

## **"Servant Leadership and A Servant versus a Servant Leader"**

from *Leading Your Ministry* by Alan E Nelson.

### **Servant Leadership**

A result of being broken in the right place, in the soul, yields a leader with the heart of a servant. Just as leadership is a relationship versus something a leader does, servant leadership is a type of relationship process. It is a relationship whereby a group of people choose to serve each other in unique roles. Servant leadership is about a group of people mutually submitting to each other for the purpose of achieving something they could not achieve alone.

The way one tells a servant leader from a nonservant leader may be different than many people perceive. A servant leader can still be strong, dynamic, animated, and outgoing. During times of intense crisis, a servant leader may be very boisterous and even dramatic. The leader, may be seen with a whip in hand, clearing the temple, or challenging naysayers with their own sins and hypocrisy. We must get beyond the idea that a servant leader is a wimp, someone who really cannot lead dynamically, and therefore backs down to contrary pressures. A nonservant leader may be less outgoing, more docile, and even more sedate. Try to avoid stereotypes and personality idiosyncrasies in understanding servant leading.

What makes a leader a servant leader is not temperament, strength, or energy. What makes a leader a servant leader is first and foremost the type of motivation in the leader. When the motivation of the leader is to unleash the potential of the followers and primarily benefit the needs of the organization, that person is a servant leader. A person who is not a servant leader will tend toward more mixed motives in leading, striving to lead out of pride, manipulation, and force.

Servant leaders understand that means to ends are just as important as ends. A person can feign servanthood by claiming that the goals of the organization are for the benefit of all involved, and that whatever it takes to reach those goals is justified. Each of us know pastors who would claim to be serving the people and would consider themselves servant leaders, but who go about reaching church goals via manipulation, using people, and who privately exemplify a very prideful attitude.

### **A Servant Versus a Servant Leader**

You can be a servant and not a leader. You can be a leader and not a servant. But to be a servant leader, you must first become a servant. A servant leader is one who both serves by leading and leads in such a way as to exemplify a servant's attitude. Two people can do the exact same job, and one be a servant and the other not a servant. A leader ceases to be a servant leader when she ceases to lead with the right attitude. A servant ceases to be a servant leader when he ceases to lead. A leader is one who brings about change via an influence relationship. In the literal sense, a person ceases to be a servant leader when he is not seeking to bring about change.

The typical corporate model in the context of leadership is a pyramid, where managers and leaders occupy the upper domains and the middle managers and laborers inhabit the lower regions of the pyramid. In this model, THE leader is at the top of the mountain where there is greater pay, more benefits, power, esteem, and all the other perks and resources (automobiles, exquisite offices, exclusive dining rooms, and so on) of being top dog.

Quite often, we describe servant leadership by inverting the pyramid, suggesting that in this view the leader is at the bottom, serving the needs of the people. The servant leader has the fewest rights in that the task is to help others find their potential and fulfillment as a part of the organization. I believe this description is very plausible, and I continue to use this as a teaching tool. However, it has limitations and may not be the best reflection of real servant leadership. The reason is that in organizations and churches where servanthood is embraced, the servant leader still receives more perks and benefits than those who are now "higher up."

Although inverted from an industrial, corporate model, the inverted pyramid still lends itself to hierarchical thinking.

Perhaps it would be better to think of servant leadership with a model which did not imply higher and lower strata.



*Figure 5a. Servant Leader Equality*

If we place leaders (see figure 5a) on a single line with others in the leadership relationship, the implication is that there are none higher or lower, but that all are peers in an influence relationship. The amount of one's influence is represented by one's length on the line. The wider the length, the more the influence. People who are not in the leadership relationship are not even on the line. This is perhaps a better view of what the New Testament means when discussing spiritual gifts and the Body of Christ. No part of the body is better than another, just because some are given more prominence. Thus, none are higher or lower, just different. This does not suggest that all are equal in impact. The heart plays a more vital role than the hand. In leadership, the leader fills the key role because without this person or persons the quality of the relationship would be severely reduced. At the same time, the leader is considered a peer, just another part doing her unique job. Because leaders are a minority, they are usually the hardest to replace as well. A linear peer relationship conveys servanthood because it equalizes everyone when the tendency is to elevate leaders, even servant leaders.

Motives are difficult to measure. Perhaps only God can effectively judge such subconscious workings of the mind. However, servant leadership involves a much kinder, gentler approach to leading. It can be equally forceful and dynamic, but does not reduce the self-esteem of followers. Some managers debunk leadership because they have seen so many people get chewed up in the process. They equate strong leading with autocratic, dictatorial, love'em and leave'em tactics. This is an indication of ineffective leading and a lack of servant leading. Effective leading rarely leaves bodies strewn along its path due to blowing people over who will not bend to the new goals and vision. Effective leading communicates, motivates, inspires, and wins people's wills. Servant leadership is a win-win proposition. Other types of leading take a win-lose approach, especially if a win-win is not possible or is too expensive. The reason why leadership has at times left bad impressions is almost always due to a lack of servanthood integrated into the process by the leader.

Churches that split over charismatic gifts (such as speaking in tongues), contemporary music, or any number of other reasons are almost always victims of ineffective servant leadership. Godly men and women can ruin churches when they go about transformation through manipulating and forceful approaches. Whether good or bad, those of us who seek to exemplify Jesus' style of leading must necessarily avoid certain approaches of leading. Nonservant leaders may be very successful, but their strategies have no place in God's Kingdom. Those who cannot accomplish what they desire through servant leading would do best to improve on their leadership skills or move out of the picture and let someone else rise to the call.

The old sports slogan suggests, "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." This cliché lacks balance because it suggests that winning is not important. However, we cannot overlook the fact that in the philosophy of Jesus, how you play the game is a part of whether you win or not. Those who lead as nonservants can very well grow the church, build the building, and apparently expand God's kingdom, but they may fail to be successful in Jesus' eyes. Leaders with integrity must be constantly asking the questions, "How am I leading?" "Am I being effective?" "Am I portraying a servant's attitude in the process?"