

BUILDING A SERVANT LEADERSHIP CULTURE

EMBRACING THE SPIRIT OF A SERVANT IN BUILDING GREAT ORGANISATIONS

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THE term *servant leader* seems to be an oxymoron. How can one be a leader and a servant at the same time? Is it possible? The answer is a resounding yes! Exemplary leaders like Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela have all demonstrated to us that impactful leadership, which makes a lasting difference, lies in servanthood.

Gandhi once stated that, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Although the principle of servant leadership has been a timeless practice, the modern understanding of this term was first pioneered by Robert K. Greenleaf back in the 1970s.

Greenleaf teaches that a servant leader leads by serving others. They place the interests and needs of others ahead of their own interests and needs. In short, servant

leaders place others before self. They are servants first and leaders second. In fact, they make such great leaders because they simply know how to serve.

Let's bring a little more clarity to the practice of servant leadership. When one is a servant leader, we are not saying that he or she has to make coffee for their team members, wash the office toilets, or come early into a meeting to ensure that all the chairs are being arranged properly.

What matters is how leaders serve, and not about leaders being servants. Servant leaders are those who embrace the spirit of a servant in their leadership expression.

A CASE STUDY: TONY HSIEH AND ZAPPOS

Tony Hsieh, chief executive officer of Zappos—one of the world's largest online shoe and clothing company—is known for his servant leadership.

As a company that records over US\$1bil (RM4bil) in sales revenue, Hsieh sits at a desk that is of the same size and model as the ones given to new employees at the company's call centre.

He sits with other executives in the same row, within an open space where he is easily accessible to all employees.

Hsieh is known for his humility and authenticity as a leader. His modelling of servant leadership is simple: *We're all here for the same reason and no one in this operation is more important than anyone else.*

This is demonstrated in the construct and design of the Zappos office. The moment you enter the Zappos office, you hear upbeat music pumping and you would observe employees engaged in recreational activities.

The interior design and environment in the 11-storey office building is cool and appealing. There are refreshment stations on every floor, and if employees are hungry, the cafeteria offers free and other affordable food. Hammocks can be found everywhere for employees to take a nap if they are tired.

All this is intentionally done because Hsieh is a big believer in building the right organisational culture.

As a servant leader, he is always thinking about what is best for his people, and he places much emphasis in building an environment where his employees are being served well.

One of Zappos's core values is to build a positive team and family spirit. Here is how they express this value:

"At Zappos, we place a lot of emphasis on our culture because we are both a team and a family. We want to create an environment that is friendly, warm, and exciting. We encourage diversity in ideas, opinions, and points of view.

The best leaders are those who lead by example and are both team followers as well as team leaders. We believe that,



Nelson Mandela is a good example of a servant leader.

in general, the best ideas and decisions are made from the bottom up; they're influenced by those on the front lines who are closest to the issues and/or the customers. The role of a manager is to remove obstacles and enable his/her direct reports to succeed. This means the best leaders are servant-leaders; they serve those they lead."

The last sentence above encapsulates Zappos's view on what makes a great leader.

How does this translate to organisational success?

At Zappos, the heart of a servant leader is effectively transferred to the way he serves his customers. For example, if a customer calls Zappos because he couldn't find the product he was looking for on Zappos's website, the customer representative will then search the company's inventory database. If the product is truly unavailable, Zappos will convey it to the customer.

In a traditional sales approach, this is the moment where most sales representatives would take advantage of the situation to cross-sell a different product to the customer in order to close the sale.

However, in Zappos, the standard operating procedure is for the sales representative to search online on their competitors' website, and once the product is found, they will refer the customer to their competitor's website.

Zappos' servant-leadership approach is simple: *We exist to serve our customer and therefore, we will do whatever it takes to please them, including losing a sale.*

You may say this does not make sense, from a business point of view. But, let results and statistics speak for themselves. With a sales turnover of over US\$1bil (RM4bil) and a 10mil customer database, 75% of Zappos' business comes from repeat customers. This is any organisation's dream.

Zappos' customers are no ordinary customers. They are diehard raving fans!

When there is authenticity in the way that we put others first before self, the expression of this type of leadership can truly be amazing.

Take a look at this scenario: There was a woman who bought a pair of boots for her husband at Zappos. Sadly, her husband never received the gift as he was killed in a car accident on his way home from work.

When the woman called Zappos to inquire about the return policy and told the Zappos representative what had happened, the Zappos representative ordered flowers to be sent to her in order to offer their condolences.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The practice of servant leadership is all about putting others before self. This is in total contradiction to many of the tragic leadership practices we see today where the focus is on the leaders' personal self-serving agenda.

Famous businessman and writer, Max De Pree, says that, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."

Great leaders possess the heart of a servant. Serving others leads to leadership greatness.

So, my question to you is, what kind of a leader do you want to be? What kind of an organisation are you building?

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SERVANT leaders are individuals who have a strong desire to serve first, before being chosen to lead others.

Robert K. Greenleaf, the man known for coining the concept of "servant leadership," had spent years working for telecommunications company, AT&T, and who later grew weary of the traditional authoritarian leadership style endemic to many organisations of his day, left to set up his own firm to promote servant leadership.

