



# Book The Secret

## What Great Leaders Know and Do

Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller  
Berrett-Koehler, 2009  
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## Recommendation

With more than 20 million copies of his books in print, *One-Minute Manager* author Ken Blanchard is one of the world’s most popular business authors. You will immediately understand why after you read this inspirational business novel that he wrote with Mark Miller, training and development vice president of the Chick-fil-A restaurant chain. They tell the fictional, motivational story of Debbie Brewster, a newly appointed manager of corporate client services for a division of her company. As the narrative opens, Brewster is down for the count and sprawled out on the canvas. Her business unit is the company’s worst and she’s failing miserably as a leader. She worries that she will lose her job, but the firm’s president becomes her mentor and gives her a crash course on leadership. He’s a savvy leader and she is an apt pupil. He walks her through the “SERVE” leadership model and brings the reader along. You’ll feel the uplift as the book closes with Brewster’s staff cheering her as she moves up to a new executive position. *BooksInShort* warmly recommends this short, nicely written parable on the meaning of leadership.

## Take-Aways

- Great leaders serve others, as exemplified by the SERVE model of leadership.
- S stands for “See the future.” To be a great leader, you must have a vision of where you want the company to go and you must share it to guide your team.
- View problems as opportunities and look “Heads Up” at the future.
- At the same time, you must attend to “Heads Down” day-to-day details.
- E stands for “Engage.” To get people behind you, connect with them.
- Enable your staff members to develop their talents and capabilities.
- R stands for “Reinvent continuously.” Work to boost your skills and expertise.
- V stands for “Value results and relationships.” Strive to reach your goals and enhance your bond with your team members.
- E stands for “Embody the values” you promulgate so people will trust you – and, therefore, follow you.
- “Servant leaders” guide and motivate their followers by being of service to them.

## Summary

### A Manager in Trouble

Debbie Brewster was worried. She had been doing well at work, winning a promotion to director of corporate client services for a division of her corporation. But now she was failing miserably. Her business unit had the firm’s poorest performance. It missed its profit goals and her employees clearly were unhappy. Nothing was going right, and Debbie didn’t know what to do. To get some perspective, she took a few hours off to go to the library, think quietly and make some notes.

“Great leaders don’t become great in a moment – or in a month or a year.”

When Debbie entered the library’s main reading room, a smiling librarian asked if she could help. Debbie replied that she needed only a quiet place to work. The librarian escorted her to a large desk in the corner of the room. Ten minutes later, she returned and offered to help. “What is the problem you’re trying to solve?” she asked. Debbie smiled ruefully, “In our company, we often refer to problems as opportunities,” she said. “OK, so what’s the opportunity?” the librarian asked, offering the library’s information resources.

“Everything that you will accomplish as a leader ultimately hinges on the people around you.”

Touched by her concern, Debbie confessed, “I’m worried that I am failing as a leader.” The librarian took Debbie to her computer and pulled up some articles, seeking something helpful. Debbie noticed that the word “mentor” showed up repeatedly and remembered a company email offering managers the chance to apply for a new mentoring program. Feeling better, she thanked the librarian, returned to the office and signed up for the program.

**Debbie’s New Mentor**

Two weeks later, Debbie received notice that she had been chosen to participate in the mentoring program. She was astonished to see that Jeff Brown, the company’s new president, would be her mentor. She contacted Jeff’s assistant to see if someone had made a mistake. The assistant assured Debbie that Jeff was looking forward to seeing her. Debbie was amazed when the assistant offered her a choice of meeting times. The president of the company wanted to accommodate her – she did a double take. Shouldn’t it be the other way around?

“Continuously ask yourself... ‘Am I a self-serving leader or a serving leader?’”

When the day of her first mentoring session arrived, Debbie arrived early. Mr. Brown got up from his chair and shook her hand. Asking her to call him “Jeff,” he explained that he would meet with her for a series of hour-long sessions every month or so over the following few months. He told Debbie about himself and asked Debbie to tell him her story. When she was done, he asked how he could most effectively serve her as a mentor. Debbie asked the question she had discussed with her husband the night before: “What is the secret of great leaders?” Jeff praised Debbie for asking a great question and promised to discuss it with her at their next meeting.

