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Becoming a Servant Leader

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I. Stop Putting Out Fires. Prevent Them from Starting.

How do you spend your time at work? Do you find yourself constantly caught between any number of urgent and important tasks, rushing from meeting to meeting and resolving immediate conflicts? If so, you probably have little time to pause for reflection, planning, or relationship-building.

The day-to-day duties of many professionals can best be described as “putting out fires,” and all that time spent firefighting can drain and exhaust us. It leaves precious little time for what’s really important: setting the right goals, ensuring the entire team or organization is aligned in working toward those goals, and fostering the ongoing professional growth in ourselves and others needed to achieve those goals.

Need proof? Only about half of managers believe their organization’s strategic goals are reflected in how they spend their time.¹ Some managers spend as little as 4 percent of their time coaching team members to help them reach personal and organizational goals.²

No wonder it often feels like there aren’t enough hours in the day. Just maintaining the status quo can be a struggle. How can we shift our efforts away from putting out fires to preventing them from starting in the first place?

We can start by examining our approach to leadership. Servant leadership addresses the root causes of the time-and-energy-draining challenges of an organization that’s paralyzed by putting out fires. How? By recognizing that relationships within an organization are just as important as the results an organization is trying to achieve. This simple shift in mindset can bring all members of an organization—from the frontline employee to the CEO—into alignment around the same strategic goals, and empower each and every individual to execute on those goals in their unique roles. At the same time, the emphasis on relationships elevates critical factors of organizational culture like employee engagement, retention, and diversity and inclusion, resulting in not just a more effective organization, but also a much more functional and fulfilling place to work.

1. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/making-time-management-the-organizations-priority>

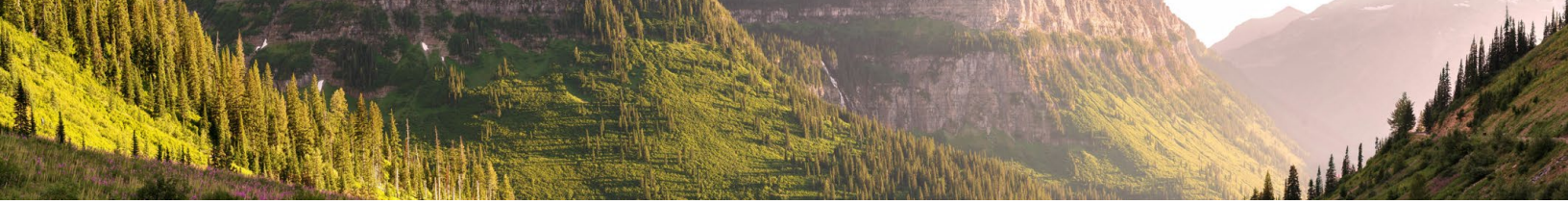
2. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/unlocking-the-potential-of-frontline-managers>

A servant leadership approach achieves this by turning traditional top-down leadership on its head. Leaders are tasked with setting a visionary direction, establishing values to guide the path, and setting goals to serve as mile markers. Then, they get out of the way. Their roles shift to supporting the execution of the vision, serving team members who are executing the vision, and allowing them to be accountable for their own success.

In *Becoming a Servant Leader*, we'll explore how servant leadership can address the

root causes of some of organizations' worst dysfunctions: employee disengagement and burnout, lack of collaboration, siloed departments, and toxic workplace cultures. Whatever your role in your organization—whether you are looking to implement an organization-wide training intervention or culture shift, looking for a better way to manage a team, or simply looking to improve your relationships with your colleagues—this guide will serve as your roadmap to implementing the tenets of servant leadership in your organization.





II. What Does It Mean to Be a Servant Leader?

Who is the best boss you've ever worked for?
What set them apart?

Your answer probably has to do with two things: clear goals or direction, and your personal relationship.

