in her book, *Dare to Lead*, said something very similar. She said: "I define a leader as anyone who takes

responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.”³⁴

Years ago, I met a man at a social function and I asked him what kind of work he was involved in. He said he was in education. I asked if he worked at a school or college. He said no, he ran a fast-food outlet. Nearly all his employees were high school and college students, and for many of them, working at his store was their first job. He did his best to teach them about work—the importance of showing up on time, learning the needed skills, doing a good job, treating customers courteously, and so on. Nearly all of them left after a year or two, but by the time they left, he could see how they had grown. He was doing exactly what Robert Greenleaf and Brene Brown said. He was in the business of growing people. Incidentally, he also sold a lot of fast food and was running a successful business.

Growing people requires both challenge and support. If you only challenge people, they may crash and fail. If you only support people, they may not grow. You need to do both.

I had a teacher who was a master at challenge and support. He was my ninth-grade band director, James Uyeda. He was very demanding. We had to practice until we were perfect. Every note in a sixteenth-note run had to be exactly right. We had to listen to each other and make sure we were together as we played. We had to be good at reading music the first time it was placed in front of us. When I was in his band, I practiced and played the clarinet four hours a day. I worked hard.

Everybody knew that Mr. Uyeda was demanding. But we also knew that he would be there every day after school. His office door would be open. If we needed help with our instruments or help interpreting a passage in a piece of music, he would take the time to help us. He was also ready to talk to us about anything we wanted to talk about—the band, school, or life. The band room became a second home for a lot of us. He challenged us, but he also made it clear that he believed in us, and as the months went by, we performed better and better. We achieved things we didn’t know we could achieve. After graduating, I stayed in touch, and Mr. Uyeda became one of my lifetime mentors and friends. He continued to challenge and support me as I moved through my career.

Helping people grow and fulfill their potential can require patience. I was at an organization once that hired a young woman after she graduated from college.

Her job with us was her first full-time job. It was clear that she had a lot of potential to grow, so I started looking for additional opportunities for her. When I found one, I went to her and said, “Hey, here’s a project that we need to get done. Would you like to do it?” And she said no. So a few months later, I went to her again with another project. Again, she said no. After the fifth time, she said yes. She was ready to try something new. She grew, and the project became a bigger and bigger part of her work. It was a joy to see.

One way to help people grow is to create environments in which creativity is encouraged. That’s what servant leaders do. That was the conclusion of research by Mitchell Neubert, Michele Kacmar, Dawn Carlson, Lawrence Chonko, and James Roberts published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2008. They concluded that employees of servant-leaders were shown to be more creative than those working with leaders who scored lower on servant leadership.³⁵

Growing people is a triple win. When people grow, their capacity grows, and that’s good for them. When their capacity grows, the capacity of the organization grows, and that’s good for the organization. When the capacity of the organization grows, it can do things better or do things it was never able to do before, which is good for those the organization serves. So individuals benefit, the organization benefits, and those served benefit.

6. *Help people find meaning at work*

The sixth way to demonstrate that you really care about your colleagues is to help them find meaning at work. In a talk he gave in 1970, Greenleaf proposed a new business ethic. He defined the ethic this way: “*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.”³⁶ He said that the goal of adopting this ethic should be as important as any other goal of the business.³⁷

How important is meaning at work? Dr. Catherine Bailey and Dr. Adrian Madden interviewed 135 people in the United Kingdom who work in a variety of occupations. They published their results in an article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* titled “What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless.”³⁸ They said that the research shows that meaningfulness is more important to employees than *any other aspect of work*. It is more important to employees than pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions. Bailey and

Madden said that meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved employee performance, commitment, and satisfaction.

Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas agreed that meaningful work can be highly motivational. In his book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy and Commitment*, Dr. Thomas identified a sense of meaning as an important intrinsic reward. He said that according to the research, intrinsic rewards are consistently related to job satisfaction, performance, innovativeness, commitment to the organization, and reduced stress.³⁹ Dr. Ron Friedman agreed. He said that “studies show that the more intrinsically motivated people feel, the more creative, engaged, and energized they are while working. And what’s more, they stay motivated for longer periods of time.”⁴⁰

Dr. Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, explored the issue of motivation and performance in an article published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2008.⁴¹ In his research, Dr. Grant 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. Grant concluded that employees display higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity when they experience prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation together. In other words, when people have the desire to serve and are intrinsically motivated because they find their work to be meaningful, the result is higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

That matches what Greenleaf said about servant leadership. Greenleaf said that servant leadership starts with the desire to serve, to benefit others. That’s the prosocial motivation. Greenleaf also emphasized personal growth and meaning. That’s the intrinsic motivation. When you put the two together, you get the result that Grant observed in his research—higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

Because meaning is so important, you should do whatever you can to create an environment in which meaning is enhanced for your colleagues. Be a meaning-maker. Find meaning in the work of your colleagues and share that meaning with them. Seek to redesign work when necessary to make it more meaningful. Your

colleagues are very likely to be happier and perform at higher levels, which will in turn produce excellent results for your organization.

