

What Services Do Servant Leaders Provide?

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Sometimes leaders ask if I help organizations understand and implement “servant leadership.” Maybe the individual has heard of the concept but can’t imagine how it functions, considering his or her current beliefs about leadership. I love exploring existing perspectives with inquisitive people, searching together for a more effective model, and encouraging them to adjust their leadership behaviors.

The common image of leadership involves the traditional pyramidal hierarchy. Developed centuries ago, the corporate organization chart identifies the portion of the empire each leader controls. “These people work for me” is the operative mental outlook. Within this framework, some leaders recoil when presented with the concept of servant leadership. “You expect me to serve them? You must be kidding!”

Let’s start thinking about servant leadership by representing the organization through a different model. Imagine how we might use a tree as a more appropriate organizational metaphor.

Visualize that the individuals who do the work on a day-to-day basis are the leaves, converting sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide into sustenance for the tree and oxygen for the atmosphere. The leaves are supported by the branches, which are the organization’s managers and supervisors. Top management is the trunk supporting the branches and leaves and delivering water and nutrients up from the roots.

The trunk and branches provide substantial support for that portion of the organization where the “real work” is accomplished. When the winds of change blow, the trunk and roots provide stability, keeping the tree anchored firmly. The tree’s extensive root system collects revenue from customers, and the trunk delivers the needed capital equipment, raw materials, tools, and supplies to the leaves.

Through this simple paradigm shift, many individuals are immediately able to better understand the concept of servant leadership. The trunk and branches function collaboratively to ensure the health and growth of the twigs and leaves. A tree is a living organism; if any part becomes diseased, the life of the entire tree is in jeopardy. The main function of the trunk and branches is to keep the leaves healthy.

If the organization remains healthy, the parts that do the “real work” are pushed higher, competing favorably with surrounding trees for sunlight. Growth, through increased production and reliability, is a natural desire among those doing the work. The trunk and branches grow only as much as is required to deliver the resources needed by the increasing numbers of leaves.

Pyramids were never intended to grow; they were designed as tombs! Trees, however, are alive and beautiful. With apologies to Joyce Kilmer, “I think that I shall never see a pyramid lovely as a tree.”

Now, let’s consider the real-time services that you provide when you function as a servant leader. Let’s start with you as an entrepreneur, gathering resources and sending up the first shoots. Leaves are added as survival seems viable. Growth occurs quickly in those first few years as the tender seedling seeks sunshine and manages to avoid consumption by insects, herbivores, and competing vegetation.

Once the organization matures, you as the leader provide an inspiring vision, clear expectations, a healthy work environment, opportunities, and resources. Depending on the surroundings, you communicate direction so that everyone is empowered to achieve reliable and robust growth. When problems arise, you listen and collaborate to eliminate obstructions and pursue enhanced processes.

You offer respect, feedback, coaching, and expanded responsibilities. You inform everyone of the organization’s results, and you invite new ideas. You offer encouragement, hope, balance, and clarity. You tell the truth. You plan so that last-minute requests rarely occur. You keep promises that you’ve made. You ask people what they need, and you work to provide it. You openly reveal your motives.

Lest we take this model too far, let’s acknowledge that those doing the “real work” are accountable to your authority. However, the leaves rarely need to be reminded why they exist. They realize that their role--processing sunshine, water, and nutrients--is a critical function for the success of “the tree team.”

As a servant leader, you respect, support, and empower those who do the real work of the organization!

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