Industrial and Commercial Training

What every leader ought to know about becoming a servant leader
Tina Mertel Carol Brill

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service
information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit
www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of
more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online
products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication
Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

What every leader ought to know about becoming a servant leader

Tina Mertel and Carol Brill

Tina Mertel is Author, Professional Coach and Facilitator with offices in New York and California, USA. Carol Brill is Author, Coach, Educator at the Cape May, New Jersey, USA.

Abstract

Purpose – *Employees want to be supported to do their best work, but not every leader is comfortable or motivated to serve an employee's "soft, emotional" needs. One key to help leaders become servant leaders is connecting serving others to their own values (even if "serving others" is not a value). Two assessments provided the framework for understanding this link between servant leadership attributes and the leader's values. A case study demonstrates this link within a healthcare system where these tools helped develop servant leadership skills to support employee performance. The paper aims to discuss these issues.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The authors used a servant leadership competency assessment and values assessment with leaders in a healthcare organization. By citing several leadership experts, and explaining how values relate to servant leadership behaviors, the authors offer a way to help leaders understand that anyone can improve their success with servant leadership.*

Findings – *By offering two case studies of anonymous yet actual participants in the study the authors show how leaders gained insights they needed to change their habits in working with others.*

Research limitations/implications – *The research results are from two distinct assessments. Researchers are encouraged to test the proposed propositions further with other similar assessments.*

Practical implications – *The paper includes implications for the development of a leader's servant leadership behaviors, which in turn supports employee engagement and organizational success.*

Social implications – *In today's age of mass technology, it has become a unique proposition to relate to others on the basis of serving their needs by relating to their values one-on-one. This paper inherently promotes in-person conversation with "soft" skills such as, listening, empathy, appreciation, and kindness.*

Originality/value – *This paper fulfills an identified need to study how servant leadership behaviors can be improved by using a second tool focused on values.*

Keywords *Leadership, Servant, Service, Behaviour, LSI, SDI*

Paper type *Case study*

How do leaders balance serving the needs of their employees and business needs to boost engagement and retention, especially in tough economic times? When leaders are continually trying to achieve more with less, how do they support employee development and empower them to meet or exceed business and customer needs? Consider the answer is in the hands of leaders and the behavioral choices they make in how they lead.

Why should a leader care about meeting employees' needs? Because employees leave managers not companies – many of us have heard the claim and seen the supporting statistics. Greg Savage, in a recent Huffington Post article tells us, "But when they (the departing employees) talk about 'morale,' when they say, 'communication is poor,' when they express frustration at the lack of clarity for their career progression – they are telling you that it's the leaders they are leaving. For it's obvious, isn't it? Leaders are responsible for morale, communication and career path[1]."

Employee turnover can be very expensive and presents new management challenges, so it is "more efficient to retain a quality employee than to recruit, train, and orient a replacement of the same quality." Turnover reports created by SHRM show that voluntary turnover will now resurface as a critical component of workforce planning as high performers seek opportunities to switch jobs and take their in-demand skill sets with them[2].

We have also seen how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (2013) applies to the workplace: the lower rungs of physiology and safety equate to the givens – things like fair pay and benefits, a workplace free from harm and harassment, reasonable job security, and the resources to do the job. We consider these givens because they are usually controlled and provided by the company and some are protected by laws.

The top three rungs of Maslow's Hierarchy: belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, are about an employee feeling valued to do their best work , make a difference, and be appreciated and respected by others for their contribution. This is what delineates an engaged and confident, "fully actualized" employee. It is also what seems to be missing for many employees, hence the decision to leave the manager who fails to meet these intrinsic needs (Figure 1).

There are many reasons why leaders may not pay attention to the top three rungs of employee needs or see it as their job to meet what seem like soft/emotional needs – after all is not that what H.R. is for? Or, they may have workplace behaviors they believe others share, or should share. In other words, "if everyone cared about the same things I do, we'd all get along."

The key to helping leaders reframe how they think about the "soft, emotional stuff" is for them to realize how supportive behaviors connect to the their own values. When leaders learn what is in it for them when they serve their employees, they can be motivated to serve more effectively, boosting employee engagement to do more with less. This is a win-win for the leader, the staff, and the organization.

"The soft emotional stuff"

So how do you get the leader to focus on the "soft emotional stuff" without resisting because it seems too touchy-feely?

