



Servant Leaders for Knowledge Workers

Excellent contributors of today need leaders and managers who understand their role

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GENUINE SERVANT LEADERS *think* differently from conventional authority figures. Look closely and dig into *why* they do what they do and you'll see a sharp distinction in values, philosophies, and motives compared to average leaders.

New leaders for a new age

In my last article I surveyed the changes from the industrial-age economy of the past to the knowledge-based world of today.* The

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knowledge-worker economy is firmly in place, but many leaders and managers are still slow to mark the difference. Knowledge workers (in Peter Drucker's words, those who "work with what is between their ears rather than their hands") are valuable **assets** who must be largely *self-managing toward results*.

The old command-and-control philosophy and methods of managing are counterproductive and demotivating, and tend to run off talented and intelligent knowledge workers who know they are beyond that. **Knowledge workers need servant leadership.** Given the right kind of leading and managing, they can thrive and hit on all their potential cylinders. For them, there are few things more enjoyable or stimulating than working with and behind an effective servant leader. That's when a job has a chance to be a truly great job, and teams become well-oiled performance machines.

The mindset of servant leaders

Whether you lead a large organization or a small team, the mindset of a servant leader is basically the same. Here are 7 characteristics.



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1. **Servant leaders serve something greater than themselves**

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins explored the reasons behind some companies' outstanding performance. The results of his team's studies were contrary to their initial expectation, which was that leadership style is irrelevant. They were forced by the facts to recognize that great companies are led by "Level 5 Executives."

These proved *not* to be the flamboyant celebrity-type leaders that I call the "Conventional Model," but tended to be unassuming, personally humble people. A Level 5 leader, they found, "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will." These men and women have strong egos, to be sure, but their ego strength is directed at the success of the *enterprise*. For some conventional leaders, serving their ego *is* the enterprise.

Servant leaders are in pursuit of something greater than themselves: A vision of what their organization or team "could be," or driving toward ideals embodied in their mission, vision, and values. Possibly, it's some compelling personal commitment, such as exceptional customer service. The main thing is that they genuinely **believe it**. People around them sense their genuineness and buy in to it.

2. **Servant leaders view the development and protection of a healthy culture as a top priority**

Every group has a culture: the question is not *If?* but *What kind?* Is it based on defined values or driven by personalities? Is it healthy or toxic? Motivating or demotivating?

Cultures can be formed accidentally like a sand dune, or by design like a building. Wise servant leaders know that their group's culture cannot be left to chance. They deliberately build it according to a blueprint based on

defined values and philosophies. They also know that a healthy culture is fragile, and must be protected to endure. It is the atmosphere of an organization, like the air people breathe daily. A servant leader is dedicated to "climate control"; that is, protecting a healthy, values-based culture that allows workers to perform.

3. **Servant leaders know they cannot do it alone, and view success as a team effort**

Some conventional leaders like to assume the position of "a genius with a thousand helpers." Servant leaders do not possess that delusion. They know their human limitations, and believe in the power of a diverse group of dedicated, talented people. Their focus is on how the **team** can function at its highest capacities, and approach the building and maintenance of the team as a dominant role.

Servant leaders tend to be comfortably confident of their own strengths and aware of their own weaknesses. They are not threatened by strong coworkers, and generously share credit for successes. They are receptive when their views are challenged, knowing that the organization is safer when people have the freedom and courage to speak their minds.

4. **Servant leaders view themselves as being in the "people-development business"**

Knowing that the success of the organization rests upon the quality and performance of the whole team, servant leaders devote significant time and effort to developing people. John Schnatter, founder and chairman of Papa John's Pizza, exemplified this attitude when he said, "**It's my job to build the people who are going to build the company.**"

I have created and led people-development processes for several organizations, and I can

confidently say that without commitment *and participation* from the top they fall flat. The top leader's attitude and commitment toward people development (or lack thereof) will flow down the ranks of the company. Servant leaders make that commitment.

5. **Servant leaders ensure their people have what they need to perform**

One of the most important roles of servant leaders is removing obstacles and hindrances so people can do their jobs. They are also diligent to provide the resources, tools, and training people need to perform at their best.

One of the simplest things you can do is to work at *minimizing or eliminating meetings*, a major drain on the production of knowledge workers. As Drucker observed, you can be either working or meeting, but you cannot be doing both at the same time.

Servant leaders also know that many supposed "people problems" are really **system problems**, especially those that recur. They look behind problems to ferret out dysfunctional pockets of the organization, and then fix those systems that are hindering knowledge workers from performing.

6. **Servant leaders remember their role as captain**

The pursuit of effectiveness for the leader of a team is like being captain of a ship. First, they clearly communicate the mission of the ship so there will be unity of purpose. Second, they are disciplined regarding their role. If the captain is down in the engine room messing around with the engine, who is guiding the vessel? This means in practice that servant leaders aren't trying to be everywhere doing

everything. They remain "on the bridge" and allow knowledge workers to do their jobs.

Changing metaphors, servant leaders aren't trying to be omniscient geniuses or command-and-control puppeteers. Their role is more like the conductor of an orchestra, guiding, teaching, and training a diverse group of musicians to play together.

7. **Servant leaders are intentionally available to their people**

After insufficient communication, the biggest complaint I hear in organizations is the difficulty people have getting their leader's attention. People need it for a variety of reasons, but their leader is a moving target — a FAST moving target.

As a servant to talented and motivated knowledge workers, effective leaders must be **intentionally available** to their people, and not leave it to chance or to the slim possibility that some free time will appear. They put time for appointments with their people on their schedules. They leave some "white space" on their calendars to allow for unplanned interruptions so they will be able to give their people time. They plan MBWA tours ("managing by walking around"). In other words, **they intentionally schedule time for unscheduled conversations**, knowing how valuable they can be for all concerned.

The role of the leader is **to serve**. Properly understood, it always has been. But seeing how the world of business has changed in the last several decades should bring out in bold relief how leaders and managers must **think and behave differently** as they work with today's intelligent, skilled, and motivated knowledge workers. **L**