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Zingerman's

## A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to BEING A BETTER LEADER

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Zingerman's  
GUIDE TO GOOD LEADING, PART 2

A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to



# BEING A BETTER LEADER





**SECRET**  
#23

# A Recipe for Servant Leadership

*Thinking about, and in, Servant Leadership*

*As I'm sure you well know by now, I'm all about the conceptual, intellectual, and emotional end of leadership work. But at the same time, there's also the other end of the leadership spectrum—the daily struggles that we all need to work through if we're going to get to the greatness to which we aspire. As anyone who's been a manager for more than a month knows full well, leadership is not all love and positive learning experiences. As much as we all try to stay on the high side of things, there are still those days where, all of the visions and values and mission statements and missions to Mars aside, everything feels like it's falling apart. While the vision and values can give some solace and a sense of direction, the truth is that we also need something that we can, almost reflexively, fall back on when the inevitable in-the-moment crises come.*

*Speaking of falling, as I'm writing about Servant Leadership, my mind keeps coming back to fumbles. You know, in football, when a player suddenly, inadvertently drops the ball and everyone then scrambles desperately to be the first to fall on it. Even though every player knows that they're supposed to do this, football teams still regularly run loose ball drills—knowing you should fall on the ball is one thing, but being able to dive for it, instinctively and effectively, is another thing altogether. Recovering fumbles, clearly, is not rocket science. But doing it in a game is far harder than you would think. Which is also what I think about leadership. It's not rocket science either, but being able to do it, instinctively and effectively, is another thing altogether.*

*Now, football, as I'm sure virtually every North American knows, is not about fumbling. The point is to score points, and then keep the other team from scoring more than you do. In leadership work, most everyone knows that we're going for greatness, working to attain bottom-line results, create a special place to work, and deliver great customer experiences. The challenge is that things don't always go the way we want. Like them or not, fumbles and fub-ups happen almost every day. And it's safe to say that—in football and business both—the better teams do a lot better job of handling those unexpected events than do bad ones.*

*The business equivalent, I think, of the loose ball drill would be training managers on what to do when, despite the best-laid plans, all hell breaks loose. In the madness of the moment you need an inner default, a drill you've done over and over again, something that puts you into the right frame of mind to maneuver through the madness. One of the many things I love about Servant Leadership is that it allows us to do that training. If we practice it regularly, it builds the ability—the management muscle memory, so to speak—that over time becomes instinctive, the way a well-trained linemaker knows how to dive for a loose ball.*

*Servant Leadership says, when in doubt, do what's right for the organization*

*and the people in it. When you're in doubt in any situation, simply give more service. When there's a problem, look inward first. When you're confused, be kind. When there's not really enough to go around, give more to others before you take for yourself. In every case, the "decision arrow" points clearly in the same direction. When in doubt, serve. Which is why I can't stress enough the import of drilling ourselves on Servant Leadership. When in doubt, give service to the staff, the customers, the organization, and the community. Try it for a week or two—it's amazing how much difference a service focus can make!*

The phrase "Servant Leadership" may sound like one of those nice throwaways they always write into the opening section of employee manuals. But please don't let any perception of passivity fool you—Servant Leadership is very strong stuff. If you really live it, Servant Leadership changes everything.

Our approach to the concept is based on a book written back in 1977 by Robert Greenleaf entitled, simply, *Servant Leadership*. It's very much worth reading the whole thing—I've gone through it in detail at least ten or twelve times. Over the years we've worked with, adapted, and adjusted various elements of his teachings, translating them from the theoretical into the practical world of day-to-day leadership here at Zingerman's. What follows is our interpretation of Greenleaf's approach—the Zingerman's recipe for effectively implementing Servant Leadership.

To get you going, here's a small taste of Greenleaf in action: "[W]e should move," he writes, "towards a new institution that embraces both work and learning—learning in a deep and formal sense and all of the learning influence most people need. This requires a new type of leader, one who can conceptualize such an institution, generate enthusiasm so that many good able people want to be part of it, and provide the strong focus of purpose that builds dynamic strength in many. Great things happen when able leaders create these conditions." Servant Leadership is, quite simply, one of the easiest ways I know to help make our organization more effective and the world a better place in the process. Best of all, it's free. You can make an enormous impact without investing anything other than your own intellectual and emotional energy.

The basic belief of Servant Leadership is that our job as leaders is—first and foremost—to serve our organization. To paraphrase John Kennedy's magnificent 1961 inaugural speech, "Ask not what your organization can do

for you. Ask what you can do for your organization." To those who already think that way, this statement might sound obvious, or even inevitable, but in my experience, it's actually neither. In fact, in most traditional organizations the service flows in the other direction—the rest of the organization exists primarily to serve the needs of its leaders. In a servant-led world, by contrast, we do the opposite—here, *we* serve the organization. Instead of just being about the boss, Servant Leadership is about success for all involved.

Servant Leadership is all about giving, and it's all about service. It requires that each of us come to work every day committed to doing what the organization needs done, to serve the entity as a whole even when that means that what we would like as individuals may get short shrift. It means treating those who "report" to us as we would our customers, not like hired help who are there only to serve our every need. It means that the more we succeed, the more we grow, the more people I get to give service to. And if I serve well, we'll likely keep growing, and then serving and growing still farther into the future.

It's safe to say that, although he's hardly a household name, Robert Greenleaf's ideas are much better known in the business world than anything ever put forward by Emma Goldman. But hearing them and living them are two totally different things. Paying lip service to Servant Leadership is easy, but doing it well is another story altogether. For those of us (which would be most) who were raised in a hierarchical world where success is all about earning privilege and power, Servant Leadership is actually completely counterintuitive.

Seriously, to live Servant Leadership effectively is no small thing. It's not a hobby, and it's not about sending an annual donation to the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in central Indiana. It is an entire reorientation of the way most all of us are "raised" in the work world. When we live it well, Servant Leadership means that

- I, as the leader, come last, not first.
- We get promoted in order to serve more, not to be served more by others.
- We respond to staff complaints with the same sort of positive, appreciative response we would give to customers.
- It's more important for me as the boss to bring coffee to the new cashier than the other way around.
- When there's a conflict between what's right for us as individuals, and what's right for the organization, we have an obligation to do what's good for the group.

- We hire people in order to help *them* succeed.
- We lead the way in making an appreciative workplace.

Here's how it works in practice. My major "customers" here at Zingerman's are the managing partners of the ZCoB businesses, people like Frank Carollo and Amy Emberling, the managing partners at the Bakehouse. In turn, Frank and Amy's primary customers would be the Bakehouse managers. The managers' major customers would then be the frontline staff. The idea throughout is to keep the (positive) energy flowing *out*, towards the frontline staff. They, after all, are the ones who are dealing with paying customers and/or making the products we sell. Servant Leadership means we have an obligation to make sure their energy is upbeat, available at all times to give the best possible service to customers. The better their energy is, the better our service, the better the outcome will be for the entire organization.