One leader who focused on purpose and meaning as a way of lifting her colleagues and her company was Cheryl Bachelder. Bachelder was the CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen from 2007 to 2017. At the time, the restaurant chain had \$2.4 billion in sales and 2,187 restaurants in 27 countries. Sales and profits had been declining for years. But six years after Bachelder assumed leadership, the improvement was dramatic. 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. Bachelder said that the leaders at Popeyes who had an action plan for their personal purpose were having more impact on the business. She concluded that personal purpose leads to sustained superior performance.⁴²

7. Help your colleagues beyond the workplace

Seventh, you can demonstrate that you care about your colleagues by helping them beyond the workplace.

The simple fact is that what's happening in your private life affects your work life. If you are happy in your private life, you tend to bring that happiness to work, and vice versa. As a leader, you don't want to be intrusive, but you should be open to supporting the lives of your colleagues beyond the workplace.

Here are some examples. Between 2007 and 2014, Joe Patrnchak led a successful effort to lead a change process at the Cleveland Clinic, one of the largest and most respected healthcare systems in the world. Joe commissioned a survey on employee engagement that showed that engagement was poor. In response, the clinic launched a number of programs, including a "care for the caregivers" program that established a series of new employee benefits. These benefits helped people in their lives beyond the workplace. One was an "Adoption Assistance Benefit" for staff members adopting children. Another was a "Caregiver Hardship Program" for staff members with financial emergencies. There was a "Tuition Reimbursement Program" and a "School to Work" program to help staff members complete their educations. There was also a wellness program that gave staff members free access

to Weight Watchers and Curves. Over 12,500 employees participated in the wellness program, and they lost a total of 75,000 pounds, saving the clinic \$78 million in healthcare costs. As a result of these and other efforts, employee engagement improved dramatically.

Another example is L&R Pallet Services, a Denver company with 130 employees. Years ago, they had a 300% turnover rate. Most of their employees were immigrants, and they spoke seven different languages. James Ruder, the CEO, said that in those days he treated employees as a commodity. He had to focus on recruiting and training because so many employees left so quickly. Then he discovered that his senior managers were embezzling from the company. That discovery, followed by a personal experience with his family on a mission trip to Peru, caused him to change his approach.

Ruder decided to get to know his employees and find out what was going on in their lives. He met their families and he saw how they lived. For example, he learned that one of the company's employees lived in a small room, where he slept on a blanket on the floor because he didn't have a mattress. He had a few family photos and a bag of rice. That was all.

Under Ruder's leadership, the company started supporting its employees with such things as clothing, a workshop on how to prepare your tax return, and assistance in getting driver's licenses. Ruder decided to help his employees to be successful at work by helping them to be successful in life. The idea was to come alongside them and give them more than just a paycheck. The result was that employee turnover dropped dramatically from 300% to 30%. Helping employees beyond the workplace was the right thing to do, and it made the company much more successful financially.⁴³

The story of Cheryl and Ralph Broetje is another great example. In 1968, they started Broetje Orchards, a faith-based family farm in Washington State. In 1979, there was a sudden change in the people available to work in their orchard. One reason was that the Iran oil embargo drove up gasoline prices to the point that U.S. migrant families stayed home instead of following crops around the country. In their place, young Latino men began showing up for work.

The Broetje's understood that the migrant lifestyle was not good for their employees or their families, so they redesigned the work so that more of it was year-round, reducing the need for their employees to be migrant. Year by year, they reached beyond the workplace to meet the needs of their employees and their

children. For example, they built affordable housing, a chapel, and a preschool and elementary school that provided quality education. They also established scholarships so that children could go on to college.

Their willingness to help their employees beyond the workplace was a major factor in their success. By the time they retired a few years ago, the Broetje's had over 6,000 acres of apple and cherry orchards and 2,500 employees. They were packing about 7 million boxes of apples per year. Their company was profitable, and they were donating 75% of their profits each year to their foundation, which continues to help people in need all over the world.

