

# White Paper

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Solution Focus Areas:

**Engagement / Morale**  
**Productivity**  
**Leadership / Supervision**

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# Servant Leadership: History & Evolution

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# Servant Leadership: History & Evolution



“As many, small trickles of water feed the mightiest of rivers, the growing number of individuals and organizations practicing servant leadership has increased into a torrent, one that carries with it a deep current of meaning and passion.”

(Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership)

## A Shift in Paradigm

Over the past four decades, a “quiet revolution has been taking place in workplaces around the world” (Spears, 2004). Known as “servant leadership,” this revolution has come about as a result of organizations competing to retain qualified, committed employees.

## Background and Evolution of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, though not a new term, was first formalized as a method of leadership by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. A leading expert in management research, development and education, and consultant to large organizations such as AT&T and the Ford Foundation, Greenleaf spent much of his professional career advocating for the benefits of leadership through serving others. As organizations began to see the advantages of leaving the autocratic leadership style behind, Greenleaf’s work began to catch on. So much so that the Robert K. Greenleaf Center, previously called the Center for Applied Ethics (1964), was renamed in 1985 and today serves organizations throughout the world.

In addition to Greenleaf, several other prominent authors have expanded on the subject of servant leadership. For example, Ken Blanchard addresses this topic in his book *“The Secret, What Great Leaders Need to Know and Do”* and provides insight into how servant leadership can be achieved through techniques, such as visioning, engagement, relationship building, and stressing the importance of values. Peter Senge, a leading organizational strategist, who emphasizes the importance of creating a learning organization in order to compete in today’s market, states that “leadership is a social process, something that happens between people.” Though servant leadership is not mentioned here, the implication is clear that leaders must have a personal understanding of those they lead in order to be effective. In other words, Senge suggests that leaders can set into motion a positive organizational change by investing in building relationships, such as those formed through servant leadership.

As still others grasp the concept of servant leadership, organizations are now evolving to where humanistic approaches are favored over authoritative methods of leadership. Additional evidence can be found not only in the organizations themselves, but in higher education. While some theorists claim that the concept of servant leadership was taught in ancient China and Biblical times to willing students, leading universities such as Harvard Business School, have adapted servant leadership training into their curriculums to equip leaders with the necessary skills to lead in this way.

### Servant Leadership Defined

According to Greenleaf, “Servant-Leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions” (Spears, 2004). Servant-leaders may or may not hold formal leadership positions. Servant-leadership encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment. In addition, Greenleaf suggests such traits as, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship and building community as important to servant leadership.

As suggested by Bill Bridges, “*change* is external (the different policy, practice, or structure that the leader is trying to bring about), while *transition* is internal (a psychological reorientation that people have to go through before the change can work).” Leaders who internalize the servant leadership lifestyle through the practice of specific behavioral traits, become a product of their efforts. There is a personal transformation of self that extends beyond the organization. It is a lifestyle or alteration in one’s worldview.

### Pro’s and Con’s

Data suggests that employees, who feel valued, motivated and are seen as an asset to their organizational community, are more apt to be retained than employees who exist in organizational environments where supervisors use power for leverage. For example, research has shown that:

- 89% of managers believe employees leave for more money, while 88% of employees actually leave for reasons having to do with the job, the culture, the manager or the work environment. (“The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave”)
- 43% of workers report that they do not feel valued by their employers. (CareerBuilder.com)
- 71% of workers in the United States rate themselves as either “Not Engaged” or “Actively Disengaged.” (The Gallup Organization)
- 70% of the reasons employees leave their jobs are related to factors that are controllable by the direct supervisor. (“The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave”)

- 66% of workers do not identify with or feel motivated to drive their employer's business goals and objectives. (Taylor Nelson Sofres – TNS)
- Only 12% of employees leave for compensation issues. (“The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave”)
- The #1 reason employees leave jobs is a poor relationship with their immediate supervisor. (The Gallup Organization)

Employee turnover has obvious detrimental effects on the success of an organization. Not only are there the direct costs of Human Resource related items, such as recruitment, selection and training of new employees, there are also indirect costs, such as diminished customer service efforts, project interruptions, and the potential loss of future leadership.

As stated in a recent Organizational Dynamics publication:

“Understanding the value inherent in attracting and keeping excellent employees is the first step toward investing systematically to build the human and social capital in an organization. The second step is to identify retention practices that align with the organization's strategy and culture...” (Holton, Mitchell, Lee, 2006)

In other words, putting this information in context, the essence of servant leadership is that building relationships/cultures where employees feel cared for and personal growth flourishes, leads to organizational communities where employee commitment is high.

It would be misleading to assume that servant leadership comes without challenges, however, or that there is one specific formula for implementation. Considering systems theory, as it relates to an organization, many factors come into play that necessitates leaders to be flexible. While they may possess the servant leadership traits, how they adapt to and consistently interact with those they lead is key. This adaptation is possible, if the factors are seen through the lens of experiential learning and reflection take place to evaluate whether servant leadership is actually taking place.

Another consideration is that changing the existing worldview of leadership of ourselves, much less others, is not an easy task. This transition results in internal struggles with change, complexity, confusion, and conflict (Baker, 2001). There is, in essence, a very personal commitment that results in a change in lifestyle, outside of the organization that can not be accomplished through quick-fix methodology. There is solace in that organizations that have chosen to adopt the strategy of servant leadership have successfully overcome the challenges.

## A Look at Successful Organizations

Considered one of the first companies to formerly practice servant leadership, for TD Industries, a plumbing and heating firm which has been consistently ranked in *Fortunes* magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, the shift to servant leadership lies with founder Jack Lowe. Mr. Lowe happened upon an essay termed, "The Servant as Leader" and asked employees to read the essay and debate the impact of servant leadership on the organization. Thirty years later, the essay still circulates the organization and guides TD Industries in their business philosophy (Spears, 2004).

Another company worth mentioning is the retail chain, The Men's Wearhouse. The President and CIO, Jeffrey Marshall, states that in order to effectively lead the 12,000 employees under his care and align the business for success, he must practice servant leadership. To offer a visual, he sees the organization as an upside pyramid. Management is charged with supporting and protecting all employees, and in turn employees are retained and organizational success is achieved (Thibodeau, 2005).

These are but two of the many success stories, and there are also many more well-known organizations worth mentioning that use servant leadership as their organizational philosophy: Southwest Airlines, Starbucks Coffee, Service Master, and the Toro Company. The point to be made here is that these companies attribute their success, in large part, to the practice of servant leadership. Despite the multiple locations, diversity, and market differences, these companies have all be successful in retaining employees and have all experienced financial success as well.

## Summary

To continue this journey in promoting Servant Leadership, Rising Sun Consultants is dedicated to learning how this concept can be achieved through effective leadership and supervision. From a research standpoint, while there is little to be found in the way of empirical data for the challenges leaders may face as servant leaders, there are direct correlations that can be found in the way servant leaders achieve success through the development of specific characteristics. In future White Papers, we will provide a practical guide for the development of the following characteristics/skills through 10 specific keys or tools ("The 10 keys to Effective Supervision<sup>TM</sup>"): Support Growth, Unite with Your Team, Praise Others, Expect Excellence, Require Accountability, Verify Potential, Instill Independence, Share Continuously, Optimize Ownership, and Reinforce Relationships).

Please remember that throughout this process, it is crucial that the concepts are practiced and reinforced to assist in your transition to becoming a servant leader and to achieve organizational success.

## Resources

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