### Paradox and Servant Leadership

Having lived it for so many years now, I think that one of the underlying requirements for successfully living Servant Leadership is the ability to work through paradox—people who have a hard time with it (and many do) won't, and don't, do well in this system. If you haven't looked it up lately, according to a quick, online search in the-moment definition, paradox is "a statement or group of statements that leads to a contradiction or a situation which defies intuition." And that's exactly what Servant Leadership sets out to be. Quite simply while the theory sounds straightforward, when you start to put it into practice, you'll find it's way more difficult to deal with the paradoxical realities it presents than it might seem after just a couple of pleasant-to-read paragraphs.

I don't know what it is about this subject and sports that use balls, but getting new managers to understand Servant Leadership is like teaching someone who spent a lifetime playing soccer to learn basketball for the first time—it's completely counterintuitive, and much of what you did to succeed in one setting will cause you big problems in the other. A guy who spent his whole life learning to keep his hands *off* the ball, now has to learn to grab hold of it and handle it with grace for a good two hours. In soccer, when you kick the ball you're doing the right thing. In basketball, if you kick it they stop the game. If you kick the ball on purpose you get a technical foul. Kick it again and you'll probably get kicked out. Same with Servant Leadership. What brings success in the old-school business world would probably get you kicked off the team at the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.



Perhaps the toughest Servant Leadership paradox to tackle is that the higher up you move in the organization, the greater your obligation is to serve. It's simple, but counterintuitive for anyone who's been trained in the corporate world. *In our servant-led world, the higher you get promoted, the harder you'll probably have to work and the more you have to give of yourself.* The whole system runs completely counter to the traditional American image that "we're going to get promoted so we can kick back and reap the rewards of the efforts we made earlier in our careers, taking advantage of a large staff who's there to serve us." Servant Leadership turns that idea upside down; success in the "servant" sense often makes our work *more* challenging, not less so.

Another of the Servant Leadership paradoxes is that we commit to treating staff like customers (not like low-level servants brought in solely to do our bidding). In the straight sense of service, as we define it here at Zingerman's, that really would mean doing whatever a staff member asks of us. Of course, that's neither possible nor advisable. Which just makes for more paradox. As Servant Leaders we're regularly faced with this dilemma: When should we give service to an individual staff member and when is it time to give service to the *group* by *not* doing what that staff member asked? The problem can come up in any number of ways. I can easily imagine an employee asking us to transfer one of his colleagues to a different department because he doesn't like working with them. Or demanding to have his pay doubled because his house payment went up. While I certainly don't begrudge either employee asking for what they want, clearly those are requests that we can't, in good conscience, fulfill. An even tougher situation to handle would be when we find ourselves having to fire a staff member because it's become the right thing for the organization for them to move on.

One final, related, paradox: Servant Leadership creates a setting where what we want for ourselves may conflict with what is best for the organization as a whole. Sometimes we, as leaders, have to choose to give up what we want for ourselves in the short term in order to provide more for others around us. It's hard to know where to draw the line—which is a big part of why learning Servant Leadership is hard to do: the old model calls for lots of straight lines, command and control, and good and bad sides to every decision. But *Servant Leadership lives in the gray and the uncertainty that is everyday life in the real world, dictating all the while that we err every day in favor of the organization rather than ourselves.*

Even with all the best intentions and a lot of attention to learning, Servant

Leadership is not a skill most people can master in a month. I think it's a whole different way of thinking. My friend Meg Noori, a poet, writer, editor, and one of the leaders in the work to transcribe and keep alive the Ojibwe language, has demonstrated for me regularly that two languages are not just interchangeable words for exactly the same things. To the contrary, the way living languages are constructed, they actually create different thought patterns, and, from those, different ways of relating to the world and of speaking, writing, and working. Similarly, Servant Leadership is its own business language. It's not just a nicer way of talking about "being in charge" or a more polite tactic for taking power. Servant Leadership is a wholly different way of relating to the organization and the people in it. And, like Robert Greenleaf, I think it's a better way.

### Why Bother?

After all that, you could well be wondering, "Wouldn't it be easier to just do this the old way?" Or "Isn't it kind of crazy to give employees service when we're actually paying them to perform?" Or "Why would we want to work hard to get promoted so that then we could have the chance to work harder?" Ultimately, we all have to answer that for ourselves. But at Zingerman's we believe that Servant Leadership does the following:

**It's the right thing to do for the world:** In any element of life, service is the highest form of contribution we can make to those around us. While there's certainly a lot to be said for self-improvement, ultimately, it's really much more what we *give*—not what we *get*—that defines us as leaders and establishes the legacy that we leave behind. Service, and the spirit of generosity behind it, puts positive energy out into the world, makes everyone and everything around us better—it's a natural and organic nutrient to enrich the "soil" of any organization.

**It makes for better service to customers:** This is just Natural Law of Business 5: "If you want the staff to give great service to customers, the leaders have to give great service to the staff." *The service our staff gives to our customers will never be better than the service we give to the staff.* If we want to give our guests exceptional, extra-mile service, then we absolutely, one hundred percent, have to do the same for the people who work for us. We are the ones who will either set the standard for or, alternatively, hold back the organization's service quality. The better we get at giving service—to both staff and guests—the better our business is going to be.

**It helps our staff to grow and succeed.** When they choose to work in our organization, staff members entrust us to deliver effective leadership. In return, we as leaders are responsible for *providing an environment in which staff members can fulfill their dreams and live up to their potential.* As Robert Greenleaf wrote, "The first order of business is to build a group of people who, under the influence of the institution, grow taller and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous."

Providing great service to our staff can only help to make the ZCOB a better and more desirable place to work. And since we are competing with hundreds of other companies to attract the most creative, hardest-working, food-lovingest staff we can find, this offers us a huge strategic advantage. The better we serve the staff, and the more likely they are to spread the word about what we do in a positive way, the more likely we are to get more good customers and more good co-workers. Again, everyone wins!

**It helps each of us grow as leaders.** I really believe that the more you give, the more you get. And because Servant Leadership is all about giving, it only makes sense that if I get really good at it, it's going to reward me with a more satisfying and meaningful life. For starters, I get to make a positive difference in the lives of our staff. And because Servant Leadership pushes us to look inward first before we start assuming others are to blame, the most successful people in our organization are almost always the most self-reflective. And since self-reflection very often leads directly to self-improvement, that means I'm moving forward in my work, while simultaneously serving those around me.

**It sets the right tone for everyone else:** In *Sacred Hoops*, basketball coach Phil Jackson wrote that, "creating a successful team . . . is essentially a spiritual act. It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts." I like it or not, as leaders, we set the example for everyone in our organization. If we don't put the organization's interests above our own, who will? If the leader sends a message that "I come first," then it's kind of inevitable, don't you think, that the staff will adopt that same "me first" attitude?

