

Leading with the heart

Servant leaders put other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own, writes *Sen Sendjaya*.

Today's organisations are plagued by toxic emotions and social alienation, run by leaders who bully, abuse their power and use unethical practices. Businesses grapple with work-life balance issues and the psychological well-being of employees and, in many instances, it is employees' needs and aspirations sacrificed for the sake of the bottom line.

A 'servant leadership' style is not just a theory, it's an attitude of the heart shaping the decisions and actions of corporate leaders at all levels, and offers a fresh leadership framework to build positive work environments. Servant leadership is characterised by service orientation, a holistic outlook and a moral-spiritual emphasis.

Servant leaders put other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own. Robert Greenleaf in his seminal book *Servant Leadership* asserted that: "The servant leader... begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve... Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead."

Most existing literature deems servant leadership superior to other approaches like charismatic or transformational leadership. While both are people-oriented and value individualised consideration and appreciation of others, the concerns shown by transformational leaders are merely a means to achieving the organisational objectives. In contrast, the focus of servant leadership is primarily on the followers' needs and develop-

ment rather than those of the organisation. Servant leaders priorities in their leadership roles are followers first, organisations second and their own last.

The idea of servant leadership has been steadily permeating the business world in the last decade. The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership calls it 'a quiet revolution'. Prominent leadership researchers such as Bernard Bass have affirmed the importance of the concept for future corporate leaders: "The strength of the servant leadership movement and its many links to encouraging follower learning, growth, and autonomy, suggests that the untested theory will play a role in the future leadership of the learning organisation."

Fortune magazine's annual survey of Top 100 Best Companies to Work for in America consistently includes winners that advocate the philosophy of servant leadership, such as Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries and Synovus Financial. Jack Lowe, CEO and Chairman of TDIndustries, a US-based mechanical contractor ranked as one of the best companies to work for by *Fortune* magazine, wrote that his company has employed servant leadership as an organisational-wide leadership development philosophy and program. He believes that when people become grounded in servant leadership, trust grows and the foundation for organisational excellence is established. The culture of trust is evident in the ownership of TDIndustries by the employees (30 top managers and the founder's widow own 25 per cent of the stock; lower-level employees own the rest), which explains why the company's 1,273 employees are called partners.

In a similar vein, Synovus Financial Corporation, a multi-billion dollar financial services firm, illustrates

the servant leadership concept through a strong commitment to family-oriented policies such as work flexibility, leave for new parents, work/life balance and advancing women in their careers. Chairman and CEO Jimmy Blanchard outlines the company's values as follows: "The heart of the servant-leader brings order, brings meaning to employees. When employees feel order and meaning and that they are a part of a team that stands for something good, that there is a higher calling than just working to get a paycheck, that they are improving mankind, there is an energy level that explodes and great things happen."

Under the leadership of founder and CEO Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines had one of the most distinguished organisational cultures in the US. The company is recognised as one of the most admired in the world. Servant leadership principles provide the foundation for altruism, defined as the constructive, gratifying service to others, and one of the core values of Southwest's culture. Employees of Southwest are noted for their caring approach and appreciation of each other, as well as in the service of others.

Critics of servant leadership consider it an oxymoronic concept given the negative associations the word 'servant' has with concepts like slavery, bondage, and so on. This viewpoint is, of course, inaccurate. A cursory look at the etymology of servanthood (there are seven Greek words translated as 'servant' in the English New Testament Bible) reveals that servanthood carries positive meanings. Being a servant presupposes a willingness and readiness to be subservient before others in gratitude, so that others' needs and interests are served. None of these words insinuate a lack of self-respect or low self-image, as the humble position is voluntarily assumed and an act of service is wholeheartedly performed for the sake of others.

The following comment from a CEO of an accounting software company squarely captures this sentiment: "I think you can do exactly the same thing with sex. I mean sex is fantastic; it's the perfect

expression of love. But you can commercialise it and twist it. You just look at child prostitution if you want... The principle of servanthood is a wonderful concept, but you can turn it into slavery. It's taking something that is pure and good, and twisting it. And I think you can do that with anything."

DIMENSIONS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A total of 469 Australian managers and employees in for-profit and not-for-profit organisations in Victoria were included in the research on servant leadership for this article. Fifteen senior executives around Victoria were interviewed and these results were reviewed by a panel of 15 academic scholars in the area of servant leadership. The study resulted in three main outcomes. First, servant leadership is a multidimensional concept with six empirically distinguishable dimensions: Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence.

