



A Guide to Servant-Leadership

by Ann McGee-Cooper and Gary Looper

The new paradigm of servant-leadership sharply contrasts with the traditional definition of leadership. Servant-leadership begins with a true motivation to serve others and to build a solid foundation of shared goals. By empowering all employees to contribute to decision-making, it creates high levels of interdependence, increased job satisfaction, and individual commitment to achieving a collective vision.

The results? In *Fortune* magazine's 2001 listing of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, 4 of the top 10 follow the principles of servant-leadership: The Container Store (number 1), Southwest Airlines (number 4), TDIndustries (number 6), and Synovus Financial (number 8). In addition to providing an inspiring work environment, each of these businesses is recognized as a leader in its industry.

The Traditional Boss Versus the Servant-Leader

As the pace of change accelerates, many companies are experiencing the limitations of traditional, hierarchical leadership. The model of a hero who single-handedly "saves the day" is no longer viable. Today's complex problems require input from people throughout the organization.

TRADITIONAL BOSS	SERVANT-LEADER
Motivated by a personal drive to achieve.	Motivated by a desire to serve others.
Highly competitive and independent; seeks to receive personal credit for achievement.	Highly collaborative and interdependent; gives credit to others generously.
Understands internal politics and uses them to win personally.	Sensitive to what motivates others and empowers all to win with shared goals and vision.
Focuses on fast action; complains about long meetings and about others being too slow.	Focuses on gaining understanding, input, and buy-in from all parties; understands that faster is often slower.
Relies solely on facts, logic, proof.	Uses intuition and foresight to balance facts, logic, proof.
Controls information in order to maintain power.	Shares big-picture information generously.
Gives orders; sees too much listening or coaching as inefficient.	Listens deeply and respectfully to others, especially to those who disagree.
Feels that personal value comes from individual talents and abilities.	Feels that personal value comes from mentoring and working collaboratively with others.
Develops personal power base; uses perks and titles to signal who has power.	Develops trust across a network of constituencies; breaks down hierarchies.
Speaks first; feels his/her ideas are most important.	Listens first; values others' input and builds strength through differences.
Uses personal power and intimidation to leverage what he/she wants.	Uses personal trust and respect to build bridges and do what's best for the "whole."
Views accountability as assigning blame.	Views accountability as creating a safe environment for learning from experience.
Uses humor to control others.	Uses humor to lift others up and make it safe to learn from mistakes.

"In the past I believed that being a great place to work would limit our ability to pay top wages, grow our business, and have outstanding financial performance. My paradigm has shifted. I now believe being a great place to work allows us to pay top wages, grow our business, and have outstanding career opportunities."

— Jack Lowe Jr., CEO of TDIndustries

BECOMING A SERVANT-LEADER

How can you begin to practice servant-leadership, especially when such skills have not always been rewarded in your organization? Here are some initial steps you might take:

Listen Without Judgment. When a team member comes to you with a concern, listen first to understand. Repeat back what you thought you heard and your understanding of the person's feelings. Then ask how you can help. Did the individual just need a sounding board, or would he/she like you to help brainstorm solutions?

Be Authentic. Admit mistakes openly. At the end of meetings, do a "plus (what worked?), delta (what needs improving?)" process check. Be accountable to others for your role in projects that didn't go so well.

Build Community. Show appreciation to those who work with you, both for doing a particular job well and for routine work. Create frequent celebrations and include families to build a network of friendship, fun, and caring.

Share Power. Avoid offering answers for everything. Ask others, "What decisions am I making that could be improved if I had more input from the team?" Plan to incorporate this feedback into your decision-making process.

Develop People. Take time each week to develop others to grow into higher levels of leadership. Give them opportunities to attend meetings they would not usually be invited to. Find projects that you can co-lead, and coach your partner as you work together.

BUILDING A SHARED VISION OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Here's how TDIndustries, a mechanical/electrical construction and service company headquartered in Dallas, Texas, approached the challenge of building a shared vision based on servant-leadership:

Build a Curriculum of Servant-Leadership Work. TD and its people development partners have gathered materials, videos, simulation games, and so on to create a day-long learning experience to introduce and grow servant-leadership.

Build a Foundation of Credibility for the Process. TD's senior leaders introduce every class to underscore the company's commitment to servant-leadership. Mid-level leaders co-teach the classes, candidly sharing their personal journeys and linking the subject matter to real business challenges.

Add Other Levels of Servant-Leadership. TD has integrated servant-leadership with topics such as diversity and quality. Supervisors attend refresher courses to fill in skill gaps and deepen understanding.

Solicit Feedback and Fine-Tune the Process. At the end of each session, participants provide feedback, which is used to improve future classes. This process models servant-leadership in that participants teach the facilitators how to improve the program.

Implement a Three-Part Experiential-Learning Process. During the course, each participant chooses a new skill to practice. Three months later, the group meets to celebrate at least one improvement from each participant. Thus, the learning takes place in three phases: an initial all-day session; 90 days for practice; and a final meeting to share stories and learn from others' experiences.

This material is drawn from *The Essentials of Servant-Leadership: Principles in Practice*, by Ann McGee-Cooper and Gary Looper, a volume in Pegasus Communications' *Innovations in Management* series.

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