Both are key to servant leadership, but that's just the beginning. According to the Dale Carnegie Institute, the top three behaviors or qualities employees value most in a boss are³:



Encouragement and support that helps drive the employees' growth and development



Giving praise and valuable feedback



Valuing the opinions of others

All three behaviors are essential to a servant leader. Servant leaders make a personal investment in the people and communities around them. They express genuine empathy and understanding. In doing so, they build trust and empower individuals around them to achieve their full potential.

Servant leaders are also forward-looking.

They're able to bring big ideas to life in day-to-day operations by working with direct reports to create a clear vision, develop clear and measurable goals, and then execute the vision.

In short, great leadership isn't about being the smartest person in the room. Great leadership is about creating clear direction and empowering and supporting others in its execution.

Being a CEO or top executive is not a prerequisite for servant leaders. In fact, servant leadership can flourish in individuals working at all levels of an organization. A manager can be a servant leader to her direct reports. Team members can act as servant leaders to their peers. Servant leadership can flourish within small task forces, committees, departments, or divisions within a company. From there, servant leadership can spread outward and upward, igniting a company-wide commitment to align around the same goals, empower others to reach their full potential, and build a stronger community.

3. <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/11/17/great-bosses-share-these-5-traits-says-dale-carnegies-institute.html>

A. The Evolution of Servant Leadership

Though Robert K. Greenleaf pioneered the concept of servant leadership more than 50 years ago, servant leadership is more relevant today than ever before. Greenleaf wrote that the servant leader focuses “primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong.” Traditional pyramid-shaped, command-and-control leadership structures emphasize the “accumulation and exercise of power by one at ‘the top of the pyramid.’” Many of the fires that professionals spend their time putting out are ignited by this power struggle. Servant leaders, however, share power and help those around them “develop and perform as highly as possible,” Greenleaf writes.

Why is servant leadership more relevant today than ever? The incoming workforce demands it. Research shows that as millennials assume a larger and larger share of the U.S. workforce, they’re looking for organizations that “put people over profit,” “behave in an ethical manner,” and have “leaders committed to helping improve society.”⁴

Since its inception in the 1970s, servant leadership has continued to evolve. Leadership expert and bestselling author Ken Blanchard, one of today’s top authorities on servant leadership, explains that employees will serve their own interests unless they’re given a more compelling purpose or vision to serve. He breaks down servant leadership into two

fundamental steps in [Servant Leadership in Action](#), a collection of essays that Blanchard edited with Renee Broadwell:

- **Visionary/Direction:** The leadership component of servant leadership, visionary/direction requires leaders to give team members a compelling vision of the future, overarching values to guide their way, and strategic goals to strive for.
- **Implementation/Operational:** The service component of servant leadership, implementation/operational requires servant leaders to flip the traditional hierarchical pyramid. This makes team members responsible for achieving goals and objectives, and the servant leader responsive to the team members’ needs. In traditional command-and-control hierarchies, the opposite is true.

“Servant leaders are also forward-looking. They’re able to bring big ideas to life in day-to-day operations by working with direct reports to create a clear vision, develop clear and measurable goals, and then execute the vision.”

4. <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>



In the bestselling book, *Servant Leadership in Action*, Blanchard notes a common misunderstanding that servant leadership allows employees to decide “what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and how to do it.” Of course, that’s false. The first step is to establish vision, values, and goals.

“Once people are clear on where they are going, the leader’s role shifts to a service mindset for the task of implementation—the second aspect of servant leadership,” Blanchard writes. “The question now is: How do we live according to the vision and accomplish the established goals? Implementation is where the servant aspect of servant leadership comes into play.”

“Focusing your energy on people and relationships can actually improve your organization’s profits.”

