

Rate Yourself as a Servant Leader

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Assess your leadership service quality, and see how to improve it.

Robert Greenleaf coined the term “servant leadership” in a 1970 essay in which he advanced the following insight: “Servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”

“Servant leaders reverse the organizational hierarchy.”

Servant leaders reverse the organizational hierarchy by facilitating the efforts of others in the organization, rather than asking others to facilitate their own efforts. They help people put together the resources they need to reach their desired outcomes. Then they aggregate those efforts into a greater outcome for the group. Much as a coach positions players to be successful, so too does a servant leader.

You Manage Things; You Lead People

It's important to remind you of a key distinction between management and leadership. At the core, management is getting work done through others. Managers plan, organize, and control. Leadership is about influencing others to achieve group goals. You manage things such as a facility, customer service process, order fulfillment center, fundraising walk, or capital campaign, but you lead the people associated with these items. Never forget: It's things, not people, that you manage. It's people whom you lead.

What Drives You as a Leader?

A crucial question to ask yourself is, “What's my leadership style?” That is, what basic philosophy drives you in the fulfillment of your leadership role? Before you started your season of leadership, your work was all about you. You worked to be successful and to be recognized for your efforts. This high performance and personal recognition opened doors for you and your professional development.

Once you accept the leadership challenge, however, you must shift your philosophy. To quote the first line of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*, “It's not about you.” It's about those you lead — their needs, their success, and their recognition. When your team is successful, it reflects positively on you, but the opposite is true as well. You are responsible for putting them in positions (with resources) to increase their likelihood of success. You're responsible for them and to them.

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Two Types of Leaders

Let's compare two ways you might lead: as a self-serving leader (it's about you) or as a servant leader (it's about others). If you were a self-serving leader, you would focus on your power, your recognition, and your success. You would fear feedback that might reflect poorly on you. You would see the professional development of your staff as a means to an end.

As a servant leader, on the other hand, you approach the leadership task with a focus on others. You lead people by serving them. It's all about the success and recognition bestowed on those you lead. You welcome feedback as an opportunity to improve your efforts. You see your staff's professional development as a desired outcome in-and-of-itself, not simply as a means to an end. Table 1 draws on the writings of Ken Blanchard, a leading voice in the servant leadership movement, to highlight these differences.

Seven Pillars of Servant Leaders

James Sipe and Don Frick, in *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*, suggest seven traits that successful servant leaders possess. Ask yourself how you rate on these seven brutally honest questions:

- 1. Am I a person of character?** Do I make insightful, ethical, and principle-centered decisions?
- 2. Do I put people first?** Do I help others meet their highest-priority development needs?
- 3. Am I a skilled communicator?** Do I listen earnestly and speak effectively?
- 4. Am I a compassionate collaborator?** Do I strengthen relationships, support diversity, and create a sense of belonging among my team?
- 5. Do I have foresight?** Do I imagine the possibilities, anticipate the future, and proceed with clarity of purpose?
- 6. Am I a systems thinker?** Do I think and act strategically, lead change effectively, and balance the whole with the sum of its parts?
- 7. Do I lead with moral authority?** Do I show myself worthy of respect by inspiring trust and confidence, and establishing quality standards of performance?

How Can You Improve?

If you want to improve the quality of your leadership, how should you proceed? Let's look at the SERVQUAL model of service quality, also known by the useful acronym RATER because of its five essential components:

RELIABILITY refers to people's perception that you're trustworthy and that your services meet their needs. In a leadership context, your team members want to know that you have their best interests in mind. They want to see a consistent pattern of your putting their needs first. They want to know that you stand behind your commitments.

Trust is a solid foundation on which to build relationships. The absence of trust is said to be the number one reason that teams don't work well. Anticipating your team's needs and acting in advance to address those needs show your reliability, trustworthiness, and commitment to your team.

Tips for Leading Your Team:

- Do what you say you're going to do.
- Let people know you "have their backs."
- Accept their problems as your problems.
- Be willing to be vulnerable.

