



Article from

The Stepping Stone

August 2015

Issue 59

Making a Case for Servant Leadership

By Marcel Schwantes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The term “servant leadership” might prompt a negative reaction from some insurance carrier leaders who think the philosophy is too soft for a corporate setting. But millennials entering the workforce seek companies with leaders who empower their employees, suggests executive coach Marcel Schwantes. Here he lists 10 characteristics of servant leaders.

The question is one I have heard countless times over the years in my capacity as an executive coach: “What would you say are the traits that make a great leader?”

It’s not exactly a question that can be answered while standing in line at Starbucks.

And it’s certainly a question that deserves exploration. But first, let’s acknowledge that the topic of leadership is as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon. We need to narrow it down to a proven framework that practically works. I have one: servant leadership.

Now, before you roll your eyes and grumble “that’s too soft for my corporate setting,” let me expand on what I feel is the best leadership philosophy in the world based on more than 40 years of research.

In framing this approach and winning your hearts, I hope to ultimately make a case for developing your leadership teams. But first, let me give you some really good news:

- The timeless principles of servant leadership have proven to meet the tough challenges facing those in leadership positions today, wherever your level on the org chart happens to be.
- There are proven methods, tools and resources avail-

able on how to operate like a servant leader not only in philosophy—or head knowledge—but in behavior and actions as well. (Ask me about that and I’ll be happy to share some ideas and solutions straight out of our methodology.)

- The final piece of good news is that the skills of servant leadership can be learned and applied by most people who have the will and intent to change, grow and improve. It’s no longer, “Oh, I don’t have the natural gifts of a leader,” or “I’m not a people person,” or “I’m not extraverted enough,” or “I think with my left brain.” I often hear these excuses.

The reality is everyone can learn and apply the principles of servant leadership.

If you’re keeping up with the trends, what we are finding is that organizations around the world are changing their attitudes toward leadership, people and relationships. Leadership has been written and talked about for decades, with great authors defining it in different ways, calling it different things. In the end, most of these folks have been talking about the same things—the simple truth that leadership and life are about people and relationships. Consequently, servant leadership has emerged over the last 20 or 30 years on a grand scale in some of the most admired and successful companies on the planet.

And if you remember your ninth grade history books, history tells us that during the Industrial Revolution right on up

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16



till the first half of last century, most organizations treated workers as tools or “cogs in a machine.” Workers supported those at the top of the hierarchy, who had all the control and power.

In that world of manufacturing, those early autocratic approaches worked. Leaders at the top understood market conditions and made decisions based on information that was not necessarily important to those lower-level employees on the factory assembly line, who had specific functions within the organization.

But as we entered the information age and competition became global, things changed. New forms of leadership began to emerge and take hold. We entered a new era.

Usher in a new generation of millennials who are entering the workforce, seeking more autonomy, purpose and meaning in their daily work—they are social and experiential creatures, have you heard?—and we are finding that traditional leadership no longer works. We have entered the relationship era, so collaborative leadership is now the future of business.

This is great news for servant leadership.

So, finishing up our history lesson, toward the end of the Industrial Revolution in the 20th century, there was a major shift in leadership research because of one man—Robert Greenleaf. A spectacled AT&T management trainer and tireless leadership researcher and author for more than 40 years,

he was the first to coin the term “servant leadership” in the corporate setting and is known as the founder of the modern servant leadership movement.

His most important work was published in 1970, a legendary essay titled “The Servant as Leader.” He writes, “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.”

In his research, Greenleaf realized that the organizations that thrived had leaders who acted more as supportive coaches and served the needs of both employees and organizations. As he once put it: “The organization exists for the person as much as the person exists for the organization.”

This was not a popular idea at the time. It may not even be so today.

In his essays, Greenleaf discussed the need for a better approach to leadership, one in which serving others—including employees, customers and others—was to be the highest priority of an organization. He stressed that servant leadership emphasizes a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community and the sharing of power in decision-making. These were unheard-of ideas during that time.

Greenleaf always claimed that although he was informed by his Christian ethic, servant leadership was for people of all faiths and all institutions, secular and religious.

Today, scores of colleges and universities include servant leadership in their curricula, and hundreds, if not thousands, of successful companies embrace and practice servant leadership, including some that have made *Fortune* magazine’s list of “100 Best Companies to Work For”¹ for the last five years. Here is a short list of companies that have been identified as servant leadership companies.

- SAS Institute, a software firm, was No. 1 on the list in 2011. Last year it ranked No. 2, and this year, No. 5.
- Wegmans Food Market was No. 3 in 2011 and No. 7 in 2015.
- Zappos.com, the online retailer, was No. 11 in 2012 and has been on the list consistently every year.
- Nugget Market was No. 8 in 2011 and No. 26 in 2015.
- REI, the outdoor equipment retailer, has cracked the top 10 over the years and remained in the top 100 in 2015.

