

Leader as Servant

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While most leadership literature focuses on action, the book, *The Servant Leader*,¹ takes a different approach. The authors call the “action approach” the “doing,” or the “hands.” However, they assert, if the axiom “being precedes doing” is true, then one really needs to start with the *heart* of a leader before considering his or her outward actions. A heart motivated by self-interest looks at the world with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude. The servant leader, in contrast, looks at the world with a “How can I help you succeed?” attitude.

Three behavioral patterns distinguish self-serving leaders from servant leaders:

- How they handle feedback
- How they handle succession planning
- How they conceptualize leading versus following.

Self-serving leaders spend most of their time protecting or promoting things that provide their own feelings of self-preservation and self worth. These may include a focus on a particular position at work, a specific image, a “good” reputation, and so on. If any one of these is threatened, the self-serving leader responds in a fearful and/or defensive manner.

True servant leaders believe their position and influence are “on loan” to those they serve, and are able to see feedback as a gift, rather than as a threat. For these special people, personal worth flows from an inner sense of value. This allows them to willingly serve others.

A second behavioral pattern that sets servant leaders apart is how they plan for their own succession. No one remains the leader indefinitely. Our leadership is not only a matter of what we have accomplished, but

also the legacy we leave behind in the hearts and the minds of our successors. How well have we taught them? Your personal succession planning speaks volumes about your motives as a leader.



Self-serving leaders are afraid to give away their knowledge for fear that they may then render themselves dispensable. These leaders play their cards close to their chests and only divulge information on a “need-to-know” basis. They often intimidate others or hide behind their position. Self-important lead-

ers use the pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” to promote themselves and live in the spotlight. This attitude builds an atmosphere of distrust and ultimately undermines the leader’s role.

Servant leaders say “we,” “us,” and “our.” They include their team as part of their own self-definition. Their team’s success becomes as crucial as their own personal success. This attitude fosters an atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and teamwork, inspiring staff to care about their workplace and to contribute to its success.

Finally, servant leaders are differentiated from self-serving leaders by answering the question: Who leads and who follows? Self-serving leaders think they should lead and others should naturally follow. Ego is their main motivator; they have a need for power and control. They must be in the right, and are unwilling to subjugate themselves to correction or change for fear of losing power or control. As a result, these individuals seldom support their people. The servant leader, on the other hand, seeks the respect and trust of others, so that they may *earn the right* to lead, teach, and influence for a season. ☐

¹Blanchard K, Hodges P. *The Servant Leader*. Nashville, TN: J. Countryman; 2003.

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