

## leadership instalments

### Revisiting Servant Leadership

By Dan Gaynor

#### WE DON'T HEAR ABOUT SERVANT LEADERSHIP

**QUITE** as much these days as we did a few short years ago. It seems this leadership concept, like so many others, has crested and is now being replaced by new trends. But good leadership is not trendy, it is timeless. The "leader as servant" image remains a vital leadership perspective. In this installment I hope to redefine and reinvigorate it.

I believe servant leadership is often misunderstood. For many it invokes the image of a kindly and encouraging leader who works with everyone and never fires anyone. People don't put servant leadership, conflict and firing people in the same sentence very often. To be sure, good leaders are kind and encouraging, but good leadership doesn't end there; true servant leadership and constructive conflict are inseparable.

To examine this more fully, let's start with an important question: Who or what does a servant leader serve? Good leadership is unselfish and this holds a clue to our answer. All good leaders serve their teams and their missions - they put these ahead of selfish interests. Many poor leaders have this the other way around. Their teams and their missions exist to serve them. They don't admit it but leadership is all about personal gain. They want power, prestige or the benefits (from big homes to fast cars) that they believe leadership provides.

Our first question leads to a second one: When someone does something that is contrary to the interests of the team or its mission what does a servant leader do about it? Our answer becomes clear, the servant leader must intervene to protect the team and its mission. This often brings the leader face to face with constructive conflict. Servant leaders tell people when they are offside and make it clear that they must correct destructive or unproductive behaviors.

There are three facets of organizational life that leaders must be: protect with strength, they are justice, values and accountability. Let me illustrate with a common values issue - laziness. Laziness is a value, just as diligence is. Lazy people are unproductive. They don't contribute what the team and mission need. Laziness also discourages diligent team members if the leader doesn't do



something about it. And lazy people don't feel much job satisfaction or security.

Laziness is not productive and this raises the issue of accountability. The other members of the team can't afford "free rides" because the success of the mission depends on performance. So when someone on the team is exhibiting laziness the servant leader must confront the issue and ensure there is accountability - one way or the other. The individual must correct the problem or leave the team. Sometimes people need to lose a job to learn a lesson. The best leaders resolve these situations skillfully and sensitively. They are sensitive and strong as they make it clear that people who are exhibiting values issues - and the list is long, from laziness to treating colleagues badly - must change or leave. They don't avoid confrontation, as so many weak leaders do. Avoidance only enables the destructive behavior. They serve their teams and missions by getting these problems resolved. So genuine servant leadership draws leaders into and not away from constructive conflict. If you are not in conflict from time to time you are most likely avoiding much of the most important work of leadership.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree that servant leadership is often misunderstood?
2. Is your tendency to avoid or engage in constructive conflict?
3. Is there an issue on your team today that you have been avoiding?

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