

Servant Leadership is Unnatural

Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, May 2, 2011

My most recent article addressed the limitations of traditional “command and control” leadership. This week, I’d like to address a very different kind of influence on others, servant leadership. But servant leadership is not easy. If it were, lots of people would be doing it. There would be plenty of good role models to support your learning.

But, alas, servant leadership is rare. Why? Because it’s not only difficult, it’s unnatural. I had the privilege of hearing a presentation on this topic by trainer and consultant, Jim Hunter. Jim presented concepts contained in his book, *The World’s Most Powerful Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader*.

Jim made it clear that most people really don’t want to change. They’ve adopted their approach to leadership, and they are comfortable. They may want to change the world—the territory “out there”—but they don’t want to change themselves. They prefer to do what comes naturally for them instead.

Yet good leadership requires many “not natural” behaviors. And doing what is unnatural requires hard work and maybe even some sacrifice.

Oh, good leaders make it look easy, but that’s because they’ve been doing the right things for so long, it has become second nature to them. But it is clearly SECOND nature. Good leaders have made many conscious choices to do things that are NOT natural.

For example, it is not natural to be patient. Our human nature wants satisfaction right now! Just watch a toddler who doesn’t quickly obtain what he wants. And, unfortunately, many of us never grow beyond that “give me” stage.

It is not natural to be kind. Our human nature wants to blame and judge others for their errors, while justifying our own limitations.

It is not natural to be humble. Our human nature wants to proclaim our achievements for all to hear! We like to look good, and we have a tendency to promote our good performance.

It is not natural to be respectful. Our human nature showers attention only on those who are in a position to do something to benefit us.

It is not natural to be selfless. Our human nature looks out primarily for number one. (Jim reminded us that each of us judges the quality of a snapshot by how we look, right?)

It is not natural to forgive. Our human nature seeks revenge. We’ll hold that grudge until we get payback! At a minimum, we remember and even replay in our minds that injustice that was done to us.

It is not natural to be honest. Our human nature tends to exaggerate in whatever way makes us look good.

It is not natural to remain committed to our choices and follow-through on our promises. Our human nature seeks whatever is easy.

It is not natural to serve and sacrifice. Our human nature yearns for comfort, hoping somebody else will attend to our needs.

The information was stimulating, and the presentation flew by. As Jim neared the end of his material, however, he revealed the bad news.

Based on his previous experience, despite a high desire to capitalize on the new energy and learnings from the session, fewer than 10% of the attendees will actually be significantly better leaders a year later. He predicted that the few who make considerable progress will generate an improvement plan right away and execute it daily!

I spoke with Jim at the conclusion of the session, offering a suggestion for how he might improve this transformation percentage. Few of us go to a four-hour session, then change significantly on our own.

However, building in frequent follow-up contact with a designated leadership coach—to identify the gaps in performance and to hold us accountable for choosing and executing new behaviors—will nurture the transformation. Studies indicate that as many as 80% will significantly improve when sound training is supplemented with personal coaching.

Consider inviting someone you trust to serve you with feedback and option generation as you seek improved, unnatural behaviors in the quest for greater servant leadership.

Dennis Hooper is a leadership coach, helping organizations build future leaders. Contact him at dhopper2@juno.com. Call him at (404)-575-3050. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com.