

# **Servant Leadership--Seeking Feedback Unselfishly**

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Do you practice the mindset and habits of “servant leadership”? If not, perhaps you don’t understand the concept. Maybe you’ve not experienced life under the direction of a servant leader. Maybe you grew up with “command and control” so strongly influencing you that you can’t imagine another option.

If you would like to learn about servant leadership, please go to my website (see address below). Click on “Article Archives,” and put the words “servant leadership” in the search box at the top of the page. A variety of articles will pop up; I welcome dialogue if you have questions about anything you read there.

This article is about seeking feedback, which is typically a selfish act. You want to learn that what you’ve been doing is appropriate, constructive, and beneficial. It’s seeking to learn about YOU and your behaviors. As a servant leader, can you seek feedback in such a way as to make the conversation about--and put your focus on--the people who work with you?

If you already practice servant leadership, you may have never thought about seeking feedback unselfishly. What does that mean, anyway?

Let’s be very real here. Currently, you probably seek feedback rather infrequently from the people you influence. Why is that? You simply don’t think about it much. And why is that? You typically presume your behavior is well-intentioned, proficient, and delivers beneficial effects.

Even when you consider seeking feedback, you often don’t. Why not? Seeking feedback requires effort, and you already have plenty of demands on your time. Further, you don’t really want to risk hearing that your choices and behaviors were offensive or had detrimental consequences.

For those who understand servant leadership and the value of seeking feedback, let me stretch your thinking a bit. Would you welcome the people under your authority truthfully telling you, with no fear of repercussion, the way your directives and actions affect them?

Such a situation won’t occur naturally, of course. People don’t typically tell their bosses the same things they tell their coworkers. Further, most bosses don’t want to subject themselves to that kind of scrutiny.

If, however, you want extreme openness with your team members, how could you create it? When you talk with your direct reports, ask them to describe how your behaviors and directives affect them. Then listen for the sole purpose of understanding that person’s experience so well that you can compassionately repeat back to him or her what you’ve learned.

Be aware that the temptation to explain yourself will be very strong. Your tendency will be to justify your behaviors and explain what you were hoping to accomplish. Don’t do it! If you had been successful in achieving your intended outcome, your desire to share such an explanation would not be necessary.

This approach gets at the heart of what good feedback is all about. You knew when you took action what your intentions were. Now you are learning the effect of your behavior on others. You’ll often learn that the effect of your actions is very different from your intent!

You may find more often than you’d prefer that an apology is in order. Should you apologize if the effect on the other person is less favorable than what you intended? If you think about it, that situation will arise far more often than having to apologize for some intentional discomfort you caused.

“Apologizing” is an interesting and powerful interpersonal activity. Few of us do it well. Yet apologizing is a beneficial practice that can measurably strengthen relationships. The concept of apologizing is worth additional exploration, and I’ll do that in my next article.

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