The tool we used to focus on values was a self-assessment called the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI). The SDI is based in relationship awareness theory – a group of ideas developed by Elias H. Porter (Porter, 1996). The SDI was developed with the understanding that the quality of an organization is impacted by the effectiveness of its relationships. Unlike other personality assessments, the SDI goes beyond behavior to identify the motivational values behind

Figure 1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Source: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (2013)
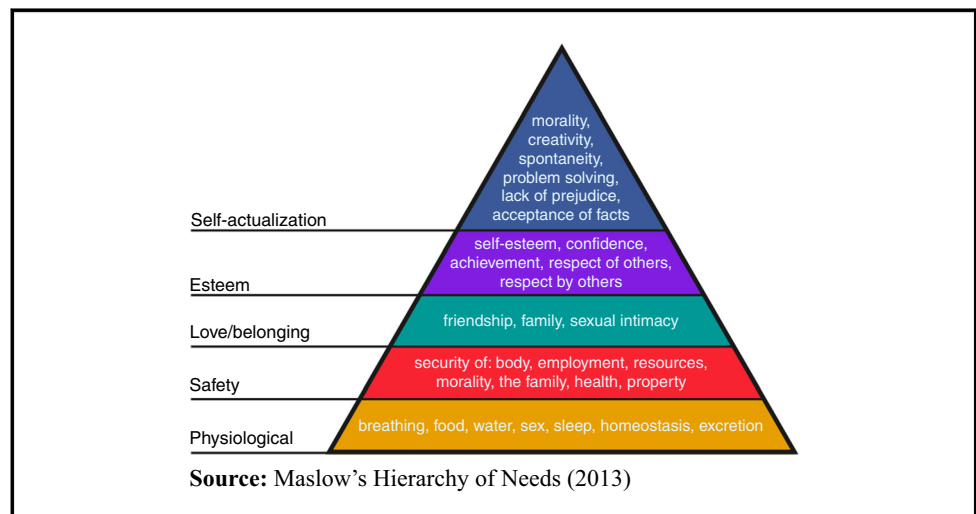
behavior – answering "why" individuals act the way they do. It becomes easier for the leader to adopt supportive behaviors once they understand the values that drive them from within.

There are numerous style assessment and trait inventories and we believe an approach like ours can work with many of them. We selected SDI because we saw a natural fit to the concept of serving employees by recognizing the values that drive the leader.

Dr Porter suggests seven grouping of values, known as Motivational Value Systems (Table I).

To gauge how consistently the leader serves their population, we used another assessment based on the concept of servant leadership.

You may know that Robert K. Greenleaf was the founder of the modern servant leadership movement. After years of working for AT&T, he felt a growing suspicion that the power-centered authoritarian leadership style so prominent in US institutions was not working, and in 1964 he took an early retirement to found the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (first called the "Center for Applied Ethics").

In *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970, Greenleaf said:

> The servant-leader is servant first […] It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. […] The best test, and difficult to administer, is: **Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?** (Greenleaf, 1991).

> Greenleaf has also remarked on how the Servant Leader not only serves others, but does so by serving an idea. "It is not 'I', the ultimate leader, that is moving this institution to greatness; it is the dream, the great idea. 'I' am subordinate to the idea; 'I' am servant of the idea along with everyone else who is involved in the effort […] It is the idea that unites people in the common effort, not the charisma of the leader. It is the communicated faith of the leader in the dream that enlists dedicated support needed to move people toward accomplishment of the dream" (Greenleaf, 1998).

In his book *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, author James Hunter, fictionalizes the ideologies of servant leadership and weaves them into an accessible parable-like tale. His story of a failing and unfulfilled leader teaches servant leadership in a simple way – helping leaders understand that successful leadership is based on respectful relationships, service, and love (Hunter, 2004).

Hunter also talks about love and leadership, love defined as how we behave toward others. This concept of love has its roots in the Greek word *agape* which is more about the choice to behave respectfully to all others – to unconditionally love their humanness in spite of whether we like or feel affection for them, choosing behaviors toward others that preserve respect and self-esteem. This "serving" kind of love is embodied in a quote by legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi. "I don't necessarily have to like my players and associates but as the leader I must love them. Love is loyalty, love is teamwork, love respects the dignity of the individual. This is the strength of any organization" (Hunter, 1998).

