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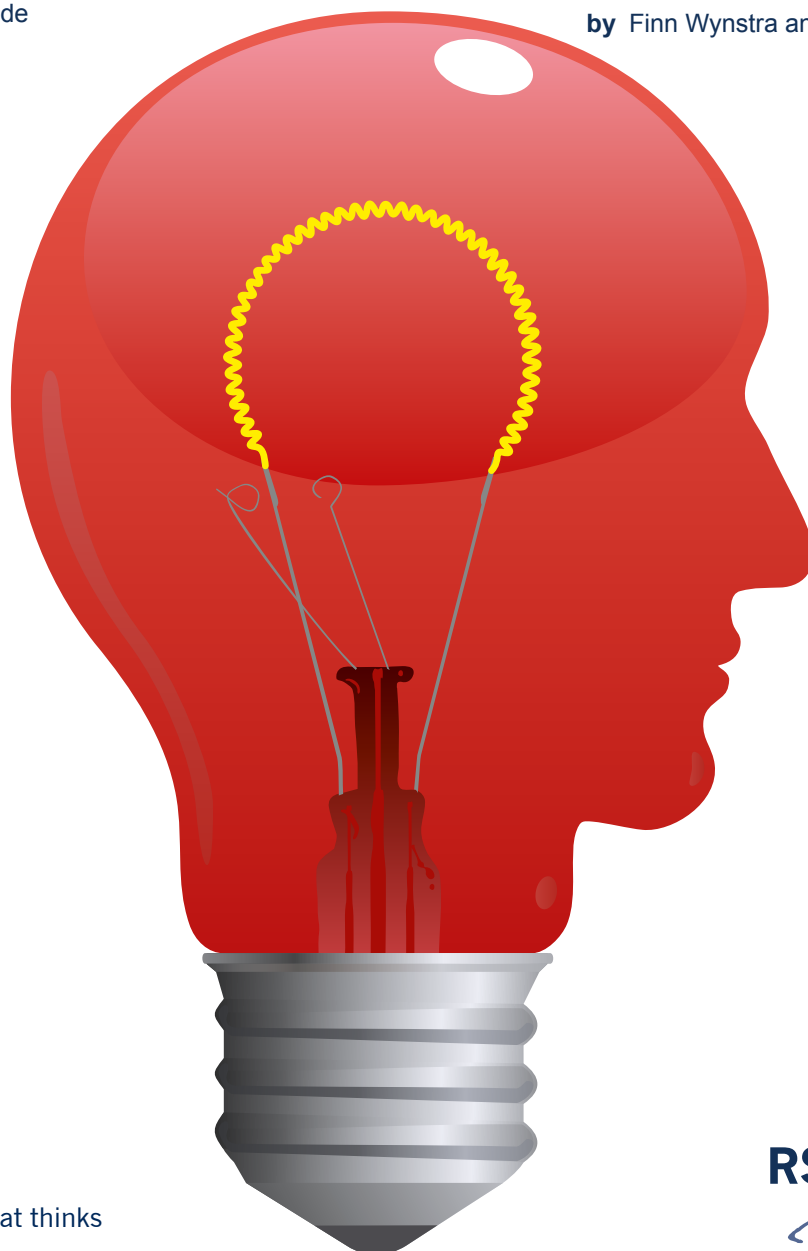
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The business school that thinks and lives in the future

Understanding servant leadership

by Dirk van Dierendonck

The 21st century has brought much in the way of turmoil and change to the world of business. As a consequence, ways of doing business that were once universally accepted now seem outdated and inflexible in an age where knowledge drives economies and socially responsible corporate attitudes influence stakeholders and shareholders alike.



With such changes have come new priorities and responsibilities and it is in this environment that the theory of servant leadership has flourished as a management style for the redefined business world of today, one that can serve as a cornerstone for organisations wishing to build corporate structures based on stewardship, empowerment and trust.

Former AT&T executive Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term *servant leadership* in 1970. After retiring in 1964 as director of management research, and inspired among other things by the supportive culture of AT&T, which to him exemplified his belief that an organisation could nurture the spirit of its employees whilst still making a profit, he set to work on his now seminal book *The Servant as Leader*.

Although it has taken four decades for his philosophies to have a real influence on mainstream management thinking, a number of companies riding high in the *Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For* have adopted his principles to great effect by building cultures in which employees come first and leaders exist to facilitate their growth collectively and individually.

Servant leadership is often misunderstood, possibly this is because people find it confusing to have the words servant and leadership together. To be

a leader of people, executives often mistakenly believe, one always has to be the driving force that subordinates follow. Indeed, research tells us that to be an effective leader individuals must have a certain motivation to lead. However, servant leadership requires a different approach and in addition to the motivation to lead, there must be the need to serve both employees and organisation.

The servant leader should feel a responsibility towards employees as individuals and must have a sense of stewardship for them and the organisation as a whole. Companies adopting servant leadership within their organisational culture give a lot of attention to developing environments and support structures that foster high levels of employee satisfaction. In addition, the servant leader works toward building a learning organisation where individuals are encouraged to grow and be of unique value.

