

Let's face it, leadership has a bad rap. From sex scandals to embezzlement, from the power hungry monster to the inept bureaucrat, many people have a difficult time putting faith in their leaders, and working with them efficiently to reach shared goals.

And yet, there are people leading for what we might call the "right" reasons; people who use leadership as a means to help others, instead of as a way to gain personal power. These people come to leadership because they want to be to serve others better.

How is that? In their service, they have found that they can do the most good by accepting the responsibilities and possibilities of leadership. We call these people who become leaders out of a desire to serve more effectively *servant leaders*.

In the next few pages, we will explore some of the ideas of servant leadership. Next, we'll look briefly at how someone becomes a servant leader. Finally, we'll discuss an equally important topic--how the servant leader can maintain his or her desire to serve over the long run.

What are the qualities of the servant leader?

Many of the other sections in this chapter of the Tool Box have discussed different qualities of leadership, such as influencing others, decision-making, and identifying needs. All of these qualities are true of servant leaders as well. But the term servant leader asks for something more; a different mindset, perhaps. It is truly a unique take on the idea of leadership.

What follows is a list of some of the most important qualities of servant leadership. Some of the following ideas and actions are unique to servant leadership. Others, while they may be found in all types of leadership, are simply emphasized more strongly by servant leaders.

The servant leader believes himself "first among equals." This idea is at the very core of servant leadership. A servant leader does not consider himself *above* those he leads. Rather, he is *primus inter pares* from Latin, meaning "first among equals." That is, he sees those he leads as peers to teach and to learn from. He is willing to lead others in order to reach an agreed upon goal, but he doesn't believe that being the leader makes him better than others.

Because of this, the servant leader is a consummate team builder. She will draw on the strengths of followers, and be a follower *herself* when appropriate. Such a leader doesn't lead by decree or dictate. Instead, he or she leads by allowing everyone to do what they do well. In this sense, she might be like the ringmaster at the circus--directing people to their proper position, then stepping out of the spotlight and letting them shine.

This idea is hardly new--in fact, it was captured several thousand years ago in the following verses adapted from the *Tao Te Ching*:

The reason why rivers and seas receive the homage of a hundred mountain streams is that they keep below them. Thus they are able to reign over all the mountain streams. So the sage, wishing to be above others, stays below them; wishing to be before them, the sage stays behind them. Thus, though the sage be above others, they do not feel the weight; though the sage be before others, they do not count it as an injury.

Like the sage, the servant leader's style of leadership might well be called *unassuming*. And this style of guidance--where people, as equals, are able to voice their concerns and work to their potential--is not a heavy weight on followers. Instead, the servant leader shares burdens and benefits equally with these peers. Everyone involved benefits.

The servant leader uses power honestly. A servant leader uses leadership and power legitimately, for the good of the people he or she serves. She sees leadership as a *means* to obtain the general good, not as a desired personal *end*.

For those of us watching people in power, the difference is very clear. We don't look up to the loan shark who uses his muscle and brags of his brawn, nor to the politician who uses slick talk and brags of his skill. We look up to the Mother Theresa's of the world; the Nelson Mandela's. They are servant leaders who have filled their positions with integrity.

Robert Greenleaf, in his essay *The Servant as Leader*, puts it this way: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. 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."

Do our leaders always succeed in this arena? Hardly. They may fall from this--and we, as servant leaders, may fall from it as well. We're human. Nonetheless, it is an ideal we look up to in our public institutions and in our leaders. And by continuing to try, we may inspire our followers to a life of service as well.

The servant leader understands the importance of day-to-day details. When we think of great leadership, many of us think about what may be termed, "The Great Talk." We think about Martin Luther King's dream; we think about what we can do for our country. We think about fire and brimstone, or slogans from revolutionaries.

And yet, the truth of the matter is these speeches make up a very small portion leadership, and their need is even smaller for a servant leader. Being a servant leader is more about the one-on-one discussions and in taking care of the every day details.

Exercise:

Think about a group of people you have worked with or witnessed that was particularly effective. Things got done and done *well*, and members truly seemed to enjoy their work. Who was the leader, officially or unofficially? What did (s)he do? What was his or her style of management?

