

The 7 Things That Great Leaders Do---It's Called Servant Leadership

Every leader wants to deliver breakthrough top and bottom-line results.

What many leaders don't realize is that if they improve their relationships with their peers, subordinates and superiors, their results will improve dramatically. Results and relationships are truly intertwined.

We call this highest leadership level Servant Leadership. You have a choice: be the all-too-common self-serving leader or choose to be a Servant Leader. Choose the latter—be respectful of people; coach your people; develop them; help them succeed. Lead with both your head and heart.

Servant Leadership is serving others while holding them accountable—a powerful combination. In other words, Servant Leaders seek to grow and develop people as an end goal of equal importance to results. This requires a healthy capacity to forgive, correct and move on.

Your role as Servant Leader is to be responsive to your team's needs—training, coaching and developing them to deliver on the mission and goals. Failure to do this is the reason many organizations get in trouble. Said another way, when you actually do this, your organization will thrive.

Do you do the following 7 things that Servant Leaders do?

1 – Listen first, talk last

Give others a great gift—the chance to be heard. You quite likely do the opposite--like many leaders, you tend to emphasize your speaking over listening. It should be the other way around. When you make a conscious choice to listen fully and openly, you provide people and teams the opportunity to have true collaboration, creativity and trust. Many leaders are too focused on what they're saying or what they are going to say next. Instead, tune into what the other person is saying. Tune everything else out.

In our 22 years of consulting experience, we have found time and time again that the most effective leaders are good listeners—they ask good questions, then listen and learn from people at all levels of their organization. The best ideas are often bottom up. These leaders provide their undivided attention to others. They realize the importance of others. Through their listening, they lift others up. They are true Servant Leaders.

2 – Be transparent, become self-aware

Although it's counter-intuitive, transparency and vulnerability really work. You likely make the mistake of being less than fully open and honest about both your strengths and weaknesses. You may demonstrate either no transparency at all, or limit it to “safe” situations such as when you are with people who already know you well. Let's face it, many leaders want to sound good and look good, especially to the “troops”. But here's the truth—your people already know you're not perfect! When there is no or limited transparency on your part, others wonder what else you're hiding, and start to question your key decisions and actions too. Support and alignment by people in the firm can be seriously compromised.

When you are transparent, others will respond favorably. It increases their admiration and respect. Transparency also enables self-awareness. Understanding yourself—your strengths and weaknesses—is essential to Servant Leadership. In many of our consulting engagements, we have helped the senior leaders receive valuable feedback through a simple yet powerful process where they periodically ask people for feedback on weaknesses they want to improve as well as strengths they want to use even more.

3 – Keep your promises

When you and coworkers keep your promises—you get clear, coordinated actions, strong relationships and visible results. However, you may, without fully realizing it, operate from the principle “results can mean no results plus a good excuse”. That way of operating undermines results and damages relationships. In all domains of life, the ability to keep our word, that is be accountable and hold others accountable, is a key driver of success.

In an engagement with a large distribution company, we helped the CEO and his team transform their skills in this area. Their meetings had always been lots of talking and little action, and often lasted well beyond the agreed end time. With our help, they realized a good meeting is about clear, coordinated actions, where people make promises on actions they will take, and then keep those promises. The CEO and senior team quickly began to hold themselves and others accountable. Idle talking and broken promises became a thing of the past. The company's earnings went from breakeven three years running to a 20% return on sales within one year. Not surprisingly, through people keeping their promises, relationships were strengthened also.

4 – Acknowledge others

Express authentic appreciation to others as often as you can. Both results and relationships will be greatly enhanced. Unfortunately, your organization may be like many others, where workers at all levels rarely if ever hear or receive “pats on the back” or a simple “job well done”. Since few employees experience this, they therefore become resentful and withholding at their jobs, making it difficult to get engagement and alignment.

Servant Leaders admit their own mistakes and look inward to blame and outward to give credit. Both results and relationships are significantly improved when employees, especially leaders, become consciously aware of the contributions and accomplishments of others, and give themselves permission to express appreciation. We have found that high performing organizations are filled with people who do this. We helped a mid-size insurance company adopt this behavior. Virtually everyone in the organization began to look for and express authentic appreciation to their co-workers. After a while, it became a habit. Those employees said that new habit was the single most important thing they ever did—both for the results they produced and the relationships they created with each other. Those employees became Servant Leaders. They literally and permanently changed their organization’s culture, which in turn generated breakthrough results.

5 – Use breakdowns to learn and grow

Use every problem or setback as an opportunity to learn, grow and forward the accomplishment of breakthrough results. Instead, like many others, you may view breakdowns, setbacks and problems as a cause for upset, blame, or resignation, and forward progress is slowed or stopped.

The best leaders realize that life itself causes problems. Good leaders and good people are not immune. A problem or breakdown, when handled well, is a principle means of accomplishing the extraordinary. We worked with one sales team that was committed to a 20% increase in sales, but fell way behind. They could have used those results to find fault with one another, their managers, their company, or even the economy. Instead, they demonstrated Servant Leadership skills by acknowledging the reality of their results, determining the cause was excessive administrative tasks, fixing that problem, and producing a 26% sales increase—a real breakthrough.

6 – View life and business as fun

Do you want people to be engaged at work? You go first—have fun, be upbeat, be engaged! If you don't enjoy what you are doing, it will be difficult if not impossible to truly connect with employees. You have an exponential impact on your people, and without becoming paranoid, must be aware of your impact on the people around you.

We have observed many examples of a leader's upbeat attitude contributing significantly to the engagement and productivity of their people. Several of our recent clients have suffered extreme difficulty from the economic recession. The CEOs of these clients have refused to allow their attitude to fail themselves and their workers. They have remained upbeat, rallied the troops, and almost certainly their firms will not only survive but truly thrive in the months and years to come.

7 – Remember it's not about you

The truth is it's really all about your people, not about you. When leaders think of themselves first, others second, they do a great disservice to themselves, their people and their organization.

Great leaders are Servant Leaders. They truly serve others and help them be the best they can be. They coach their subordinates, and give feedback to all co-workers. Servant Leaders are humble—they don't think less of themselves, they just think about themselves less. They emphasize the importance of others. They lift others up. They are responsive to their team's needs so that the mission, vision and goals are achieved. Extensive research as well as our own experience shows conclusively that the key to any leader's success is the ability to drive for achievement while demonstrating emotional intelligence with everyone around them. That combination delivers truly unprecedented, sustainable results.

If you fall short on any of the things that great Servant Leaders do, or have experienced problems in these areas and would like to know more or get some

help, give me a call or send me an email to set up a complimentary Strategy Session. The session can take place in person or over the phone. We'll explore the challenges you and other leaders face, the kind of results you'd instead like to see, and whether we can help you or not.

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