

Hoyt Lecture

Servant Leadership: A Leadership Concept for Today's World

Frank Carl Headington
Neenah Foundry – Retired, Neenah, Wisconsin, USA

Copyright 2025 American Foundry Society

ABSTRACT

Our world is a mess: violence, starvation, disease, pain, crushed dreams, untapped talents, social media has reduced our human interactions and severely handicapped our interpersonal skills. People are suffering to some degree or another everywhere we look. One major reason the world is like this is that people are using the power model of leadership which focuses on power and control. That coupled with the reduction in interpersonal communications has created a more divisive climate at work and in our government relations with our citizens.

Given that this is the current state of affairs, and many feel that the servant leadership style of leadership can help us, let's look at what servant leadership is: Robert Greenleaf originally defined the servant in his now classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, back in 1970.¹ He indicated that the "servant leader is quite simply a leader who is focused on serving others".¹ Servant leadership is ethical in that it is about serving people, not using people. It is practical in that servant leaders get results. It is significant in that serving others is the most meaningful and satisfying way for leaders to live and lead. It begins with "the natural feeling that one wants to serve."¹

INTRODUCTION

Our country has gone through three periods of transition through which the predominant leadership style used has changed:²

PERIOD ONE

This was a period from the end of our American Civil War through the American Industrial Revolution up until the end of World War II.

This was a period of individual determinism, i.e., our lifestyles were contingent upon our work ethic and how hard we were willing to work and take or give orders which led to what opportunities we would have. It was a time which could be defined as a period of command and control.

PERIOD TWO

This was a period from post-World War II to the mid-2000's.

This period is one of significant societal change and the introduction of advanced technologies, i.e., computers. Women began holding jobs that only became available to them during World War II. As they developed new capabilities outside the home, they developed a desire for more independence.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's further diversified the workforce, as disenfranchised African Americans began to have more opportunities and make gains in the social and economic ladders of society.

The introduction of computers moved us from a primarily manufacturing base to one with new services and opportunities. New conveniences and services began to flourish. New industries began to emerge, moving us from an industrialized economy to a new and modern service economy.

The top-down or hierarchical style of leadership was still predominant but now had to consider workers who were not as familiar with a military style of operation. As more women, immigrants and African Americans came into the workforce companies had to introduce more teamwork and manage diversity to achieve their goals.

Our workforce was becoming the most diverse in our history. Workers wanted to have more input into the decisions being made. Employee retention, brain drain and competition for talent led to a significant drop in employee engagement and subsequent productivity. Employee disenfranchisement rose and management struggled.

More diversity was seen in some of the decision-making efforts, but it was not very significant given the continuing hierarchical leadership style which was predominant and clearly unable to handle the demands of the new workforce.

PERIOD THREE

This is the "new era" we are currently in with employees with very different lifestyles, talents, needs, and motivations.

This is an era where leadership style must bring a significant focus to the intrinsic capabilities of each individual along with the potential synergies within each

group of people. A telling statistic within our world is that “only 15% of employed people report being engaged at work.”² WOW!

Given the direct correlation between employee engagement and employee productivity, this should get everyone’s attention.

This is a time for Servant Leadership.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

This is a time when leaders capable of inspiring, engaging, aligning, coaching, and coaxing out excellent performance from both individuals and teams are more in need than ever before. The answer is not in systems, but in people. As more and more technology invades our lives we have a greater need for clarity, caring, culture and talent development; all things which machines, no matter how smart, cannot do for us. As managers who are responsible for the employees who create value for our companies, we must do this for ourselves and our people.

Enter Servant Leadership!

Servant Leadership was defined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf as the “natural desire to lead by serving others—meeting the needs of the team members, empowering them to make decisions, focusing on growth, and ensuring their basic needs are met”.³ One benefit of servant leadership is a higher level of engagement which leads to increased team performance.

The greater sense of engagement comes from feeling valued; that the leader cares about the employee and their well-being. The team performs with a high level of integrity as they are guided by a moral compass as the leader leads with ethical standards. There are some fundamental competencies of servant leadership which must be developed by the servant leader over time to enable them to develop engaged and effective teams.³

SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness represents a deep understanding of oneself; your passion, strengths, weaknesses, and emotions. It is important to understand what “makes you tick” so you can gain an understanding of how you react during various situations. The strength of your leadership lies in knowing your strengths.

