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# BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

## Servant Leadership: Leading by Lifting

By James Clark

**G**rowing up in rural southwest Idaho, I spent my summers working for my father in his agricultural business. Over the years I have seen parallels between what is required to produce a successful crop and what is required for success as a team in a business setting. What I learned relates directly to elements of servant leadership and can serve as a framework for exploring some of the concepts behind this leadership philosophy.

Servant leadership was first introduced as a specific phrase in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf, who later founded the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. The concept has become widespread and deeply explored over the past 50 years. A simple internet search for “servant leadership” turns up nearly a quarter million hits.

A “top down” leadership style focuses on the success of the organization and views the employees as cogs in the machine driving toward that success. In contrast, servant leadership is a philosophy in which the first goal of leaders is to serve and enrich the lives of their employees, with company or organizational objectives as the secondary goal. A servant leader acts to unleash the potential of the employees and recognizes that the organization will rise as a natural consequence of employee engagement. This focus creates a more vibrant and sustainable organization in which employees can grow and develop their careers, while the organization is benefited by their engagement.

### PREPARE THE SOIL: CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EMPLOYEE GROWTH

For a crop to thrive, the soil in which it is planted needs to be properly prepared. It needs to be plowed so the soil is loosened, allowing seeds to germinate and establish a healthy root system. The soil needs to be provided with water and proper nutrients for seedlings to be able to quickly develop and strengthen.

Servant leaders will likewise prepare the soil for their employees. The leader has a responsibility to create an environment in

which employees can be creative and bring forward ideas that will help the organization succeed in its goals.

The first step is to take the time to make sure everyone understands both the long-term and intermediate goals of the company. For the second step, the leader needs to take the time to listen to the employees and sincerely consider their suggestions. A servant leader will also work to draw out input from employees who may be hesitant and help them find the courage to speak up. This demonstrates that they recognize the group achieves optimal solutions when multiple options are considered. In return, the employees learn to trust the leader as they participate in the process of setting direction and recognize that their ideas are listened to, even if something they brought up is not ultimately implemented.

### FEED AND WATER THE CROP: PROVIDE EMPLOYEES WHAT THEY NEED TO THRIVE

Once plants have been established, they need water and nutrients to continue to grow. Without light, warmth, a proper amount of water and careful fertilization, plants will fail to reach their full potential. They may continue to grow if these essential elements are out of balance, but they will likely be subject to disease or will be feeble and unable to withstand a harsh spell of weather. Crops subject to these problems ultimately have reduced or no yield.

Servant leaders think of their employees first, not themselves. They will seek to nourish and strengthen their employees continually. They listen to them, seriously consider input and encourage their employees to strengthen their skills and knowledge.

When employees have the goals of the company explained and illustrated so that they internalize them and clearly visualize their role in accomplishing them, they become further engaged. They begin to work for those goals out of a desire to see them achieved, rather than working for goals that have been imposed on them by a manager, and only because they “have to” or because “it’s a job.” Truly engaged employees begin to work better as a team and leverage each other’s unique talents as they develop an esprit de corps and create a cycle of success.

### DON’T ALLOW WEEDS AND INSECTS TO FLOURISH: REMOVE OBSTACLES TO EMPLOYEE ACHIEVEMENT

Crops are inevitably subject to competition from weeds and damage from insects. Pests such as these limit growth and, in some cases, kill the crop—either by rerouting necessary nutrients or by direct attack. Weeds and insects need to be dealt with so that the intended crop is not damaged.



Like weeds and insects in a field, any human enterprise is subject to problems that need to be dealt with. Problems that limit growth and adversely impact a team can come from both inside and outside the organization.

Examples of internal problems are personality conflicts, roadblocks created by other parts of the organization or noncooperation by individuals important to a process or project. Servant leaders address these and clear the way for their team members so they are not hindered in moving their work forward. This may require the leader to work cross-functionally, engage with other leaders to help reach a resolution or mediate a conflict.

Servant leaders also care enough about their employees to help them through problems that arise from outside of work. While generally not being able to solve such problems, they can sit down with their employees and lend a listening and sympathetic ear, sensitively dealing with issues that are impacting them from outside of work. Work-life balance issues can appear anytime and may require flexibility on the part of the leader. Employees who know that their leader cares about them personally and will be there to support them will show superior loyalty. They will be less stressed and therefore more productive while at work.

## ENCOURAGE PRODUCTION: HELP EMPLOYEES REACH ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONAL GOALS

The ultimate success of a crop is measured by the yield and the quality of the harvest, which determines the value to the farmer. The goal is to maximize both measures. All the work expended over the growing season leads to the harvest. A farmer will do all that he or she can to encourage productive growth and enable the crop to mature and be fruitful by clearing the way for the crop, carefully responding to the needs of the crop and humbly recognizing that his or her success rests on the growth of the crop, aided by his or her work to help the goal be achieved. A wise farmer understands the law of the harvest—you reap what you sow.

True success in an organization is measured both by the achievement of organizational goals and by the growth of its employees. High-quality, engaged employees who successfully help an organization achieve its goals become the next generation of leaders for that company. These new leaders can then help newer employees travel the same path they have traveled.

Servant leaders see it as a primary duty to help grow and develop other leaders and recognize, with humility, that their success is not just from their own actions but from the actions of others as well. Servant leaders seek out opportunities to lift others, and by so doing elevate the entire organization. They sow the seeds of trust, creativity, shared vision, listening, job skills and personal attention, and reap a strong, vibrant, sustainable organization.

It has been my experience that by incorporating these characteristics as a leader, teams can be lifted, energized and engaged, and they can accomplish more than the sum of the parts. They create a sustainable culture that ensures organizational success over time and individual success now and in the future.

Like a high-yielding, high-quality crop, successful completion of organizational goals and development of people are the fruits of consistent, caring labor on the part of a servant leader. The days I spent working in my father's fields were sometimes long, hot and difficult, but there was a satisfaction that came from a job well done and a sense of fulfillment in a successful harvest. Likewise, the work of a servant leader is often difficult and requires consistent effort. However, the work is worthwhile and satisfying. Most important, there is joy when there is a successful harvest of both organizational goals and employee growth. ■



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