**Effective Leaders “SERVE”**

Jeff impressed Debbie; she was particularly struck by his listening skills, and she decided to try to learn from them. She started to go out of her way to listen to her employees so she could learn what was on their minds and how she could help them.

“Creating a compelling vision is one of the privileges and most serious demands of leaders.”

When she next met with Jeff, he compared leadership to an iceberg, with a small visible peak and a lot of bulk under the waterline. The top is made up of “skills,” or the “doing” part of leadership, the portion that other people see. The remainder is “character,” the “being” facet of leadership and the leader’s essence as a person. “The secret is, great leaders SERVE,” he said. They have “servant hearts” and they serve their firms and their people five ways. Promising to review the five steps in the future, Jeff told Debbie to seek opportunities to serve her staffers that would enable them to do better work.

“It’s the leader’s job to make time today to ensure that there is a tomorrow.”

Debbie went out of her way to learn about her employees’ difficulties and to help them. When she met again with Jeff, he complimented her and said she was ready to “discover more strategic ways to serve.” Then he broke down the meaning of the SERVE model of leadership.

**S Stands for “See the Future”**

Great leaders are visionary, Jeff explained. They use the *S* in SERVE, which means seeing ahead. They should think about the future and feel passionate about its possibilities, using their sense of direction to motivate their followers with work that has purpose. Great leaders must have solid values, because “values are the beliefs that drive...behavior.” Jeff instructed Debbie to discuss her department’s mission and future with her staffers. Great leaders, he said, meet the “‘Heads Up’ versus ‘Heads Down’ challenge.” Heads Up means looking forward and planning for the future; Heads Down means handling daily activities. Heads Down executes Heads Up.

“Everything rises and falls on leadership.” (John C. Maxwell)

Previously, Debbie had quit holding team meetings because she saw them as time wasters, but after she considered what she was learning about leadership, she decided to rebuild her staff’s sense of being a team and to reinstitute their meetings. As she and her staff discussed Jeff’s challenges, Debbie realized that her team must work in unison to build the future its members wanted. She also came to understand that she had to delegate enough “Heads Down” work to her staff to allow her to focus on mapping out goals. She realized it is “the leader’s job to make time today to ensure that there is a tomorrow.”

“A person can serve without leading, but a leader can’t lead well without serving.”

At the next mentoring session, Debbie explained to Jeff that she was delegating more – and to good effect. She found that having more time allowed her to think ahead and to craft a vision for her unit. She was inspired by Jeff’s letter in the company’s annual report listing the pivotal elements of future success: “Put customers first,” “serve others,” “practice stewardship” by being accountable for the people entrusted to you, and “cultivate creativity.”

**E Stands for “Engage and Develop Others”**

As Debbie incorporated Jeff’s teachings about leadership into her daily activities, matters began to improve in her business unit. Her employees were more enthusiastic

about their jobs, so their productivity increased. They were happier and so was Debbie.

“The leader’s objective is to leverage the strengths of people and make their weaknesses become irrelevant.” (Peter Drucker)

At their next meeting, Jeff explained that the first *E* in SERVE represents “engagement,” or hiring the best people and being involved with your staff. His routine was to meet with job candidates four times to make sure that he’d found the right person and to get to know prospective employees thoroughly. He also saw the process as a way to give prospects as much information as possible about him and the company. He encouraged them to interview him and to inspect his résumé and credentials. This approach enables candidates to withdraw if they feel the company isn’t a cultural match for them. Over time, engagement also involves developing existing employees through training, education and mentoring.

“Profits and financial strength are the applause we get for a job well done.”

Jeff taught Debbie to stay on the lookout for good candidates to join her team. Recalling the friendly librarian who had steered her toward mentoring, Debbie went back to the library. She discussed personal development plans with the librarian and finally asked her name, which was Jill. In the course of their conversation, Debbie asked Jill if she had ever considered a career change. When she expressed an interest, Debbie invited her to join the company. Jill was pleased by the request and said she would consider it. Debbie filled Jill in about her division, and gave her an application. Three weeks later, Jill became the newest member of Debbie’s team. She immediately made a strong contribution.

