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guide/)

Your Complete Guide to Servant Leadership

Servant leadership focuses on service to others. Whilst this leadership style has been around for centuries, it has become more common in management in the last few decades. Let's discover more about this leadership style.

This leadership style has a rich history in ancient texts of wisdom from *Tao Te Ching*, one of the founding texts of Taoism, written by fifth-century Chinese philosopher and poet Lao-Tzu to *Arthashastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy to *The Book of Mark* in The Bible. The Quran, which is the holy text of Islam, also emphasizes servant leadership.

“In a servant leadership culture we learn by choice or example that if we want to be great, we have to serve others respectfully.”
– Vern Dosch

What is servant leadership?

While the idea of servant leadership is a timeless concept that goes back at least two thousand years, the modern servant leadership movement was launched by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 when he published his definitive essay, *The Servant as Leader* in which he coined the words “servant-leader” and “servant leadership.”

“It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead,” Greenleaf wrote about the process of servant leadership. He went on to define the servant-leader as follows:

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.

That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.

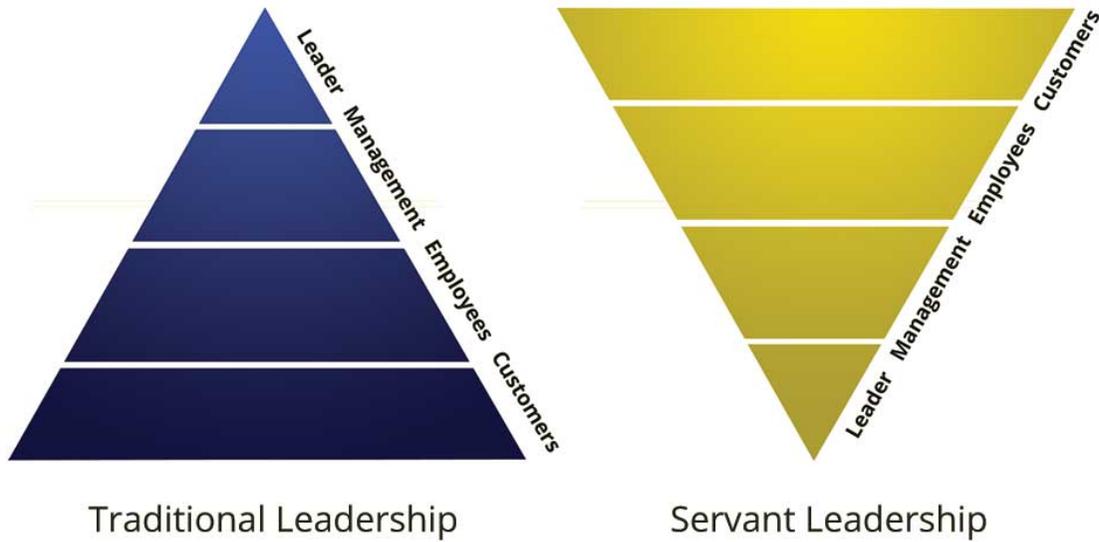


The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

Servant leadership is a very social leadership style (<https://inside.6q.io/qualities-that-define-a-good-leader/>). While traditional leadership is about the accumulating, hoarding and exercising (which often degenerates into abusing) of power by the one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is about sharing power with your team (<https://inside.6q.io/fantastic-ideas-to-encourage-team-spirit/>), identifying, prioritising and meeting of others and helping people develop and perform as highly as possible.

It must be highlighted that in saying “the servant-leader is servant first” Greenleaf didn’t mean that the servant-leader should be submissive but rather that they should genuinely want to serve, to help others.

Greenleaf spent nearly four decades as director of management development at AT&T and when he retired in 1964, he was considered one of the leading experts on corporate leadership in the world.



Traditional Leadership versus Servant Leadership

Why servant leadership is a powerful management style

Servant leadership is a concept that has attracted the attention of several researchers in the past decade and their findings have been consistent in showing the power of this leadership style.

Greenleaf’s ‘Best Test’ of Servant Leadership: A Multilevel Analysis

(digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=aglecdiss) is a 2011 study by Robert W. Hayden of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA that stated, “This study empirically

tests Robert Greenleaf's (1970) seminal articulation of servant leadership. The four personal outcomes he theorised (health, wisdom, freedom-autonomy, and service orientation) were tested against established dimensions of servant leadership. All correlations were significant and positive."

The Influence of Servant Leadership on Employee Trust in a Leader and Commitment to the Organisation (<https://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/mjss/article/download/1621/1626>) a 2013 study by Richard Chinomona of the Vaal University of Technology, South Africa that was published in the *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* concluded, "The results indicate that servant leadership positively influences employee trust in the leader and employee commitment to the organisation in a significant way."

Servant Leadership And Employee Commitment To A Supervisor (<https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/ijls/new/vol8iss2/5-Sokoll.pdf>), a 2014 study by Shane Sokoll of Concordia University Texas, USA that was published in the *International Journal of Leadership Studies* stated, "Servant leadership was found to have a significant effect on employee commitment to a supervisor."

