

Are You a Servant Leader?

by Jeffrey Leventry

(August 2, 2017)



I was intrigued by a recent article in the Philadelphia Inquirer about a man who won the “Janitor of the Year” contest sponsored by Cintas. He was described by the Elementary School Principal as the “glue that holds the school together.” In addition to being a janitor, he has a magic touch with kids and is a calming influence for youngsters who are anxious and have fears at school. The principal added that he is beloved by parents, teachers and all of the kids, in part because “everything he does is from the heart.” As you might have imagined, he was humbled by the honor and was surprised by the crowd of over 100 who attended his award ceremony.

Reading this story reminded me of a business concept known as Servant Leadership, which has fallen out of favor in today’s cut-throat economic environment. Most people think of this concept in terms of one who has a leadership role or title. However, as I have stressed with my Leadership Development Program students at Rider University, the role should not define the leader. Instead, the genuine leader defines the role. Therefore, anyone can be a Servant Leader regardless of their position in the organization.

What is it?

Servant Leadership is a leadership philosophy first espoused by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 essay “The Servant as Leader.” The basic idea is that leaders are servants first and leaders second. They take responsibility for the actions and performance of their team, are selfless and find ways to develop others as leaders. This concept runs counter to the traditional idea of leaders whose main objective is to seek publicity, power and material possessions.

The Servant Leader deviates from the command and control leadership approach and instead, empowers his / her team while inspiring them to excel in their performance. He / she also places great importance on teamwork and relationship building. In addition, he / she acts with humility and sets an example of service, understanding that the focus is not on the leader, but rather on others.

There are many examples of people who fit the definition of Servant Leaders. The problem is that they are not normally well known outside of their organization because of their humility and their insistence on giving credit for success to others. However, I would argue that Sam Walton (founder of Wal-Mart) is one exception and meets the definition of Servant Leader. From stories I have read, I believe Bill Gates (co-founder of Microsoft) is another example of this leadership approach that focuses on serving others.

How can you develop it?

Since there are many qualities that define the Servant Leader, it normally takes time to develop this type of leader. Among other things, you need to develop self-awareness by understanding your strengths and weaknesses, while asking for and receiving candid feedback. You also need to learn to manage your emotions so that you consider how your actions and behavior might affect others.

Furthermore, Servant Leaders must learn empathy – identifying with and understanding others’ perspectives, experiences and emotions. Another necessary quality is the commitment to the personal development of everyone on the team so that their contributions are maximized over time. In addition to selecting appropriate learning programs for his / her staff, the Servant Leader should provide employees with growth opportunities through special projects and expanding individual responsibilities to develop new skills and areas of expertise.

Finally, the Servant Leader strives to build a sense of community within the organization. This can be accomplished by providing time for team members to interact with others throughout the company via internal social networking events and non-work-related endeavors such as attending a baseball game or participating in a bowling night. In addition to developing a strong chemistry among teammates, these activities also help cultivate a culture of trust.

Why is it important?

The benefits of being a Servant Leader are both short-term and long-term in scope.

In the short-run, this type of leader is more likely to have engaged employees who enjoy more productive relationships with fellow team members and others in the organization. In my experience, his / her employees are also more apt to possess a positive attitude which fuels better performance and the achievement of both individual and strategic business objectives.

In the long-run, the Servant Leader sets an example that others in the organization attempt to emulate and learn from. He / she also demonstrates behaviors and values that they want to see in others as a way to perpetuate the firm’s unique culture. Another benefit is that he / she typically creates strong loyalty and helps the organization retain talent over time. Finally, he / she takes a long-term view to develop the next generation of leaders who will sustain the success of the organization.

In conclusion, leaders who serve others (and who possess the quality traits described above) are needed more today than ever before. Regardless of your role or title, given the definitive rewards and benefits of this approach, what is stopping you from becoming a Servant Leader?