

# How to Become a Servant Leader

BY JOSH SPIRO

Servant leaders are attentive to the growth and development of those they work with, including partners, employees, and customers. Here's how you can join their ranks.

iStock

No **business owner** sets out to mistreat employees or customers. But not every entrepreneur puts an equal amount of thought into whether their employees are growing and being challenged or whether their customers need anything above and beyond what's already being provided to them.

Servant leadership is a pretty intuitive concept; in fact you might be practicing it already unawares. However, it also clashes with many of the values instilled by modern American culture.

"I think the simplest way to explain it would be to say that servant leaders focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others rather than trying to acquire power, wealth, and fame for themselves," says Kent Keith, CEO of the [Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership](#), a Westfield, Indiana-based non-profit that promotes education about and implementation of servant leadership.

But servant leadership goes even beyond your personal interactions within your company. "In business [practicing servant leadership] would start with your customers and ultimately [involve] serving society through the good work you're doing on behalf of your customers," says Bill George, a professor of management at Harvard Business School and the former CEO of Medtronic, a large medical technology company.

Here's how to listen to and respect those you work with, flatten your organizational hierarchy, and stay focused doing it.

## **How to Become a Servant Leader: The Origins of Servant Leadership**

The Greenleaf Center, which Keith presides over, takes its name from Robert Greenleaf, the originator of the concept of servant leadership. Greenleaf spent much of his career handling HR and personnel for AT&T. "He observed over time that there were leaders who were in it for themselves and leaders who were in it for others,"

Keith explains, "and his conclusion was that those who focused on others were the most effective."

Greenleaf's observations don't just apply to the workings of a single company. Keith feels that the behaviors exemplified by servant leaders makes capitalism itself more efficient. "Servant leaders really are good at listening, they stay close to their colleagues, they have a good understanding of what their colleagues need to perform at a high level and they work hard to get that to them," Keith explains. Another reason it boosts economic efficiency is "if you're really paying attention, then you can provide the programs, products, and services that people really want."

### **Dig Deeper: Joel Spolsky on His Style of Servant Leadership**

#### **How to Become a Servant Leader: Signs You Aren't Practicing Servant Leadership**

Much as Keith holds that servant leadership makes the wheels of free enterprise turn smoother, George believes that people practicing a very unservant-like form of leadership precipitated much of the recent economic crisis.

He says you can tell if you're serving your own interests or those of others simply by how much and how well you're listening to those around you. "Many entrepreneurs are brilliant people at getting a business going. They're very self-determined, very committed, but you can see at some point in time a separation [between] them and their team and they feel like they're carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders," says George. When entrepreneurs shoulder an excessive portion of the burden, they neglect opportunities to delegate to their team, opportunities which would help them grow and develop as employees and as people. That's why George cautions entrepreneurs not to play Atlas.

The antithesis of servant leadership, which Keith refers to as the "power, wealth and fame model," also manifests in low employee morale and lower levels of commitment to the organization. "People kind of do their jobs and leave when the clock says five o'clock. They don't put in any extra effort, they give you the minimum," says George. High turnover rates can be another symptom.

One type of behavior, which can lower employee morale, is any examples of extreme executive privilege or hypocrisy. If a company "imposes very strict expense control limits on an organization, but spends lavishly themselves," it creates a climate where people feel unfairness and hostility.

### **Dig Deeper: How to Delegate Properly**

## How to Become a Servant Leader: Improving Your Servant Leadership

So becoming a servant leader sounds pretty straightforward so far but, as with most things, it's far easier to talk the talk than to walk the walk. Here are suggestions for ways to reorganize your personal and professional habits to improve your servant leadership:

- *Get started early* – The best way to make servant leadership a part of how you run your business is to build it into the founding values of the company. "There's a lot of talk these days about corporate social responsibility. I think the way that companies fulfill their responsibility to society is through the core missions of their business, not peripheral activities that look good to others but may not be central to the business," says George. Building in profit sharing or other ways to let employees share in the company's success is also important.
- *Stay introspective* – When you're directing so much energy outwards into your company it can be hard to recognize your own strengths and weaknesses and their impact on the people around you. It is a strategic necessity and potentially a source of stress relief getting others to step in where you fall short. George has been meditating since the 70's although running and other forms of exercise can also work well as stress relievers that simultaneously provide reflection time.
- *Upead the pyramid* – When your org chart looks like a steep pyramid with you at the top, it can cause a number of problems within the organization. Keith feels that people in those organizations focus excessively on pleasing their bosses to the exclusion of doing as much as they can for the customer. Additionally, "when you have that kind of a pyramid it's hard for the person at the top to get information and it's hard for that person to test new ideas," Keith says. As a solution, he proposes a team at the top. The chief executive still retains final say on things but creates a flatter organization with more openness to dialogue and dissent.
- *Listen* – One of the most central tenets of servant leadership is listening to the people around you and listening well. "Particularly if you're successful," George cautions, "you start to believe your own press, but when you get down with people and you get honest, gut-level feedback from them, [you ask] 'Hey, how are things going?' 'Well they're not going so well, here's why.'" As CEO of Medtronic, George used to hold a program called Breakfast with Bill in which he would travel around the world to meet cross sections of the companies workforce, which was in the tens of thousands. Rather than meeting with management he sat down with employees from all levels of the organization.

- *Expand the family* - Servant leadership also influences how you treat your suppliers and business partners, not just your customers and employees. Keith says that Greenleaf believed that "leaders of organizations should care about everyone that the organization touches." So how can you try to develop mutually beneficial relationships rather than stoic exchanges of goods and services? George feels you should make vendors and partners feel like part of the family by selling them on the importance of the companies mission. TD Industries, a Texas-based mechanical construction company, invites their vendors to the servant leadership trainings that it hold for staff; and Kohler, Wisconsin-based Johnsonville Sausage sends their people out to work in restaurants and stores where their sausages are eaten and sold. It's all about understanding each other's philosophies and needs to improve the partnership and cooperation.

## **Dig Deeper: The New Rules of Leadership**

### **How to Become a Servant Leader: Dispelling Misconceptions**

So if servant leadership has all these benefits, why don't you hear about more people practicing it? For starters, Keith says, "it's more widely spread than we know, people just aren't using the word servant leadership, but they're doing what servant leaders do." He was able to think of a number of large corporations who have practiced servant leadership, including Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, and FedEx, but far fewer examples of start-ups practicing it.

In addition to business owners practicing servant leadership without giving it a name, there are certain misimpressions surrounding the practice of servant leadership that Keith hypothesizes might deter people from attempting it. "People hear about it and think 'oh, it's warm and fuzzy, but it doesn't work.' We've got plenty of evidence that it works from individuals and companies that are using it."

## **Dig Deeper: 10 President's Day Leadership Lessons**