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Servant Leadership, Employee Satisfaction, and Organisational Performance in Rural Community Hospitals (<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5a4d/306052867e035b1751833e108657dbffb106.pdf>) a 2014 study by Jack Thomas McCann (Tusculum College, USA), Daniel Graves (Lincoln Memorial University, USA) & Lieven Cox (Claiborne County Community Hospital, USA) that was published by the Canadian Center of Science and Education in the *International Journal of Business and Management* concluded, "This research revealed that servant leadership and employee satisfaction are strongly correlated."

Servant Leadership and Its Effect on Employee Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intent (scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5184&context=dissertations) a 2017 study by Dennis M. Mitterer of Walden University stated, "The purpose of this study was to investigate

the relationship between servant leadership behaviours, the psychological state of engagement, nursing response, job satisfaction, and turnover intention.

Empirical results demonstrate significant, positive relationships between the independent variables of servant leadership behaviour and the moderating variables of the psychological state of engagement and nurse response with job satisfaction and turnover intention.”

10 traits of servant leaders

Servant leadership requires an individual to have or develop certain skills in order for them to execute it effectively, of which the 10 most significant traits are as follows.

Self-awareness

Looking inside and being introspective is important to every servant-leader because it helps them view situations from a holistic position rather than being self centred.

Empathy

Understanding people’s unique perspectives, drives and intentions is key to the servant-leader because people need to be accepted for their special one-of-a-kind spirits.

Listening

Actively seeking out (<https://inside.6q.io/collecting-valuable-employee-feedback/>) the will of your team, listening intently to what they have to say and reflecting upon what they mean is essential to the growth of the servant-leader.

Healing

Many people walk around with a variety of hurts and good servant-leaders endeavour to emotionally, mentally, and physically support those with whom they come in contact.

Foresight

The servant-leader seeks to use their intuitive mind to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the possible outcome of a decision for the future.

Conceptualization

Servant-leaders seek to always “dream big” because visualising the big picture and thinking beyond day-to-day realities sets long-lasting organisations apart.

Persuasion

The servant-leader is effective at consensus-building and seeks to convince others rather than coerce compliance relying on persuasion rather than hierarchical dominance.

Stewardship

Servant leadership, just like being a steward, requires a commitment to serving the needs of others first and taking responsibility for the actions and results of your team.

Team growth

Servant-leaders understand that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible efforts as workers and are committed to the personal growth of every individual.

Community building

Servant-leaders build a sense of unity and wholeness in the organisation because they know that human beings have an innate need to belong to a “tribe” of some kind.

Methods to practice servant leadership

Here are the top six practical ways you can start practicing servant leadership in your organisation.

Trust and respect

Treat everyone on your team like a whole person: every person has value and deserves civility, trust, and respect as well as the consideration due to them as a one-of-a-kind human being.

Accountability

Hold yourself accountable: servant-leaders know no one is perfect, and everyone makes mistakes, including themselves, so they hold themselves accountable for their actions.

Listening

Listen intently: actively solicit your team members' participation, their ideas, and their feedback such that you can tailor your leadership approach to each one of them accordingly.

This is a perfect example of why companies are using [pulse survey software \(https://6q.io\)](https://6q.io), to listen to their employees.

Service to others

Build and reinforce the spirit of service to others: encourage your team members, through your words and actions, to set aside self-serving behaviours in favour of [serving others \(https://inside.6q.io/why-is-employee-peer-recognition-important/\)](https://inside.6q.io/why-is-employee-peer-recognition-important/).

Mentoring

Offer selfless mentorship: helping to guide the people who work for you will help them learn vital skills that will both improve their performance, and improve them as people.

Persistence

Practise persistence: servant-leaders are patient and tenacious, realising that one or two conversations may not have the desired change in an employee's assumptions or mindset.

Further servant leadership reading

Here are some fantastic articles that expand further on the topic.

[Think Servant Leadership Is Too Good To Be True? Why It's The Best Investment A Business Can Make \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidkwilliams/2016/08/02/think-servant-leadership-is-too-good-to-be-true-why-its-the-best-investment-a-business-can-make/#4019513379e1\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidkwilliams/2016/08/02/think-servant-leadership-is-too-good-to-be-true-why-its-the-best-investment-a-business-can-make/#4019513379e1) (Forbes)

[How to Retain Employees Through 'Servant' Leadership \(https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/289730\)](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/289730) (Entrepreneur.com)

[New Managers Need a Philosophy About How They'll Lead \(https://hbr.org/2015/09/new-managers-need-a-philosophy-about-how-theyll-lead\)](https://hbr.org/2015/09/new-managers-need-a-philosophy-about-how-theyll-lead) (Harvard Business Review)

[What is Servant Leadership? \(https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/\)](https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/) (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership)

In Summary

Servant leadership entails placing the needs of others at the forefront. A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong.

Servant leadership has survived the sands of time thanks to the merit of its core premise: service to others first, and remains a powerful tool for modern managers looking to bring out the best in their team members.