

LEADERSHIP

Why Servant Leadership Is More Important Than Ever



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Photo: GETTY

This global pandemic is a time of unprecedented challenge, and a time when servant leadership is more important than ever before. Service before self is paramount.

The pandemic is affecting us all — individually, organizationally and societally. We are having to find new ways of working, and

normal business concerns are overlaid by added challenges: different ways of operating, keeping staff safe and handling sickness, layoffs, furloughs and loss of income. Wider societal impacts include adverse effects on the global economy. This all calls for a more comprehensive, communal leadership approach: leadership that is focused on serving others.

The Servant As Leader

In his essay *The Servant as Leader*, Robert K. Greenleaf first coined the phrase "servant-leader," writing, "The servant-leader is servant first ... 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."

In fields that are vital in this pandemic, like health care and global development, you might believe that values like caring and serving others are integral to the role, but not every leader embodies these traits. Even in the caring professions, money, power or day-to-day decision-making can cause leaders to lose sight of their altruistic goals. They may lead the organization without prioritizing service to the community. Although Greenleaf does say, "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 differences are:

- A servant-leader's focus is primarily on other people's (and their communities') well-being and growth.
- The servant-leader isn't a sole leader with power, but rather, a power-sharer.
- They put other people's needs above their own and enable their team to grow, develop and perform to the best of their ability.

During this pandemic, we all need to step up and do what we can for the greater good.

The Organization And Servant Leadership

In *The Institution as Servant*, Greenleaf said that in caring for people and serving each other, servant leadership was the foundation of a good society.

Caring used to be an individual responsibility, but now, most caring is delivered through institutions or organizations — which can be complex, large, impersonal, sometimes incompetent and even corrupt. However, collectively, organizations have the power to be world-changers. To create a better, just and more caring society with more opportunities for people, we need to increase our organizations' capacity to serve. We need to improve their "serving" performance, by examining operations and the people operating within them. Organizations have the power to change society, but first, capacity must be built, people developed and servant leadership must be given the necessary climate to thrive and prosper.

How To Develop Servant Leadership

In *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Peter G. Northouse describes 10 characteristics of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community. How do you practice these? Whether you are at work, or in your family or community, servant leadership has a vital role to play, now more than ever.

These three things can help you to become a better servant leader during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Communicate and engage with others. These days, people are looking for certainty and safety. In his article "[The Psychology](#)

[Behind Effective Crisis Leadership,"](#) Gianpiero Petriglieri advocates "holding" — a concept from psychology describing the way someone "contains and interprets" events in uncertain times. Containing refers to the ability to soothe distress, and interpreting to the ability to help others make sense of a confusing predicament. Offering reassurance — about a person's life, job, the organization, the future — and presenting a clear direction are all part of holding. Petriglieri writes, "In groups whose leaders can hold, mutual support abounds, work continues, and a new vision eventually emerges. When leaders cannot hold, and we can't hold each other, anxiety, anger, and fragmentation ensue." Sharing ideas and communicating are important, and so is team spirit. Engage employees in finding solutions and working on projects that benefit those they serve, both in and outside of the organization. Build resilience by sharing positive stories of what your organization and/or employees have been doing well!

Create a plan. It is important to prepare for potential challenges. Think of the things that need to happen, including obstacles that might get in the way and plan how you will respond. Include your team, and consider this to be a real, working risk assessment with practicable actions. Address all the possible scenarios — extended periods of lockdown, illness, loss of income streams, continued new ways of working or adapted business practices. How will you react to each scenario? Planning ahead, considering all eventualities and knowing what you'll do in each case will help alleviate anxiety, stress and panic, and enable you to act in a calm, measured way. Furthermore, communicating this information with candor builds trust and demonstrates transparency, which is especially important during times of uncertainty.

Model servant leadership. In times of perceived danger, the primitive "fight, flight, freeze" responses prevail and

extraordinary behavior can manifest, like people hoarding toilet paper or reporting their neighbors to the police for taking a walk. In times of crisis, people often look to leaders for how they should respond. So lead by example. Demonstrate servant leadership by modeling the kind of attitude and behavior you want others to have in the face of crisis — one of calmness, sharing, gratitude and compassion for others. Encourage "we" before "me" and walk your talk.

During this pandemic, we have already seen many acts of servant leadership around the world. Let's think about how we can continue to show up as servant leaders and continue to serve others, while we live and lead.

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