

From Hero-as- Leader to Servant-as- Leader

As an organisational and spiritual awakening sweeps through corporations, traditional leadership models are no longer effective. Instead the servant-as-leader approach is gaining ground over the traditional hero-as-leader model.

This excerpt from *Focus on Leadership: Servant-Leadership for the 21st Century* (Edited by Lawrence C. Spears and Michele Lawrence) clarifies the difference between the traditional boss and the new servant leader.

Ann McGee-Cooper and Duane Trammell

An organisational and spiritual awakening is currently taking place. On the cusp of the new millennium, more and more people are seeking deeper meaning in their work beyond just financial rewards and prestige. The desire to make a difference, to support a worthwhile vision and to leave the planet better than when we found it, all contribute to this new urge. Whom we choose to follow, how we lead and how we come together to address the accelerating change are also shifting.

Organisations must pay attention to these transitions because of (1) the radical reduction in the numbers of workers currently available for jobs and (2) the movement into our working ranks of a new generation of employees with totally different values and expectations. If companies want to attract and keep top talent, the old ways of recruiting, rewarding and leading won't get them there. A different kind of leadership is required for the future.

Traditional leadership models

What are the roots of the leadership models that brought us to this point in organisational development? During the Industrial Revolution, hierarchies were the norm. At that time, businesses depended on the completion of many repetitive tasks in the most efficient way possible. To that end, factories, railroads, mines, and other companies followed a top-down view of leadership in which those at the top gathered the information, made the decisions, and controlled the power. Those at the bottom – the “hired hands” – were rewarded for conformity and unquestioning obedience. In addition, business moved much more slowly than it does today.

Our approach to preparing new leaders over the last 50 years has sprung from these roots. Leadership training in MBA courses has been based on the case-study method, through which learners study patterns of how others solved their business problems. The assumption has been that if you learn enough about the successful case studies, you will be prepared as a leader – you will be able to go forth, match your new challenges to the case studies of the past, and superimpose a similar solution on the problems of today.

Yet change is accelerating and we are now in a time when many companies view a traditional education as more of a negative than a positive. They even consider an MBA a detriment, because graduates must unlearn their reliance on the past in order to see new, more complex patterns emerging. Some observers have said that this shift has turned the pyramid of power on its head.

How servant-leadership serves organisations

Servant-leadership is a powerful methodology for organisational learning because it offers new ways to capitalise on the knowledge and wisdom of all employees, not just those “at the top”. Through this different form of leadership, big-picture information and business strategies are shared broadly throughout the company. By understanding basic assumptions and background information on issues or decisions, everyone can add something of value to the discussion because everyone possesses the basic tools needed to make meaningful contributions. Such tools and information are traditionally reserved for upper management, but sharing them brings deeper meaning to each job and empowers each person to participate more in effective decision-making and creative problem solving. Individuals thus grow from being mere hired hands into having fully engaged minds and hearts.

This approach constitutes true empowerment, which significantly increases job satisfaction and engages far more brain power from each employee. It also eliminates the “That’s not my job” syndrome as each person, seeing the impact he or she has on the whole, becomes eager to do whatever it takes to achieve the collective vision. Servant-leadership therefore challenges some basic terms in our management vocabulary; expressions such as “subordinates”, “my people”, “staff” (versus

“line”), “overhead” (referring to people), “direct reports”, “manpower”, all become less accurate or useful. Even phrases such as “driving decision-making down into the ranks” betray a deep misunderstanding of the concept of empowerment. Do we believe that those below are resistant to change or less intelligent than others? Why must we drive or push decisions down? Something vital is missing from this way of thinking – deep respect and mentoring, a desire to lift others to their fullest potential and the humility to understand that the work of one person can rarely match that of an aligned team.

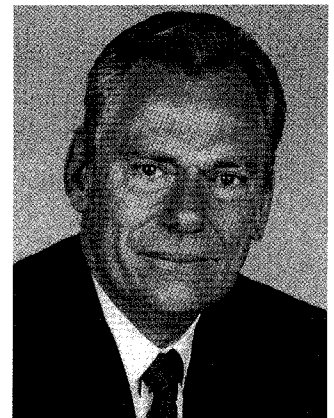
A new kind of leadership

A servant-leader thus does not duck behind the letter of the law but asks, “What is the right thing for us to do to best serve all stakeholders?” He or she defines profit beyond financial gain to include meaningful work, environmental responsibility and quality of life for all involved. To quote Robert Greenleaf, “The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will each benefit, or at least not be further deprived?”

Supervisors often believe that they don’t have time to make a long-term investment in people. When an individual’s primary focus is on doing everything faster, he or she becomes addicted to the constant rush of adrenaline. To feed this craving, the person neglects proactive tasks such as coaching, mentoring, planning ahead and quiet reflection to learn from mistakes. Instead, the brain sees only more problems – reasons to stay reactive and highly charged. Servant-leaders spend far less time in crisis management or fire fighting than do traditional managers. Instead, they use crises as opportunities to coach others and collectively learn from mistakes.

