

# **Servant Leadership vs. Traditional Leadership**

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Have you noticed that when you describe something new, you tend to compare it to something the other person already understands? Or maybe you explain how it's different from that other thing.

So it is with "servant leadership." By now, many leaders know the term. But I'm still surprised when leaders hear the words for the first time and respond negatively without understanding the meaning. "Hey, hold on! Don't expect to see me delivering milk and cookies to their workstation every day!"

To appreciate servant leadership, it's helpful to contrast the concept with something more familiar. Please don't conclude too quickly that "I'm okay. I don't need to think about this 'serving leader' concept." Allow me to contrast this counterintuitive idea with something you probably know better.

Many leaders behave as if they have "command-and-control" authority. They give the orders. They expect obedience. They equate leadership with power--the power to create and execute action plans, the power to delegate aspects of work to someone else, and the power to distribute rewards.

Traditional leadership is about the leader looking good, though most "command and control" leaders would not agree. Most traditional leaders would say it's about making the organization look good. The operations have to look good to customers, of course, or they will take their business elsewhere. Results have to look good to the owners, too, whether they be stockholders or private individuals.

And everything has to look good to the "higher-ups." Especially the higher-ups--they're always evaluating, so you never want things to look bad to the higher-ups.

Having to look good all the time leads unintentionally to some self-protective behaviors. Sometimes leaders get creative with reporting information, giving it a look-good "spin." However, threats associated with potentially negative consequences seem to help activities occur on time and in just the way the leader wants them. At least the fear of retribution seems to work in the short term.

To overcome this tendency toward intimidating behavior, many leaders opt for a "nice-guy" alternative. They become benevolent dictators. Everyone is reminded periodically where the power lies, but these leaders make sure folks know how compassionately humane they are. They don't want to look bad in the eyes of the people doing the work. Where would they be if all those folks decided to leave?

Many organizations function quite adequately under traditional leaders. When the organization looks good, leaders may point out the skill, creativity, and tenacity required of all the people who routinely do the work. However, the leader appears to get the attention and recognition of those "higher up."

Traditional leaders are not intentionally self-serving. It's not their focus to look out for themselves. That's just the way we human beings are--it's human nature. We make choices. It's not our fault that we usually choose to make ourselves comfortable--and to look good to the "higher-ups" in the process!

The way many leaders make things look good is to keep a short leash on delegated projects. They are explicit in directing how things should occur, then look over people's shoulders to make sure they aren't messing up the process. And since most people will take advantage of every opportunity, you have to be insistent that no rules are bent for any special exceptions.

Two weeks ago, I referenced a devotional entitled "The Shoeshine Man, written by John Fischer. (<https://catchjohnfischer.live/?s=the+shoeshine+man>)? Most of us would assume the well-dressed man on the throne to be a leader of some sort. John suggests that you consider yourself to be the shoeshine man serving the people in your organization who do the daily work! It's a contrast, for sure!

Until next week, I ask you to consider if you've known any traditional leader similar to what I've described here. Then think about what the alternative might be. A serving leader has a vastly different outlook regarding those served. I hope that some assumptions are revealed to you as you ponder.