ASSURANCE refers to people's belief that you possess the knowledge needed to perform effectively. Your team members want to know that you have the moral authority to make decisions as well as the skills to contribute when necessary.

Tips for Leading Your Team:

- Keep your skills current and relevant.
- Jump in and help.
- Don't ask others to do things you wouldn't be willing to do yourself.
- Be the one to take on the tasks that no one else wants to do.

TANGIBLES are the visible assets associated with your service and your leadership. To your team, tangibles are your leadership style and philosophy in action. If you say you serve others, what have you done in the last day, week, or month to serve them? If you say lifelong learning is essential, do you provide lots of educational opportunities? If you say you're concerned about people, how do you show it on a daily basis?

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“Do you show yourself worthy of respect?”

TABLE 1: SELF-SERVING OR SERVANT LEADER: WHICH ARE YOU?

Self-Serving Leader	Servant Leader
It's all about you.	It's all about others.
You're driven to lead for personal reasons.	You feel called to lead, called to serve.
You think you own everything – your possessions, your relationships, and your roles.	You believe you're a steward of the people and resources entrusted to you. You think the possessions, relationships, and roles are on loan to you.
You spend time protecting the things you own (or that you perceive you own). You're threatened by feedback as it might reflect poorly on your leadership efforts.	You spend your time giving yourself away to support the efforts of others. You welcome feedback as an opportunity to improve your leadership efforts.
You believe your employees are for your benefit. They exist to serve you.	You believe leaders exist to serve others.
You make sure that money, recognition, and power move up the organizational hierarchy toward you.	You assure that money, recognition, and power move down the organizational hierarchy toward your people. You're responsible for your team members' development.

When team members stay late to complete a task, for example, they look for leadership support. Ordering in pizzas to refuel workers' tanks is a tangible demonstration of servant leadership, as it shows you're thinking of people's health, welfare, and well being.

Tips for Leading Your Team:

- Bring people together, and help them start conversations about topics of interest to them.
- Develop people to reach their potential — not as a means to an end but to serve each individual.
- Hold celebrations whenever your team reaches a milestone or has a success.
- Let people see you sweating the details.

EMPATHY means providing caring attention. Team members want to know that you understand and appreciate them. It's important not only to feel empathy for others but to make your compassionate feelings clear and visible to them.

Tips for Leading Your Team:

- Recognize and acknowledge each person's efforts.
- Ask people how you can fulfill their wants and needs — and then follow through on their suggestions.
- Take every opportunity to help team members see how important their work is and why it matters.
- Let your heart shine through.

RESPONSIVENESS points to people's impression that you provide services promptly. In a leadership context, it means supporting your team members and responding to their requests — and doing so promptly.

Tips for Leading Your Team:

- Act as a coach, mentor, and facilitator.
- Address problems before they become known to your team.
- Reassure people when necessary.
- Respond to issues as quickly as possible.

Marching Orders

Will you accept the servant leadership challenge? Will you serve yourself, or will you serve others? Will you place yourself at the top of the pyramid with all others beneath you, or will you flip the pyramid and lead by serving all those entrusted to you? The next step is up to you. 

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RECOMMENDED READINGS

Books

Blanchard, Ken, *Leading at a Higher Level*, FT Press (ft.com)

Blanchard, Ken & Phil Hodges, *The Servant Leader: Transforming Your Heart, Head, Hands, and Habits*, Thomas Nelson (thomasonson.com)

Sims, Bennett, *Servanthood*, Wipf & Stock Publishers (wipfandstock.com)

Sipe, James W. and Don Frick, *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press (paulistpress.com)

Articles from *Nonprofit World* (available at NonprofitWorld.org/members):

Do You Have the Skills of a Servant Leader? (Vol. 28, No. 6)

The Key to Building Productive Teams (Vol. 21, No. 4)

Be a Better Leader by Becoming a Better Listener (Vol. 28, No. 2)

How to Build a Framework for Strategic Alliances: A Framework of Trust (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Leaders as Midwives Who Birth a New World (Vol. 28, No. 5)

