

How To Become a Servant Leader

Serve employees first, and success with clients will follow

By Emma Johnson



Bossing around employees is so passé. Developing people, treating them with respect, encouraging their talents and input—these are trends that research has proven build strong companies and give them the competitive edge. Servant leadership—the philosophy of focusing first on the needs of employees and customers—has gained popularity in recent years, with numerous Fortune 500 firms like TDIndustries, Aflac and Synovus subscribing to its principles.

“If you really listen to your colleagues and figure out how to get them what they need, they will perform at a higher level, which improves the customer experience, which affects business results,” says Kent Keith, CEO of Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. The Indianapolis-based center promotes the teachings of Robert. K. Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive who coined the term and founded the center in 1964. “The world is increasingly competitive, and the work required for companies to succeed is more knowledge-based and depends on employees being creative and making good judgments,” Keith says. “It makes sense to invest in growing employees in order to grow the capacity of a company.”

Jim Hunter, a servant leader consultant and the author of *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, adds that younger employees no longer hesitate to quit an unsatisfying job. "If you're my boss and you don't get what I need, I have no problem leaving and going to Google," Hunter says.

The essence of servant leadership—serve the employees first, and success with clients will follow—might appear to be the antithesis of modern business. The roots of the philosophy are thousands of years old, with examples dating back to the 4th century B.C. in India and China, as well as in the New Testament and texts of Islam. In contemporary practice, it means actively listening to employees, treating them as people with needs, interests and failings, and respecting their roles in the company and the world.

Southwest Airlines' former CEO Herb Kelleher believed that his company's flight attendants were the airline's most important leaders because they had the biggest impact on the customer experience. Those who have flown the airline know that Southwest flight attendants are some of the happiest people in the air. The corporate culture is often identified as an example of servant leadership, says Hunter, and the company is one of the industry's most profitable. "The test of true leadership is whether employees leave the company better than when they got there," Hunter says. "You want everyone growing and changing and improving. That is the only way your company will grow and change and improve."

Unfortunately, the concept of servant leadership tends to evoke high-level philosophical meanderings with little practical application. However, advocates say, there are everyday habits leaders can incorporate into their management routines that can have powerful results.

► **Listen.** Pay attention to how you interact in face-to-face conversations, large groups and meetings, Keith advises. How do you communicate with your peers, subordinates, vendors and customers? How much do you really hear what they're saying? Do you understand what they need? Find meaningful ways to invite employee feedback and suggestions, like peer evaluations or an idea box.

► **Appreciate.** "Instead of trying to catch people doing things wrong, shift your attitude to look for people doing things right," Hunter says. Tell them about it both routinely—as in annual reviews—and spontaneously.

► **Respect.** Do you treat the assistant the same as the executive? The waiter the same as the banker? The leader sets the level of respect within the organization.

►**Develop.** Do you offer your employees the tools to become the best they can be? What do you provide in terms of training, new job development, book clubs or other personal growth tools? "The emphasis should be on coaching as opposed to controlling," Keith says.

►**Unleash.** "People already have power and energy. They can use it or not use it," Keith says. "How can you help them develop it?" Focus on decentralizing as many decisions as possible so employees can use the power of their experience to help the company. Those with direct customer contact should be involved in customer service policy making, and those in operations should have a say over those decisions. "Everyone is already showing up and getting paid. Why wouldn't you want each one to make the biggest contribution he or she can make?" Keith asks.

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