It is important to develop a team of individuals with very diverse knowledge and skill sets to help compensate for your weaknesses and allow your team to address a large variety of issues. Being self-aware enhances your ability to be a good steward to your team members.

STEWARDSHIP

The two primary components of stewardship incorporated into your leadership are: accepting responsibility and being accountable for the performance of your team. It is critical to hold yourself to the same standards and regulations of the team.

Regardless of the outcomes of your team’s projects, good or bad, you must accept responsibility for the actions and performance of your team. Learn to develop, as a team, solutions to various obstacles your team encounters and, when negative outcomes are experienced, learn from them and work to turn those negatives into positives.

PERSUASION

The ability to persuade and motivate your team members to work together toward a particular goal will be critical to the ongoing successful performance of your team. A key factor in being able to persuade and motivate your team members is in knowing them and what their internal motivations are. As you get to know your team members more deeply, an emotional connection is developed which leads to a higher level of engagement which allows you to do a better job of leading your team in the best direction for your team to be successful.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening is an interesting dynamic. During a typical communication between two individuals the spoken word represents only 35 percent of the intended meaning while the remaining 65 percent is communicated through body language. On average we only process about 13 to 25 percent of what we hear. Think about the last time you spoke with someone and had to ask them to repeat all or a portion of what they said because you were unable to recall the details! We just have too many distractions around us or in our mind. It is normal.

So, since listening is such an important component to learning about others and developing good team cohesion, it is important that we work seriously to develop our active listening skills. It is critical to prepare to listen, which involves removing distractions, both mental and physical, and making sure that you are 100 percent present during the conversation. Mindful active listening is very important to your development as a good leader of your team.

EMPATHY

Empathy relates to your ability to understand someone’s feelings. It is important to develop empathy for others with an ability to recognize and manage your own emotions. You want to develop a position of trust with your team so they will feel comfortable sharing concerns with you and sharing their ideas with you and your team. Developing a good empathetic relationship with your team members will help lead to this comfort level. Your team members will start to understand that you care for

them and will feel respected. As the team leader, this trust that is developed will help strengthen your leadership of the team which will lead to greater collaboration and engagement, which ultimately leads to greater performance.

HUMILITY

Humility is a key characteristic of the servant leader as we move from a team that is me-driven to a team that is team-driven. It is about letting go of our own egos and self-interests and putting the needs of the team first. Humility is another key component for developing trust with your team.

CULTURE OF TRUST

It is extremely important that a strong trust relationship develops between you and your team, as well as between your team members. You do not want your team to follow your lead just because you are the leader. You want them to follow you because they have developed a strong trust relationship with you and want to follow your lead. The key to developing this level of trust is by being honest and transparent with them so they feel comfortable approaching you to share their thoughts and concerns.

This type of trust is developed over time one team member at a time. It is important to be fair and objective with them as they take ownership of their role in a project. Then as they proceed, they will begin to recognize and understand your help in setting them up for success in their role. As you follow through with your support for them your leadership strength is enhanced.

MENTORING

One of your most important objectives as a leader is to help your team members grow in the development of their own technical and leadership skills. Mentoring them is an opportunity for you to give back and pass on the knowledge and skills you have developed during your own leadership journey. Again, mentoring a team member as part of their development helps you evolve and grow in your own leadership position.

VISION

The most important thing that you as a leader do for your team is to help create and communicate the overall vision that your team is working toward. A clear vision will communicate to your team the values, beliefs and goals of your group, department, or organization. You need to communicate and demonstrate your conviction toward achieving that vision above all else. The various projects and strategies that your team works on may change over time, but the vision does not change, and your team's efforts should always be pointed toward achieving that objective.

Each new initiative that your team considers should be measured against whether it will move the ball forward

toward that overriding vision. As your team has now developed a strong connection and cohesion with each other and a respect for each other's strengths and subsequent roles on the team you are in a strong position to confidently provide effective leadership for them. It is important to recognize that the vision, by necessity, may need to change. To help your team evolve from the current vision to a new one an effective model was developed by Andrew Carnegie to help work through that change:³

First evaluate the current state:

- What is the motivation for the change?
- Analyze why the change is needed.
- Plan the direction for moving forward with the change.

