

Traditional Leadership vs. Servant Leadership

by Dennis Hooper, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, June 14, 2005

I've been promising a column that addresses "servant leadership." Why, then, would I prepare an article on traditional leadership?

To appreciate servant leadership, it's helpful to contrast the concept with something more familiar. I want you to consider how you might improve your leadership behaviors. Don't conclude too quickly that "I'm okay--there's no need for me to think about this 'servant leader' concept."

Many leaders think of their positions as having "command-and-control" authority. They give the orders. They equate leadership with power--the power to create and execute action plans, the power to delegate the less desirable aspects of work to someone else, and the power to distribute rewards.

Traditional leadership is all about the leader looking good. Most traditional leaders would correct me and 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." To make sure things are done on time and in just the way the leader wants, threats associated with the potential negative consequences seem to work (at least 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. After all, where would they be if all those folks decided to leave?

Many organizations function quite adequately under traditional leaders. When the organization looks good, many leaders remind folks of the skill, creativity, or tenacity required to make all this happen. The leader gets to claim the credit, right? At least on behalf of the folks who created the good results, right?

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. Be very specific in directing how things should be done, 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 had better be reluctant to bend the rules for any special exceptions.

So how does any of this relate to "The Shoeshine Man," the "servant leadership" devotional written by John Fischer that I quoted two weeks ago? It's clearly a contrast. Instead of the leader being the shoeshine man, this description has the leader as the well-dressed "suit" on the throne.

Until next week, I ask you to consider if you've known anyone similar to what I've described here. Then think about what the alternative might be. A servant leader has a very different outlook from that described above. I hope that some assumptions are revealed to you as you ponder.