

Frequently Asked Questions about Servant Leadership

By Dr. Kent M. Keith (2020)

- *What is the basis for servant leadership?*

Servant leadership is founded on love, service, and ethics. When you love people, you want to be of service and help them in appropriate ways. And when you lead, you know that you are having an impact on people, so you want to treat them right. Servant leadership is profoundly ethical because it is about making a positive difference in the lives of others.

- *What are the characteristics of a servant leader?*

The most important characteristic is the desire to serve. Servant leadership begins with the desire to serve, not the desire to lead. When you have the desire to serve, and you see the opportunity to serve by leading, then you assume leadership responsibilities and become a servant leader.

Robert Greenleaf, who launched the modern servant leadership movement with his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, described a number of additional characteristics: Listening and understanding; acceptance and empathy; foresight; awareness; persuasion; conceptualization; self-healing; and rebuilding community. He also said that servant-leaders initiate action, are goal-oriented, are dreamers of great dreams, are good communicators, are able to withdraw and re-orient themselves, and are dependable, trusted, creative, intuitive, and situational.

Scholars have defined servant leadership in order to conduct their research. For example, Dr. Bob Liden, professor of management at the University of Illinois at Chicago, led a team of scholars who identified seven dimensions of servant leadership: conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community.

- *Isn't servant leadership a contradiction in terms?*

It is true that the words “servant” and “leader” conjure up images that appear to contradict each other. For servant leaders, however, the two words are not equal. The foundational word is “servant.” That’s because servant leadership starts with the desire to serve. When a person who has the desire to serve sees the opportunity to serve by leading, he or she assumes leadership responsibilities and becomes a servant leader. His or her character as a servant

at heart does not change when he or she becomes a leader. A servant leader is a servant at heart before, during, and after serving in a leadership position.

- ***Can servant leaders be effective?***

Certainly. The simplest way to explain it is that servant leaders identify and meet the needs of others. They identify and meet the needs of colleagues so that they can perform at their highest levels. They identify and meet the needs of those they serve—customers, clients, patients, members, students, citizens—so that they are truly served, and the organization will succeed in fulfilling its mission. There are also specific practices that help servant leaders to be effective. For example, they are good at listening, developing their colleagues, and exercising foresight.

There is a growing body of empirical research that proves that servant leadership works. For example, servant leaders are good at leading teams. Groups led by servant leaders are more helpful and creative, more committed, and perform at higher levels. In the business world, companies led by servant leaders are more successful. As servant leadership goes up, profits go up.

- ***Do servant-leaders get results?***

Yes. What is significant is that servant-leaders seek two kinds of results. First, servant leaders obtain the resources their organizations need to continue and if possible expand the work of the organization. To grow, they will seek to generate an operating surplus, a profit, or an increase government funding, depending on their type of organization. That is an organizational *need*.

Servant-leaders also seek a second result, which is to serve one's colleagues and customers, and make a positive contribution to the world. That is the organizational *purpose*. Organizations need to obtain resources, but that is not their purpose—their purpose is to serve others.

There is no question that servant-led organizations can be, and are, successful. For example, over the years, a number of the companies on the *Fortune* magazine list of “The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America” have been implementing the principles of servant leadership. Those companies have included Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Synovus Financial, The Container Store, TDIndustries, and AFLAC.

- ***Does servant leadership work in all kinds of organizations?***

Yes. Every type of organization—public, private, non-profit, or academic—can benefit from servant-leaders who identify and meet the needs of their colleagues and those the organization serves. The key practices are fundamentally about listening to people and developing people, and those key practices are always relevant and effective in any kind of organization. However, exactly *how* servant leadership works in each case will depend on the specific organization, its mission, its servant-leaders, and its organizational culture.

- ***Can I be a servant-leader if the person I report to is not?***

Yes. Just do the things that servant-leaders do. Identify and meet the needs of others. Become aware of the impact you are having on others. Listen to your colleagues and customers. Develop your colleagues, coach and mentor them, and then unleash them. Exercise foresight. Because these key practices work, you will get positive results and your team will be successful. Your boss will either leave you alone or will drop by and try to learn more about what you are doing.

By doing what servant-leaders do, you can create an effective, servant-led environment within your team, department, or branch, even if the entire organization is run differently. You can be authentic as a servant-leader, and you can help others to become servant-leaders as well.

- ***Won't people take advantage of me if I'm a servant-leader?***

Not unless you let them—and *you don't have to let them*. Servant leadership is not about allowing people to take advantage of you. You can say “no” when you need to. *You can serve without being servile*. If a colleague or supervisor asks you to do things that are not appropriate, or that will prevent you from performing your agreed-upon duties, you don't have to “serve” them by agreeing to their requests. If a supervisor asks you to do more than you can handle, you can explain your current workload or list of projects, and ask the supervisor which tasks or projects should be put on hold in order to open up the time for the additional work the supervisor wants to assign to you.

When you are a servant leader, you will give high priority to helping your colleagues to grow and succeed. However, you do not have to be “easy” or “soft” on team members and allow them to perform poorly. You make it clear that they must get their work done, and they must do it well. When you coach and mentor others, you can give them negative feedback as well as positive feedback, to help them grow. You can train and seek to inspire people, but you

can also discipline them, even fire them, if they are unwilling to grow or are simply unable to perform.

- ***Can servant leadership work when times are tough?***

Servant leadership is even more important, and more obviously effective, when times are tough. Servant leaders and their institutions stay close to those they serve, so they know what programs, products, or services are most important to their customers. Those programs, products, or services are therefore most likely to get the needed resources when resources are scarce. Servant-leaders are also good at developing their colleagues. When times are tough, everyone counts—everyone needs to perform at their highest possible levels. Employees at servant-led institutions can do that because they have been given opportunities to grow and develop their understanding and their skills. When times are tough, being close to the customer and having high-performing employees can make a big difference.

- ***Are there common misperceptions about servant leadership?***

Yes. Some of the common misperceptions are that servant leadership is about being and not doing, servant-leaders are soft and can't make tough decisions, and that servant-leaders "let the inmates run the asylum."

There are important character traits that support servant leadership, such as humility and the desire to serve. Because of the importance of character, servant leadership starts with *being*. But the whole point of servant leadership is to serve others. That requires *doing*. So servant leadership is about *both* being and doing.

Servant-leaders make tough choices. Servant-leaders seek to identify and meet the needs of their colleagues and customers. However, not all those needs will be equally important, and meeting all of those needs may not be possible. There are limits in terms of time and resources. Servant-leaders have to make professional judgments as to which needs are most important, and how they can best be met, by whom, and how soon. These are often hard decisions.

If by "soft" people mean that servant-leaders are easy on people and let them get away with poor performance or bad behavior, that is simply not the case. When people are not a good match for their jobs, or cannot grow to meet the demands of their jobs, or behave badly, servant-leaders help them find work elsewhere.

Servant-leaders don't "let the inmates run the asylum." However, servant-leaders understand the importance of flattening the hierarchy. They delegate decisions to the action levels, where people have the most information and can therefore make the best decisions. Servant leaders also build teams. Delegating decisions and working in teams can build an organizational culture in which individuals can grow and effectively serve others.

- *Is there a downside or disadvantage of servant leadership?*

Yes. Servant leadership is not a quick fix. Servant leadership requires an up-front investment of time. It takes time to develop one's colleagues so they can grow in their capacity to do things better, or to do things they have never done before. It takes time to listen to customers and learn how to be relevant to their needs. Investing time in colleagues and customers allows servant-leaders to get excellent results in the end— results that other leadership approaches might never achieve. But servant leaders know that they have to invest the time up-front.