The Choice is to Serve

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The role of leadership and how teams want to be led has dramatically shifted during the pandemic and spaces, such as the home life of the leader, were gradually revealed to employees at all levels of work environment. Video conferencing became the window to glimpse the interplay of the personal and professional identity of both the leaders and the followers. This was especially the case for educators as "education has shifted out of the school buildings and into living rooms and spare bedrooms across the world" (Etchells et al., 2021, p. 1). Moreover, there has been a significant organizational shift to greater attention being placed on employee wellness, values, and cultural inclusivity (Ortiz-Gomez, 2022). With a mass exodus to remote and non-traditionally office-based work, how leaders lead is at the top of the list of questions potential employees want to know at the point of interview. Leaders need to have a solid understanding of (a) their leadership style and, (b) the style that will best serve the community being guided. This is critical because if employees are going to invest their energy, knowledge, skills, and experience in an organization, they want to know that the organization will be led with empathy, community building, stewardship, and a commitment to the mental and physical health of employees.

When individuals are asked to offer their thoughts on a particular concept, they scan relevant life experiences to formulate meaningful responses. Leadership is no different, as many who preceded us have defined the concept of servant leadership through their own experiences. Thomas Merton (1999) always considered one's real self to be the servant or spiritual self. If the reader holds this as true, then can leadership ever be separated from service to others? Robert Greenleaf, founder of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, always attempted to convince leaders that true leadership comes from serving others; to lead is to serve...to serve is to sacrifice (Greenleaf, 1996) and this ability to lead is directly connected to the desire to serve others (Hunter, 2004). This is a time-tested principle and is often given the title of *servant leadership* (Spears, 2002).

The success of any organization can be directly attributed to this way of leading, regardless of whether it is a family, business, sports team, or school (Ramsay, 2004). The more the leader serves, the greater the depth of loyalty from those who follow (Salka, 2004). Each organization mentioned is composed of a fragile ecosystem of egos and psyches, and as individuals evolve within the organization, the egos will inevitably expand (Lynch, 2020). Often as achievements increase both in quantity and quality, members of the organization tend to grow distant and apart. This is particularly the case when the leader does not cheer and applaud the accomplishments of the successful members. In fact, often the leader takes credit for the success of others and often blames others if things go wrong (Covey, 2008). The servant leader, or level five leaders, always enjoys the triumphs of others and more often than not derides himself or herself for any of the organization's shortcomings (Collins, 2001). Great organizations have great leaders who lead first by serving others and then through this service, develop loyal followers to the mission (Collins, 2001).

The ability to establish this clearly defined goal, communicate the obtainable goal with clarity, and craft loyal followers willing to commit to attaining such goal is the mark of a servant leader. This is particularly true if success is sustained over a long period of time (NIST, 2005). If a leader first thinks of others, a servant leader, not only will individuals benefit but also the entire organization (Lynch, 2016). This service to others can be described using several different constructs and in so doing will show that this is a "real" style rather than some public facade the leader picks up and puts down as suits their needs. These examples show that this type of leader subscribes to a set of principles that truly have withstood the test of time (Covey, 1991).

This essay began with an assumption that to lead is to serve. It is apparent that when an organization has a culture embedded with the principles of servant leadership led by a servant leader and creating other level five leaders, the organization at all levels will flourish and all stakeholders will receive the direct benefit (Collins, 2001). This unique blend of leaders serving each other and those with whom they interact will serve as an effective model for all organizational structures.

Using principles of serving others permits the principles of freedom, power, fun, survival, belonging, and love to be fulfilled by each member of the organization, both for themselves and for the joy and happiness of others, personally and within the workplace (Glasser, 1993). It has been shown that if these principles or needs are continuously nurtured by each member of the organization, the leader and organization reach high levels of effectiveness (Schultze, 2019). The way a group practices these concepts makes them a model for collective efficacy, while supporting accomplishments and creativity (Singh, 2014). Using these principles heightens quality-of-service delivery and places leadership in the foreground as a choice — and not exclusively as a job position (Covey, 2004). Finally, the authenticity of a leader to be genuinely willing to serve is critical because trust in leaders has diminished at an increasing rate in recent years (Ortiz-Gomez, 2022). For leaders, investing in service to others is integral for the health and sustainability of an organization.

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