Second, the concept of servant leadership is can be observed and assessed through a psychometrically valid and reliable measurement instrument called the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS). Third, the SLBS is an accessible and easily administered measure of servant leadership behaviour and is useful for various organisational settings to inform assessment, selection, training, promotion and performance evaluation decisions. It is particularly valuable for leadership selection and development purposes.

The following sections outline the attributes associated with the six behavioural dimensions of servant leadership.

Voluntary Subordination

The term Voluntary Subordination signifies a revolutionary act of will to voluntarily abandon one's self to others. The readiness to renounce the superior status attached to leadership and to embrace greatness by way of servanthood is a hallmark of servant

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leadership, as outlined by O. J. Sanders in *Spiritual Leadership*: “True leadership is achieved not by reducing men to one’s service but in giving one’s selfless service to them.” It refers to behaviors of the leader which demonstrates their self-concept (being a servant) and primary intent (acts of service).

Being a Servant: This servant leader views themselves as servant first, not leader. Servant leadership is not merely the service that one performs (doing), but represents something deeper that reflects who the person is (being). It is a manifestation of the leader’s orientation of character, which finds expression in the leader’s ingrained pattern of living. A group executive of a large charity organisation says: “When you’re a servant leader, you look at the servant role as being your real responsibility. Your role is to lead, but the real responsibility is to actually make sure that you’re serving ... You need to be constantly reminded that you’re the servant of the group.”

Servant leaders view themselves as stewards, who regard their followers as people entrusted to them to be elevated to their better selves and what they are capable of becoming. It logically implies, therefore, that the leader-follower relationship is that of a client-server, not supervisor-subordinate or master-slave relationship.

Acts of Service: Unlike the larger-than-life Herculean leaders who control and command others at will, servant leaders’ primary intent is to serve others to be what they are capable of becoming. A servant leader says, “I am the leader, therefore I serve” not “I am the leader, therefore I lead.”

Herman Miller CEO Max De Pree tells an amusing story in his book *Leadership Jazz* which illustrates the difference. Before changing in the locker room for a game of tennis at his club, he saw used towels left lying on the floor by some high school kids. He picked them up one by one and threw them in the hamper. A friend, observing him quietly, said: “Do you pick up towels because you’re the president of the company. Or are you the president because you pick up towels?” De Pree couldn’t get his mind off that question

for a long while. The former signifies ‘I serve because I am the leader’, which is more in keeping with servant leadership philosophy.

Authentic Self

Authentic Self is the state of knowing and being who we really are. The authenticity of a servant leader is shown in his or her humility, integrity, accountability, security, and vulnerability.

Humility: Humility refers to the idea of making a right estimation of one’s self. A humble person neither over nor under estimates their standing. Humble servant leaders work quietly, carefully and patiently behind the scenes. Their willingness to spend time on small things and make seemingly inconsequential decisions without reward or being noticed is

an indication of their modesty. They give credit to external factors and other people for success, and deflect recognition of themselves to others. A CEO of a thriving accounting software company says: “Humility is recognising that as a leader you are still one person. That if something is going well, it’s not because you’re such a hero ... Even though others might choose to see you as the hero. You’d rather deflect that to others that have done the work even if you’ve been involved in it.”

Integrity: Integrity is the consistency between words and deeds, which is often tested in the presence of temptation or challenge to do the contrary. The importance of integrity is acknowledged by a group executive of a charity organisation: “I don’t think you can be successful as a servant leader without integrity. You will be quickly found out.”

Accountability: Accountability entails a leader’s willingness have their decisions and actions questioned by a core group of people, who then provide constructive correction and rebuke when necessary. Leaders who put themselves on an unrealistic pedestal without any accountability mechanism are bound to fail. While it is not the natural inclination of leaders to want to be accountable, the extent to which a leader

is willing to be answerable for their performance is often a good indication as to whether they have the heart of true servanthood.

This does not mean that others can easily manipulate or take for granted the service orientation of servant leaders. It is important to have the right perspective outlined by a director of an ethics research organisation: “Call it ‘I am your servant, but you are not my master’ ... If you think servant leadership is just giving people what they want ... you are actually missing the generous nature of true servant leadership. Your relative accountability is to the people you work with and who work for you. So you do have a relative accountability then, but it’s not absolute.”

