


Service

Leadership

Reimagined





In the case of servant-leadership, a leader's motivation derives from a core, egalitarian belief that they are no better than those whom they lead.

Carol Smith

When the notion of Servant Leadership was conceived in the 1970's, it brought a welcome “people” focus to leadership styles, which, while much needed, was also criticised for lacking coherence and clarity. Subsequent scrutiny also raised concerns about it being gender blind to the inequity of social systems. But despite these direct challenges, the ideas survived and are experiencing a reimagining in the current VUCA landscape.

As organisations move to more values-based, relational culture models, people-focused leadership is not just increasingly relevant, but essential. And though it might not provide a complete antidote to all our modern leadership challenges, servant (more often referred to now as “service”) leadership is certainly deserving of new attention.

What is Servant leadership?

The pioneer of Servant Leadership, Robert Greenleaf, based his theory on the idea that in order to improve society and provide greater opportunity, organisations and institutions had to learn how to better service the people within them. According to Greenleaf, “the servant leader’s primary objective is to serve and meet the needs of others, which optimally should be the prime motivation for leadership.”

This leadership style relies on “giving” rather than “glory” and its goal is to develop individuals first. The expected flow-on effect is increased levels of trust, sense of belonging, and commitment and loyalty, and performance among team members.

Following Greenleaf’s work, a [leading American business school](#) developed seven key principles of Servant Leadership that are a useful guide:

1 Honor Others (Before Yourself)

This is about your approachability factor. Do you speak with equal respect to everyone?

2 Inspire Vision (Before Setting the Course)

Have a shared goal and keep your compass set to it. Provide the stability and confidence teams need to feel purposeful.

3 Choose Ethics (Before Profit)

Integrity is not a moment-to-moment option, it’s a lifelong commitment.

4 Empower Others (Before Personal Gain)

Support, recognise, and celebrate your team members development and their wins.

5 Privilege People (Before Tasks)

Understand that your energy should be spent on individual, and team needs, not personal gain.

6 Balance Focus with Flexibility (Before Making Decisions)

A key skill for current leaders is the ability to remain flexible, while keeping a forward focus.

7 Serve With Humility (Before All Else)

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” Rick Warren.

Reimagining the Service

Leader

Though principles such as these have been helpful in developing a service leadership model, what has also become apparent over time is that the practice of its key ideas can be challenging to sustain. Service leaders are prone to burnout and have to find a way to balance organisational purpose and individual development. It also takes time to build the trust that embeds service leadership in organisations.

So how can we reimagine this important leadership style in a way that removes any interference to its success?

Burnout

Fortunately, current business thinking has a greater appreciation of the self-awareness and self-care required to enable us to sustain a service attitude to others. Leaders are beginning to understand that they need to look-to and look-after themselves first, in order to serve others.

3 Steps to Reimagine Service Leadership

Serving Others Better by Starting with Self



Self-Reflection

Examine your values



Self-Awareness

Know your impact



Self-care

Build your resilience

Source: Center for Creative Leadership



Burnout can also be mitigated by perceived organisational support i.e., the extent to which an organisation is perceived to value the well-being and contribution of their team members. When support, recognition and understanding of the service leader's contribution to the health and climate of the greater eco-system is embedded in an organisation's culture, they will thrive.



Building Trust

Relationships are key to the Service Leader's effectiveness; however, trust and a sense of belonging take time to foster, especially with natural attrition and the complexity of hybrid and poly working trends. It has never been more challenging or important to build both strong and weak ties at work. The only way to do this at speed is to prioritise the human connection and team cohesion. This might mean getting more intentional about promoting cross functional interactions and finding a balance between in-person and remote work.

Individual and Organisational Alignment

As a Service Leader, our focus is on individual personal development. This has to be balanced against organisational purpose and goals. Finding an alignment between the two and being able to balance serving a company vision and the needs of individuals can be complex. Ways to build this alignment include creating absolute clarity around your business strategy, then communicating with your teams about how their contributions fit into this picture. What are your common goals?

One Size Does Not Fit All

Lastly, there are situations where Service Leadership may not be entirely practical. The Defence Forces, for example, cannot operate in their current mode with purely service leaders, especially where decision making needs to be quick and decisive, based on information not available to everyone.



Service Leadership is a Two-Way Street

A recent qualitative study shows that another key consideration in Service Leadership is that it is a co-constructed undertaking. While team members might accept and even embrace their manager in a service role, they will not always *concurrently* view them as their leader.

This response is tied up in a complexity that stretches into intersectionality. Team members are often influenced in their thinking about leadership by race, power dynamics, gender, and numerous other considerations. In other words, “followers [team members] are not homogenous blank slates who statically sit within organisational hierarchies. They are dynamic, socially constructed subjectivities that may accede or resist leadership.”

Because of these factors, practicing service leadership may encounter hidden obstacles, especially if the co-constructors [team members] are negatively influenced by their subjective beliefs e.g., These beliefs could vary from “if they are serving me, they aren’t strong and authoritative”; to “their racial or gender status is outside my leadership norm, so I can’t respect them.”

At its heart, SL makes power-neutral assumptions about leadership that can be derailed in the workplace. But with strong movements towards more diversity and inclusion, the timing is better than ever for service leaders to drive engagement.

The Future of Service

Leadership

Equipped with the benefit of these perspectives, the adoption of a Service Leadership model embeds a positive, mentoring, human-centred mindset, which focuses on unlocking human potential. This can be a powerful influence within organisations and is highly relevant for values and purpose driven workforces of today.

If the Service Leader remains self-aware and communicates with clear context, they will be able to manage the nuances of its daily practice and build stronger, more resilient workplace cultures.

Intrinsic Service Leader Attributes

Vision	Modelling (for others)
Honesty	Pioneering
Integrity	Appreciation
Trust	Empowerment
Service	

Accompanying Service Leader Attributes

Communication	Stewardship
Persuasion	Teaching
Credibility	Service
Listening	Visibility
Competence	Delegation
Encouragement	Influence

Source: Robert Greenleaf



©Copyright Performance Frontiers

STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] info@performancefrontiers.com

performancefrontiers.com



Please read on screen to save paper,
but if you must print, please print
only the pages you need.