
Servant leadership: A journey, not a race



Amidst changing organisational mandates and employee expectations, leaders must learn new ways of leading. Old command and control styles of management need to be replaced by new models that are principled and service-driven.

Servant leadership offers a fresh approach to meeting the critical leadership challenges of contemporary healthcare organisations, while honouring the humanity of everyone they touch, according to management and innovation experts.

The concept of servant leadership was made popular by Robert K. Greenleaf, who built a career spanning 38 years at AT&T. After retiring in 1964, he began his second — and most productive — career as a writer, consultant, and teacher. According to Greenleaf, the servant leader is a person of integrity who leads an organisation to success by putting the needs of customers, employees and communities first. The leader pursues this goal by sharing knowledge and power, and by helping people perform to their highest capacity.

The servant leader is servant first, whose conscious choice brings him/her to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, with the perks and power that implies. The difference, Greenleaf maintains, manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.

"Servant leadership is not a new idea, but it is being 'discovered' at an exponential rate. Contemporary organisations are eagerly searching for guidance in achieving their missions and goals through engaged and invested employees — employees who become co-creators of the organisation," say Phillip Anderson, Co-Program Director for the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, and Linda W. Belton, former director, Organizational Health U.S. Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and Greenleaf Center's former board member.

In the healthcare industry, where the drivers are quality, safety, compassion and a solid business model, it's notable that servant leadership is not practised everywhere.

"In our estimation, and in the experience of major providers like VHA and the Cleveland Clinic, servant leadership is an ideal platform for excellence in healthcare. It is compatible with patient-centric, relationship-centred and value-based approaches. It enhances efforts in change management, succession planning, diversity and inclusion, and is a launching pad for high-functioning teams," Anderson and Belton point out.

Servant leadership does not replace traditional management functions, but shapes how they are performed. Servant leadership is often countercultural. As Robert Greenleaf surmised, being servant first, addressing people's highest priority needs, offering others a seat at the table, and upending the hierarchy, contradicts many of the things people learned in graduate school.

Some distinguishing characteristics of the servant leader are:

- Authentic humility: a regular practice of reflection
- A focus on serving followers for their own good, not just the good of the organisation; instilling a sense of collective ownership in the organisation's success
- Concern for the wellbeing of all stakeholders — from patients, families and staff to suppliers, contractors and the community
- Emphasis on providing opportunities for growth and professional development; coaching and creating more servant leaders
- Leading by moral authority instead of relying on positional authority alone: inspiring followership

"Servant leaders operate from courage, persistence, resilience, accountability and a steady internal compass. They understand the difference between service and servitude," explains Belton, who adds that her tenure at the VHA gave her many opportunities to champion servant leadership in a massive healthcare system.

"VHA is on a servant leadership journey, encountering the struggles and achievements with which many systems can identify. Like most organisations, VHA is a work in progress," she says.

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