Security: The servant leader’s deliberate choice to serve and be a servant should not be associated with any forms of low self-concept or self-image, in the same way as choosing to forgive should not be viewed as a sign of weakness. Instead, it would take a leader with an accurate understanding of their self-image, moral conviction and emotional stability to make such a choice. Servant leaders’ secure sense of self enables them to work behind the scenes willingly without seeking public acknowledgement, to distribute their power and authority to others without hesitation, and to step aside for more qualified successors without feeling threatened. This view is echoed by an executive of a leadership training firm: “Unhealthy leaders who are very insecure or driven by some of the dark sides inside themselves, will find themselves struggling to do servant leadership. Because to serve others rather than exercise power over them requires an internal security.”

Vulnerability: Vulnerability is the capacity to be honest with feelings doubts and fears; being willing to admit mistakes openly without reservation. It implies leaders must be willing to let go of old notions of absolute control. Servant leaders are willing to admit that they do not have all the answers. They do not hesitate to say “I don’t know” or “I was wrong” and are open about their own limitations and shortcomings. For servant leaders, the absence of defensiveness is an indication of strength and maturity.

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Covenantal Relationship

Covenantal relationship refers to behaviors of the leader that foster genuine, profound and lasting relationships with employees. Unlike contractual relationships which are built on expectations, objectives, compensation and constraints, covenantal relationships rest on the mutual intimacy among people and shared commitment to values, which enable work to be meaningful and fulfilling. While contractual relationships are necessary in organisations, they are insufficient to attract and retain the best people in organisations. The best individuals work like volunteers who will be motivated by intangible things found in covenantal relationships. In order to build covenantal relationships with others, servant leaders rely on the following building blocks; acceptance, availability, equality, and collaboration.

Acceptance: Robert Greenleaf argues that servant leaders empathise and accept others for who they are, not how others make them feel. Servant leaders also accept others regardless of background, limitations, characteristics or past failures. The unqualified acceptance that servant

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leaders exhibit encourages others to be creative and provide opportunities to grow. It is important to note, however, that while servant leaders accept others unconditionally, they are not content with the status quo. Instead, servant leaders lift people up and encourage others to grow as persons and to be what they are capable of becoming.

Availability: Servant leaders make themselves available for others to build a genuine relationship. They nurture intimacy in the workplace to be able to establish meaningful relationships with others. Hence, they avoid superficiality in relating with other people. A tangible expression of a leader's availability can be found in the discipline of responding to any problem by listening first. Servant leaders possess a natural tendency to engage with others by listening with intent to understand, as opposed to merely pretending to listen or selective listening. Of particular importance is for leaders to 'listen between the lines', hearing followers' feelings uncommunicated, pains unexpressed, and complaints not spoken of.

Equality: Key to the concept of servant leadership is the idea of equality, where servant leaders do not consider themselves above others and treat others as equal partners in the organisation. Unlike most leaders who seek and protect status symbols as a means of establishing distance between themselves and

their followers, servant leaders dismantle the status syndrome and engage with others at the same level. This orientation is in keeping with 'mateship' which is typically associated with Australian executives.

Collaboration: Servant leaders always work with others collaboratively, giving each of them opportunities to express their individual talents collectively. They are fully aware of the adage that "none of us is as smart as all of us". The analogy of jazz-band leaders nicely captures this spirit: A leader will pick up the tune, set the tempo, start the music and define a 'style'. After that, it's up to the band to be disciplined and free, wild and restrained... Jazz-band leaders know how to integrate the 'voices' in the band without diminishing their uniqueness. The individuals in the band are expected to play solo and together. An executive of an information service company made a similar remark: "When people work together to achieve something as opposed to one person trying to work achieve it, it makes a huge difference in the process."

Responsible Morality

Responsible Morality refers to behaviours of the leader which elevate both leaders' and employees' moral convictions and actions. This fourth dimension of servant leadership is manifested in the leader's moral reasoning and moral action. Since the exercise of authority and power by leaders always entails ethical challenges in every leader-follower relationship, servant leaders ensure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ can be morally legitimised, thoughtfully reasoned and ethically justified.