B. The Characteristics of a Servant Leader

Servant leadership expert Larry C. Spears writes in *Servant Leadership in Action* that “servant leadership characteristics often occur naturally within many individuals and, like many natural tendencies, they can be enhanced through learning and practice.” But what, exactly, are those characteristics? Spears identifies the 10 most common characteristics:

- > Listening
- > Empathy
- > Healing
- > Awareness
- > Persuasion
- > Conceptualization
- > Foresight
- > Stewardship
- > Commitment to others’ growth
- > Community building

Unfortunately, many organizations are not set up to inspire or encourage these characteristics in their leaders. Raj Sisodia, a leader of the global-conscious capitalism movement, explains that this has made work a source of “deep suffering” for many people today. “Leaders are products of the systems that give rise to them. The existing system has elevated people into positions of leadership who lack the qualities needed to lead in today’s world. These people do whatever it takes to deliver the numbers without regard to human cost or long-term consequences for organizational health,” Sisodia writes in *Servant Leadership in Action*. This mindset is yet another source of ignition for the many fires that professionals are constantly working to put out.

Why do so many leaders choose the “whatever it takes” philosophy over servant leadership? Because that’s what they’ve learned, and they’ve been rewarded for it. However, focusing your energy on people and relationships can actually improve your organization’s profits. “In the long run, our research shows that such companies generate far more financial wealth than do traditional profit-centered firms—outperforming the S&P 500 index by 14 to 1,” Sisodia writes. How is that possible? Because employees are more engaged and productive when they’re working for a higher purpose. Servant leadership offers just that.



C. The Inclusive, “For All” Culture of Servant Leadership

There’s good news and bad news when it comes to diversity and inclusion. The good news is that there’s widespread acknowledgment that businesses benefit from diverse teams and inclusive environments. Research shows that teams that include individuals from a wide range of ages and backgrounds make better decisions 87 percent of the time.⁵ The bad news, however, is that companies spend up to \$8 billion per year on diversity and inclusion training programs—and see few results in return.⁶ In fact, diversity and inclusion training can actually do more harm than good, resulting in what economists call “diversity fatigue.” Maybe the solution isn’t more diversity training. Maybe the solution is a new approach to leadership that puts relationships first.

Servant leadership can help by fostering “for all” workplaces. *In A Great Place to Work for All*, Michael C. Bush, the CEO of Great Place to Work, the organization behind *Fortune* magazine’s 100 Greatest Places to Work, notes “significant gaps in the employee experience between groups of people.” Gaps can arise from gender, race, sexual orientation, disability status, religious beliefs, or the different background of experiences we all bring to the workplace. “These gaps mean not everyone is having a positive experience,

which means they are not likely to bring the best of what they have to offer to the organization.”

Servant leadership can help reduce these gaps by introducing “mediating mechanisms” into the workplace that help manage relationships and create a climate of inclusion.⁷ Because of their focus on service to the entire team or organization, servant leaders work to ensure that all employees are heard. They see it as their responsibility to act as healing, empathetic forces when cultural differences emerge. Servant leaders also foster a culture of collaboration that allows individual members to best use their unique skills and talents—while learning new skills from their peers. The “for all” nature of the servant leadership model also creates opportunities for all employees to advance professionally and reach their full potential. There is, of course, a great deal of work to be done in fostering more inclusive workplaces and change won’t occur overnight, but encouraging your organization’s leaders to adopt a servant leadership approach can be a good start.

“Find a way to get that spotlight to shine on others.”

Cheryl Bachelder, *Dare to Serve*

5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/#a1125754cbfa>

6. <http://time.com/5118035/diversity-training-infuriates-men-fails-women/>

7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303997416_The_role_of_servant_leadership_in_fostering_inclusive_organizations

III. Putting It into Practice: Helping Your Organization Adopt Servant Leadership

You might be thinking that servant leadership sounds nice in theory, but is really a utopian pipe dream. On the contrary, servant leadership is actually extremely practical. In this section, we'll explore some steps you can take to begin practicing servant leadership at your own organization. We'll discuss the ins and outs of applying servant leadership to any level of the organization by setting a clear vision and building supportive, open relationships, as well applying servant leadership on a larger scale to drive overall vision, strategy, organizational cultural shifts, and even things like talent management and hiring policy.

