

What You Need to Know Before Adopting Servant Leadership

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Medical practice leaders may be tempted to adopt a servant leadership style of leading. There are great organizations that do exhibit servant leadership throughout their organizations, but it is also possible to be a servant leader for just one's own team. Alignment of organizational goals with the servant leadership style is important in all cases. Servant leadership is not about optimizing profits; it is about creating and maintaining a strategic vision that focuses on the team members. It is this culture that produces positive organizational outcomes such as profits.

KEY WORDS: Servant leadership; leadership styles; other-orientation; goal setting; organizational citizenship; rewards; respect.

An organization that successfully grows organically or strategically constructs a servant leadership culture can expect positive outcomes throughout, because servant leadership at its core promotes improvement at all internal levels as well as with external partners and the community. Servant leadership is a holistic style of leadership, meaning the leader engages followers not only with their minds but also from their hearts and souls. In this integrative approach to leadership, the leader's character and moral compass provide their motivation to lead followers. A leader using this approach is interested in improving the individual team member, the team, and the entire organization. They are interested in how the organization interacts with their business and community environment. This positively affects subjective outcomes, such as employee satisfaction, and objective outcomes, such as productivity.¹

The subjective outcomes of servant leadership are widespread and positive. Team members have greater satisfaction with their job and their supervisor. Trust in the organization, fellow team members, and the management team is increased. Increased trust, in turn, reduces negative characteristics, such as fear of their supervisor, emotional exhaustion, and voluntary turnover intention. Team members report satisfaction with their work-life balance and reduced work-family conflict, and many describe their life as thriving. Social scientists found that at least 17 positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes were at greater levels in a servant leadership environment.¹

Servant leadership incorporates a broad category of employee characteristics called organizational citizenship

behaviors, or how an employee contributes to their organization beyond their formal job description. When an employee exhibits high organizational citizenship behavior, the increased volunteerism that results helps an organization in many ways. For example, on-boarding new employees might be considered a burden to a member of the team receiving the newbie. However, when high organizational citizenship behavior is present, team members readily help out for the good of all. They may volunteer to mentor new and existing team members if that would improve the organization. Team members identify with the organization and relate the improved organizational performance to their personal improvement and contribution.

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The objective outcomes related to servant leadership also are powerful. Performance measures such as productivity, sales goal achievement, and project completion rates are better. This effect is seen at both the individual and team levels, which is significantly different than with other leadership styles that affect only individual performance and do not necessarily lead to better team results.¹ It follows that if individual and team performance are better, then organizations will do better at meeting management goals overall. In organizations that promote innovation or require innovation to succeed, the improvement-oriented

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nature of servant leadership supports innovation to a high degree, especially with the higher degree of organizational citizenship behavior (i.e., volunteerism).

Customers win as well. Customer service is of higher quality in an organization with servant-leaders. This type of leadership is other-oriented, and “others” include customers, who benefit from the employee and leadership motivation to satisfy them. The improvement motivation builds on existing customer service processes and procedures to create even better ways of satisfying customers. The quality of service is important in servant leadership environments.¹ Individual and organizational attention are given to making things work right in the first place and fixing problems as they arise.

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Organizations win with servant leadership because of the holistic approach to achieving goals through improving the organization, the teams, and the individuals. “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts” applies. The servant leadership environment promotes self-efficacy—that is, not only trust between leaders and followers but also employees’ trust in themselves that they can do the job and do it right. Improved self-efficacy supports knowledge sharing and group socialization, and social scientists have found this synergy when servant leadership is present.¹

Given all of these benefits, why wouldn’t every organization want to adopt servant leadership? It isn’t easy.

The first of three things to know about servant leadership is that this process is complex and requires commitment. It involves a well-defined set of leadership characteristics that must be fully actualized in an organization. Secondly, servant leadership may be embodied in only a few of the organization’s leaders now, requiring time to effect broad change. To achieve the goal of a servant leadership-style run organization, servant leadership must characterize most of the leadership. The third part of the puzzle is that servant leadership is exhibited in degrees, from low to high—it isn’t just “there.” It is important to review all three of these facets to better understand what must be undertaken to adopt this type of leadership.

The first step is to understand servant leadership. To put this into organizational leadership context—social scientists study leaders individually and collectively to describe their existing style of leadership. Their style could be authoritarian, characterized by the leader controlling the decisions with little or no concern for input from the team members. The style could be transformational, where the leader is considered a change agent and a visionary, helping

to identify what needs changing and leading the change process along with their team members. Another style is transactional leadership, which relies on motivating employees by trading objective rewards for work done. Servant leadership differs from these three styles and most others in one particular dimension: it is based on the fact that the personality of the leader is that of a servant.¹ To achieve a servant leadership environment, most of the organization’s leaders must have the servant-leader personality.

Consequently, it is not easy to adopt this type of leadership. For example, if a leader is an autocrat, there will be a lot of change ahead to become a servant. Social scientists make the distinction that this leadership style is about a person with a servant personality being a team leader, not the team leader serving the team, although that is usually a result. A servant in this context has three elements: motivation; implementation; and mindset.