Moral Reasoning: Servant leadership promotes post-conventional moral reasoning in organisations, as well as encouraging others to engage in it. Servant leadership also fosters leader-follower relationships that elevates both to their better selves morally and ethically. It employs relational power which facilitates good moral dialogue between leaders and followers, a practice which is typically considered impossible with other forms of leadership that employs hierarchical power. The capacity for engaging with others in moral dialogue is useful not only to examine the ethics of the organisation, but also of the leaders themselves.

Moral Action: Organisational bureaucracy plays an important role in shaping the moral consciousness of managers. Sadly managers are often compelled to conform to the belief that 'what is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you'. In view of this organisational reality, servant leadership has been considered more likely than other leadership models to foster reflective behaviors which bring about positive changes in the ethical climate of the organisation. As servant leaders always appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and the higher-order needs of followers, they are more likely to ensure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ can be ethically justifiable.

Transcendental Spirituality

The fifth major construct of servant leadership, Transcendental Spirituality, refers to behaviours of the leader which manifest an inner conviction that something or someone beyond self and the material world exist and make life complete and meaningful. The spirituality of servant leaders is expressed through their religiousness, interconnectedness, sense of mission and wholeness.

Researchers concur that servant leadership is closely associated with spiritual leadership.

Religiousness: Many publications on servant leadership are written in the domain of religious theology. A common thread among these publications is the internal conviction that the servant leader is above all a servant of God who serves other people out of their obedient gratitude to God. Most of these publications allude to Jesus Christ whose principles and actions serve as an exemplar of servant leadership par excellence. The following comment from a CEO of an information service firm is not atypical: "I am not sure I know anyone who has a real servant leadership heart or attitude that doesn't have it founded in a spiritual belief."

Interconnectedness: Spirituality is commonly defined in reference to the notion of interconnectedness between the internal self and external world. The alignment between the self and the world starts with an inner awareness of one's self, the knowledge of which enables the individual to fittingly contribute to the world and engage in meaningful and intrinsically motivating work. This sentiment is demonstrated in the following comment from a group executive of a charity organisation: "I think if you believe that you're part of something that is bigger than you, you then question what is the part that you're supposed to be playing... That's what drives me because I know I'm at the right place. I'm now making a contribution to the world."

Sense of Mission: The intrinsic drive within us to find meaning and purpose is evident in the workplace, particularly since work occupies an increasing portion of waking hours for most people and is increasingly becoming a central part of their existence. People seek ways to express their spirituality at work by engaging in work that is meaningful and gives them a sense of purpose. Repeated studies found many senior executives regarded business leadership as a calling to service, not merely a job or a career. The fulfilment of that calling is manifested in the experience of making a difference in the lives of others through service, from which one derives meaning and purpose in life.

Wholeness: The disconnectedness of self from others in and outside the workplace which compartmentalizes one's life into separate domains is a recognised symptom of the modern workplace, and leads to life disorientation and fragmentation. This problem triggers a need for individuals to restore a sense of wholeness and to live a holistic, integrated life.

A general manager of a student service organisation observes: "The servant leadership approach helps people have a sense of completeness in life. And the more we have that sense of completeness within us in the

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workplace, the more we are likely to contribute to the organisation and, hence, the better the organisational performance is.”

Transforming Influence

Transforming Influence refers to behaviours of the leader that help employees to be what they are capable of becoming. Central to the idea of servant leadership is its transforming influence on people surrounding the leader. Servant leadership is demonstrated whenever the people who are served by servant leaders are positively transformed in multiple dimensions, including emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. The personal transformation that servant leaders bring about in others occurs collectively and repeatedly, and in turn, stimulates positive changes in organisations and societies. This process occurs through vision, modelling, mentoring, trust and empowerment.

Vision: Robert Greenleaf notes that the servant leader “needs to have a sense for the unknowable and be able to foresee the unforeseeable”. A primary task of the servant leader is setting a strategic vision for the organisation, which is crucial because it links the present to the future, energises people and builds commitment, provides meaning to work, and establishes a standard of excellence.

Modelling: Servant leaders lead by modelling and influence others by setting personal, tangible examples. What leaders do in practice is far more vital in determining the culture of the organisation than what they espouse, publish or preach. A group executive of a charity organisation remarks: “Servant leadership would be about being prepared to do the stuff you’re asking your staff to do.”

