

**What Is Servant Leadership?  
By Dr. Kent M. Keith  
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Hello. My name is Kent Keith. In this talk, I will do my best to answer the question: what *is* servant leadership?

First, I'd like to provide some context. Servant leadership is a philosophy, a practice, and a field of study and research. Servant leadership is often referred to as a movement. We know that servant leadership principles are being implemented in various ways in the public, private, academic, military, and non-profit sectors.

The servant leadership movement is international. There are servant leadership centers and institutes around the world. As an example, there are Greenleaf Centers for Servant Leadership in the United States, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Iceland, and Singapore. People all over the world are interested in servant leadership.

Servant leadership is being taught in leadership courses in dozens of universities as well as many other organizations. There is a growing body of research on servant leadership, conducted by scholars in many countries. Practitioners and scholars have produced many useful books and research articles on servant leadership. In short, servant leadership is a diverse, well-established, active, and exciting movement.

Before going further, I'd like to disclose my biases. For the past thirty years, I have been a passionate advocate of servant leadership. There is no question in my mind that servant leadership is the best way to lead, for both the leader and those being led. I enjoy learning about, writing about, teaching about, and applying what I know about servant leadership. I am a practitioner who has worked in the public, private, nonprofit, and academic sectors. While being a practitioner, I appreciate the insights of scholars. Finally, being part of the servant leadership movement has enriched my life. I see servant leadership as a lifelong journey. Some of the finest people I have ever met are people who are also on a lifelong servant leadership journey. I am grateful to know them and share the journey with them.

So, now to the question: What is servant leadership? Servant leadership is a philosophy of leadership that is based on the desire to serve others. It is ethical, practical, and meaningful. It is ethical because it is about serving people, not using people. It is practical because servant-leaders get results. And it is meaningful because identifying and meeting the needs of others is a meaningful way to live and lead.

My experience is that there are two major models or ideas about leadership in the world. The dominant model is the power model. According to the power model, leadership is about acquiring and wielding personal power. The other model is the service model. The service model is about making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Servant-leaders live the service model of leadership. So a servant leader does not ask, "How can I get power? How can I make people do things?" The servant leader asks, "What do people need? How can I help them to get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization to do it?" Thus, rather than embarking on a quest for personal power, the servant leader embarks on a quest to identify and meet the needs of others. Servant leaders identify and meet the needs of their colleagues so they can perform at their highest levels. And they identify and meet the needs of whomever their organization serves— customers, clients, patients, members, students, or citizens—so that they will be truly served. Colleagues perform well, and customers get what they need.

Servant leadership is founded on love and service. I believe that most of us do love others. When we love others, we usually want to help them— we want to be of service in some way that is appropriate. Serving others is universally recognized as a fundamental human value.

Servant leaders have a bias, here. For the servant leaders that I know, serving others is not just one more thing on their to-do list. *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. We know that 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*, then he or she assumes leadership responsibilities, and becomes a servant-leader.

## The modern movement

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 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*. 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*. That book ranks high today on the Amazon.com list of most-purchased books on leadership.

This is how Greenleaf defined the servant leader in his classic essay:

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?”

Greenleaf focused on growing people. He said that whatever business we are in, we should be in the business of growing people. Growing people 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.

Greenleaf was also concerned about the impact that a leader's decisions have on those who he referred to as 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?”

Greenleaf believed that modern institutions could build a better society for all of us if they truly served people. In his second essay, *The Institution as Servant*, he stated what is known as his credo:

This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions— often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to *raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant* of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.

In the essay, Greenleaf introduced the important role of Boards, discussed organizational structures, described the difference between conceptual and operating talent, and argued for a team of equals instead of a single chief at the top of the organizational pyramid.

Greenleaf's third essay, *Trustees as Servants*, was about board members, whom he called trustees. He said that board members hold the charter of public trust for the institution. He described the respective functions of the board and the administration, and urged board members to be pro-active in helping their organizations to become servant institutions that care about everyone the organization touches.

For Greenleaf, the ultimate goal was to make the world a better place. Servant-leaders can help their organizations to become servant-institutions, and those servant-institutions can truly serve their employees, customers, business partners, communities, and society as a whole.

I think it is significant that Greenleaf's ideas about servant leadership grew out of his experience in the world of business. During his career at AT&T, he was dealing with practical issues in one of the world's largest companies. He saw servant leadership as the best way to get things done. It wasn't a philosophy developed in a think tank or an ivory tower. It wasn't an abstract proposition. It arose from the daily reality of a large, competitive business.

## **Characteristics of the servant leader**

Let's turn now to the characteristics of a servant leader. Of course, the most important characteristic of the servant-leader is *the desire to serve*. If you don't have the desire to serve, you will never be a servant-leader.

In addition to the desire to serve, Greenleaf mentioned other characteristics: Listening and understanding; acceptance and empathy; foresight; awareness; persuasion; conceptualization; self-healing; and rebuilding community. Greenleaf said that servant-leaders initiate action, are goal-oriented, are dreamers of great dreams, are good communicators, are able to withdraw and re-orient themselves, and are dependable, trusted, creative, intuitive, and situational.