A. Create a Compelling—and Relatable—Vision of the Future

“I love the saying ‘a river without banks is a large puddle.’ The banks permit the river to flow; they give direction to the river. Leadership is about going somewhere; it’s not about wandering around aimlessly. If people don’t have a compelling vision to serve, the only thing they have to serve is their own self-interest.”

- Ken Blanchard, *Servant Leadership in Action*.



When organizational leaders are able to clearly communicate their strategic vision, they can expect better results and higher profits.⁸ Yet, in one survey, just 33 percent of executives were confident that their employees could articulate their company’s strategic direction.⁹ Clearly, many organizational leaders struggle to clearly define and communicate a vision and clear goals for their team.

Here’s where the visionary part of servant leadership comes into play. Remember, employees will serve their own interests unless they’re given a clear organizational vision to contribute to. It’s the

8. <https://chiefexecutive.net/4-ways-to-motivate-employees-to-help-achieve-your-strategic-vision/>

9. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/zeno-group-study-explores-reasons-why-employees-are-so-disengaged-300096754.html>

leader's job to provide that vision—and to communicate it effectively, make sure it's simple and relatable, and set clear values and goals.

1. Create a Simple Vision

Ken Blanchard warns that many leaders make purpose statements too complex. In *Servant Leadership in Action*, he uses Walt Disney's purpose statement, "We're in the happiness business," as an example of a clear, simple purpose that tells employees of Disney theme parks that their job isn't to run an amusement park—it's to make visitors happy.

2. Make It Relatable

In their book, [Full Steam Ahead!](#), Ken Blanchard and Jesse Lyn Stoner write that relatability "makes vision accessible to everyone, in both their organizations and their personal lives."

The key is to not only create a compelling vision, but to create a shared vision. That means all team members must clearly understand the vision and relate to it. Most importantly, they also have to see how they're directly contributing to it. It should be possible to apply the vision to the day-to-day work of teams, committees, departments, divisions, and even individual contributors. This makes the vision more relatable because employees are directly in control of—and accountable for—its success or failure.

3. Incorporate Clear Values and Goals

As part of your vision, you'll need to communicate values and goals.

Ken Blanchard writes in *Servant Leadership in Action*, "Values provide guidelines for how you should proceed as you pursue your purpose and picture of the future. They answer the questions, 'What do I want to live by?' and 'How?' They need to be clearly described so that you know exactly what behaviors demonstrate those values as being lived."

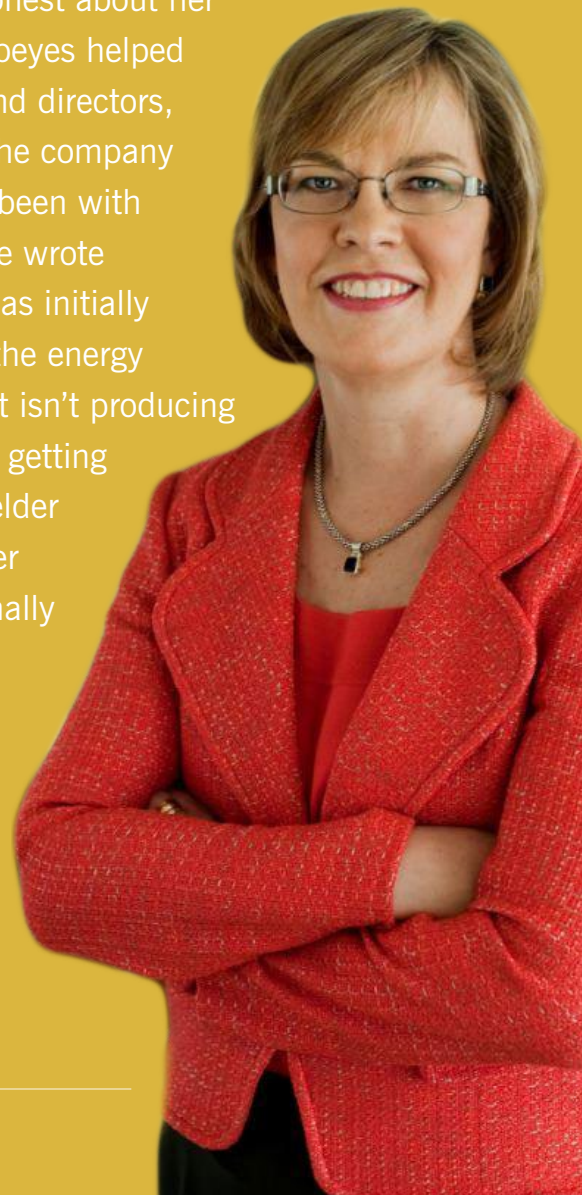
Like values, goals need to be clearly defined and measurable. They should be agreed upon by leaders and team members so that team members understand exactly what they're responsible for, what success looks like, and how to get there.