I have done my best to help employees beyond the workplace in the organizations I have served. For example, when the pandemic started in 2020, I was one of the leaders of an organization that had a lot of part-time employees. Many of them had a second part-time job that helped them to make ends meet. We kept everybody on payroll, but many of our part-timers lost their second part-time jobs. We knew they were struggling financially as a result. We also knew that they were not likely to ask for help. So we made an announcement, saying that financial help was available. Then we asked staff members to let us know if they discovered anybody who was struggling financially.

Word got back to us, and we wrote checks for two people. We just gave them extra money. When the checks were delivered, there were tears in the eyes of those delivering the checks as well as those receiving them. It was the right thing to do. It was the kind of thing that you do when you are willing to look beyond the workplace to care for your colleagues.

8. *Care about everyone the organization touches*

The eighth thing you can do to demonstrate that you care about people is to care about everyone your organization touches. In his essay on *Trustees as Servants*, Greenleaf said this about trustees— by which he meant board members: “Trustees are accountable to all parties at interest for the best possible performance of the institution in service of the needs of all constituencies— including society at large.”⁴⁴

Caring about *all* your stakeholders is the only truly ethical position. I define stakeholders as the people who make the organization's work possible: employees, customers, members or shareholders, lenders, vendors, and so on. They are all essential. The organization has an impact on all of them, so the organization needs

to care about all of them. The good news is that when you care about all of them, you will be more effective as a leader.

In 2020, Dr. James Lemoine and Dr. Terry Blum wrote a chapter for the book *Inspiration for Servant Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice*. In that chapter, they proposed this definition of servant leadership:

Servant leadership is composed of influence behaviors, manifested humbly and morally within relationships, oriented towards continuous and meaningful improvement for all stakeholders. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to, those being led, communities, customers, and the leader, team, and organization themselves.⁴⁵

In the private for-profit sector, the idea of caring for all stakeholders runs up against a major problem. That problem is a myth called “shareholder primacy.” This myth has caused a lot of unnecessary harm to individuals and society at large.

The shareholder primacy myth is that shareholders own the corporation, so the purpose of the corporation is to maximize shareholder wealth. To do that, corporations must give priority to shareholders over all other stakeholders. This view was promoted by Dr. Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics, beginning back in the 1970s. Business school students have told me that on their first day of class, they are taught that the purpose of a for-profit business is to maximize the wealth of shareholders. This idea has become very deeply embedded in American culture.

For example, some corporations chose their shareholders over their employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. In May 2020, two months after the pandemic began, Caterpillar had suspended operations at two plants, Levi Strauss had closed stores, toolmaker Stanley Black & Decker was planning layoffs and furloughs, and Steelcase and World Wrestling Entertainment laid off employees. *The Washington Post* said: “And as thousands of their workers were filing for unemployment benefits, these companies also rewarded their shareholders with more than \$700 million in cash dividends.”⁴⁶

Supply-line problems and the war in Ukraine made it harder to move oil around the world, but oil companies managed to use the crisis to generate huge profits. In the second quarter of 2022, two years after the pandemic began, British Petroleum posted second-quarter profits worth \$8.5 billion, while ExxonMobil reported \$17.9 billion in net income, its largest-ever quarterly profit. U.S.

company Chevron, London-based Shell, and France's TotalEnergies also recorded blockbuster results. Put together, these five major companies made \$55 billion in one quarter, as hundreds of millions of people around the world bore the brunt of surging prices at the pump.⁴⁷ When a reporter asked an oil executive why the profits were so extraordinary, his reply was that they had to take care of their shareholders.

Jacob Rose published an article in the *Journal of Business Ethics* in 2006 titled "Corporate Directors and Social Responsibility: Ethics versus Shareholder Value."⁴⁸ The participants in Rose's research were thirty-four active directors of U.S. Fortune 200 corporations, each of whom had served on an average of six boards and had an average of twenty years of management experience.

The directors were divided into two groups. One group of seventeen was asked to act as directors, and the second group of seventeen was asked to act as partners in non-traded firms that did not have responsibilities to shareholders. Both groups were presented two hypothetical cases. In one case, loopholes in the law would allow the corporation to cut down old-growth trees. In the other case, loopholes in the law would allow the corporation to emit a toxin at a high level that would threaten human health. Deciding to cut down the old-growth trees and releasing the toxin would increase earnings per share, which would be good for shareholders.

What were the results? Sixteen of the seventeen directors voted to cut down the old-growth trees, and fifteen of the seventeen directors voted to emit the toxin and threaten human health. The results were different for those who were asked to take the perspective of partners without shareholders. Only ten of the seventeen partners voted to cut down the old-growth trees, and only three of the seventeen partners voted to emit the toxin.

