

# Servant leadership



By **Dr Mike Bagshaw & Caroline Bagshaw**

## Servant leaders don't just lead from the top

### Author profile

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**S**ervant leadership, a concept developed by Robert Greenleaf<sup>1</sup>, utilises the collective brain power of the entire team. The term 'servant' in this case means helping others in the team in the pursuit of the goal.

It is a process that ignites motivation. On average, people dislike being told what to do, but want to achieve. Give them a common goal, ask for their help, and that goal becomes the motivator.

Servant leadership goes against the traditional grain, but it does work. The Container Store in Texas is listed as the top company to work for in America (Fortune 2001), and firmly espouses servant leadership principles. There are three others that do this in the Fortune top ten, and all are highly successful enterprises.

The move to servant leadership takes a fundamental shift of attitude but if it can be achieved, it will bring a parallel shift of attitude in the employees.

The traditional leader wants the trappings of power and visible respect, of a type not far removed from fear. This attitude engenders rebellion or submission. Rebellion is actively obstructive. Submission may be superficially fine, but a team that avoids initiative has a stultifying effect. Servant leaders seek to dismantle the barriers of hierarchy, to release ideas that have been locked up by the wrong kind of respect.

As barriers fall, interactive attitudes grow

and dialogue begins. Some leaders feel threatened by this. They stiffen and nod politely before rejecting an idea that isn't theirs. Servant leaders are more confident and can open their minds wide. They ask as many questions as they give answers. The team feels more valued, and expects and wants to contribute more.

Good dialogue requires good knowledge. These days, knowledge is a problem because there is just so much of it, criss-crossing the globe in milliseconds. The best way to sift through it all is to interact with others on the same mission.

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When there are mistakes, the temptation is to look for someone to

blame. With servant leadership, blame is not important. We learn a great deal from mistakes, as long as we don't hide them. Hierarchies tend to make people defensive, so mistakes are covered up as much as possible. As a result, little is learned.

Post-it notes are an example of a mistake that led to huge success. Somebody made a glue that just wouldn't stick. If the inventor had been too frightened of authority to admit it, the glue would have landed in the bin. Instead, we have a cheap and ubiquitous indispensable product. Servant leadership encourages just that sort of enterprise from apparent failure. ▶

**Servant leaders don't go for authority, or seek superior status**

## The servant leader vs the hierarchical leader

- Servant leaders invite discussion
- Servant leaders learn to discard preconceptions and spend as much time listening as talking
- They ask questions, to clarify the views being expressed
- They know that an idea with potential might come from anyone, so are open to possibilities
- Discussions do not centre on what is right or wrong, but on what potential the idea has, and how it fits in with the shared goals
- Leaders who do not use servant leadership but instead lead through autocracy, only have their own skill to draw on
- Hierarchical leaders seek power, and present ready-made decisions as the only right way forward. The team is not allowed to witness hesitation, as this would give the impression of weakness and uncertainty.
- Hesitation is not a problem for servant leaders. They accept uncertainty as inevitable, and share their half-formed ideas with the team. Reaching the final decision is a joint effort. This not only lightens the load, it makes it more likely that the best decisions will be made.
- Old-style leaders might believe that keeping knowledge to themselves gives them a personal advantage
- Servant leaders disseminate new knowledge as widely as possible, knowing it will all cross-fertilise and create new knowledge, paving the way for innovation, productivity, and profit.



Autocratic leadership, on the other hand, sets a scene where mistakes can only be made by underlings. One tragic example of this is the Challenger disaster, where seven people fell to their deaths, 73 seconds after launch off. <sup>1</sup>Afterwards, it was in every newspaper that the cause was simple – low temperature had an adverse effect on one of the components. The people in charge knew this beforehand, and there was a move to delay the launching till the weather improved. However, the leadership was too determined to go ahead to give credence to the dissenters. The leaders saw themselves as leaders, and the workforce as servants. It happened despite the fact that some teams had a history of collaboration and seeking full agreement before making major decisions. It's frightening how quickly leaders who demand that their authority be respected can defeat that.

Servant leaders don't go for authority, or seek superior status. They know it's important that all the team gain self-development. After all, who wants a team of dullards getting nowhere? The better they become at their jobs, the more they contribute. It's true they also become more attractive to other employers, but then, they are less likely to want to. Surveys find that

self-development and job satisfaction rank above money in retaining key talent. If you make it easier for people to go, they are more likely to stay.

The atmosphere in an organisation of servant leadership is informal, exciting and fun. Laughter and enjoyment are lubricants for good relationships, self-confidence, and the desire to work. Enterprise needs fun as cars need oil.

One of the top ten companies cited by Fortune 2001 as being good to work for, is Southwest Airlines. This organisation specifically aims to create a culture where employees love coming to work. "Appreciation of nuttiness" is a job requirement, and nuts to eat are provided! They find this attitude more productive than one where the employees do enough work to avoid getting the sack, then go home. This is one of the companies that specifically have a policy of servant leadership. It is just one example of a principle that might look like just altruism, but in fact has high commercial validity.

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> On Becoming a Servant-Leader; the Private Writings of Robert K Greenleaf (Jossey-Bass, 1996)

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