Larry Spears, who was CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership for many years, selected ten characteristics of servant leadership: Listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Dr. James Sipe is a licensed psychologist and executive coach, and Dr. Don Frick is an author, teacher, and the biographer of Robert Greenleaf. They wrote a book titled *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*. In their book, they said that the "seven pillars" of servant leadership are: person of character, puts people first, skilled communicator, compassionate collaborator, foresight, systems thinker, and moral authority.

Juana Bordas, who served on the Greenleaf Center Board for many years, wrote a book titled *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*. She said that servant leadership is found in the cultures of Native Americans, African-Americans, and Hispanic Americans. She identified three dimensions of servant leadership in those cultures. She said that it is understood in those cultures that leadership positions are conferred by the community and belong to the community, not to the individual leader; that leaders are guardians of public values, not their personal self-interest; and that leaders are community stewards, working for the common good, not for their personal gain.

## Scholarly definitions

During the past 15 years, scholars have done a lot of exciting work on servant leadership. They have developed their own definitions of servant leadership and the characteristics of servant leaders. Let me share a few examples.

Dr. Peter Northouse is the author of a textbook titled *Leadership* that includes a chapter on servant leadership. Here is a quote from that chapter:

...servant leadership emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them. Servant leaders put followers *first*, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities... Furthermore, servant leaders are ethical... and lead in ways that serve the greater good of the organization, community, and society at large.

In his textbook, Northouse discusses the model of servant leadership that was developed by Robert Liden, Sandy Wayne, Hao Zhao, and David Henderson. They published their model in an article in 2008. They use seven domains of servant leadership in their research. Those domains are emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping followers grow and succeed, putting followers first, and behaving ethically.

Dr. Dirk van Dierendonck is a professor at Erasmus University in Holland. After surveying the servant leadership literature, he published an article in 2011 that described six characteristics of servant leadership. He said that servant-leaders empower and develop people; they show humility; are authentic; accept people for who they are; provide direction; and are stewards who work for the good of the whole.

In an article published in 2019, Dr. Nathan Eva, Dr. Mulyadi Robin, Dr. Sen Sendjaya, Dr. Dirk van Dierendonck, and Dr. Robert Liden commented that “servant leadership focuses on followers’ growth in multiple areas, such as their psychological wellbeing, emotional maturity, and ethical wisdom.” They said:

...the mindset of servant leadership... reflects that of a trustee... servant leadership is a centrifugal force that moves followers from a self-serving towards other-serving orientation, empowering them to be productive and prosocial catalysts who are able to make a positive difference in others’ lives and alter broken structures of the social world within which they operate.

In 2020, the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership published a new book, *Inspiration for Servant Leaders: Lessons from Fifty Years of Research and Practice*. Dr. James Lemoine and Dr. Terry Blum wrote an excellent chapter for the book in which they proposed this definition:

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.

So as you can see, there are many scholars at work, and they are producing many valuable insights into servant leadership.

### **What is unique about servant leadership**

We know that there are lots of ideas or theories about leadership. What makes servant leadership different from all those other ideas or theories? Based on my own reading of the scholarly literature, I believe that there are four elements that are unique to servant leadership.

First, 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.

Second, 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 while serving the organization.

Third, 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 their organization has on *all* the people their organization touches.

Fourth, 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.

I'd like to say more about humility. Some leadership gurus urge people to be assertive, to take control, to make sure people know who is in charge, to be dramatic, to bark out orders. These gurus see humility as a weakness.

And yet, research makes it clear that people respect and follow humble leaders, and humble leaders are successful. By contrast, vanity can result in bad relationships, bad decisions, and failure. Dr. Laura Reave reviewed 150 leadership studies and shared her observations in an article titled "Spiritual values and practices related to leadership effectiveness," published in 2005. She said: "in spite of all the fascination with charismatic personalities, it turns out that quiet, humble leaders who stay in the background are often the most effective." She also noted that "a major cause for executive failure identified by executives themselves is personal vanity and pride."

Jim Collins researched successful companies, and found that the most effective leaders, whom he called Level 5 leaders, were humble about themselves while being very ambitious for their businesses. In his book, *Good to Great*, he said: "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company."

### **Does it work?**

All of this is well and good, but the question that I am asked the most often is this: Does servant leadership *work*? It sounds very nice. It's very aspirational. But does it work in the real world? The answer is yes, it not only works, it works very well indeed.

For centuries, servant leaders have provided anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of servant leadership. Servant-leaders have shared their stories in speeches and books that give us insight into servant leadership in the workplace. For example, there is Jack Lowe, Jr. at TDIndustries, Howard Behar at Starbucks, Joe Patrnchak at the Cleveland Clinic, Linda Belton at the Veterans Administration, Tom Green and Mary Miller at Delphi, Ken Melrose at the Toro Company, James Autry at the Meredith Corporation, and William Turner at Synovus Financial Corporation and W. C. Bradley Company. They have all enriched the servant leadership literature.

It should also be noted that for-profit companies that have implemented servant leadership principles have been financially successful. Many companies have 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.