Rose concluded that "directors favor shareholder value over personal ethical beliefs and social good because they believe that current corporate law requires them to pursue legal courses of action that maximize shareholder value."⁴⁹ But that is not what the law requires. Corporate law does *not* require directors to maximize shareholder value. Corporations can *choose* to do that, but they are not *required* to do that.

Remember that the reason given to justify shareholder primacy is that shareholders are the owners of the corporation, so they must be given priority. However, as a matter of law, shareholders *do not* own the corporation. A

corporation is a legal person. Just as you and I own ourselves, a corporation owns itself. Shareholders don't own the corporation, they own shares. As shareholders, they have the right to vote for the board of directors. It is the board of directors that exercises the ownership rights of the corporation. The board members are the trustees or guardians of the corporation, and as trustees or guardians, they make decisions on the corporation's behalf.

Lynn Stout was a professor of corporate law at UCLA and then Cornell who studied this issue for decades. In her book, *The Shareholder Value Myth*, she pointed out that most state corporate statutes actually *reject* shareholder primacy. State laws allow boards to consider *all* stakeholders when making decisions. The statutes allow board members to serve the interests of employees, customers, creditors, and the local community as well as shareholders.⁵⁰ This is known as the business judgment rule. Boards can make whatever decision that, in their judgment, is in the best interests of the corporation. They *could* decide to give shareholders priority, but the law does not require it. Corporations are free to do what they think is in the best interests of *all* their stakeholders.

The case that is cited most often in support of shareholder primacy is *Dodge v. Ford Motor Company*, decided by the Michigan State Supreme Court in 1919.⁵¹ It is an old state supreme court case, not a U.S. Supreme Court case, and it has rarely been followed by any other court in the last one hundred years. The case is not very relevant to the issue of shareholder primacy because it was a dispute between majority and minority shareholders in what was effectively a private, closely-held corporation. It was not a dispute between shareholders and other stakeholders in a public corporation.

The biggest problem, however, is that the case supports the business judgment rule, not shareholder primacy. In its written decision, the court reviewed a number of ideas about corporations, including the idea that corporations exist to maximize shareholder wealth. However, the court's *decision* did not maximize shareholder wealth. The court awarded less than forty percent of the money to shareholders. That allowed Ford to keep the rest of the money to build a larger factory, hire more people, increase employee wages, and reduce the cost of cars so more people could buy one. The court allowed Ford to spend sixty percent of the money to benefit other stakeholders—employees and customers. In short, the case that is cited to support shareholder primacy does not support shareholder primacy. It supports the idea that boards can make decisions that benefit other stakeholders as well.

That's fortunate, because there is evidence that serving all stakeholders is good for shareholders. In 2021, Dr. James Lemoine, Dr. Nathan Eva, Dr. Jeremy Meuser, and Patricia Falotico published an article in *Business Horizons* in which they examined the stakeholder approach to leadership.⁵² They drew on more than two hundred peer-reviewed articles as well as a number of case studies. They concluded that a broad stakeholder focus that includes employees, customers, suppliers, and communities, not just shareholders, is the optimal path for successful business performance. This is important research that can be the basis for an ethical resolution to the shareholder primacy problem. It is clear that the best way to serve shareholders is to do the right thing and serve *all* stakeholders.

Conclusion

So those are eight ways that you can be an effective servant leader by demonstrating your love for people. First, get to know the people you lead, and let them get to know you. Second, try to understand their work, and what their daily life is like at work. Third, be ethical. Treat people right. Fourth, create strong communities at work. Fifth, help people grow. Sixth, help people find meaning at work. Seventh, look beyond the workplace for ways to help your colleagues. And eighth, care about everyone the organization touches—all of its stakeholders.

There are many dimensions of servant leadership that are important, but love is where it all begins. As you go about your daily life as a leader, keep asking yourself: Are we doing the most loving thing? How do we demonstrate that we really care about our colleagues and the people our organization serves? What could we do better?

I wish you all the best as you move forward on your own servant leadership journeys. I know that you will find your own unique ways to be effective leaders who help your organizations to be successful in serving others. Whatever happens, however hard or easy it may be, however wonderful or difficult people may be, I encourage you to love them. Love is where effective servant leadership begins. So let's love people. Let's love them *anyway*.

Thank you!

NOTES

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Dr. Keith is the author of fifteen books. His books on servant leadership include *The Case for Servant Leadership*; *Servant Leadership in the Boardroom: Fulfilling the Public Trust*; *Questions and Answers about Servant Leadership*; *The Christian Leader at Work: Serving by Leading*; and *Discovering Servant Leadership*. He is the editor of *The Contemporary Servant as Leader*. More information about Dr. Keith is available at www.kentmkeith.com. He can be contacted at drkentkeith@hotmail.com.

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