### Putting an Inspirational Idea into Practice

This is where the intellectual rubber really hits the organizational road, where we leave theory behind and figure out how to actually put our beliefs to work on the line in a very practical sense. As with so much of our other work, we've taken the broad conceptual approach that Robert Greenleaf writes about and

come up with very specific ways to put it into practice every day. In this case there are six elements—*providing vision, giving service to staff, working in an ethical way, learning and teaching, helping staff succeed, and saying thank.*

#### 1. PROVIDE AN INSPIRING AND STRATEGICALLY SOUND VISION

At Zingerman's the Servant Leader's number-one responsibility is to provide vision for his or her part of the organization. There's much more on the subject of visioning (as you probably already know) in *Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading, Part 1*. As we use the term, a vision is a descriptive and fairly detailed picture of what success will look like for us at a particular point in the future. It's the big picture, the lofty and inspirational edifice that we're all working to construct collaboratively. The vision, as we view it, is an answer to the simple yet radical question, If we're really successful in our work, what will our organization look like (fill in the blank) years/months from now? In our model, a vision should be

- **Inspiring.** To all who will be involved in implementing it.
- **Strategically sound.** We actually have a decent shot at making it happen.
- **Documented.** You really need to write your vision down to make it work.
- **Communicated.** Yes, if you want your vision to be effective you have to not only document it, but actually tell people about it.

Writing and sharing a vision is, straightforwardly, great service to the group—it gets all of us on the same organizational page; it lets the staff know where we're headed, what tomorrow will look like, and how that future will be better than the present-day reality in which we're currently working. The vision is, in essence, the "cathedral" that all our work is contributing to building and that we believe in, every day. Here at Zingerman's we want to provide a vision for pretty much everything we do. The most critical would be a vision for the business as a whole. For us, that is Zingerman's 2020. We also need a vision of greatness for each business unit—we have one for the Bakehouse, Roadhouse, Creamery, Mail Order, and all the other ZCOB entities. We also write inspiring, strategically sound, and documented visions for each department or operating unit. Literally, we write visions for every new project, every new product, and every process we're trying to put in place.

Don't underestimate how much people who work with you want to know

where you're going. They may not ask the questions aloud, but in the privacy of their minds, or in conversation with colleagues, they're all wondering "What will things look like a year or two down the road? How will things be the same? How will they be different? What big successes will we have had? How will people be working together? What products will we be offering? How much of them will we be selling? How will our financials look? Our workspace? What will our customers say about us?" Don't hold back when you write the vision. Detail makes a difference. People want to know where they're going, why they're going there, what's in it for them and those around them.

If the staff is clear on where we're headed, we can all avoid wasting energy on unnecessary conversation—staff members feel calmer and more confident when they know what's going on. We know here at Zingerman's that we're not opening anywhere other than the Ann Arbor area (as one example), so when offers come in for us to open in other cities, we can quickly and politely say "no," without wasting any time assessing the opportunity. And if we start to lose focus or forget where we're going, that written vision is easy to access and provides us with a quick answer.

One subtlety to stress: while Servant Leadership dictates that we make *sure there is an effective vision in place, it doesn't mean that we need to dictate that vision from the top down.* We may be the primary author or just another person on the team who decided to contribute. Our job is mostly to make sure there is one. Good Servant Leadership might well mean giving someone else in the organization the opportunity to lead by writing the first draft. Or if we write the first draft ourselves, to then go out and gather input from others and adjust accordingly. The key in all of this is effective collaboration; the best visions almost always blend the insight and intuition of whoever's in the leadership role (who may not be the one with the title) with the wisdom of the rest of the group.

## 2. GIVE GREAT DAY-TO-DAY SERVICE TO STAFF

For anyone who's taken our service training classes or ZingTrain seminars, this next element is all about applying our 3 Steps to Great Service and 5 Steps to Handling a Complaint to our interactions with staff, just as we would with customers. Seriously, pretty much all the same stuff applies. For more in-depth info on our "service recipe," see *Zingerman's Guide to Giving Great Service*, but for the moment let me quickly walk you through.

## 3 Steps to Great Service, Servant Leadership-Style

### 1. Find out what the customer wants.

In a Servant Leadership context this comes down to simply greeting and engaging with staff members as we would customers. If I see staffers coming towards me, I live our "10/4 Rule"—when I get within ten feet of them I make eye contact and smile, and within four feet I greet them. If they've worked here for many years, I'd probably greet them with the same sort of familiarity I would use with a regular customer of long standing. If they're new and I don't know them, I need to reach out and introduce myself and welcome them aboard. (Just so you know, this last act isn't easy for me. I'm actually very shy, and a total introvert, but Servant Leadership dictates that I need to do it anyway. So I do.)

As with customers, I engage staff members, spending as much time with them as I can in order to get a solid sense of what they're feeling and thinking, how their energy is, what's going on in their lives, etc. The more I know, the better I'll be able to serve them, and the better, in turn, they'll be able to serve the customers. Just as I would do with a customer coming in the front door, it's good to get things going by asking the staff member what I can do for them and then actually (whoa!) listening to the answer. Just as it does in giving great service to guests, paying attention to staff adds immensely to the quality of the service work we do. Throughout the interaction, as a leader, I'm reading the energy, body language, and nuance in the tone of voice of the staff member.

### The Power of Listening

Listening is a hugely important element of literally everything we do, but it's particularly important in Servant Leadership. Greenleaf is adamant about this and has a lot to say on the subject: "I believe," he begins, "that the first step in good communication, anywhere, is listening. In planning, deciding and communicating, on matters concerning how people think and feel and act and grow, one has only two general ways of getting at the data needed to manage: observing and listening. And a great deal must be gotten by listening. I have a hunch," he adds, "that most managers are poorer listeners than they are observers."

I'd agree. In fact, I put myself in that category. While Paul is probably naturally good at it, I think that by nature, I'm a lousy listener. But I've worked hard to get better and, while I still slip more often than I'd like, I'm probably now pretty good much of the time. Without question, improved listening skills have helped me get better at almost everything I do, in every part of my life.

"Listeners," Robert Greenleaf points out, "learn about people in ways that modify—first the listener's attitude, then in behavior towards others, and finally the attitudes and behavior of others." How well we listen says a lot about how much we value (or don't value) other people's views, and also the results we get in the organization. The whole element of active listening—not just being able to repeat the words you heard, but rather putting your whole emotional, reflective, caring, sensitive, empathetic, vulnerable self into it—puts me in a different place in the world than when I focus on defending or proving others wrong.

I'm convinced that Greenleaf is totally right to add, "Listening is an attitude, an attitude towards other people and what they are trying to express." Adding to that I'll share what I heard from Stanislaw Kazimierski, one of the managing partners in ZingTrain, who long ago taught me to try listening "with my heart, not just with my head." This, I will say with certainty, is a huge element of good service to staff. To really listen closely, not just to hear the words but to hear the spirit of what people are communicating, the cry for help, the sense of success . . . to suss out the small inner smile forming slowly but still so deeply inside they barely hear it themselves, is a great service.