"The key is to not only create a compelling vision, but to create a shared vision. That means all team members must clearly understand the vision and relate to it."

B. Building Personal Relationships in the Professional Workplace

Strong personal relationships are key to the service aspect of servant leadership. Once the leader establishes the vision, their role shifts to empowering team members to execute the vision. This means working with team members to ensure they have the support, resources, development opportunities, feedback, and whatever else they need—which requires open and honest relationships between leaders and team members. Team members and leaders alike must be comfortable expressing their needs and limitations. Indeed, leaders who are honest about their own limitations, show respect and appreciation, and give credit where deserved have been found to foster more creative, innovative, cohesive teams.¹⁰

Dare to Serve author Cheryl Bachelder’s experience being honest about her limitations as a leader shortly after taking over as CEO of Popeyes helped build a stronger team. During a meeting of vice presidents and directors, each participant wrote down the first thing they’d fix about the company on a Post-it note. Bachelder recalls that a participant who’d been with the company for over a decade sighed and said that everyone wrote down the same things every year, and nothing changed. “I was initially shocked, but I appreciated her candor. It was a reminder of the energy wasted in corporate America while people focus on work that isn’t producing results. Even CEOs shy away from hard things—worry about getting the board aligned, or finding the money for a project,” Bachelder wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*. In response, Bachelder told that participant that “we wanted to be the group that finally fixes problems—not all of them, but the few on which we could focus to make the most impact.” By admitting to her own limitations, Bachelder strengthened the group’s focus. Bachelder’s exchange demonstrates a highly personalized leader-follower relationship. Although hard to hear, Bachelder appreciated and took the participant’s candor to heart. Impersonal leader-follower relationships, on the other hand, accomplish the opposite.



10. <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-49118-001>

Edgar H. Schein, an expert on organizational development and behavior whose career spans half a century, and management consultant Peter A. Schein expand on this point in their book, [Humble Leadership](#). Based on traditional command-and-control organizational hierarchies, impersonal leader-follower relationships can lead to high turnover, disengaged talent, and safety and quality problems. “We therefore need a model of leadership that is more personal and cooperative, that changes relationships both inside organizations and between organization members and their customers, clients, and patients,” they write.

Here are three ways to build more open and authentic personal relationships:

1. The Virtue of Humility

In his bestselling book, [Humble Inquiry](#), Edgar H. Schein makes an important statement: Leaders depend upon team members. When leaders reflect that in how they communicate with employees, they open the “door to building a relationship.” Schein calls this behavior “humble inquiry.” Leaders who ask rather than tell team members to do things, Schein writes, imply that “the other person knows something that I need to or want to know. It draws the other person into a situation and into the driver’s seat; it enables the other person to help or hurt me and, thereby, opens the door to building a relationship.” This communication technique can play a critical role in fostering the open relationships required for servant leadership to thrive.

2. A Little Love Goes a Long Way

“Love” isn’t a word that generally comes up in

leadership training, but maybe it should.