First, the servant is motivated to help others and the organization through leadership responsibility. His or her motivation is not about advancing their agenda, but to discover what is best for the organization and its members and then advance that agenda. This internal motivation comes from their moral character and their resolve to achieve for others. So this type of servant is not a servile person the way a footman might be as they try to please their household. The servant motivation can result in harsh management actions if that is what the leader believes is needed to move the agenda forward.

However, it is unlikely a harsh management style will be exhibited, because the second element involves how they implement their servant style. A servant-leader is concerned with each team member individually. A “this is for your own good” tough love approach might be used with some individuals, but if the servant-leader is true to their motivation, they will first seek to understand the needs and goals of the individual. Their goal is not only to achieve organizational ends, but also, and at times more so, to help the individual become their best person. With a servant leadership style, it can be hard to find a line separating work life and personal life when it comes to how the leader and team member interact. Leadership studies have found that this way of treating team members builds high levels of trust, which, in turn, is associated with a large number of positive organizational outcomes.²

The third element, the leader’s mindset, focuses on the individual team members. Servant-leaders are a force within an organization to move team members from self-orientation to the servant style of concern for others. Modeling this behavior with authenticity underlies their everyday concern about nurturing individuals, using resources for the greatest good, and making a positive difference. This differs from other leadership styles, because it is more of a personal necessity to act as a servant-leader than it is a choice. This is who they are. And this is the first reason why trying to adopt servant leadership is not simple.

The second reason it is not simple builds on the first. If adopting servant leadership is the aspirational goal, then the organization and the leadership have to align with that goal. Imagine a strategic planning session of the highest management where a goal is stated, “To become the finest company in the United States by implementing servant leadership.” After stating the goal, the next step in strategic planning describes the tactics to support this goal. A tactic that works here is, “We will fire all leaders who do not already exhibit servant leadership and hire new ones who do. We will do this immediately because research finds the biggest barrier to building servant leadership capacity is sabotage from within by current leadership.” This imagined scenario is not uncommon once top leadership who are servant-leaders identify that the change needed in the organization is to have all levels of leadership saturated with servant-leaders. Suffice it to say that unless the organization has organically grown its servant leadership, heads will roll to accomplish this goal.

The third hurdle that shows it is not possible to adopt servant leadership easily and quickly is that servant leadership is a complex construct, with at least 16 measures identified by social scientists. Each measure purports to identify levels of servant leadership in either an individual or an organization, or both. Three of those are considered the gold standard of measurement, but even they differ in what they report.¹ How does an organizational leader who desires to have a servant leadership management team know which person to keep or hire? Industrial psychologists might subject potential leaders to a battery of testing—and this could work. They would be looking for personality elements including emotional healing, creating community value, putting subordinates first, transcendental spirituality, humility, and courage.¹ It is a daunting task, but if the goal is to change by adopting servant leadership, this is the type of work that must be done. A true servant leader will want to spend the time to develop those characteristics with the current leadership team, but this can take a long time and is likely to fail if many individuals need this attention.

Little research is available on how to integrate non-servant leadership-oriented talent into a servant leader environment. For example, it may be difficult to find a CFO or CIO who is great at that work and also servant leadership-oriented. A majority of top management will have to have a servant-leader orientation for the organization to have positive outcomes overall associated with servant leadership. At the team level, servant leadership can exist within an organization led with another style provided that the servant leader-style team leader reports to superiors who accept the team leader’s style.¹

Why would an organization want to adopt servant leadership? It is not the easiest task, unless the organization grew from servant leadership roots from the very first. Examples of this include Starbucks and Ritz-Carlton. Perhaps that is the motivation for the change itself: who wouldn’t want to run these companies? Servant leadership has been theorized to be important to an organization as an evolutionary substitute for leadership during the human hunter-gatherer phase.¹ Those leaders had to build teamwork and kinship to survive. They had to give of themselves to better the community’s chance of survival. Leadership scientists might be encroaching on anthropology in this theorizing, but this description is close to what a servant leadership leader does daily in their organization. They identify what is needed for each individual to contribute at their greatest level and develop or provide what is needed. Great organizational outcomes are the result.

Servant leadership is a worthwhile pursuit. An individual wanting to be a servant-leader has an interesting first step: a review of their personality to see if they are a natural servant. Traits can be developed through forming habits regarding how they treat others. However, too much change may be required, as indicated by the fact that most of the research on the psychology side of the studies refers to innate servant orientation. At a team level, the leader can best create a servant-leader atmosphere by learning and using the leadership skills that support trust between the leader and each team member. The leader should ensure good two-way respectful communication, help members improve, reward them appropriately, and model the right behaviors.³ For an organization, the management team will develop a strategic plan for adopting servant leadership with specific goals, tactics, measurements, and periodic reviews of achievements. This strategic change process is required unless an organization is organically characterized by servant leadership. For the individual, team, and organization this aspirational goal is worth the effort—but not easy. ■■

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