Then, consider the future state after the change:

- Implement the change.
- Review and assess the impact of the change.
- Modify and adjust as needed.

Then, proceed with the new vision in place.

CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

As with any human endeavor it is critical as a servant leader to embrace your continuous development. This includes staying abreast of changes within your current industry and profession as well as staying aware of and learning new practices in leadership being employed and studied. There are numerous resources to help you as servant leader to do self-assessments and monitor current trends so you can maintain your effective leadership position.

For more recommended reading on servant leadership, please review References 4-9.

CONCLUSION

The world today is clearly in an era where the needs, wants, and aspirations of the individual must be considered in the development of effective leadership of our businesses and organizations. The model of hierarchical leadership is no longer effective. The time for the true and effective servant leadership model is here. Servant Leaders are first of all servants. They start with the internal desire to serve others, then the desire to lead follows.

Servant Leadership was defined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf as the "natural desire to lead by serving others – meeting the needs of the team members, empowering them to make decisions, focusing on growth, and ensuring their basic needs are met".³

This desire to serve and put other's needs above their own is the first step in building empathy, love and cohesion amongst the leader and the team members. This relationship builds a team that through its connectedness and desire to put the teams' goals first and perform their individual roles to achieve that is what leads to a high degree of engagement and subsequently the high level of effectiveness in the performance of the team.

Servant leaders grow and develop over time as they learn how to incorporate the various skills necessary to build a strong bond between the team members themselves and him/her as their leader.

Two references that show good examples of business and sports application of the Servant Leadership concept are:

- Dave Hataj's book *Good Work: How Blue-Collar Business Can Change Lives, Communities and the World*. In his book Dave shares his story of the integration of faith and work within his second-generation family gear-making business in Wisconsin.⁵
- Steve Jones and Lucas Jadin's book *The Twin Thieves: How Great Leaders Build Great Teams*.⁶ In their book, Steve and Lucas share the development of a young high school football coach as he learns to incorporate the Servant Leadership concepts in the development of his high school football team.

As we move forward in the world and require more effective leadership, I believe the incorporation of the servant leader model into our businesses, corporations, and organizations will continue to grow.

Over human history, there have been many truly outstanding examples of those demonstrating servant leadership skills. In recent times these have included Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama to name a few.¹⁰ Our best example, over time, of a servant leader was Jesus of Nazareth. His mission was to serve others, then lead them to become servant leaders themselves, with a clear over-riding vision to save the world! His life and mission are well documented in the four gospels of the Bible.

REFERENCES

1. Keith, Kent, M., "Servant Leadership at Work: Caring About People and Getting Extraordinary Results," Honolulu, Hawaii: Terrace Press (2024).
2. Harris, Omar, L., "*The Servant Leader Manifesto*," New Jersey: Paulist Press (2020).
3. Bramlett, Cara, PA-C, "Servant Leadership Roadmap: Master the 12 Core Competencies of Management Success with Leadership Qualities and Interpersonal Skills" (2024).
4. Greenleaf, Robert, K., "Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness," Essays by Robert K Greenleaf, 25th Edition, New Jersey: Paulist Press (2002).
5. Hataj, Dave, "Good Work: How Blue-Collar Business Can Change Lives, Communities and the World," Chicago: Moody Publishers (2020).
6. Jones, Steve and Jadin, Lucas, "The Twin Thieves: How Great Leaders Build Great Teams," (2021).
7. Keith, Kent M., "The Case for Servant Leadership," Second Edition, United States: Terrace Press (2012).
8. Autry, James, A., "The Servant Leader: How to Build a Creative Team, Develop Great Morale, and Improve Bottom-Line Performance," United States: Crown Publishing Group (2004).
9. Greenleaf, Robert, K., "The Power of Servant Leadership: Essays by Robert K. Greenleaf," edited by Larry C. Spears, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. (1998).
10. Dhiman, S.K., Gonzalez, V., Baghgedjian, A., Kaur, G., "Servant Leadership," in: Roberts, G.E. (eds), "The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership" (2023).