A good book for an overview of servant leadership in the workplace is a book by Dr. Don Frick titled *Implementing Servant Leadership: Stories from the Field*. Don went into a VA Medical Center and Peaberry’s coffee shop in Wisconsin, TDIndustries in Texas, and Community Restoration Ministries, a faith community in Cape Town, South Africa. Don did a great job of describing what servant leadership was like in each of those organizations.

So we have important stories about the real-life application of servant leadership. In addition, leadership scholars have been conducting 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.

Dr. Suzanne Peterson, Dr. Benjamin M. Galvin, and Dr. Donald Lange studied 126 chief executive officers in technology organizations in Silicon Valley. They interviewed the CEOs at length, and then classified them as founders, narcissists, or servant leaders. They found a positive relationship between servant leadership and firm performance. Companies led by servant leaders generated better financial results than companies led by founders or narcissists. The researchers said that CEOs could improve their firms’ performance if they adopted more inclusive forms of leadership, such as servant leadership, that take into account a broader number of stakeholders and that are more other-focused.

Research also suggests that servant leadership increases the profitability of for-profit corporations. Dr. Bob Liden, a professor of management at the University of Illinois at Chicago, conducted a study of 147 small and medium-

sized companies in South Korea. The study showed that as servant leadership goes up, profits go up.

Greenleaf believed that servant leaders should care about everyone the organization touches— all stakeholders. In 2020, 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. They drew on more than 200 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.

### **Why does it work?**

So, anecdotal evidence and empirical research demonstrate that servant leadership works. But *why* does it work?

Well, why *wouldn't* it work? Think about it. 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. Why wouldn't that work? When you think about it, it's pretty simple.

Of course, there are specific leadership practices that help servant leaders to be effective. For example, in my own writing and speaking, I talk about self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight. Those are seven practices that I consider to be *key* practices.

There are additional reasons that servant leaders are effective. I'd like to talk about three of them.

First, servant leaders have positive assumptions about people in the workplace, and as a result, they draw out the best in their colleagues. Second, servant leaders go beyond extrinsic motivation to emphasize intrinsic motivation, which supports higher levels of performance. Third, servant leaders promote meaning at work, which is a very important intrinsic motivator. These three assumptions and principles help servant leaders to be successful. Let's take a look at each of them.

## **Theory X and Theory Y**

First, let's talk about assumptions about people in the workplace. Years ago, Douglas McGregor was a Professor of Management at MIT. In 1960 he published his classic book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, a book that I highly recommend. McGregor 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 assumptions are 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.

Servant leadership works 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. Of course, if a colleague cannot or will not perform, that colleague will have to find happiness elsewhere. But servant leaders begin with Theory Y assumptions and they work hard to draw out the best in their colleagues. This is one reason that servant leadership works so well.

## **Motivation and high performance**

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

We all know the difference. 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 something that people enjoy doing. 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.

Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and his colleagues spent 16 years studying intrinsic motivation at work. They concluded that a sense of meaning is an important intrinsic motivator.

Meaningful work was central to Greenleaf’s business ethic. Greenleaf 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.”

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.” 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.

It makes sense 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. Grant concluded that employees display higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity when they experience prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation together.

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 proved in his research—higher levels of persistence, performance, and productivity.

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

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. 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, sales had climbed 25%, market share had grown from 14 to 21%, profitability was up by 40%, and the stock price was up 450%. The improvement was dramatic.

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. 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.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the modern servant leadership movement was launched by a businessman who concluded that the most effective leaders were servant leaders, focused on serving others. We have anecdotal evidence and empirical research that demonstrate that servant leadership works well for all stakeholders. There are key

practices that help servant leaders to be effective. Servant leaders also get good results because they hold Theory Y assumptions about people in the workplace, they promote intrinsic motivation, and they enhance the meaning and purpose that help people to perform at their highest levels.

Well, that's what I think servant leadership is. Let me add one more thing. I have no doubt that servant leadership is the most meaningful, satisfying way to lead. It's not about self-denial or self-sacrifice. It's about self-fulfillment. Servant leaders find a kind of deep happiness that is not available to other kinds of leaders. That is happiness that I wish for each of us.

Thank you!

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### **About the Presenter:**

Dr. Kent M. Keith earned a B.A. from Harvard College, an M.A. from Oxford University, a Certificate in Japanese from Waseda University, a J.D. from the University of Hawaii, and an Ed.D. from the University of Southern California. He is a Rhodes Scholar. During his career he has served as an attorney, state government official, high tech park developer, YMCA executive, and President of two private universities. From 2007 to 2012 he served as CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in the United States, and from 2012 to 2015 he served as CEO of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership (Asia) in Singapore. He is the author of a number of books and articles about servant leadership, including the best-selling *The Case for Servant Leadership*, and *Servant Leadership in the Boardroom: Fulfilling the Public Trust*. His servant leadership website is [www.toservefirst.com](http://www.toservefirst.com). He can be contacted at [drkentkeith@hotmail.com](mailto:drkentkeith@hotmail.com).