The servant leader listens to and cares for his or her constituents. Servant leaders are willing to take the time to listen to what others have to say. In fact, they are more than willing--they actively seek out the opinions and ideas of these followers. This is of top importance to the servant leader.

And from this listening, a relationship of mutual respect can grow. Listening is innate to the servant leader--caring about others is a part of who they are. They can use that skill and learn from their followers; they aren't only teachers.

The servant leader helps people get what they want. The servant leader cares about people; and so she will naturally find out what they want, and help them to get it.

Sometimes, however, a servant leader seems to want something very different than her constituents. What happens then?

Often the greater goal may be the same, but people will have different ideas in mind of how to get it. For example, a servant leader may want to meet diplomatically with leaders of the opposition in a case of environmental pollution, while others in the group want to confront them.

When faced with this type of situation, a servant leader tries to phrase things in the proper terms, or put them in the right light to make people see things his way. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, goes the old adage; an effective leader explains and discusses things in a manner so that common goals are clear, or the advantages of doing things a certain way become obvious.

Wait a minute, you might say. This is all starting to sound a little bit negative--all of this talk of selling things, and putting them in the right light. Does a good leader, then, essentially dupe his or her followers?

Not at all. Remember, we said at the beginning that the servant leader must lead honestly, for the right reason(s). But if you speak English, and want to hold a discussion with someone from Brazil, you would have to change the way you speak to him or her. You would need to learn Portuguese. Then, you could go ahead and have a good talk.

While most cases aren't that extreme, the message is clear: a servant leader knows--and uses--the language of his constituents. Take the following example:

The leader of a teen pregnancy prevention program wanted the support of the local Catholic priest. However, he knew he probably wouldn't get very far by discussing the program's "condom sense" campaign. Instead, he and the priest talked about their common work. They both promote abstinence, and both of them have a strong desire that young people's lives are as full and healthy as possible. In leaving the discussion, they agreed to work on several projects together, and the priest agreed not to loudly oppose other work by the group that he did not agree with. In the end, a great alliance was formed.

The lesson? Start where people are. Before we go on, it's important to note here that the servant leader is not closed minded. He will do his best to convince others to see things his way; that much is true. However, as we have said, the servant leader listens and learns from his constituents. He is open to improvement. So, if he is convinced that the other is right, he will gracefully accede to the other's suggestion.

The servant leader stretches his or her constituents. While, as we saw in the last point that the servant leader starts where people are, he doesn't *stop* there. Instead, the servant leader helps others see the potential that exists. This can be personally (I know you can finish a marathon), as well as in the community (can you just imagine what this neighborhood would look like with fresh paint and some trees?). A servant leader helps people to do things they didn't know they could. She sits down with her constituents to set goals that are both feasible and challenging.

The servant leader inspires others to service. Finally, a servant leader knows she can't do it all alone--and frankly, she wouldn't want to if she could. A servant leader wants to work with and *for* others. To do so, then, the leader must be able to inspire those she serves to serve others.

How does the servant leader inspire people? The methods he uses to inspire people to serve aren't necessarily any different from methods used by *any* leader to inspire others to do anything--or really, by *anyone* who inspires people. The desire of a servant leader to help others may be inspirational in itself, but people may be inspired by many, many different things.

We might answer this question, then, by looking briefly at inspiration in general. We can start on a personal level. What causes us to jump out of our seat when a speaker is talking; that convinces us to send money to a child we'll never meet? What is this fountain of inspiration? What do we need to do?

Exercise:

Before you go on, write down a list of five leaders you either know personally or know about--five people whom you admire tremendously. Why do they grab you as they do? What do they do? How do they do it? What do you like about them? Do they all have the same style of leadership? If not, how do they differ?

Chances are the five people whose names you have in front of you are very different. One might be quiet, another brash. One might yell, another question. One might love publicity, another have a healthy distaste for (or distrust of) the media. Perhaps you have someone on the list that you have never even seen, but something he wrote sent chills of excitement running down your spine.

