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# Servant Leadership

## Putting Your Team First, and Yourself Second



By the  
Mind Tools  
Editorial Team



Find out how meeting  
others' needs can  
make you a more  
effective leader.

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A good objective of leadership is to help those who are doing poorly to do well and to help those who are doing well to do even better.

— Jim Rohn, American entrepreneur.

Everyone on Samit's team knows that he's "there for them." He checks in with them often to see how they are, and he helps them develop the skills they need to advance their careers, even if this means that they may move on.

Samit also makes an effort to see situations from others' perspectives. He makes decisions with the team's best interests in mind, and ensures that everyone has the resources and knowledge they need to meet their objectives.

As a result of this, his team is one of the most successful in the department, with low staff turnover and high engagement.

Samit is an example of a "servant leader." In this article, we'll explore what servant leadership is, and the advantages it can bring you as a leader. We'll also look at situations where it isn't appropriate.

## What is Servant Leadership?

Robert K. Greenleaf first coined the phrase "servant leadership" in his 1970 essay, "**The Servant as a Leader**." However, it's an approach that people have used for centuries.

As a servant leader, you're a "servant first" – you focus on the needs of others, especially team members, before you consider your own. You acknowledge other people's perspectives, give them the support they need to meet their work and personal goals, involve them in decisions where appropriate, and build a sense of community within your team. This leads to higher engagement, more trust, and stronger relationships with team members and other stakeholders. It can also lead to increased **innovation**.

Servant leadership is not a leadership style or technique as such. Rather it's a way of behaving that you adopt over the longer term. It complements **democratic** + leadership styles, and it has similarities with **Transformational Leadership** + – which is often the most effective style to use in business situations – and **Level 5 Leadership** + – which is where leaders demonstrate humility in the way they work.

However, servant leadership is problematic in hierarchical, autocratic cultures where managers and leaders are expected to make all the decisions. Here, servant leaders may struggle to earn respect.

**Important:**

Remember that servant leadership is about focusing on other people's needs – **not** their feelings. Don't avoid making unpopular decisions or giving team members negative feedback when this is needed.

Also, do not rely on it exclusively – use it alongside styles like Transformational Leadership, where you develop an inspiring vision of the future, motivate people to deliver this, manage its implementation, and build an ever-stronger team.

## How to Become a Servant Leader

According to Larry C. Spears, former president of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, these are the **10 most important characteristics** of servant leaders:

1. Listening.
2. Empathy.
3. Healing.
4. Awareness.
5. Persuasion.
6. Conceptualization.
7. Foresight.
8. Stewardship.
9. Commitment to the growth of people.
10. Building community.

From "Character and Servant Leadership: 10 Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders" by Larry C. Spears, published in "The Journal of Virtues and Leadership," Vol. 1, Issue 1. Reproduced with permission.

Once you've decided to prioritize other people's needs over your own in the long term, you can work on developing your skills in each area. Let's look at how you can do this.

### 1. Listening

You'll serve people better when you make a deep commitment to listening intently to them and understanding what they're saying. To **improve your listening skills** +, give people your full attention, take notice of their body language, avoid interrupting them before they've finished speaking, and give feedback on what they say.

## 2. Empathy

Servant leaders strive to understand other people's intentions and perspectives. You can be more **empathetic** + by putting aside your viewpoint temporarily, valuing others' perspectives, and approaching situations with an open mind.

## 3. Healing

This characteristic relates to the emotional health and "wholeness" of people, and involves supporting them both physically and mentally.

First, make sure that your people have the **knowledge, support and resources** + they need to do their jobs effectively, and that they have a **healthy workplace** +. Then take steps to help them be **happy and engaged** + in their roles.

You could also use a tool such as the **Triple Bottom Line** + to think about how your organization can make a positive impact on the people you lead and the customers you serve.

## 4. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to look at yourself, think deeply about your emotions and behavior, and consider how they affect the people around you and align with your **values** +.

You can become more self-aware by knowing your **strengths and weaknesses** +, and asking for other people's feedback on them. Also, learn to **manage your emotions** +, so that you consider how your actions and behavior might affect others.

## 5. Persuasion

Servant leaders use persuasion – rather than their authority – to encourage people to take action. They also aim to build **consensus in groups** +, so that everyone supports decisions.

There are many **tools and models** that you can use to be more persuasive, without damaging relationships or taking advantage of others. You should also build your **expert power** + – when people perceive you as an expert, they are more likely to listen to you when you want to persuade or inspire them.

## 6. Conceptualization

This characteristic relates to your ability to "dream great dreams," so that you look beyond day-to-day realities to the bigger picture.

If you're a senior leader in your company, work through and develop a robust organizational **strategy** +. Then, whatever level you're at, create **mission and vision statements** + for your team, and make it clear how people's roles tie in with your team's and organization's long-term objectives. Also, develop **long-term focus** + so that you stay motivated to achieve your more distant goals, without getting distracted.

## 7. Foresight

Foresight is when you can predict what's likely to happen in the future by learning from past experiences, identifying what's happening now, and understanding the consequences of your decisions.

You can use tools such as **SWOT Analysis** + and **PEST Analysis** + to think about your current situation and environment, while **Scenario Analysis** + helps you understand how the future could play out. Use the **ORAPAPA checklist** + when you make a decision, to learn from experience and make sure that you've considered all the angles.

Also, learn to trust your intuition – if your instinct is telling you that something is wrong, listen to it!




## 8. Stewardship

Stewardship is about taking responsibility for the actions and performance of your team, and being accountable for the role team members play in your organization.

Whether you're a formal leader or not, you have a responsibility for the things that happen in your company. Take time to think about your own values, as well as those of your organization, so that you know what you will and won't stand for. Also, **lead by example** + by demonstrating the values and behaviors that you want to see in others, and have the confidence to stand up to people when they act in a way that isn't aligned with them.

## 9. Commitment to the Growth of People

Servant leaders are committed to the personal and professional development of everyone on their teams.

To **develop your people** , make sure that you use **Training Needs Assessments**  to **understand their developmental needs**  and give them the skills they need to do their jobs effectively. Also, find out what their personal goals are, and see if you can give them projects or additional responsibilities that will help them achieve these.


## 10. Building Community

The last characteristic is to do with building a sense of community within your organization.

You can do this by providing opportunities for people to interact with one another across the company. For instance, you could organize social events such as team lunches and barbecues, design your workspace to encourage people to chat informally away from their desks, and dedicate the first few minutes of meetings to non-work-related conversations.

Encourage people to take responsibility for their work, and remind them how what they do contributes to the success and overall objectives of the organization.

### Tip:

See our article on **Leadership Styles**  to explore popular leadership approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

And see this **Expert Interview** for a valuable discussion on the misconceptions and realities of servant leadership.

## Key Points

You are a servant leader when you focus on the needs of others before you consider your own. It's a longer-term approach to leadership, rather than a technique that you can adopt in specific situations. Therefore, you can use it with other leadership styles such as Transformational Leadership.

You can become a servant leader by working on these 10 characteristics:

1. Listening.
2. Empathy.
3. Healing.
4. Awareness.
5. Persuasion.

6. Conceptualization.
7. Foresight.
8. Stewardship.
9. Commitment to the growth of people.
10. Building community.

Servant leaders are likely to have more engaged employees and enjoy better relationships with team members and other stakeholders than leaders who don't put the interests of others before their own.

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