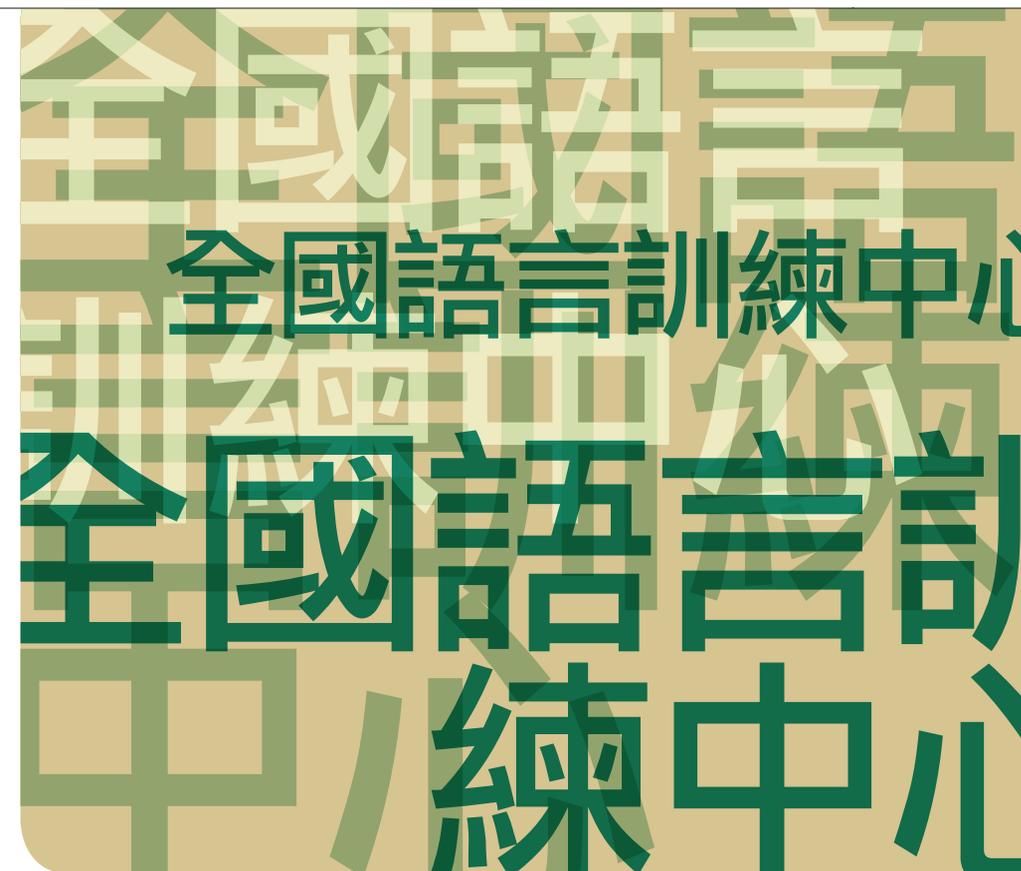
Mentoring: Mentoring is generally defined as an interpersonal relationship where a mentor guides others inexperienced or less senior to them to achieve personal and professional goals. It is considered a natural part of leadership. Mentoring in essence entails helping people learn to be themselves instead of compelling people to conform to an image. Servant leaders readily become mentors by helping clarify other people’s personal values and beliefs, contributing to their personal and professional growth and providing candid feedback on their performance.

Trust: In an era when organisational restructuring and downsizing are rampant, fostering trust in

the workplace can be a tough challenge for corporate leaders. While the notion of trust is considered a key element in virtually all leadership models, servant leadership has been strongly associated with trust in the literature. There are two ways leaders establish relationships with any new individuals: that is by treating them with suspicion until they prove themselves that they are trustworthy, or by assuming that they are trustworthy until they prove they are not. Servant leaders choose the latter. A visible manifestation of servant leaders’ trust on others is their willingness to delegate responsibilities and share authority with them, even if doing so is risky.

Empowerment: Empowerment is a key characteristic of servant leadership. The director of a leadership training firm illustrates this concept: “I think servant leadership has within it the idea of empowering other people rather than holding onto the power yourself.” As such, servant leaders possess a commitment to and derive satisfaction from the growth of others, believing people have an intrinsic value beyond their contribution as workers or employees.

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