In any case, the folks you have in front of you are probably quite different. That's true among leaders in general, and even among servant leaders. If you look closely, however, some qualities might occur again and again. A partial list of qualities that inspire include:

- Honesty
- Awareness
- Empathy
- Passion
- Ability to overcome obstacles, especially obstacles that followers have grappled with
- A sense of joyfulness

A servant leader adapts to fit the situation. If your house is on fire, you don't want the firefighter to say, "Now what do you think would be the most optimal use of time and direction at the present moment?" Rather, you probably want to hear, "The ladder is right there, and we're going to get you and the kids out of here."

On the other hand, if you are at work discussing a major change in your organization, "What do you think we should do?" becomes an appropriate question. In fact, you might become pretty angry if you aren't asked.

To inspire, then, a servant leader gauges each situation and responds to each individually. When appropriate, she will pass over the reins to someone whose leadership style is more appropriate to the situation--she works with people's strengths. A good leader understands when she is not necessarily the best person for the job; she knows her strengths as well as her weaknesses, and can gracefully pass on opportunities best suited to other individuals.

How do you become a servant leader?

As you can see, becoming a servant leader is more a state of mind than a set of directions. So unlike many of the other sections in the Tool Box, becoming a servant leader does not follow a step by step process. (First, you become honest. Second, you care about people...). However, there are things that the servant leader does, rather than simply believes. You can work on these skills to keep the *servant* part of *servant leader* fresh in your mind. Many of these are discussed in detail in [other sections](#), and so we will simply mention them here. They include:

- Listening to others
- Involving others
- Promoting teamwork rather than individual decision making
- Enhance problem-solving skills

How do you find inspiration?

The servant leader, as we have discussed, is someone who wants to help others first--and thus, by definition, take care of himself second. However, maybe that is sometimes a problem. Perhaps, as a leader, you feel you are losing your edge. You want to help people--or at least you used to. But you're wearing down. You're getting tired. The problem you took on seems larger than ever, and the only thing larger is the pile on your desk. You don't remember the last time you saw your spouse. You want to hand over the reigns. You don't want to serve, you want to be spoiled for a while. You want to run off to Jamaica, and not ever, ever return.

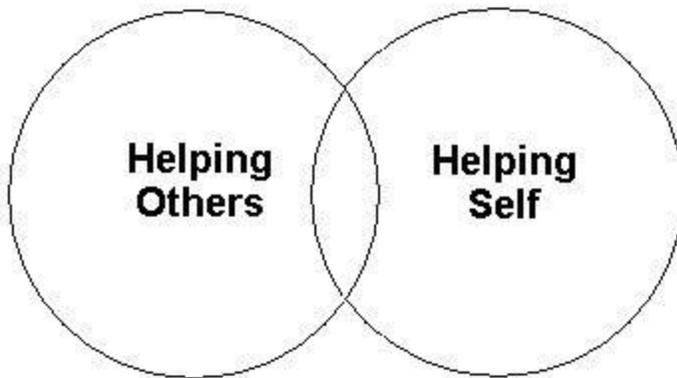
Sound familiar? And if so, what can be done about it? What inspires--or reinspires--the servant leader? Where do we get the energy, the excitement, and the persistence to enthrall others and lead them to be active champions of our cause? What moves us to move others?

For the leader on the road to burn out--or for someone who wants to stay away from that path altogether--it's not always easy to remain inspired, and full of excitement about the cause. And yet, *it may be the most important thing you can do*. Burning out and giving up is all too real a possibility. Think of it this way--if you allow yourself to burn out, a light has gone, robbing your cause of a powerful weapon.

A good leader, then--a strong, in-it-for-the-long-run leader--takes care of him or herself *along with helping others*. It's easy for many of us to get caught up in our work, and not consider our own needs. Or, if we do take care of ourselves, we do so haphazardly, when levels of frustration are high and the floodgates finally burst.

To avoid that, then, the servant leader thinks about his or her needs on a continuous basis. He takes care of himself before disaster strikes.

