

# The Key Practices of Servant-Leaders

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Servant leadership has been supported by many leadership experts such as Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, Max De Pree, Peter Senge, and Margaret Wheatley. They are drawn to servant leadership for a number of reasons, but all of them are supportive because servant leadership *works*.

Servant leadership works because of the specific practices of servant-leaders, practices that help them to be effective leaders and get positive results for their organizations. Seven of these key practices are self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight. Here is a summary of each of these practices:

## *Self-Awareness*

Each of us is the instrument through which we lead. If we want to be effective servant-leaders, we need to be aware of who we are and how we impact others. Other people are watching and reacting to our personalities, our strengths and weaknesses, our biases, our skills and experiences, and the way we talk and move and act. What we learn about ourselves depends on feedback from others and our own reflection—taking the time to think about how we behave, and why, and when, and consider whether there are other, better, more appropriate, more effective, more thoughtful ways to behave.

## *Listening*

In his classic essay, *The Servant as Leader*, Robert Greenleaf said that “only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*.” Servant-leaders listen in as many ways as possible. They observe what people are doing. They conduct informal interviews, formal interviews, surveys, discussion groups, and focus groups. They use suggestions boxes. They do marketing studies and needs assessments. They are always asking, listening, watching, and thinking about what they learn. By listening, servant-leaders are able to identify the needs of their colleagues and customers. That puts them in a good position to *meet* those needs. When they do, their organizations are successful—their colleagues are able to perform at a high level, and they have happy customers, clients, patients, members, students, or citizens.

## *Changing the Pyramid*

One of the obstacles to listening is the traditional organizational hierarchy—the pyramid. Often, members of the organization look up toward the top of the pyramid, and focus on pleasing their “bosses.” But if everyone is looking up to please his or her boss, who is looking out, and paying attention to the needs of the customers? That’s why servant-leaders talk about inverting the pyramid, or laying it on its side, so that everyone in the organization is focused on the people whom the organization is designed to serve.

Robert Greenleaf pointed out that the person at the top of the pyramid has no colleagues, only subordinates. As a result, it is hard to get information, and it is hard to test new ideas. The chief may be the only person who doesn’t know certain things, because nobody will tell him. Or people may share information that is biased, or incomplete, and they may not share the bad news, for fear that the chief will shoot the messenger. It is also hard for the chief to test ideas. People are reluctant to tell the chief that his or her idea is a bad one. The solution is obvious—servant-leaders create a team at the top. The team consists of senior leaders who are committed to the mission and to each other, who will share information, and who will challenge ideas. The chief is still the chief and makes final decisions, but those decisions will be far better informed and more relevant to the needs of those being served.

## *Developing Your Colleagues*

Robert Greenleaf proposed a new business ethic, which was that “*the work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work*.” Put another way, the business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customer.” Work should provide people with opportunities to learn and grow and fulfill their potential. When your colleagues grow, the capacity of your organization grows. Developing colleagues includes a commitment to extensive on-the-job training, as well as formal education, new assignments, and internal promotions.

## *Coaching, not Controlling*

Coaching and mentoring is a good way to develop people. Organizations need rules and regulations, but trying to control people doesn’t bring out their best. Servant-leaders bring out the best in their colleagues by engaging, inspiring, coaching, and mentoring. Servant-leaders help their colleagues understand the organization’s mission and their role in fulfilling it. Servant-leaders make sure their colleagues understand the organization’s goals, and have the training and tools they need to achieve those goals.

## *Unleashing the Energy and Intelligence of Others*

After developing and coaching their colleagues, servant-leaders unleash the energy and potential of their colleagues. People need experience making their own decisions, because occasions may arise when they need to be the leaders, or make a decision that they normally don't make. *Not* unleashing the energy and intelligence of others is extraordinarily sad and wasteful. It doesn't make any sense to have lots of people in an organization, but let only a few people—those at the top—use their full potential. Servant-leaders unleash everyone and encourage them to make the maximum contribution they can make to the organization and the people it serves.

## *Foresight*

Robert Greenleaf said that foresight is the central ethic of leadership. In *The Servant as Leader*, he said that “prescience, or foresight, is a better than average guess about *what* is going to happen *when* in the future.” Greenleaf said that foresight is the “lead” that the leader has. If you aren't out in front, you really aren't leading—you are just reacting. And if you are just reacting, you may run out of options, and get boxed in, and start making bad decisions—including unethical ones. Greenleaf said that the failure of a leader to foresee events may be viewed as an *ethical* failure, because a failure of foresight can put an organization in a bad situation that might have been avoided.

While there are other practices that help servant-leaders to be effective and successful, these seven are fundamental. They are about paying attention to people, developing people, and looking ahead so that the servant-leader and his colleagues will be able to continue serving others, far into the future.

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Further information about the seven key practices can be found in *The Case for Servant Leadership* by Kent M. Keith, available from the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership ([www.greenleaf.org](http://www.greenleaf.org)).