Raj Sisodia writes in *Servant Leadership in Action* that the opposite of love is fear. “An organization suffused with fear is inherently incapable of genuine creativity and innovation,” he writes. Sisodia notes that history’s greatest leaders—Lincoln, Gandhi, Mandela, King—all “possessed tremendous strength along with a powerful capacity for caring. They were able to expand their circle of caring to encompass more and more of humanity—often including their own so-called enemies.” They cared truly and deeply about others and demonstrated why “a fundamental leadership quality is the ability to operate from love and care.” When it comes to adopting servant leadership, love is a required ingredient.

Showing that you care about a team member or direct report can be as simple as asking them how they are and listening to what they say. Making sure you give time and space for this is a simple but powerful way to show you care—and a building block for the type of relationships servant leadership thrives on.

3. Treat Your People Right

It may sound simple, but treating employees with respect goes a long way. Colleen Barrett, the president emerita of Southwest Airlines, notes that one of the company's leading priorities is to be "the employer of choice." That's reflected in the company's philosophy on leadership: Treat your people right, and good things will happen. That means treating employees with "Golden Rule behavior" and making sure the work environment is enjoyable, and people feel good about what they do, about themselves, and about their position in the company.

"Not only do we serve and care about our people, but we empower them to use common sense and good judgment. Yes, we have written rules and procedures, and you can go look at them, but we say to our folks every day, 'The rules are guidelines.'" This means employees can go off script when the situation warrants it without fear of punishment or retaliation. In trusting employees to use their own judgment, instead of written rules and procedures, to make the correct decisions, Southwest leadership demonstrates respect and empowers their employees to bring their full selves to work. In return, Southwest employees can trust their leaders to do the same.



C. Taking the First Steps to Implementing Servant Leadership

Anyone, regardless of their place in the organizational hierarchy, can choose to set a clear vision for themselves or their team and invest in relationships. But how can servant leadership be implemented on an organizational level? Here are some ideas.

Adopting Servant Leadership Organization-Wide

- 1. Educational Programs:** Books or training curriculum on servant leadership are a great way to introduce your organization to the key points of servant leadership.
- 2. Organizational Analysis:** Conducting an organizational analysis will allow you to identify gaps in current leadership strategies and mentalities. It will also provide baseline data to gauge the effectiveness of servant leadership after implementation.
- 3. Coaching:** Coaching sessions can help accelerate learning and foster the culture and sense of community that are critical for servant leadership to thrive.
- 4. Evaluation:** Set a timeline for servant leadership implementation, and establish an evaluation timeline for check-ins with various leaders and departments at different milestones.
- 5. Continuing Education:** Ongoing servant leadership training with guest speakers, training sessions, certifications, and other continuing education programs are critical to effective implementation. Here are a couple of recommendations:
 - > The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership offers workshops such as [Implementing Servant Leadership](#).
 - > The [Ken Blanchard Companies](#) offers many training programs that incorporate elements of servant leadership.
 - > The [Newton Institute](#) offers a full slate of leadership training courses and workshops.



Implementation of servant leadership requires shifting to a mindset that equally values relationships and results, prioritizes empathy, focuses on asking instead of telling, and commits leaders to supporting their teams. The most successful implementation strategy for servant leadership combines educational curriculum, collaboration among stakeholders, and continuing education.

Remember, servant leadership doesn't have to trickle down from the top. In fact, the best implementation strategies for servant leadership begin with a small team, task force, or division that can successfully foster a sense of community.

D. Servant Leadership from an HR Perspective

1. Recruit for Character, Not Skills

If your organization sources talent with specific skills and certifications, it might be approaching recruitment all wrong. If you want to create

and sustain an organizational culture oriented around servant leadership, your first question should be, "Does the candidate fit our values?"

Remember, most people have the potential to learn new skills. Fewer people have the service-minded character you might be looking for. In the Servant Leadership Online Training Summit, a 2017 event co-produced by Ken Blanchard, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, and Conscious Marketer, the leaders of Waste Connections put it this way: "You can't train character."

