

Servant leadership

Shore up 'the other bottom line'

Question:

I read your article in the Feb. 4 issue of *Small Business Times*, and it got me thinking about what makes a workplace a more employee-centered "place to be." I feel that much of what you talked about rang true for me. But as I look back on jobs I have liked or not liked, one of the most important factors for me is what the company's image is in the community. Are they seen as supportive of the community? Are they linked to programs and/or projects that are improving the quality of life for residents in the community? Are they giving back?

I also know from years of non-profit experience, that work environments that support employees (whether it is allowing them to volunteer on boards or committees or just letting them sell Girl Scout cookies in the lunchroom) with their efforts to be a part of making the community a better place to work and live, are viewed in a more positive light.

As a member of a nonprofit who has benefited by these "grass-

roots" employee-driven programs and projects, and as a professional who has the pleasure of working with employee volunteer representatives, I think this type of team building and development tool is often overlooked, yet it is an important part of employee satisfaction. These programs/projects often teach them leadership and project management skills they may not have received in the workplace.

What do you think?

Answer:

The concept of "servant leadership" is at the heart of what you are describing. Most researchers acknowledge Robert Greenleaf as the person who originated this approach. He wrote a book on the topic about 30 years ago. Underlying this leadership philosophy is the belief that the most effective leader is the one who serves the people. Implicit in this approach is the belief that leaders define success by the impact their actions have on others. Helping people become all that they can be becomes an overriding objective rather than solely focusing on the bottom line.

In order to accomplish this end, servant leaders:

- Serve the needs of organization members.
- Meet the needs of those they lead.
- Develop employees to the fullest.
- Coach others.
- Facilitate personal growth in all who work with them.

- Listen and build a sense of community.

As you can see, this is a fairly radical departure from the typical concept of what leaders are supposed to do (i.e., lead). Servant leaders seek first to serve by addressing the needs of their followers. Because of this, some researchers have called servant leaders, virtuous leaders — individuals who focus on leading others with a focus on moral character, doing the right thing, etc. Recent years have seen a resurgence in the focus on values, principles, doing well by others, etc., and this helps explain why we are hearing more about servant leadership these days.

Generally speaking, researchers who have examined servant leadership suggest that the following attributes are the foundation for this approach:

- **Humility** - Servant leaders are humble and open to the criticism of others.
- **Altruism** - Servant leaders strive to better the common good.
- **Vision** - Servant leaders challenge their followers to serve the needs of the constituents and to stay focused on achieving the desired end.
- **Trust** - Servant leaders create open environments and encourage others to get involved and share.
- **Empowerment** - Servant leaders give their power to their people. They turn them loose to pursue their goals with maximum autonomy.
- **Service** - Service is at the heart of servant leadership. Servant leaders focus their energies to the fullest on meeting the needs of others.

It is worth noting that servant leadership is applicable to any organizational setting. It is interesting to me, though, that you mention your background in the nonprofit sector. In many instances, nonprofit organi-

zations have practiced servant leadership without thinking about it. That's simply the way the organization has operated. In this regard, nonprofit organizations have outpaced many for-profit organizations whose focus has been solely on the bottom line.

What is to be gained by examining servant leadership or studying those organizations that employ it? Why should organizations pursue servant leadership? I think you make a strong case for it in your question when you highlight the impact that service-oriented leaders and employees have on the community. Frankly, the building of community, whether it be at work or away from work is central to the concept of servant leadership.

And, by turning attention to community, we turn attention to what I like to call the "other bottom line" — corporate culture. There are many definitions of corporate culture, ranging from the simple (e.g., "The way we do things around here") to the complex (e.g., "The shared and relatively enduring pattern of basic values, beliefs and assumptions in an organization"). Suffice to say that when we are talking about corporate culture, we are talking about how the business does business — the words it uses, the messages it sends, the behavior it expects, etc.

A corporate culture that is guided and affected by servant leadership is going to be much different than one that is guided and affected by the use of a single criterion for success (i.e., maximum monetary profit). You illustrate this beautifully in your question.

One servant leader with whom I am familiar has gone so far as to draw an organizational chart in which the employees are at the center. As the president of the company,

he believes his principal purpose is to make sure his people have what they need to meet their goals. If this means that he must fill in on the frontline so that one of his employees can make it to his or her child's concert, baseball game, etc., his response is, "No problem. That's what I'm here for." His people are loyal and extremely committed to him and the company. He and his people have, in essence, built a sense of community within the company.

Want to build a sense of community? Then, start practicing servant leadership.



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