This listening work is well worth the effort—I've found few more effective ways to expend my own energy. It does take work, though. Practice probably won't make perfect (nothing does, really), but it does make a difference. As Greenleaf elucidates, "Everyone who aspires to strength should consciously practice listening, regularly. Every week, set aside an hour to listen to somebody who might have something to say that will be of interest. It should be a conscious practice in which all of the impulses to argue, inform, judge, and 'straighten out' the other person are denied. Every response should be calculated to reflect interest, understanding, seeking for more knowledge. Practice listening for brief periods, too. Just thirty seconds of concentrated listening may make the difference between

understanding and not understanding something important." And who knows what good things could come out of that?

## 2. Get it for them.

We have three facets to this second service step, which, when done well, are delivered to staff members just as they would be with customers.

**Accurately.** This is fairly simple, although all too rarely done in the daily work world. Someone told me years ago that, on average, American executives deliver on only about 50 percent of what they say they're going to do. While that may be disheartening, it actually seems pretty accurate. But that stat won't fly in a servant-led world. Imagine if we only did one of two things we promised our customers? We'd be out of business in no time.

Quite simply, then, if we say that we're going to do something for a staff member, Servant Leadership dictates that (duh!), drum roll, we should *do* it! If they leave us a voice mail . . . yes, we should call back in a timely way. If they text, email, or write a letter, we should write back promptly. Not three weeks later because we were busy or in a bad mood. I know you knew all that but not responding in a timely way is quite common and, as good service states clearly, is really not okay. Imagine not calling a customer back for a couple weeks because you were busy! You'd never do it (I hoped). Accurate and timely responses, deliverables delivered, paychecks paid, etc., usually go unnoticed, but their absence undercuts almost everything.

**Politely.** This means that we greet staff members or colleagues as the smart, caring professional human beings that they are. Courtesy counts inside the company as much as it does outside of it. All those nice words we teach staff to say to customers we need to use inside the organization as well. "Please," "Thank you!" "Sir," "Ma'am," . . . you know the drill. The key is that we have to actually do it, not just talk about it. And do it, with meaning, at every level. Whether it's a new staff member in our call center or a new CEO, everyone should get the same polite greeting. Being exceedingly courteous with the new counter person will likely count for a lot more than you might think. And it will be one of the most inexpensive strategic initiatives you ever implement.



**Enthusiastically.** Enthusiasm is a tough one for many managers with old-school mindsets. It's understandably difficult to get over, but it's what Servant Leadership is all about; yes, *we're* paying people to work, but we still need to act enthusiastically every time we see them. Even, I should add, when you don't really like them all that much. The organization's overall energy, of course, starts with the leaders—if we want staff to be really enthusiastic, we'd better be acting pretty darned upbeat when we greet them. The energy we put out there is going to set the tone—the more positive we are, the more motivated, the more grounded, the more fun we're having, the happier we look when we see the staff, the more likely it is that they're going to do a great job with guests.

### 3. Go the extra mile.

This third step is really just as we would do it with paying customers. Extra miles for us are generally small things—the stuff that, more often than not, costs next to nothing but leaves staff members smiling. Open the door for them, give them a small gift or thank you card, let them leave early on occasion, provide them with additional time off or additional resources to do their work. Extra miles aren't magic, and they generally don't cost much, but they definitely make a difference. If we were in a Zing Train seminar I'd probably have the whole group brainstorm a bunch of extra miles on white sheets on the wall in order to get them thinking, but I'm sure you get the concept already. (Of course, if you want some practice, flip to the "Notes" page at the end of the book and jot a few extra miles down while the concept is fresh in your mind.) It's usually pretty simple—schedule an extra session of a class you offer for a staff member who couldn't make it to your last one, offer them a cup of coffee, a ride home, empty their trash so they don't have to, buy them a good book or a bouquet of flowers.

I know this probably seems like small stuff, but I will say from experience that, just as is the case with customers, these little things go a long, long way towards helping staff members feel cared for, believing that they, and their work, make a difference, that the small things matter. Which means that they in turn are more likely to go the extra mile, to care and take care, to do the little things that add up to making a big difference in the way the business is being run. Extra miles may seem like minor asterisks on a very complex and fast-paced production, but they add up and make a very big difference.

## 5 Steps to Handling a Complaint, Servant Leadership-Style

When it comes to complaint handling, Servant Leadership leads us to almost, though not quite, the same process we would follow with paying customers. There's much more on these in *Zingerman's Guide to Giving Great Service*, but in a Servant Leadership nutshell, here's what I try to do when someone who works here complains to me.

### 1. Acknowledge the complaint.

With staff, as with customers, the whole complaint-handling process works so much better when we just start by letting the person know that we've actually heard what they've said. So instead of refusing, denying, explaining, excusing, or any of those other things that I often instinctively want to do, it's important to just get grounded, swallow hard, take a deep (mental, if not physical) breath, and say "Oh," or "Wow!" like I really mean it. Really big complaints call for a combo package—a big "Oh, wow!!!" can work pretty well. Mo at our Mail Order likes to say "Sheesh!" Someone else here (I can't remember who) told me they use "Yow!" You can, of course, have your own catchphrase. The point is to let the staff member know you heard them, which is a fairly rare occurrence—bosses in the old school usually give the staff commands, not confirm that they've heard concerns.

Acknowledgment sounds easy. But it's far easier to know that I should do it than it is to actually come through under pressure. By nature, I take things pretty personally and I'm often a bit tired and operating at a high level of intensity, so when someone on staff is unhappy with something that I've worked hard to make go, it's easy to slide into being defensive or to start explaining why things are the way they are. This is not, I can say with the voice of way too painfully much experience, at all effective. Which is why practicing, role playing, and a lot of mental discipline can add up to make such a difference with stuff like this!

### 2. Sincerely apologize.

This one's pretty counterintuitive for most people in positions of power. It was for me at least. Service has never come naturally to me; I've just worked hard at it for many years now. But just as it does with customers, cutting to the chase and sincerely saying, "I'm sorry" to a concerned or frustrated staff member will go a long way towards reducing stress and helping get everyone on the same side of the problem. Please take note that an apology does not mean that the

staff member (or the customer for that matter) is necessarily correct about the content of their complaint or criticism; we're just appropriately apologizing for the fact that they're upset or concerned. And we follow that acknowledgment with a simple, but sincere, apology. Something along the lines of, "I'm really sorry you were so upset," or "I'm sorry you were caught off guard," or "I'm sorry it didn't work out as you wanted it to," or whatever way you can come up with to convey an apology. (Caveat: Sorry to say it, but "I'm really sorry you're acting like a jerk" won't cut it in this context. Although, I'll say that *thinking* it for a brief second might at least get you smiling to yourself and help you get over yourself and get focused on giving good service instead of being frustrated.)

