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Isn't *Servant* Leadership an Oxymoron?

You lead a steadily growing organization. You may be the founder, or possibly the leader who has replaced the founder. Historically, the people within such an organization have followed the leader, an energized, visionary entrepreneur. Typical for entrepreneurs, they know more than any other individual about all aspects of their business (or nonprofit), and direct most of the people and activities. Are they Leaders or Servants?

A servant by definition has the role of serving, and a leader's role is to lead. Someone who serves does what they are asked to do by another, and a leader tells others what to do. For decades, business texts would say the responsibilities of management are to *Plan, Organize, Staff, Direct, and Control*. Nothing about servanthood there. Make the plans, then direct others to accomplish that plan, controlling everyone's performance and behaviors. Isn't that what leaders do? (Lead, follow, or get out of the way!) So isn't the concept of "servant leadership" an oxymoron?

What we'll explore here is that servant leadership – or servant *anything* – has little to do with WHAT you do, and everything to do with WHO you are.

A Little History

For most people today, *servant leadership* is not a new idea. Yet it was a radical idea just a couple generations ago. There were those in positions of authority, and everyone else who were not to question authority. When I started my career, there was really no distinction between the concept of management and leadership. They were synonymous and interchangeable terms for those in charge of an organization.

Back in the late 1960's, Robert Greenleaf coined the phrase *Servant Leadership*, as he began promoting a different approach to leading, other than the predominant command and control style. Actually, the concept of servant leadership goes back to Biblical times. This is how leaders were to act in the early New Testament Church:

"Be shepherds...not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples" (1 Peter 5:2-3)

"whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 25:26)

In the increasingly competitive market of the 70's and 80's, there was a movement underway that businesses wanted to capture their employees' heads and hearts, not just their hands. The experienced, front-line people had much to offer their organizations. In these larger, growing businesses, employees often knew both the customers and internal processes better than top management. Out of necessity, many were finally seeing value in getting employees more involved in improvements and the decision-making process.

Though management and leadership had been interchangeable terms, “management gurus” began to distinguish between the role of management and leadership. Tactical operations and shorter-term improvement became designated as the role of managers, while leadership was to be the visionary, strategic role. Managers were responsible for operational efficiency, while leaders were responsible for long term effectiveness. Most of you have likely seen the many lists comparing the role of manager versus that of a leader.

The values of “servant” leadership espoused earlier by Greenleaf and others began to take hold. Concepts like Human Resource Management, Organization Development, Teambuilding, and Total Quality Management came into vogue. Management and business authors latched onto this notion of the leader as servant. The leader’s role was to serve the organization, and the people within it (while the organization existed to serve their customers). The concept of “command & control” *directive* management began falling into less favor. (Unfortunately this is a bad rap. In reality, there will always be situations where a directive style is the most appropriate) So is it only leaders that should now have this servant mindset?

Servant (*fill in blank*) – It’s About WHO You ARE, Not WHAT You DO

So aren’t there servant *managers*? Organizational leaders were to have a servant mindset, but not managers? What about first level supervisors? How about teachers, or parents? This list could go on. A “servant” perspective or value system is about who you are and how you approach what you do. For some reason, authors have honed in on servant “leadership” as if serving is now the unique role of organizational leaders. Yes, there needed to be a resetting of the bar from the traditional command and control leaders. But a servant’s perspective is from the heart, not the head. It is with that worldview that you approach everything in life, no matter what the role or responsibilities.

Top level leaders do have different responsibilities than lower level managers. Teachers have different responsibilities than administrators, and parents have a specific role, as do various nonprofit volunteers. But every role can be approached with a servant’s heart – putting something bigger, and others above yourself. We can be either self-centered or other-centered.

In younger, growing organizations, its necessary for the entrepreneur to plan, organize, direct and control – a part of what all leaders do. But there is a major shift at some point, for either that leader, or the next one. The leader can no longer be looked upon for all the answers. They will no longer know all the customers, technology, legal requirements, accounting requirements, and production processes better than anyone. There is a point (I’ve called it *Adolescence* in other articles), where the leadership role *must* shift to serving the needs of the organization. To work “on” not just “in” the business. I’ve called this a “rebirth” where the focus and allegiance moves away from the Person, and toward the Purpose of the organization. New leaders are then able to come and go over the years, but the organization survives, as leaders remain servants to the Mission.

I remember jotting down a quote once, something to the effect of, “*You will never become a servant leader – unless you have been a servant to a leader.*” There is always something bigger than yourself. Whether you’ve served past leaders, a board of directors, your family, a “higher power”, or an organization’s mission. Unless you know what it is like to serve some other leadership in your life, you will have difficulty becoming a servant leader.

Servant Leadership = “Leadership”

The full term “servant leadership” is rarely used today. As the decades marched on, management authors simply began defining the role and traits of leaders as synonymous with what was once described as servant leadership. Leadership literature now *incorporates* the values of servant leadership.

First: Leadership = Management
Then: Leadership distinct from Management
Now: Leadership = Servant Leadership

Here is just an example of how management authors have integrated the values of *servant* leadership over recent decades, into the “new” definition of *leadership*:

- The 1990’s “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become as servant and a debtor.” (DePree, *Leadership Is An Art*, 1989)
- The 2000’s “Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.” (They build) “enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.” (Collins, *Good To Great*, 2001)
- The 2010’s “You must detach yourself from the existing business, your current role, and your ego...You must elevate yourself above the business, look down on it, and make decisions for the long-term greater good of the company.” (Wickman, *Traction*, 2011)
- The 2020’s “To liberate is to empower those you lead. To liberate means to fight for the highest possible good of those you lead.” (Kubicek/Cockram, *The 100X Leader*, 2019)

Servant leadership is now synonymous with leadership. Leaders are expected to serve the organization. It is not either/or – either servant or leader. I’ve always remembered a description I read many years ago that I believe clearly defines the one role of being both servant and leader. The organizational leader is to:

Serve the organization’s Mission	And <i>Lead</i> the Vision
Then <i>Lead</i> the Equipping of those on Mission with you	While <i>Serving</i> your Team as they work toward that Vision

No, servant leadership is not an oxymoron. It is simply the description of how healthy organizational leadership was always intended.

Michael Wilkes & Company specializes in management consulting and leadership team development for closely-held businesses, churches, and nonprofit organizations challenged by the necessary leadership transitions due to growth or strategic change. For further information: www.michaelwilkesco.com