2. "I Am Here to Serve": Serving from an HR Perspective

Shirley Bullard, The Ken Blanchard Companies' Chief Administrative Officer, notes that the service aspect of servant leadership can be an exceptional guiding principle for the unpredictable and unscripted encounters of the HR professional. In *Servant Leadership in Action*, she writes, "There is no clear-cut plan of what to do or not to do. But with a mindset of 'I am here to serve,' you can get

through even the most challenging event with grace. Notice I did not say ‘without angst, second guessing, or fear.’ These are real emotions that exist for any leader who finds themselves encountering a situation that is unfamiliar territory.” It’s no coincidence that the strengths of top HR leaders reflect characteristics of servant leaders. A review of global data on thousands of HR leaders found that developing and coaching others, building inclusive relationships, positive relationships that foster diversity and inclusion, “walking the walk” by honoring commitments and promises, and having technical expertise and know-how are characteristics of top-rated HR professionals. What do those characteristics have in common? Service to others.

E. Leveraging Servant Leadership to Lead Positive Culture Change

How important is company culture to success? One survey found that 84 percent of employees ranked company culture as the top indicator of success—but 51 percent of respondents said their company’s culture needed a “major culture overhaul.”¹¹

Harvard researchers have identified the following qualities of positive workplace cultures: caring for and being interested in others, providing support and offering kindness to the struggling, avoiding blame and forgiving mistakes, emphasizing meaningfulness of

work, and treating others with respect.¹²

You can imagine that an organization whose culture displays these types of qualities tends to invest heavily in relationships. Organizations that don’t invest in relationships suffer the consequences.

How do you go about changing a dysfunctional culture? The solution is usually not found in company trainings or social events like free beer Fridays or company outings. After all, a dysfunctional culture is often the symptom of a core issue, not its root cause. The root cause can often be traced to the organization’s approach to leadership and a values system that prioritizes profits over people. Adopting a servant leadership approach can be a powerful driver of positive culture change.

“Leaders are products of the systems that give rise to them. The existing system has elevated people into positions of leadership who lack the qualities needed to lead in today’s world.”

Raj Sisodia, *Servant Leadership in Action*

11. <https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/global/home/press/displays/corporate-culture-is-critical-to-business-success>

12. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>

Shining the Spotlight on Others: How One Servant Leader Drove Change

Former CEO of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, Cheryl Bachelder inherited a broken franchise when she assumed control of the company in November 2007. The business model pitted franchisees against the parent company, innovation was lagging, and there was no strategy for growth. Bachelder quickly began to turn things around using a servant leadership model. “The more my team and I talked about it, the more we saw the franchisees as our primary customers,” she wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*.¹³ “They have mortgaged their homes or taken out large loans to open restaurants. They have signed 20-year agreements. No one has more skin in the game.” Because of this, Bachelder made restaurant-level profitability—the most important metric to franchisees—the franchise’s primary indicator of success. The organization’s leaders had invested in the people. Then, the franchise began to regain franchisees’ trust by listening to their needs and, more importantly, serving them.

As she put it in her bestselling book, *Dare to Serve*, it’s the leader’s responsibility to “shine the spotlight on others.” She writes, “[Leaders] will help [employees] pursue dreams and find meaning in work. You will grow their capabilities. You will model principles in daily decisions that build an environment of trust and commitment.”



13. <https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-ceo-of-popeyes-on-treating-franchisees-as-the-most-important-customers>

IV. Conclusion

We posed the following question at the beginning of this guide: How can we shift our efforts away from putting out fires to preventing them in the first place?

The shift starts by changing our approach to leadership, the root cause of the organizational dysfunction that sets these fires ablaze.

Servant leadership offers an alternative. With its emphasis on vision, servant leadership empowers teams, divisions, and entire organizations around clear goals. With its emphasis on implementation, in which leaders get out of the way to play a support role to team members tasked with organizational goals and purpose, it drives results. And with its emphasis on relationships, a servant leadership approach brings meaning, purpose, and individual accountability to the workplace, fostering a culture of trust, inclusiveness, cohesion, and growth.

We hope this guide has given you some ideas of how you can bring elements of servant leadership to your organization—and that with servant leadership in mind, you'll have a few less fires to put out!





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