



Values-based Leadership

A manager's actions and behaviours at work may be guided by a variety of factors, including their organisation's culture and their values – the concepts that a society, group or person has deemed important or, in other words, the things they value. For example, people may value honesty, ambition or hard work. These personal values significantly influence how people behave professionally. If a manager values honesty, for instance, they are likely to honour their commitments and communicate transparently.

To do their job well, managers always need to demonstrate values such as fairness, openness, equality, inclusivity and respect. Managers who embody these values at work can be said to possess professional integrity. Importantly, the behaviours that managers exhibit can significantly influence broader organisational culture – adopting a values-driven approach promotes a culture of positivity and mutual respect. So, for instance, by actively supporting team members' wellbeing, line managers can model how to prioritise employee health. In addition, this may lead to increased job satisfaction and productivity.

This concept of values-based leadership (VBL) was born out of the moral scandals and unethical practices uncovered within both private and public sector organisations at the beginning of the 21st century. This led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of morality and ethical behaviour in leadership theory.¹ While there are many definitions of values-based leadership, you can think of it as leadership based on behaviours "that are rooted in ethical and moral foundations".²

It's worth noting that values-based leadership isn't a single leadership theory, but rather a collection of theories and styles that includes 'authentic leadership', 'transformational leadership', and 'servant leadership'. We'll look at 'servant leadership' in more detail below.

'Servant leadership'

'Servant leadership' was first described by management researcher Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 essay 'The Servant as Leader'.³ It was in part a reaction to the prevailing view of leadership styles at the time, which tended to focus on having power and authority over others.⁴ Greenleaf sought to challenge the traditionally held view that 'followers' exist to serve their leaders, by instead asking how leaders can best serve their team members.

¹ Copeland, K. (2014). The emerging significance of values based leadership: A literature review. International Journal of Leadership Studies, 8(2), pp. 105–135. Available at:

https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=business_facpub [Accessed 11 October 2024]

² Copeland, K. (2014). The emerging significance of values based leadership: A literature review. International Journal of Leadership Studies, 8(2), pp. 105–135. Available at:

https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=business_facpub [Accessed 11 October 2024]

³ Ferch, S. R. (2023). Robert Greenleaf on servant-leadership. Gonzaga University. Available at: <https://www.gonzaga.edu/news-events/stories/2023/9/26/robert-greenleaf-servant-leadership> [Accessed 8 October 2024]

⁴ Spears, L. (1996). Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 17(7), pp. 33–35. Cited in: C. Smith (submitted 2005). The leadership theory of Robert K. Greenleaf. Info 640 – Mgmt. of Info. Orgs. Available at:

https://www.boyden.com/media/just-what-the-doctor-ordered-15763495/Leadership%20%20Theory_Greenleaf%20Servant%20Leadership.pdf [Accessed 8 October 2024]



In the 1990s, author and scholar Larry Spears built on Greenleaf's work to define 'servant leadership' as:

"...a model which puts serving others as the number one priority. 'Servant leadership' emphasises increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making."⁵

Spears later distilled Greenleaf's work into ten characteristics⁶ or "moral behaviours".⁷ They are:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Healing
- Awareness
- Persuasion
- Conceptualisation
- Foresight
- Stewardship
- Commitment to the growth of people
- Building community

Listening is about actively hearing and valuing other people's views, concerns and ideas, as well as what isn't said. It also includes listening to one's inner voice and reflecting on it for personal growth and wellbeing.

Empathy is the "ability to mentally project one's own consciousness into that of another individual."⁸ In other words, truly understanding your team members' feelings. If someone is struggling with a personal issue, a servant leader would take the time to understand it before offering a workable solution.

The next characteristic is **healing**. Greenleaf believed that it's the job of the servant leader to help heal people's "emotional hurts".⁹ In a team setting, this might include being aware of conflicts or rifts between team members and helping to rebuild relationships.

⁵ Spears, L. (1996). Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17(7), pp. 33–35. Cited in: C. Smith (submitted 2005). The leadership theory of Robert K. Greenleaf. Info 640 – Mgmt. of. Info. Orgs. Available at:

https://www.boyden.com/media/just-what-the-doctor-ordered-15763495/Leadership%20%20Theory_Greenleaf%20Servant%20Leadership.pdf [Accessed 8 October 2024]

⁶ The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (N.D.). Ten characteristics of a servant-leader. Available at:

<https://www.spearscenter.org/46-uncategorised/136-ten-characteristics-of-servant-leadership> [Accessed 8 October 2024]

⁷ Chan, S. C. H. and Mak, M. (2014). The impact of servant leadership and subordinates' organizational tenure on trust in leader attitudes. *Personnel Review*, 43(2), pp. 272–287. Available at:

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/PR-08-2011-0125/full/html>

⁸ Spears, L. (1996). Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17(7), pp. 33–35. Cited in: C. Smith (submitted 2005). The leadership theory of Robert K. Greenleaf. Info 640 – Mgmt. of. Info. Orgs. Available at:

https://www.boyden.com/media/just-what-the-doctor-ordered-15763495/Leadership%20%20Theory_Greenleaf%20Servant%20Leadership.pdf [Accessed 8 October 2024]

⁹ The Spears Center for Servant-Leadership (N.D.). Ten characteristics of a servant-leader. Available at:

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Awareness is about being sharply attuned and attentive to everything that's going on around you as a leader, so that you can make better-informed decisions. This also includes self-awareness.

The next characteristic, **persuasion**, is very important. While a traditional leader might rely on giving directions or using their authority, a servant leader deploys their persuasion skills to convince others of the benefits of a particular course of action. This includes the ability to gain consensus in a team.

Following this is **conceptualisation**, which means looking beyond day-to-day realities and taking a step back to see the bigger picture. This is particularly vital when creating and sharing a vision and direction for a team.

Foresight is about being able to see likely outcomes. It partly depends on experience and learning from how similar situations have turned out in the past.

Next is **stewardship**. Servant leaders are strong caretakers of their people, resources and organisational culture, and aim to leave behind a positive legacy. By being good 'stewards', they help employees to find meaning and purpose in their work. This leads to job satisfaction, commitment and high performance.

Commitment to the growth of people involves realising the intrinsic value that individuals have beyond their roles as team members or employees. Servant leaders understand their responsibility to do everything possible for the development of their team members. This might be through providing coaching or mentoring, or delegating projects.

Finally, **building community** is about creating a sense of belonging. In a team environment, this might mean promoting collaboration and giving people as many opportunities as possible to interact on a personal level. The aim is to ensure that everyone is included and feels like they belong.

This list isn't intended to be exhaustive, but it can serve as a useful guide for managers who would like to change their leadership style to become servant leaders.