### 3. Take action to make things right.

It's a given that we're going to field a wide range of staff concerns. Some new one is sure to come up and catch me off guard almost every day. A lot of them—and a lot more than most old-line managers might want to believe—are totally legitimate. Paychecks might not have been prepared as they should have been. The schedule wasn't up on time. We promised them something but forgot to take care of it. We failed to return a call in a timely way or forgot to come to a meeting we'd scheduled. In these situations, we need to find a way to make things right, just as we would with a paying customer. I try hard not to get caught up in proving points or playing politics; my job is just to effectively find a way to make things right.

That said, there are certainly occurrences where, although the staff member is truly upset, things aren't quite so simple. Realistically, there will always be situations where people who work here are asking for, or complaining about, something that they may well not fully understand. It could be that (we believe) they've inaccurately assessed the situation; perhaps they just don't agree with the way we do business, or their scheduled request said "Saturday" but they meant to say "Sunday." There are, unfortunately, no shortage of these sorts of disconnects.

In these sorts of situations there is actually room for a significant departure from the way we treat *staff like customers*, and how we treat *customers like customers*. With paying customers we're almost always going to act like they're right, even when they're wrong. But with staff, that doesn't really work for us organizationally. For example:

- The staff member's reality is way off base.
- Their behavior is unethical or inappropriate.

- We believe the organization at large is going to suffer for something the staff member is demanding.

In those sorts of situations, it's incumbent on us as leaders who are serving the organization to find a way to constructively and kindly address this reality gap, and, as gracefully as we can, guide all involved toward a positive, mutually agreed-upon resolution. The key is that we handle it in a respectful, dignified way and go for win-win solutions whenever possible—just because someone's done something that's out of step with reality or the rest of the organization doesn't mean we need to step on them in return.

### 4. Thank them for letting us know.

Again, this is no different than it would be with a paying customer. A simple, "Thanks for letting me know you were frustrated," or "Thanks for sharing your concerns. I really appreciate it," goes a long way. The key is making sure they feel good about having voiced their concerns. Although it may not feel that way in the moment, the reality is that they're doing us a favor. If they don't complain to us, guess who they're going to be complaining to? You got it—everyone else.

### 5. Document the complaint.

While we haven't yet fully integrated this fifth step into our management work, there's really no reason not to be moving in this direction. Documenting and sharing staff concerns about operational issues, leadership shortfalls, or opportunities for improvement could bring many of the same benefits to our leadership work that it is bringing to our work with frontline customers. At an extreme level this is the stuff HR departments appropriately advocate for. But the truth is (and I could and should take note of my own advice as well), making a note or two in your computer about what happened could only help later. It certainly won't hurt!

### A Few Service Subtexts for Servant Leaders to Be Mindful Of

- a. **Treat the staff with dignity at all times.** We don't have to agree with them, we don't have to like them, we don't have to be happy to see them, but we really do need to always treat them in a dignified manner if we want this Servant Leadership stuff to work.



**b. Show that you care about them as individuals.** This doesn't mean you're responsible for their lives, nor does it mean you have to fix their problems for them. It does mean that you take a minute to ask how their vacation was, to find out how they're feeling, how school's going, how their family is, or where they're from. Show them that you know they have—and have had—a life outside of work. Small questions and a bit of recall to ask again a week later make a big difference; caring people like to know someone cares.

**c. Don't hold grudges.** Although most of the world continues to carry them, our experience here is that grudges get you absolutely nowhere. At least nowhere good—they just suspend you in an angry, unproductive past that poisons the organization and, actually, our own spiritual state as well. Hey, I know that employees err; sometimes they completely screw up. But the past is the past, and it's over. Because we're committed to giving great service to the staff, and because we're not living on Planet Fair, as Servant Leaders we commit to taking a forgiving approach. This doesn't mean that you don't hold firm on appropriately agreed-upon consequences or that you completely forget what happened. It just means that you're going to look forward to—and work towards—a positive, mutually rewarding future rather than let yourself get locked into an old grudge for past behaviors.

**d. Cut the gossip.** Yeah, I know, gossiping is good fun. For about five minutes. Until you find out someone overheard you say something, or until you realize you've talked yourself into a poisonous corner that's hard to work your way back out of. So, hey, do yourself a Servant Leadership favor of great proportion and stay away from gossip. It really never, ever helps to talk ill of the organization or its members in front of frontline staff members. Telling tales out of school is not in synch with Servant Leadership.

### 3. MANAGE IN AN ETHICAL MANNER

It's not new news that we as leaders have a huge responsibility to actually live, not just pay lip service to, our values. You definitely *didn't* hear it here first—it's

in everything from the Bible to Jim Collins's *Built to Last* and the writings of anarchists. It's also safe to say that there aren't a whole lot of leaders who actively announce that they *aren't* going to lead in an ethical manner; everyone says they will, and most, I think, actually believe they are most of the time. So what goes wrong? Probably much of the same stuff that goes wrong with everything else—unclear expectations, bad communication, decisions being made in isolation, failure to follow through, misconceptions, misperceptions, and missed opportunities all make for some pretty big ethical shortfalls.

To get a bit more specific about it: one simple and all-too-common problem is that so few organizations have actually put their guiding principles down in writing—it's hard to really live up to a set of standards when the standards aren't clearly documented. Reading minds is rarely a healthy way to run a company. And it's more than a little frustrating when the only way to find out you screwed up is for someone to set you straight after the fact. Without a sound ethical orientation, people start to lose hope, integrity falls, their belief in what they're doing starts to drop, they stop doing the little things, they lose respect for themselves, their leaders, and the organization. If you don't have your guiding principles (or, if you prefer, ethics or values) written down, . . . write them! Details on how to do it are in *Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading Part 1*.

Another simple but all-too-common problem is that even when organizations put their principles in writing, they tend to leave them languishing somewhere out of sight, which quickly puts them, also, out of mind. If you've had them, unwittingly, under cover, now's a good time to bring 'em back out and start actively sharing them with everyone in the organization. There's little to lose and there's a whole lot to gain! Even just making time to reread them regularly will make a difference. You'll quickly see where you're already doing well and where you might find opportunities to improve. The more you work with a written set of values, and the more you teach them, the more meaningful they're going to be. Here at Zingerman's, Paul and I cover them in all the new-staff orientation classes, we reference them regularly in doing our daily work, and we do actively bring them into difficult discussions and use them to help us frame decisions of all sorts.