The power of internal motivation and paradox

So what does it take to become a servant-leader? The most important quality is a deep, internal drive to contribute to a collective result or vision. Very often, a servant-leader purposely refuses to accept the perks of the position and takes a relatively low salary because another shared goal may have more value. For example, Southwest Airlines (SWA) chairman Herb Kelleher has long been referred to as the most underpaid CEO in the industry. Herb was the first to work without pay when SWA faced a serious financial threat. In asking the pilots’ union to



Herb Kelleher, Chairman South West Airlines

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A NEW KIND OF LEADERSHIP

TRADITIONAL BOSS	SERVANT AS LEADER
Motivated by personal drive to achieve.	Motivated by desire to serve others.
Highly competitive; independent mindset; seeks to receive personal credit for achievement.	Highly collaborative and interdependent; gives credit to others generously.
Understands internal politics and uses them to win personally.	Sensitive to what motivates others and empowers all to win with shared goals and vision.
Focuses on fast action. Complains about long meetings and about others being too slow.	Focuses on gaining understanding, input, buy-in from all parties.
Relies on facts, logic, proof.	Uses intuition and foresight to balance facts, logic, proof.
Controls information in order to maintain power.	Shares big-picture information generously.
Spends more time telling, giving orders. Sees too much listening or coaching as inefficient.	Listens deeply and respectfully to others, especially to those who disagree.
Feels that personal value comes from individual talents.	Feels that personal value comes from mentoring and working collaboratively with others.
Sees network of supporters as power base, and perks and titles as a signal to others.	Develops trust across a network of constituencies; breaks down hierarchy.
Eager to speak first; feels his/her ideas are more important; often dominates or intimidates opponents.	Most likely to listen first; values others' input.
Uses personal power and intimidation to leverage what he/she wants.	Uses personal trust and respect to build bridges and do what's best for the "whole."
Accountability is more often about who is to blame.	Accountability is about making it safe to learn from mistakes.
Uses humour to control others.	Uses humour to lift others up and make it safe to learn from mistakes.



Philip Ramsey

agree to freeze their wages for five years in exchange for stock options, he showed his commitment by freezing his own wages as well.

Big salaries and attractive perks are clearly not the main motivators for Southwest's leadership team; the company's top leaders are paid well below the industry average. Rather, they stay because they are making history together. Their vision is a noble one - to provide

meaningful careers to their employees, and the freedom to fly to many Americans who otherwise could not afford the convenience of air travel. SWA's leaders love to take on major competitors and win. Beyond that, each finds fulfillment in developing talent all around him or her. Servant-leadership has become a core way of being within Southwest Airlines.

A second quality of servant-leaders is an awareness of paradox. Paradox involves two aspects: the understanding that there is usually another side to every story, and the fact that most situations contain an opposite and balancing truth (see "The Structure of Paradox: Managing Interdependent Opposites," by Philip Ramsey, *The Systems Thinker*, Volume 8, Number 9).

Here are some of the paradoxes that servant-leadership illuminates:

- We can lead more effectively by serving others.
- We can arrive at better answers by learning to ask deeper questions and by involving more people in the process.
- We can build strength and unity by valuing differences.
- We can improve quality by making mistakes, as long as we also create a safe environment in which we can learn from experience.
- Fewer words (such as a brief story or metaphor) can provide greater understanding than a long speech. A servant-leader knows to delve into what is not being said or what is being overlooked, especially when solutions come too quickly or with too easy a consensus.

A time for transformation

We are moving away from a time when a strong hierarchy worked for our organisations. In the past, we gauged results in a far more limited way than we do today - financial and other material gain, power, and prestige were viewed as true measures of success. Other more complex measures, such as the impact of our businesses on society, families, and the environment, have not been part of our accounting systems. Yet now, as we move into the Information age and a new millennium, we've come to recognise the limitations of the traditional "bottom line."

A servant-leadership approach can help us overcome these limitations and accomplish a true and lasting transformation within our organisations. To be sure, as we envision the many

peaks and valleys before us in undertaking this journey, we sometimes may feel that we are alone. But we are not alone - many others are headed in the same direction. For instance, in *Fortune* magazine's (1999) listing of the "100 Best Companies to Work For in America", "three of the top four follow the principles of servant-leadership: Synovus Financial (#1), TD Industries (#2), and Southwest Airlines (#4)". In addition to providing a nurturing and inspiring work environment, each of these businesses is recognised as a leader in its industry.

On a personal level, as many of us begin to come to terms with our own mortality, our desire to leave a legacy grows. "What can I contribute that will continue long after I am gone?" Some yearn to have their names emblazoned on a building or some other form of ego recognition. Servant-leaders find fulfillment in the deeper joy of lifting others to new levels of possibility, an outcome that goes far beyond what one person could accomplish alone. The magical synergy that results when egos are put aside, vision is shared and a true learning organisation takes root is something that brings incredible joy, satisfaction and results to the participants and their organisations. For as Margaret Mead put it, "never doubt the power of a small group of committed individuals to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The true heroes of the new millennium will be servant-leaders, quietly working out of the spotlight to transform our world.

Practising servant-leadership

1. **Listen without Judgment.** When a team member comes to you with a concern, listen first to understand. Listen for feelings as well as for facts. Before giving advice or solutions, repeat back what you thought you heard, and state your understanding of the person's feelings. Then ask how you can help. Did the individual just need a sounding board, or would he or she like you to help brainstorm solutions?
2. **Be Authentic.** Admit mistakes openly. At the end of the meeting, discuss what went well during the week and what needs to change. Be open and accountable to others for your role in the things that weren't successful.
3. **Build Community.** Show appreciation to those who work with you. A handwritten thank-you note for a job well done means a lot. Also, find ways to thank team members for everyday, routine work that is often taken for granted.
4. **Share Power.** Ask those you supervise or team with, "What decisions am I making or actions am I taking that could be improved if I had more information or input from the team?" Plan to incorporate this feedback into your decision-making process.
5. **Develop People.** Take time each week to develop others to grow into higher levels of leadership. Give them opportunities to attend meetings that they would not usually be invited to. Find projects that you can co-lead, and coach the others as you work together. □