## ***R* Stands for “Reinvent Continuously”**

At their next meeting Jeff explained that the *R* in SERVE means to reinvent yourself, your systems and your structure. A leader’s quest for self-improvement sets a good example for employees, but constant corporate reinvention is even broader. It includes steadily making your systems more efficient and reshaping your structure. Some leaders become slaves to their systems, when they should be in charge of them and should improve them. Taking Jeff’s lessons to heed, Debbie met with her team members about their objectives. They opted to rebuild their unit and to go from “worst to first,” a goal that they could accomplish together.

## ***V* Stands for “Value Results and Relationships”**

When Jeff got together with Debbie again two weeks later, he explained that the “*V*” in SERVE stands for valuing your results and your relationships. Leaders must focus on achieving their professional and corporate goals – their results – but they cannot neglect their relationships with the people who work for them. Jeff disagreed with the leadership practice of using checklists to try to build strong relationships with employees, because each person is different.

“People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Jeff taught Debbie to develop a personalized approach to each member of her team and to encourage each individual. He taught her that if you approach people with warmth, you don’t have to worry too much about the occasional misstep. If you are sincere, they will respond positively. At the office, Debbie saw that Jill was making good use of the ability to connect with others that she had displayed at the library. She asked Jill how she might engage better, and Jill suggested that Debbie should talk to her employees about what they do outside of work.

## ***E* Stands for “Embody the Values”**

At their next meeting, Debbie was eager to find out what the final *E* in SERVE represented. But she questioned Jeff when he said it stands for trust, given that trust begins with a *T*, so he explained that to merit the trust of her staffers, she had to embody the values that she urged them to adopt. Debbie understood. “I don’t want to be someone who falls into the trap you warned about – a leader who just ‘stumbles the mumble’ and doesn’t walk the talk,” she said.

“Where possible, we select leaders with both character and skills. But if we have to choose between skills and character we’ve made a fundamental decisions...we will select men and women of character and develop their skills.”

Jeff told her to ask her employees what they want to “be, do, have and help” happen in their lives, and to give them any boost that she could in meeting those goals. Before their meeting ended, Debbie asked Jeff to name some leaders he believed best exemplified the SERVE model. He told her that the leaders he admired, those who really embody crucial values, are people who serve others. Then he asked for a week to consider his answer.

“People who want to be great leaders must embrace an attitude of service to others.”

Meanwhile, since Debbie had been meeting with Jeff for mentoring and had been working to implement his SERVE leadership ideas, her team had become better and better. It met its productivity goals and went from being the worst unit in the company to being one of the best. Debbie was proud to know that, as president, Jeff was watching her team’s vast improvement with satisfaction.

## **The Greatest SERVE Leaders**

Jeff and Debbie’s next meeting was the last of their formal mentoring sessions. Debbie was sorry to see the process come to an end, but glad that her friendship with Jeff would continue. As they sat down for their last leadership discussion, she asked him again which leaders he would cite as ideal role models, people who carried out all facets of the SERVE approach. He named Nelson Mandela, because he emerged from jail without bitterness and went on to serve his country. Debbie suggested former US President Jimmy Carter, because of his work with Habitat for Humanity and his efforts to promote peace. Then Jeff said that personally he saw Jesus of Nazareth as someone who “symbolized [the] whole philosophy of servant leadership.”

“All genuine leadership is built on trust.”

As Debbie thanked him for mentoring her, Jeff said he’d decided to promote her to lead the firm’s leadership development activities. She happily accepted the

promotion. A week later, Jeff joined Debbie and her team to celebrate her move. Everyone was in a party mood. Jill, who would replace Debbie as department manager, publicly congratulated Debbie on her accomplishments and on helping the team make substantial improvements. On the team’s behalf, Jill gave Debbie a gold-embossed plaque reading, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.” Under the quote, the plaque read: “Thank you, Debbie Brewster, for showing us how to be great by showing us how to serve.”

## About the Authors

**Ken Blanchard** is the author of more than 40 books and the “chief spiritual officer” of The Ken Blanchard Companies. He is co-founder of Lead Like Jesus ministries. **Mark Miller** is in charge of training and development for Chick-fil-A, a quick-service restaurant chain.

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