Please note that I'm not talking about preaching, which I've never found to be productive. This is all about effective implementation, not lecturing or handbook thumping. It's more in the mode of storytelling—sharing insights and experiences about where the values were lived or, conversely, where we fell short and how we then recovered from our shortfall. Storytelling of that

sort is the easiest way I know to make our guiding principles come alive, to keep ourselves as leaders more in line with what we're trying to do, and to demonstrate to everyone in the organization that our values actually have value! To quote Robert Greenleaf, "Ethics, in the abstract, does not interest me. But ethical people trying to do their creative, responsible best, do interest me."

I'm sure none of that will shock anyone who's given even an iota of thought to the issue of ethics in business (which I'm guessing you have, or you'd not likely be reading this in the first place). What I want to suggest next, though, might seem a bit more out of the box, uncomfortable, odd, or unwise, depending on whom you're talking to. *I propose that we actually come out of the leadership closet and actively share the struggle—with staff and colleagues—that's at the core of all ethically sound business.* That we actively let people in the business know that, more often than not, we're not all that sure what to do in difficult situations. And that figuring out a good answer is often about making peace with various shades of gray, not going straight to some simplistic black or white extreme.

## 6 Elements of Effective Servant Leadership

1. Provide an inspiring and strategically sound vision
2. Give great day-to-day service to staff
  - 3 Steps to Great Service
  - 5 Steps to Handling a Complaint
3. Live the guiding principles
4. Be an active learner (2 hours/week) and teacher (1 hour/month)
5. Help staff succeed by living the training compact
6. Say thanks

I know this is not how most of us have been trained to do it. In the old model, when the going gets tough, the bosses get going—usually that means retreating to the back room to talk strategy, then showing up not long thereafter, with big decisions already made and everything well in hand. Everyone else, in turn, is essentially asked to just follow orders. Rarely, though, do people "lower down" in the organization know that those "at the top" actually had a hard time determining the best course of action. The frontline crew is told what to do, but they hardly ever hear the discussion that was behind the actual decision. Again, I advocate the opposite approach. I think it's far more effective to actually bring people into that struggle and let them share in the decision making.

Sure, there are some things that really require privacy—difficult HR problems, salary issues, and that sort of thing. But those aside, most any difficult decision has an ethical element to it; by bringing a lot more people into the dialogue *we start to teach everyone in the organization how to effectively manage in an ethically grounded manner.* While managing in an ethical way sounds simple (just "do the right thing," right?), it's actually pretty darned difficult to pull off. Even the best of the best don't get it right all the time. In one way or another, there are dozens, and probably more like hundreds, of places we knowingly accept ethical shortfalls on any given day—products that could be better; staffers who aren't yet superb but we still allow to serve guests; a customer we know we probably should have gone back to one more time to check if they were okay. In school this stuff is an academic exercise, a chance to discuss the theory behind ethics in business. For us, it's about real food, real people, and real money, and the decisions often need to be made in the moment and under a great deal of pressure.

By involving "everyone" in sorting out those ethical uncertainties, we serve the organization in (at least) three ways:

- a. **By effectively teaching ethics to everyone.** Few folks frame it this way, but deciding how to handle a difficult customer, whether to serve a sandwich that's almost, but not quite, good enough when the customer has had to wait a bit too long already; how to respond to a colleague who's not working in a very service-oriented way—all of these are ethical decisions that get made, mostly on the Q.T., all day long, without anyone from the upper levels of most organizations even acknowledging that they're happening.

We teach everyone up front the importance of collaborative, ethical decision making—when they're making all those small decisions all day long, I feel better knowing that their thinking is grounded in much the same ethical soil as that of the partners with the broadest strategic responsibility. Personally, I think it's great—it's real, it's realistic, and it really makes a difference. The more we train everyone to work mindfully at this level, the sounder their decisions are going to be, the more successful the organization is likely to be. The power, the wisdom, the safety on this stuff, is all in the group.

- b. **By guarding against a narrow view from the top.** Second, we protect the organization from the inherently unstable reality of the



one upper-level executive (or small group of executives). The problem occurs all over the country every day: people at the top making decisions that, in the privacy of their corner office, seem totally sensible, but in truth are completely unsound for the company. To quote Robert Greenleaf, "To be a lone chief atop a pyramid is *abnormal and corrupting*. None of us are perfect by ourselves, and all of us need the help and correcting influence of close colleagues." And, he points out, "The pyramidal structure weakens informal links, dries up channels of honest reaction and feedback, and creates limiting chief versus subordinate relationships which, at the top, can seriously penalize the whole organization."

Dean Tucker, writing in *Using the Power of Purpose*, points out that over 80 percent of the knowledge in American organizations is actually still held only in the heads of its employees. Which means that a small, isolated set of leaders can't possibly make consistently sound decisions—they're missing too much information. Worse still, most of the executives aren't even aware of how much info they're missing. Speaking as a CEO who's probably more in touch than most, it's still, I think, inevitable that, left to our own devices, we're going to go off course or often do something stupid. What usually saves me is that I'm around good people who help keep my shortfalls from seriously damaging the organization over the long haul.

c. **By backing up the belief that we're all responsible.** When a business makes a major ethical error, even in a command-and-control setting, most everyone in the company is still sort of complicit. Sure, the lone chief could go solo and screw up completely in secret. But, more often than not, everyone involved suspected something was wrong but chose to look the other way out of awkwardness, apathy, uncertainty, past frustrations, or fear of getting fired. More often than not, a big ethical shortfall starts with small, seemingly uncritical decisions at every level. Sure, we as leaders have a lion's share of the responsibility. But, then again, if everyone's a leader, everyone also shares in the responsibility for what the organization is doing.

My hope here is to build an organization in which, through great service from the top, an overt commitment to active com-

munication and collaboration, and systems that require us to self-monitor (like open-book finance, for instance), we can create an environment in which people will actually speak up when they sense that something is wrong, rather than let me or Paul or anyone else drive our bus(iness) over a dangerous, unethical, cliff.

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### Have the Courage to Engage in Caring Confrontations

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Sometimes Servant Leadership calls for us to do what seems, at first glance, to be the opposite of the usual congenial approach to customer service. When someone we work with isn't living up to clearly communicated expectations, when allowing them to continue as is, is undercutting both their and the organization's success, then we need to sit down with them and have what we call a "caring confrontation." It could be with anyone we work with—partner, manager, boss, employee, or anyone anywhere in the organization whom we're struggling to work well with. It's caring because we do it with dignity, respect, and a positive (even if uncertain) outcome in mind. It's a confrontation because, by definition, it's not about all the good things the other person might be doing. For me at least, these conversations are never anything I look forward to; they're usually at least somewhat, if not very, difficult. But to not have them, when things aren't going well, is a disservice to whomever it is that we're trying to work with more effectively, and to the organization overall. To quote again from Robert Greenleaf, the challenge for each of us is, "Am I willing to say the words and take the actions that build constructive tension? The act may seem hard and unreasonable to the recipient at the time, but it may be the most constructive kindness."

To read our recipe for Productive Resolution of Your Differences, see page 338.