In his book *The Servant Leader*, Ken Blanchard—the much-revered management expert—threw light upon the attributes that make up servant leadership.

In brief, servant leaders practise the following maxims: be compassionate, see the bigger picture, and nurture others. By examining how these maxims are exemplified in some famous leaders, we can get a better grasp of the concept of servant leadership.

PRACTISING COMPASSION

Tenzin Gyatso, more popularly known as the Dalai Lama, is the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetans. Fleeing his homeland in 1959 in the wake of violent conflict between the Chinese government and the Tibetans, he arrived in India where he set up the Central Tibetan Administration in exile.

Since then, he has been working tirelessly towards achieving a self-governing democratic Tibet, while spreading his message of peace and compassion to the world.

Servant leaders are highly attuned to their followers' needs and concerns. As a servant leader, the Dalai Lama is a compassionate listener, often taking the time and energy to hear his people out. He has developed a genuine desire to understand other people's problems and to work out realistic solutions.

He has made it his mission to serve humanity by always choosing the path of peace, happiness and enlightenment, in accordance with his religious principles.

Rather than coerce others to follow, he cultivates the art of negotiation. He believes in trying to convince others that following a

THE HUMBLE ROAD TO LEADERSHIP

FAMOUS SERVANT LEADERS AND HOW TO LEAD LIKE THEM

certain course of action will be beneficial to the collective interest. He builds consensus among followers and allows others to speak their minds openly, rather than have them subordinate themselves to authoritarianism.

For instance, he strongly opposes violent solutions to Tibet's independence even though they may be expedient. Instead, his goal was to bring about independence in a way that minimises the suffering of his people, while allowing them to preserve their culture and heritage.

LOOKING FAR AND WIDE

Some of the most harrowing instances of servant leadership can be found among those who have toiled to end apartheid, and later, to bring about reconciliation between whites and blacks in South Africa. The notable ones are Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

Having lived most of his life under apartheid, Mandela suffered intense racism, violence, and ethnocentric antagonism, which eventually culminated in his 27-year-long imprisonment for conspiracy to overthrow the government.

After his release in 1990, Mandela campaigned for peace and reconciliation with the whites, even as investigations conducted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) revealed gross human rights abuses committed by the previous government, including killings, rapes, and torture.

The TRC was headed by Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town. Tutu was a firm opponent of apartheid, having organised large-scale peaceful protests against it. Inspired by his religious principles, Tutu strongly advocated a non-violent resolution which emphasised mutual forgiveness.

Opting for a more forward-looking path, the policies of Mandela and Tutu ended the

cycle of violence between the races, which might have worsened if militant groups had advocated harsher retribution against the oppressors. The peaceful resolution was vital for the economic and social development of the nation in the long run.

Both of these servant leaders have the ability to look ahead and take a wider view of the situation. While many focus on short-term results, servant leaders look far ahead and see how the actions we take today can lead to a better future tomorrow.

Many people lose sight of the bigger picture when they are bogged down by petty or mundane concerns; this is where the servant leaders' breadth of vision becomes essential.

Servant leaders can remind their followers about how the modest trials and tribulations we face lead towards a grander purpose. For the South Africans, it was about putting aside racial, political and tribal differences, to achieve economic and social development.

NURTURING OTHERS

When asked to imagine a plain, humble and modest servant leader, many people might think of Mahatma Gandhi, dressed in his white dhoti and shawl. Best remembered as the Father of India who fought for independence using non-violent methods, Gandhi was a key figure in India's struggle for independence and freedom from oppression.

As a servant leader, his sense of compassion and empathy is coupled with the desire to heal. Servant leaders like Gandhi acknowledge the insecurities and doubts faced by followers. They try their best to help followers overcome these drawbacks to become whole.

In this respect, Gandhi was a man who led by example. He popularised the method of fasting, both as a means of spiritual purifica-

tion and of protesting for justice. By employing this method, he led peaceful protests against the British colonisers.

In addition to individual growth, servant leaders also foster a more society-centred growth. It was in this department that Gandhi devoted much of his effort. He led his followers to look beyond their narrow self-interests or sectarian agendas, and strive together towards nationhood.

He persuaded many to follow him in his path of spirituality, religious pluralism, and equality. Even on the last days before his assassination, he lived out his teachings by visiting Hindu and Muslim villages across the Pakistani-Indian border to bring about reconciliation.

APPLYING THE SERVANT LEADERSHIP WAY

Servant leadership need not be limited to several well-known individuals. Servant leaders are those who ensure that the followers they serve grow as individuals: becoming wiser, stronger, more capable and independent.

Anyone who has a genuine desire to bring about compassion, growth and nurturance to others should pursue the path of servant leadership.

It does not matter if it is a caring employer who takes interest in the welfare of employees, or a nurturing teacher who educates the next generation; a great leader is born when one passes the test of being a great servant first.

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Tibetan spiritual leader Tenzin Gyatso, or more popularly known as the Dalai Lama, greets a devotee during a celebration to mark the 100 years of Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute in Dharamsala, India, Wednesday, March 23, 2016. The institute, called Men-Tsee-Khang in Tibetan, was founded in 1916 by the 13th Dalai Lama in Lhasa. After his exile, the 14th Dalai Lama re-established the institute in 1961 in India. (AP Photo / Tsering Topgyal)