This sounds contradictory, you might say; I just read that the servant leader serves first. True. But a leader must get something out of her work, and she must acknowledge that gain, or the path to giving up becomes very short. Both elements must be there. Think about two overlapping circles:



One of these circles represents the servant leader's desire to help others; the other represents her need to help herself. Ideally, a servant leader should find herself doing both of these things, in a place where these circles overlap.

So what are some things that the leader can do to remain inspired and excited about his or her work? Answers are as individual as every leader is. However, consider these possibilities, which have worked for many leaders. Might any of them work for you?

- *Take time for you.* You may think you don't have time for a vacation, or for an afternoon off: but can you really afford not to? You need time to regroup, and to replenish your well. There are many ways you can do this. It could be in daily meditation or on a jog, or by taking a day to do something you love. It could be almost anything: going to a play or enjoying a picnic; taking a pottery class or watching a football game. Whatever you do, it should be something *just for you* that you will enjoy and find renewing. And it should have nothing to do with work.
- *Read* -- and not simply news and your work. Read novels, biographies, or anything else you enjoy. One constant among many of our historical leaders is how much they read. Reading inspires creativity and helps you to see the "big picture" more clearly. By doing so, you make associations you wouldn't have otherwise. In short, it helps you keep all of life in your consciousness.
- *Have others to sustain you.* We've all heard the phrase, "It's lonely at the top." That can be true for servant leaders, too. In fact, when you get right down to it, it can be lonely wherever you are in the pile. All of us need people who can help us and who support us in our challenges and our joys.

For servant leaders, it is important that we choose these people well. That's because unfortunately, if we don't consciously choose these people, we often hoist our needs on the wrong people.

We might get a lot of this support from people in our personal lives: spouses, family members, and friends. Sometimes, however, it's helpful to get support from people within your field, who have dealt with some of the same challenges and excitements as you have. Two ways to have such relationships are:

- *Having a mentor.* We are always learning; hopefully, our education never ends. By standing on the shoulders of those who came before us, our view is much broader. Thus, maintaining a mentoring relationship can be an excellent way you to help you continue growing professionally.
- *Developing strong peer relationships.* Talking with other leaders, especially in your field, can be very helpful. This is one way in which professional meetings and conferences can be useful. By speaking to other leaders, you start understanding that other people have the exact same problems you are dealing with. It can help you realize you are not alone.

Exercise:

Think of someone whose leadership you admire or who you admire professionally in other ways. Preferably, choose someone who has been working in their field for many years. Ask them where they receive *their* support. When they are frustrated, who do they turn to? Are there similar possibilities or people in your own life? Would the same forms of support work for you?

- *Challenge yourself.* When the "old routine" doesn't work for you any longer, find new mountains to climb. Challenge yourself with new directions and possibilities. This could be by starting a new program, forming a new collaboration, or revamping an existing project. Anything that will get your excitement flowing again can work; the possibilities are boundless.
- *Look at the whole picture.* That is to say, remember the whole forest, and don't let yourself get hung up in the trees. Sometimes, we can get hung up in the daily frustrations of our work. That's when it's time to remind ourselves of our broader vision, whether it is an end to child abuse, a thriving neighborhood, or a world without prejudice. In doing so, we may be more willing to see these frustrations as small obstacles we are willing to hurdle, instead of impossible mountains that aren't worth our efforts.
- *Celebrate the small wins.* World peace, for example, is a lofty goal. It's not one you or even your organization will achieve alone. In fact, it may never be completely achieved, but many of us feel it's still worth striving for. So when you do accomplish a piece of that peace, [celebrate](#) your accomplishment.

In Summary

The servant leader sees leadership much in the same way a carpenter sees a hammer. A hammer is a tool -- and a very important tool at that. It can be used build; to create; to realize a dream. And with one wrong hit, a very painful thumb.

Leadership, too, allows one to develop dreams. It opens doors and allows opportunities to be realized. However, it's something to be careful with. For like the hammer, mistakes can be costly. Worse yet, leadership, like that hammer, can be used to destroy instead of create; to hurt people instead of help them. And without paying proper attention to ourselves, it can destroy the leader as well.

The wise servant, then, is as careful with this power as she would be with that hammer, always trying to make sure to hit the nail on the head.

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