

Becoming a Servant Leader: Do You Have What It Takes?

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This NebGuide introduces servant leadership; the 11 dimensions that typically characterize a servant leader, including inherent traits and learned skills; and several practical ways to develop skills necessary for this leadership style.

Servant leadership is one of the most talked about yet least critically examined leadership philosophies. While many people closely identify with this leadership approach, an equal number are cynical and question whether expectations of leaders are realistic. This NebGuide provides an introduction to servant leadership, based on the works of Robert Greenleaf and Larry Spears, and focuses on the 11 characteristics that identify a servant leader.

Of these 11 characteristics, some are inherent attributes or beliefs that servant leaders need to hold. Many of these are behavioral in nature and describe what servant leaders do. However, some of these characteristics are developed skills. The ultimate servant leader has developed all 11 characteristics and is continuously improving. These characteristics include *having a calling, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, growth and building community*.

The next section provides a series of questions to help you determine if you are a servant leader. Following it are descriptions of each of the 11 characteristics and some practical concerns related to servant leadership development.

Are You A Servant Leader?

Place a check in the box of each of the following questions that you would answer with a “yes.” If you can check more than seven of these, you may be well on your way to becoming a servant leader.

- Do people believe that you are willing to sacrifice your own self-interest for the good of the group?
- Do people believe that you want to hear their ideas and will value them?

- Do people believe that you will understand what is happening in their lives and how it affects them?
- Do people come to you when the chips are down or when something traumatic has happened in their lives?
- Do others believe that you have a strong awareness for what is going on?
- Do others follow your requests because they want to as opposed to because they “have to?”
- Do others communicate their ideas and vision for the organization when you are around?
- Do others have confidence in your ability to anticipate the future and its consequences?
- Do others believe you are preparing the organization to make a positive difference in the world?
- Do people believe that you are committed to helping them develop and grow?
- Do people feel a strong sense of community in the organization that you lead?

Characteristics of Servant Leadership

Calling

Do people believe that you are willing to sacrifice self-interest for the good of the group? Servant leaders have a natural desire to serve others. This notion of having a calling to serve is deeply rooted and value-based. Servant leaders have a desire to make a difference for other people and will pursue opportunities to impact others’ lives — never for their own gain. A servant leader is willing to sacrifice self-interests for the sake of others. This characteristic cannot be taught, so unless a person has a natural calling to serve, servant leadership is not a realistic or compatible style.

Listening

Do people believe that you want to hear their ideas and will value them? Servant leaders are excellent listeners. They are receptive and genuinely interested in the views and input of others. People instinctively understand that servant leaders want them to share their ideas and that these ideas will be

valued. Listening is a skill that can be learned and is essential for those who desire to be a servant leader. Without good listening skills, many of the other characteristics described in this publication cannot be achieved.

Empathy

Do people believe that you will understand what is happening in their lives and how it affects them? Servant leaders can “walk in others’ shoes.” They understand and empathize with others’ circumstances and problems. Leaders who are empathetic have earned confidence from others by understanding whatever situation is being faced. This characteristic is a skill that comes more naturally to some people than others, but it is pertinent for all who aspire to be a servant leader.

Healing

Do people come to you when the chips are down or when something traumatic has happened in their lives? Servant leaders are people who others want to approach when something traumatic has happened. They have developed a remarkable appreciation for the emotional health and spirit of others. They are good at facilitating the healing process and others gravitate toward them when emotional needs arise. The ability to create an environment that encourages emotional mending is crucial for those who want to become great servant leaders.

Awareness

Do others believe you have a strong awareness for what is going on? Servant leaders have a keen sense for what is happening around them. They are always looking for cues from the environment to inform their opinions and decisions. They know what’s going on and will rarely be fooled by appearances. This skill is crucial to the development of servant leaders.

Persuasion

Do others follow your requests because they want to or because they believe they “have to?” Servant leaders seek to convince others to do things rather than relying on formal authority. They are naturally very persuasive and offer compelling reasons when they make requests. They never force others to do things. This ability is important for servant leaders to develop.

Conceptualization

Do others communicate their ideas and vision for the organization when you are around? Servant leaders nurture the ability to conceptualize the world, events and possibilities. They encourage others to dream great dreams and avoid getting bogged down by day-to-day realities and operations. They foster an environment that encourages thinking big and valuing the creative process. Those who want to be great servant leaders must develop an environment that fosters conceptualization.

Foresight

Do others have confidence in your ability to anticipate the future and its consequences? Servant leaders have an uncanny ability to anticipate future events. This is not to say they are psychic or always right, but they are adept at picking up patterns in the environment and seeing what the future will bring. They usually anticipate consequences of decisions with great accuracy. Those who want to be successful servant leaders need to have and develop this foresight.

Stewardship

Do others believe you are preparing the organization to make a positive difference in the world? Servant leaders often are characterized by a strong sense of stewardship. Stewardship stems from medieval times when a steward would be assigned to hone the skills and development of the young prince to prepare him for his reign. The kingdom relied on the steward to teach and hold the prince in trust so that he would be a successful king. Today the term stewardship involves many of the same things. A steward in an organization is responsible for preparing it for its destiny, usually for the betterment of society. When we describe a leader as having a strong sense of stewardship, we refer to a desire to prepare the organization to contribute to the greater good of society — not unlike preparing the prince to serve the greater good of the kingdom. Making a positive difference in the future is characteristic of the stewardship mentality. Those who desire to be excellent servant leaders need to have a natural sense of stewardship. If you don’t naturally have a stewardship perspective, it is unlikely that the servant leadership style will come naturally to you.

Growth

Do people believe that you are committed to helping them develop and grow? Servant leaders have a strong commitment to the growth of people. They believe that all people have something to offer beyond their tangible contributions. Servant leaders work hard to help people in a number of ways — spiritually, professionally, personally. Those who want to be great servant leaders need to connect to others’ developmental needs and actively find ways to meet these needs.

Building Community

Do people feel a strong sense of community in the organization that you lead? Servant leaders have a strong sense of community spirit and work hard to foster it in an organization. They believe that an organization needs to function as a community. A servant leader instills a sense of community spirit in the workplace. Those who want to be great servant leaders need to work hard to build community in the organization.

Servant Leadership Development

Servant leadership is characterized by a belief that leadership development is an on-going, life-long learning process. For this reason, servant leaders commit to continual development in the 11 characteristics of servant leadership.

Some characteristics come more naturally to some people than to others. By their nature, characteristics such as *calling*, *empathy*, *healing* and *stewardship* are more difficult to learn and develop than other servant leadership characteristics. These are characteristics that leaders must already have to be successful servant leaders. Characteristics such as *listening*, *awareness*, *persuasion*, *conceptualization*, *foresight*, *growth* and *building community* all are learnable skills, so servant leaders can continually develop these. We encourage you to reflect and thoughtfully assess the degree to which you have what it takes to be a servant leader. If you are committed to being the best servant leader that you can be, we urge you to continuously work to develop these characteristics.

To learn more about servant leadership and the areas in which you could improve as a leader, you can contact your local Extension Educator or one of the authors:

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Sources of Information

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