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### 4. BE AN ACTIVE LEARNER AND TEACHER

As Paul often says, "There's a lot of information out there that we need to know. And no one of us is going to get all of it—if I'm not learning it and you're not learning it, we're probably missing out!" I agree. In fact, the reason

this application of Servant Leadership appears as it does on our list is, actually, the result of the two of us going out and doing more formal learning in the first place. The story dates to a sunny autumn day; I think it was the fall of 1992, if I remember right. The two of us had taken time out of our regular work routines to fly out to San Francisco to attend an *Inc.* magazine conference. The highlight of the conference was the chance to hear Skip LeFauve, then head of the Saturn Corporation, present on what he and his crew were doing to make a new kind of car company at their plant in Tennessee. One of the many good things he shared was their expectation about leaders learning and teaching. We loved it and we've been using it ever since.

To be clear, it's not like the idea of learning was new to us. Both Paul and I have always been big readers, conference-goers, and generally avid students on almost any relevant subject. We've always made time to go to seminars and classes, we've happily paid for others here to do the same, and we started teaching—both formally and informally—very early on in the life of the business. I don't think either of us could imagine doing it any other way; it just seemed incredibly obvious that without that learning and teaching we were never going to have even the slightest shot at getting to where we wanted to go. But as the business grew and brought in more managers, we found ourselves increasingly frustrated that many of them didn't seem to have the same passion for training that we did. Which was why we were so excited to hear what Skip had to say. At Saturn they were way more out front about it than we'd ever been—*every manager was expected to do two hours per week on average of formal learning.*

To be a bit more specific, here's what we look for from anyone in a leadership role:

**Two hours a week of formal learning.** Following Skip's lead, we ask that all Zingerman's managers and partners do an average of two hours of formal learning a week. The immediate question that almost always comes up is, "What is *formal learning*?" I can tell you more quickly what it isn't—osmosis is out, and hanging around with interesting people (even at work!) isn't included either. That said, almost everything else is in. Books, audio, websites, attending seminars or classes within our organization or without, educational websites, newspapers, consumer magazines, trade magazines, etc.

The other question that comes up is, Why ask people who are already so busy to take two hours out of their week to learn?

There's a whole host of reasons that I'll list below, but before I even get to those, it's important to make clear that this learning (and teaching) is not "extra" work—it's part of the work that we expect. So someone saying that they don't have time to do it (which, of course, I've heard too many times) is akin to saying that they don't have time to wait on a customer, clean their coolers, or any of the other eight hundred tasks that we all have to do every day.

**One hour a month of teaching inside the organization.** We also ask that all Zingerman's managers and partners make time for an average of at least an hour of formal teaching per month. The more we teach, the more we learn, the more we clarify our message, and the more clearly we understand what it is we want and what we want to say. That is a very virtuous and positive learning cycle that I love being a part of.

(Although I didn't know it when we heard him speak in San Francisco, it turned out that Skip and his family actually lived in Ann Arbor, and had been good Zingerman's customers for a long time. Over the years I had the opportunity to wait on him many times and to casually share thoughts and learn from his experience and insight. Sadly, he passed away suddenly in January 2003, at the young age of 68. While we never worked together directly, I have the feeling that he lived much of what's in this book in creative and inspirational ways. Members of his family continue to be good customers. But I'm sad that, although we were friendly and I saw him in the Deli regularly, he and I never quite managed to make the time to talk at the length that I'd have liked.)

The learning mindset is very much at the core of Servant Leadership. Perhaps, Greenleaf says, "we should move towards a new institution that embraces both work and learning—learning in a deep and formal sense and all of the learning influence most people need. This requires a new type of leader, one who can conceptualize such an institution, generate enthusiasm so that many good, able people want to be a part of it, and provide the strong focus of purpose that builds dynamic strength in many. Great things happen when leaders create these conditions."

##### 5. HELP STAFF SUCCEED BY LIVING THE TRAINING COMPACT

Servant Leadership does turn standard 20th-century business thinking on its head. The old model says that when we're successful we'll want to hire more people in order to help us succeed. Here, we actually hire people in order to



help *them* succeed. That's right. If we're successful, if we grow, that means we get to bring on more good people so, quite simply, we can help them do a great job, too. While all that might sound strange, it's actually incredibly logical. Think it through—if all the people we hire are attaining great success in their work, how then, is the organization overall likely to be doing? You got it. If they're all rocking the house, it's pretty safe to say the house is gonna be rockin'—in a good way—as well.

This approach, really, is fully in synch with the whole idea of giving great service to the staff. The better we serve them, the more success they garner, the better they do, the better we do; the better we do, the more we give them—and through all this the community and the customers are coming out better and better for it every day. The key here is that it starts with us as leaders committing to helping everyone we hire become great at their work. What that work is, and what "great" might mean, will of course vary from person to person and project to project. But the point is we're out to overtly assist and support everyone in getting there.

When we first started teaching these elements of Servant Leadership at Zingerman's, this fifth section used to simply say, "Help the staff succeed." But in early 2000 we added the line "by living the training compact." What drove us to add it was the release of one of the better books of the new century, *First Break All the Rules* by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman. The book detailed a project put together by the Gallup Organization that surveyed 1,000,000 frontline employees and 75,000 managers to find out what it was that kept the best people in their jobs for the longest period of time. The authors distilled their results down to twelve questions, ranked in order of importance, to which, if you could answer in the affirmative you had the best shot at successfully keeping the best people in your organization.

The funny thing was, when I read through the list, I realized almost immediately that there was an uncanny correlation between what the Gallup folks had found to be most important, and what Maggie Bayless had put onto our training compact ten years or so earlier. If you look at the Gallup findings you'll see that the number one question on their list is exactly the same as what was already in our training compact—"Do I know what's expected of me in my work?" The second most important query, "Do I have the tools I need to do my work?" was, uncannily, the second point on the left side of our training compact. The third Gallup question, "Do I have the opportunity to do what I do best?" is, I think, the right side of the training compact. Only if we each take

ownership of our own career can anyone truly have a good shot at doing what they believe they do best. The fourth question, "In the last seven days have I received recognition or praise for good work?" follows along with the left side of the training compact again. Anyway, you're getting the point. It was wild—what Maggie had put together in the mid-90s was being verified by a Gallup study of over a million people. It was pretty obvious that what we needed to do was just get better at doing what we were already supposed to be doing—living that training compact with ever-greater effectiveness. (For more on the training compact, see page 53 in *Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading, Part 1*.)

Quite simply, it's way easier to do a good job when you know what "good" is, when you have the tools you need to learn what you need to know, and are clear in the measurements and the rewards for work well done. Good service dictates that we give staff members all of those things from the get-go!