There is yet to be consensus in defining or providing a framework for servant leadership, and this is something I have sought to address. Through my research six key characteristics have been identified that when combined, provide a strong indication of how a servant leader should function. In short, servant leadership is demonstrated through empowerment and the development of people; by expressing humility, ▶

Understanding servant leadership (continued)

by Dirk van Dierendonck

authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction. These characteristics are outlined below:

Empowering and developing people: giving people in the workplace responsibility for their own actions. Through empowerment, the servant leader acknowledges the talents and strengths of employees.

In addition, the servant leader must encourage employees in their actions and in their personal growth. Underlying empowerment is the acknowledgment that employees are not merely subordinates, but that each is an individual in their own right.

Humility: this is an attitude and acknowledgment by the servant leader that they are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, and that employees may have more knowledge and experience. For servant leaders in organisations dependent on knowledge workers, this is especially important as it is highly probable that employees do indeed know more about their specialisation than anyone else inside the company.

By acknowledging fallibility and the limits of one's own knowledge, the servant leader helps to facilitate a learning environment: one in which employees can learn and develop through their own experimentation and by learning from others. This potential for self-determination has a powerful

and positive influence on the workplace and further aids the long-term fostering of a learning culture.

Authenticity: is a significant factor as it enables the servant leader to show very clearly to employees that not only can they be themselves, but also that the work environment genuinely encourages and welcomes this.

understanding and appreciation of their unique perspectives and allows people to feel that they matter.

Providing direction: knowing what the servant leader expects of them is beneficial for employees and the organisation. To provide direction the servant leader must make work dynamic and have it tailored to the

“The servant leader must encourage employees in their actions and in their personal growth.”

To show authenticity the servant leader must act with integrity: they must do as they have promised; show consistency in actions and morality; and be true to themselves and the spirit of the leadership principles they preach. The benefit of authenticity is that ultimately it supports and reinforces the values of the servant leader.

Interpersonal acceptance: the ability to understand and experience the feelings and motivations of others is essential in a servant leadership culture. Empathy and forgiveness must go hand-in-hand. The latter is particularly important if a culture in which it is accepted that people can and do make mistakes is to be developed with authenticity. By accepting employees as individuals, the servant leader shows

abilities and needs of employees.

Stewardship: is the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution and to focus on service instead of control and self-interest. Leaders should act not only as caretakers but also as role models for others. By setting the right example, leaders can stimulate others to act in the common interest. Closely related to stewardship is social responsibility, loyalty and teamwork.

Implementing servant leadership

There are different methods by which organisations can implement servant leadership. The most effective way to begin is to conduct a general survey so that a snapshot of the organisation

is available. This is doubly useful as repeating similar surveys over time offers a means to receive feedback and measure progress.

Conducting a series of workshops is essential. Starting from the top teams down, these should focus on exploring servant leadership and how it relates to the organisation and the people that make up the workforce. To create a genuine and long-term servant leadership culture, offering workshops or programmes to new employees within the first few weeks of them joining is a very useful means of ensuring the philosophy becomes embedded and understood at all levels of the organisation.

The ability to perform effectively as a servant leader should be an integral part of the criteria used for internal promotion. Proving by example that the servant leadership philosophy is a factor in promotions says so much more to employees and to the rest of the world about the organisation's commitment to the approach than possibly any other signal.

On the face of it, this may seem a complex approach to take, and of course, employees who are successful in commercial terms should continue to receive traditional awards. However, for employees to rise beyond a certain point they should have the traits that will make them a good servant leader.

In this way, the philosophy becomes an integral part of an organisation's overall leadership culture. The participation of Human Resource (HR) departments is essential. Not only are they integral to the development of programmes that will foster servant leadership, but HR teams can also ensure that the right kinds of people are hired through all levels of the organisation from day one.

More than any style of leadership, servant leadership addresses the psychological needs of people within an organisation. Because it builds a sense of community within the workplace, its benefits can manifest themselves in many ways.

If employees have a sense of belonging to something that they perceive is of genuine importance to them, a powerful spirit of responsibility is engendered, which in turn creates a greater likelihood of individuals putting in more effort and being more conscientious in their attitude to the organisation, the work, colleagues, and clients.

Servant leadership will benefit organisations dependent on knowledge workers and in environments where high levels of creativity and innovation are the norm. Knowledge workers in particular require a sense of autonomy in order to function at their best and it is the responsibility of the servant leader to

create this workplace freedom for them.

The servant leadership model is not necessarily suited to every organisation or to every leader. There are different ways of implementing servant leadership and organisations need to find the methods and models best suited to their own unique set of conditions.

There is evidence to support the claim that the servant leadership approach is of particular benefit to team performance. Indeed, it is especially in team environments, and particularly where the primary responsibility of the organisation is taking care of clients, that servant leadership is at its most beneficial. The healthcare sector and the civil service are good examples. In both it is absolutely essential to have a culture in the workplace in which employees feel supported by their leaders if they in turn are expected to support their clients. ■

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This article is based on the research paper "Servant leadership: a review and synthesis", which was published in Journal of Management, July 2011, pages 1228-1261.

