

Servant Leadership

by Kenneth Blanchard, Positive Living Magazine

When I first began to teach managers back in the late 1960's, I met Bob Greenleaf, who was just retiring as a top AT&T executive. Bob talked about servant leadership, the concept that effective leaders and managers need to serve their people, not be served by them. It was entirely new thinking then, and in many ways Bob is considered the father of that term.

Today, it is much easier for people to see the importance and relevance of servant leadership. There seems to be general agreement that leaders have two basic roles in business: one of vision and the other of implementation.

In the visionary role, leaders are the definer of direction. They must communicate the mission, values, and beliefs the organization aspires to for its people. They need to communicate what the organization stands for and how organizational values encompass the individual values of its members.

I once asked Max Dupree, who wrote a fabulous book entitled **Leadership Is An Art**, what he felt was the most important role of a leader. He compared the role to that of a third-grade teacher who keeps repeating the basics. "When it comes to vision and values, you have to say it over and over and over again until people get it right."

Once people are clear on where they are going, an effective leader's role switches to the task of implementation. How do you make the dream happen? This is where servant leadership comes into play. The traditional way of managing people is to direct, control, and supervise their activities and to play the role of judge, critic, and evaluator of their efforts. In a traditional organization, managers are thought of as responsible, and their people are taught to be responsible to their boss.

We're finding that kind of leadership isn't as effective as it once was. Today when people see you as a judge and critic, they spend most of their time trying to please you rather than to accomplish the organization's goals and move in the direction of the desired vision. "Boss watching" becomes a popular sport, and people get promoted on their upward influencing skills. That role doesn't do much for accomplishing a clear vision. All people try to do is protect themselves rather than to help move the organization in its desired direction.

The servant leader feels that once the direction is clear, his or her role is to help people achieve their goals. The servant leader seeks to help people win through teaching and coaching individuals so that they can do their best. You need to listen to your people, praise them, support them, and redirect them when they deviate from their goals.

The servant leader is constantly trying to find out what his or her people need to be successful. Rather than wanting them to please him or her, they are interested in making a difference in the lives of their people and, in the process, impacting the organization. The role of the servant leader is to do anything that is necessary to help his or her people win and accomplish their goals. If, for any reason, a leader's efforts don't make a difference, for example, if the person is in a position that doesn't match his or her skills, they, in a kind, humane way, try to redirect the person's efforts where the talents may be better used.

What do managers need to become servant leaders? The biggest thing they need is to get their ego out of the way. Managers who somehow have themselves as the center of the universe and think everything must rotate around them are really covering up “not ok” feelings about themselves. When you don’t feel good about yourself, you have two choices. You can either hide and hope nobody notices you, or you can overcompensate and go out and try to control your environment. Such people who need to control their environment are acting as if inside they are scared little kids.

Servant leadership is easy for people with high self esteem. Such people have no problem giving credit to others. They have no problem listening to other people for ideas. They have no problem in building other people up. They don’t think that building other people up is going to be threatening in any way. People with high self esteem can buy into the old Eastern philosophy of an effective leader: that when the job is done, the people say they have done it themselves.

To me, servant leadership is a good way to describe the coaching role that managers are expected to play today to help their people win. Judging and evaluating people erodes their self esteem. Servant leadership builds self-esteem and encourages individual growth while obtaining the organization’s objectives.

Servant leadership is something that people need. We need to support and help individuals in the organization to win. The days of the manager being judge, jury, and critic rather than cheerleader, facilitator, and listener are over. The concept of servant leadership is a wonderful way of symbolizing what the manager of today, and of the future, must have to be successful.