## *Zingerman's* training compact

trainer  
agrees to:

- ① document clear performance expectations
- ② provide training resources
- ③ recognize performance
- ④ reward performance

trainees agree to:

take responsibility for  
the effectiveness of their  
training at Zingerman's

### 6. SAY THANKS

The sixth element of Servant Leadership here is probably the simplest, the most elemental, and easiest to do on a day-to-day basis. It's not fancy and it's really not all that hard: just be actively appreciative of everyone and everything you work with. No, I'm not saying you need to send sappy cards to colleagues

every day. I'm talking about meaningful ways to let people know that you noticed the quality of their work—actively sharing that you saw that they did something special and that you care about them and what they're doing. It's letting people know that they make a positive difference for the organization, for their colleagues, and for their community. You don't really need me to tell you how to do this. It's hardly difficult to do. But it is important.

To be blunt, saying thanks is the kind of thing that high achievers (like me) can forget to do with far too great a frequency. Natural Law of Business 10 says that strengths lead to weaknesses. It only makes sense that self-motivated, internally driven, high-achieving leaders who are totally good with long-term gratification would slip up on saying something nice about the small, short-term stuff that might seem almost insignificant to us but is actually enormously meaningful to most of the people doing most of the work in our businesses. Saying thanks makes an enormous difference.

- Everyone—you and I included—works more effectively when their efforts have been noticed and appreciated.
- Ultimately, saying thanks by recognizing people's contributions is one of the best ways to let people know that their efforts have really made a difference.
- It's more effective and enjoyable to lead with appreciation than to lead with criticism.
- When we say thanks, we set the tone to move our organizational culture towards a more appreciative, positive future.

(For more on this subject, see "Creating a Culture of Positive Appreciation" in *Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading, Part 1*.)

### **Postscript: Servant Leadership and the Free Sharing of Power**

To be really clear here at the conclusion, Servant Leadership is not a scam. It's not an irrelevant nicety, and it's not insignificant. Neither is it some modern, new-agey way to delude people into doing what we want, just by smiling and being nice to them. Servant Leadership is solid; it makes sense, and, for us at least, it's been very, very successful. It is, without question, a hugely important element of the organic garden that is the Zingerman's Community of Businesses. Quite simply, Servant Leadership serves as a simple seed that we can quickly plant in new managers, something that they can consistently learn

to fall back on without having to worry too much, or overthink things, when they're under pressure. Servant Leadership has long been the core component of our orientation class for new managers, and we reference it regularly in almost every element of our work. It's a huge help to new managers from the minute they start because, I think, its basic direction is so easy to remember. It works in much the same way that the imaginary football team I describe in the intro to this essay learns to dive for loose balls. When in doubt, Greenleaf says, serve. And when the pressure's really on, serve more still.

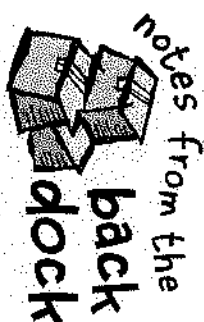
Although Robert Greenleaf was clearly very critical of the old-school approach to organizational life, he didn't (to my knowledge) ever envision himself as an anarchist. That said, a lot of his writing was well in synch, I think, with anarchist intent. The way I read it, Servant Leadership is separated from the community-minded, collaborative, free-thinking, supportive elements of anarchism by far fewer than six degrees. Servant Leadership is about the belief that service to the organization is the key to pretty much everything; that when we do it well, we bring out the best in everyone; that when those at what are usually considered to be the "lowest" levels of the business are getting better, then the entire organization is getting better too. Although we at the top may know a lot, there's actually a lot more that we don't know. And to really build a great business requires real respect, collaboration, and communication across all lines, initiative from every area, and accountability by everyone, not just each of us for our own activity, but for the success of the entire organization.

The leader, in Greenleaf's construct, still leads, but primarily by serving; he asks us to use our power as little as possible, leading always with service, gentleness, and generosity, the better to build a positive future for everyone involved. The power and wisdom, he posits over and over again, is actually in the group, in the collaborative, collective, creative people in the organization, not in the hierarchical order and special privileges that take up so much space in most of the work world. Although he worked in it his whole career, he was very critical of the old model. "The prevalence of the lone chief," Greenleaf posits, "places a burden on the whole society because it gives control, priority over leadership. It sets before the young an unwholesome struggle to get to the top. It nourishes the notion among able people that one must be boss to be effective. And it sanctions, in a conspicuous way, a peticious and petty status striving that corrupts everyone." Greenleaf (like the anarchists) envisioned a future in which people "will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants."



Servant Leadership, then, provides each of us with a framework in which to function: a mindset and set of guidelines to which we can return again and again as we grapple with the difficult, ever-challenging issues of effective leadership. While considering the idea of it may be easy, actually living Servant Leadership fully, from the inside out, is anything but. The concept is so contrary to the way most of us have learned to be the boss—or to be bossed—that it can take a long time for it to really take hold. Living Servant Leadership isn't just lip service; it's about real, meaningful, from-the-heart, authentic service to the organization and to the people who work in it. To really think *in*—not just think *about*—the language of Servant Leadership is a long, probably a lifelong, project. But it's one I'm happy to be engaged in and to work at, however imperfectly, every day. In that regard, I'll throw my own intellectual and emotional lot in with Gustav Landauer—change isn't easy to master. "I am only starting," he said, "to free myself from the spider webs [of traditional society]. I have to learn to speak very differently."

I've reread Robert Greenleaf's book many times now, and I uncover new insights each time through. The last lines here go to him: "This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions—often large, complex, powerful, impersonal, not always competent, sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them."



*The Inside Scoop on Working Here at Zingerman's*

Amos Arinada, Line Cook, Zingerman's Roadhouse

People often ask me, "Why do you think Zingerman's is such a great place to work?" I used to answer that question with a shrug and a shake of the head, usually followed by, "I don't know. It just is." That response would usually frustrate most people—if not outwardly, then probably on the inside. They were looking for something more profound, something magical, or at least more concrete. But I had nothing I could put into words. After a while my underwhelming answer for why I, and others like me, enjoy working here so much began to bother me as well. After much deliberation I realized that the answer was, plain and simple, that we practiced Servant Leadership. Because, no matter what concept or philosophy we practiced as an organization, I have found that at the root of each one lay the notion that the leader was in a place of servitude to the collective staff. It all centered around the fact that at Zingerman's, the leader was there to serve the staff and not the other way around. Take, for example, the concept of open-book management: at the very core of this style is trust that the direct reports you manage are capable, and in some cases even more capable, of making key decisions that affect the business. And as a leader your responsibility is not so much to dictate to others but, rather, to create an environment where they can make the decisions that in turn run the organization! Quite honestly, a business does not run without the staff. Until people in positions of leadership realize that fact, they cannot effectively lead.

What makes this concept paradoxical here at Zingerman's is that we encourage everyone here to be a leader—so, in a way we are to be servants to each other, right? So, when you really think about it the people who are the best servants to each other make the best leaders! Funny how that works, huh?