In fact, one-third of the top 35 companies on 2014’s *Fortune* list practice servant leadership, according to my research. Most of these are household names: Marriott, Federal Express, Southwest Airlines, AFLAC, Starbucks, Men’s Wearhouse, Nestle, ServiceMaster, United Parcel Service and General Electric.

After some years of carefully combing over Greenleaf’s original writings, Larry Spears—a leadership thought leader and

prolific author—studied everything that Greenleaf put out and identified a set of 10 characteristics that he views as being central to the development of servant leaders.

Spears found that these elements (listed below) include the capability to transform an organization. But what thought leaders in servant leadership note is that it takes a lot of work and time and hard conversations. It means inspiring stakeholders, empowering employees, establishing foundational changes and motivating people throughout an organization to want to be of service to others. Everybody has to be on the same page.

As I go over these elements, consider where you may be in your own journey as a leader. While I may be presenting theory to give you the full framework for servant leadership, these are characteristics you can apply today in your work as manager or executive to transform your culture.

1. Listening: Listening leads the list because it is a crucial yet frequently absent trait in leaders who are self-oriented rather than devoted to service.

Greenleaf wrote that “a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first.” He said, “True listening builds strength in other people.”

Practically speaking, he’s talking about leaders who listen to understand. Servant leaders respond by listening first, and they listen

before they speak, as they speak, and after they speak.

2. **Empathy:** Empathy is really an extension of listening. A servant leader attempts to understand and empathize with others—to put oneself in the other person’s shoes.

This means listening without judgment. And empathetic leaders consider workers not only as employees but also as people who need respect and appreciation for their personal development. This generates a competitive advantage.

3. **Healing:** What Spears meant by “healing” is that leaders recognize the opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact. A servant leader tries to help people solve their problems and conflicts in relationships, because he/she wants to develop the skills of each individual. This leads to the formation of a business culture in which the working environment is characterized by dynamic, fun engagement and no fear of failure.

4. **Awareness:** Servant leaders also have a strong sense of what is going on around them. They are always looking for cues from their opinions and decisions. They know what’s going on and will rarely be fooled.

They’re also very self-aware. The works of Greenleaf and Spears, in fact, focus more on self-awareness (presence of mind) than external

A servant leader tries to help people solve their problems and conflicts in relationships, because he/she wants to develop the skills of each individual.

awareness. You cannot have what they describe as the tenets of awareness without having self-awareness.

5. **Persuasion:** Servant leaders do not take advantage of their power and status by coercing compliance. Instead, servant leaders try to convince and use influence. They are effective at building consensus within groups.

6. **Conceptualization:** This is the ability to look at a problem by thinking beyond the day-to-day realities. Greenleaf said that the servant leader can conceive solutions to problems that do not currently exist.

Servant leaders see beyond the limits of the operating business today and focus on long-term operating goals.

7. **Foresight:** Foresight is the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation. It means understanding the lessons from the past, the realities of the present and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.

8. **Stewardship:** This is a commitment to serving the needs of others and also of the organization and its mission as a whole. Greenleaf’s view of all institutions was one in which CEOs, staff

and stakeholders all play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the greater good of society.

9. **Commitment to the growth of people:** This is a demonstrated appreciation and open encouragement of others and their growth. The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his/her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues.

In practice, this can include things like having a budget for personal and professional development, taking a personal interest in ideas and suggestions from everyone, encouraging worker involvement in decision-making, and even helping a laid-off employee find another position.

10. **Building community:** Servant leaders should seek to identify some means for building community among those they work with. They are what I call compassionate collaborators. They show appreciation and praise employees often for their contributions. They have a personal interest in the ideas of others and want to involve workers in decision-making.

Armed with this list, you can now reflect on whether—and how—you may have modeled some of these approaches in the last 24 hours. Take a moment. How have you been a servant leader based on the brief descriptions given?

Now imagine if we could think this way moving forward in life and in our work. What if this became our motto? How would this change our role as leaders of our workforces, or even at home as spouses or parents?

This is the introduction to a six-part series on Servant Leadership as the premier leadership philosophy suggested by the author, and modeled in “Best Places to Work” companies across the country. These skills that executives can learn to position themselves among the ranks of the best leaders will appear in monthly articles on the Carrier Management website. ■

ENDNOTE

¹ <http://fortune.com/best-companies/>.



Marcel Schwantes is principal and co-founder of Leadership from the Core. His company’s biggest calling is

to help leaders influence change, build high-trust cultures and achieve optimal organizational health. Reach him at info@coachmarcel.com or visit www.leadershipfromthecore.com for more information.