

The Servant Leader as Shoeshine Man

by Dennis Hooper, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, May 31, 2005

Let's do something different this week.

I invite you to read and think. Then I ask you to share with me your creative thoughts. If you use e-mail, send a note to dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com. If you don't use e-mail, text me at (770)-286-2250.

Books about "servant leadership" abound today. I find the concept very intriguing, and I encourage my clients to embody the best ideas from those books. For people who have functioned in a more traditional concept of leadership, however, it is often hard to make the shift in perspective.

I read an article last week that can help, and I'll share it with you.

As you read the article, imagine the shoeshine man as your organization's leader and "the guy on the throne" as representing you and others who are under the authority of your leader.

Here is my request. Tell me the products, services, or deliverables that you and your colleagues desire from your leader. I will combine your thoughts with others and share them in a future column. Leaders will then have a clear description of how to serve their "internal" customers, the members of their team.

John Fischer, senior writer for "The Purpose-Driven Life Daily Devotional," authored this "Shoeshine Man" perspective. You may view additional devotionals at www.purposedrivenlife.com.

When it comes to serving one another, think of yourself as the shoeshine man.

We've all seen these guys in airports, train stations, and downtown next to the newsstand. Their workplace usually consists of two or three elevated chairs on a platform so they can work at a comfortable level. The most upscale stations have plush leather-covered stuffed chairs and brass stands for your feet that put your shoes out where the shiner can work around them easily. Shining shoes is a servant's position that bears images of a happy-go-lucky soul, snapping his polishing cloth over shiny wingtips while cracking jokes or singing along with the radio.

A successful businessman, of course, would identify with the guy on the throne, never the one shining shoes. And yet, were Jesus here today, He would point to the shoeshine man as being the one to emulate. It's the closest thing in our society to what Jesus did when he washed the disciples' feet, and then He told them to go and do the same. He lowered Himself to a servant's status and then proceeded to meet the needs of those around Him.

Serving others begins with how I see myself. Paul said, "So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's secrets" (1 Corinthians 4:1 NLT). "Mere servants." I can't serve without first seeing myself as a servant. If being a shoeshine man seems too demeaning, I may need to rethink my calling and purpose in life, because a big part of that purpose is to serve others instead of being served.

Servants always look up to (respect) those around them. That's the other part of this image that works with Christ's foot-washing example. This whole arrangement puts me down and the other person up. For the shoeshine man, the customer is the V.I.P. The customer is on the throne in the plush seat.

My purpose as a follower of Christ is to put others on the throne instead of insisting on being there myself. I don't know about you, but for me, this is a radical redistribution of power.

So, remember, if you are a leader, you serve your team members. You don't need recognition; you don't need attention. Because it's not about you--or me. It's about the people we serve. And when we forget--and it's easy to do--just remember the shoeshine man.