

Release Control and Empower Your Teams: The Servant Leadership Model

By Steve Chriscoe

People think of the chief executive officer (CEO) as someone who sets high-level goals and tells their subordinates to accomplish them. In fact, effective CEOs will tell you they spend most of their time helping their team solve problems. CEOs' expertise, authority and relationships give them the ability to break down obstacles and make things happen.

Command-and-control leaders see their primary roles as setting clear goals and directing their team to accomplish them. They think of themselves as the boss, the person who calls the shots. They make many statements and ask few questions. Command-and-control leadership can work well in an emergency, when quick action is essential. Command-and-control leadership is associated with the following concepts:

- Respect for authority
- Hierarchy
- Decisionmaker
- Delegation
- Direction
- Execution
- Control
- Orders
- Deadlines
- Accountability

In contrast, servant leaders see their primary roles as creating a vision and helping their team achieve it. They make few statements and ask many questions. Servant leadership works well in normal conditions, when there is time for a more thoughtful process and team growth is important. Servant leadership is associated with the following concepts:

- Teamwork and collaboration
- Problem-solving
- Empowerment
- Responsibility
- Culture and values
- Ownership
- Empathy
- Listening
- Persuasion
- Initiative
- Creativity

To be an effective servant leader, adopt the following practices:

- Think of yourself as the coach, not the general.
- Lead with your vision, allowing input from your team.
- Give your team members flexibility in how they achieve your vision.
- Make decisions that guide and facilitate your team's work.
- Make yourself available to your team.
- Ask lots of questions. Listen carefully and do not interrupt. Both you and your team should learn from the discussion.
- Let your team figure out solutions and give them ownership.
- Look for obstacles that you can help your team overcome without doing their jobs for them.
- Focus on your team's success, not your status. Do not be afraid to get your hands dirty.
- Lead by example and coach your team to be servant leaders.

Servant leadership is especially useful in clinical research organizations because of the following properties:

- Clinical studies vary widely and are often unpredictable.
- Team members can have specialized technical expertise.
- Physicians/investigators do not see themselves as order-takers.
- Clinical research coordinators work independently in extremely variable work patterns.
- Matrixed organizational structures emphasize influence rather than direction.

A Personal Experience

A few years ago, I stopped by the office of my leader, a C-suite executive, to discuss an issue I was facing. In our discussion, he asked useful questions and gave me useful suggestions. As we concluded our conversation, I thanked him for always taking the time to speak to me. What he said that day has stuck with me ever since: his primary job was to be present and available for his team.

This encounter led me to rethink my work day. In the past, my top priority was completing important personal tasks, even if it meant I was incommunicado for large blocks of time. Now, my top priority is being available almost always to serve my team members. Both types of priorities are important, so it's just a matter of flexibility.

Conclusion

Robert Greenleaf is widely credited for first using the phrase "servant leader" in his 1970 book, *The Servant as a Leader*. He may have said it best: "The servant leader is servant first. It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve ... as opposed to wanting power, influence, fame or wealth." Serve your team well and you will be well-served yourself.

Author

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