

Servant-Leadership - Leadership for Our Times

Servant-Leadership, simply put, is about serving your people as well as leading them.

The term has its origins in Robert Greenleaf's essay entitled 'The Servant as Leader'. He was inspired by Herman Hesse's book, 'A Journey to the East'; a story of a band of travellers going into new territory and being supported by their servant Leo. Leo provided them with all the resources they needed along the way: food, entertainment, technical and emotional support. Many years later, one of the travellers continues on his own journey and finds a community that really impresses him. He asks to meet their leader and is amazed to discover that it is Leo, the servant from before.

This story prompted Greenleaf to write about a servant-leader, someone who is both 'of service' and a 'leader' at the same time:

"Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served."

Discovering your purpose beyond profit.

James Autry, one of the writers who have built on Greenleaf's ideas, suggests three questions that every leader should ask themselves first, before they ask them of others:

Q1. What is my purpose in being here, in this world, in this life, in this profession, in this job? Why are I here?

Q2. What must I **do** in order to fulfill my purpose?

Q3. How am I to **be**, how am I to behave, how am I to manifest my values towards others within my life as I go about accomplishing my mission in order to fulfill my purpose?

Once you have answered these three questions, you can see a place where an opportunity exists to do something you really believe in, where a combination of your talents and passions can make a positive difference. Then you can choose to lead from this place, leading in service of something greater than self, being a servant-leader.

Current Times

A Servant-Leader fits very well with the findings of the recent Ashridge report 'Leadership in a Rapidly Changing World', in which some forward looking business leaders have begun to redefine what success means for them, in relation to the impact of their core businesses on some of the world's most pressing societal challenges.

As Peter Senge says, in his Introduction to 'Synchronicity' by Joseph Jaworski:

"The potential of hierarchy to corrupt would be dissolved, according to Greenleaf, if leaders chose to serve those they led: if they saw their job, their fundamental reason for being, as true service. For this idea we owe Greenleaf a great debt. His insights go a long way to explain the 'leaderlessness' of most contemporary institutions, guided as they are by people who have risen to positions of authority because of technical skills, political savvy, or desire for wealth and power."

Five Ways of Being a Servant-Leader.

Being a Servant-Leader is as important as what you **do**. James Autry gives an excellent description of what this means:

be authentic.

Be who you are, the real you and hold to your values in whatever situation you find yourself. This can be challenging in the workplace where so often we are encouraged to not say what we're really thinking or feeling, where we may learn to cover our backs with memos and fudge the budgets. It's about being transparent in what you say and do. 'Being authentic is, first, knowing yourself, then being yourself.' And if you're truly authentic, you'll also ...

be vulnerable.

Being vulnerable means being honest with your feelings in the context of your work, being open about your concerns, about an idea, an employee's performance, or your own performance, and being OK with making mistakes. This can take a great deal of courage, particularly in some cultures where it is not the accepted way. It means letting go of the old notions of control, and realising that power comes from accepting that we can't be in control and that we must depend on others. Vulnerability has an aspect of empathy as well, the ability to put yourself in the other's shoes, to view the world or the situation from the others viewpoint. So ...

be accepting.

Acceptance is more important than approval. The art of acceptance does not imply that you accept everyone's ideas without critical analysis, discussion, and judgment - only that you accept the ideas as valid for discussion and review, and that you focus on the ideas themselves, not on the person who presented them. It also means that you accept and embrace disagreement as a human part of the process of work. Being accepting is possible only if you can ...

be present.

Being present is about being here and now and also about having your whole self available at all times, available to yourself as you try to bring all your values to bear on the work at hand, and available to others as you respond to the problems and issues and challenges of team members,

colleagues, managers, employees, vendors and customers. When people see you remaining centred and grounded in the midst of whatever crisis is at hand, they will be more assured and confident in their own actions.

Now if you are authentic, vulnerable, accepting and present, then the final piece is to be useful ...

Be useful

Being useful is the fundamental concept of being of service to others. From this perspective, Atruy offers six things he believes about leadership:

1. Leadership is not about controlling people; it's about caring for people and being a useful resource for people.
2. Leadership is not about being the boss; it's about being present for people and building a community at work.
3. Leadership is not about holding on to territory; it's about letting go of ego, bringing your spirit to work, being your best and most authentic self.
4. Leadership is less concerned with pep talks and more concerned with creating a place which people can do good work, can find meaning in their work, and can bring their spirits to work. Leadership, like life, is largely a matter of paying attention.
5. Leadership requires love.

True power comes from the people. It comes from gaining the trust and support of the people who then give you power. Power is like love, the more you try to give it to others, the more it just seems to flow to you naturally.

Do Your People Grow?

In looking more at how best to lead in a way that serves, Robert Greenleaf suggested a best test:

"The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

In his new book, *Great Leaders GROW*, Ken Blanchard says:

'If you grow your capacity to lead, opportunities to lead will follow.' The more you grow as a leader, the more you can support your people's growth and development and ultimately the growth of the organisation, so creating a virtuous circle of growth.

"I'd say the two primary reasons leaders get off track are ego and fear. For many leaders, ego is fueled by a heightened sense of confidence – you might call it over-confidence or pride. This, combined with the fear of losing control, often prevents leaders from serving people"

Great leaders want to grow and continually do so. They realise that the more self-aware they are about themselves as leaders, the less they are likely to project their 'stuff' onto their people and the more available they are to serve others.

This is where coaching can be such a valuable resource: supporting leaders in clarifying their purpose, mission and vision, and how to 'be' a self-aware leader, so they can lead and serve others, to be the best they can be. Anyone can be a servant-leader, no matter what their position, so long as they are able to influence and impact others.

As coaches, we too need to continually grow, to be at our learning edge, to be self-aware, so that we can be fully available for our coachees. We too need to ask ourselves James Autry's three questions. When we know what we value, what our purpose is and the passion behind it, we can serve our clients at our best.

Conclusion

Many writers on leadership have been influenced by Robert Greenleaf. To conclude, here is a quotation from Margaret Wheatley:

“The only way to lead when you don't have control is you lead through the power of your relationships. You can deal with the unknown only if you have enormous levels of trust, and if you're working together and bringing out the best in people. I don't know of any other model that can truly work in the world right now except servant-leadership.”

References / further reading:

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