In the work environment, the concept of serving can be unsettling as it seems to turn the chain of command upside-down. In a traditional hierarchy the customer and staff are on the bottom "looking up" at leaders. In servant leadership, the customer is on the top of the pyramid and the leader is at the bottom looking up at employees and customers – determining how to best serve

Table I	Motivational Value System	
Motivational value system	*Finds meaning in*	*Sample behaviors*
Altruistic-Nurturing	Helping others	Supportive and trusting
Assertive-Directing	Getting results	Persuasive and forceful
Analytic-Autonomizing	Creating order out of chaos	Analytical and reserved
Flexible-Cohering	Being team based and flexible	Adaptable and tolerant
Assertive-Nurturing	Helping others by getting results	Ambitious and modest
Judicious-Competing	Thinking things through to create success	Cautious and competitive
Cautious-Supporting	Developing others through thoughtful processes	Fair and devoted

employees so they in turn can become servant leaders and serve the customer. Serving matters because it engages staff. And, engaged staff attract and maintain loyal customers. Businesses need loyal customers and engaged staff to be at their most productive state.

So if leaders are going to learn to serve, what characteristics make them more successful?

Both Hunter and Greenleaf defined servant leadership attributes. Informed by their work, the organization created a list of characteristics that fit their culture and goals. Abbreviated definitions follow:

■ Honesty – to be free from deception. Honesty requires clarifying expectations and setting clear standards. It requires confronting people if gaps exist between set standards and performance and holding people accountable to remove those gaps.

■ Respectfulness – treating people like they are important people regardless of your personal feelings toward them or regardless of their behavior. One of your primary roles as the leader is to assist them in achieving success. Their success will be your success!

■ Patience – showing self-control with others. This includes creating a safe environment for people to make mistakes, offer contrary opinion in a respectful way, allowing room for personal growth, never publicly embarrassing others, taking the time to listen and understand others, etc.

■ Kindness – giving attention, appreciation, and encouragement to those you lead, regardless of your personal feelings toward them. People have a legitimate need to be appreciated, listened to, praised, encouraged, etc. Simple courtesies are also important like good morning, please, thank you, I am sorry, etc.

■ Selflessness – placing a priority on identifying and meeting the legitimate needs of others even ahead of meeting your own needs and wants.

■ Humility – an absence of arrogance, excessive pride, or "puffed-up" behavior. Humility is being authentic with people, removing unnecessary "masks" and being who you really are. It also requires being "approachable" and "safe" for people.

■ Forgiveness – giving up resentment when you have been wronged. It is essential that you learn to assertively deal with people when they have let you down and then give up any lingering resentment or anger.

■ Commitment – developing a vision and a passion for becoming the best leader you can be and continually improving yourself to realize that vision. Commitment requires pushing those you lead to give their best efforts. You cannot expect others to be committed and to give their best if you are unwilling to model that behavior. Finally, commitment requires "sticking with" the choice you have made and not giving up or giving in (apathy).

To provide leaders' feedback on these characteristics, Hunter defined specific, observable behaviors. Examples of these behavior-based statements include, "Treats people with respect (i.e. like they are important people)" and "Is able to forgive mistakes and not hold grudges."

Using these statements, he created a servant leadership behavior assessment tool called Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI). In our work together, the LSI was used to seek 360 feedback on a leader's servant leadership behavior.

The LSI included 25 behavioral statements. For each statement, feedback providers rated the leader's performance using a four-point scale where $4 =$ strongly agree, $3 =$ agree, $2 =$ disagree, and $1 =$ strongly disagree. Leaders also self-assessed using the same scale. Leaders and feedback providers had the option of providing qualitative comments about strengths and areas needing work and improvement. Feedback ratings were aggregated into a summary report including an overall composite score and an individual rating for each statement. The individual rating helped leaders target specific areas of excellence, good performance, potential opportunities for improvement, or urgent problem areas.

Viewing the LSI results through the lens of their individual values, helped leaders gain insight into: first, how their own motivations and values translate into behavior choices; second, preferences

about frequently and less frequently used strengths; and finally, how misused or overdone strengths can become weaknesses. With these insights, the leader is better equipped to make different choices about use of strengths, and to target very specific strength development that will allow her/him to better serve.

Once a leader knew where they were deficient, they were able to use their SDI results to understand why they were not motivated to perform that behavior; how learning to use that behavior supports their own values.

An added benefit is that in the process of learning about their own values, leaders gain insight, and appreciation about how others (those they serve) value different things.

True servant leaders understand and appreciate all values people hold, and most importantly how to serve others in a meaningful way – that is, a way that aligns with a variety of values.

The leader learned about their own values through the SDI assessment. The LSI provided feedback on how others observe their behavior, including their strengths and opportunities for improvement.

So how did we integrate the two to provide deeper insights to help leaders become servant leaders?

Values alignment

Looking through the lens of relationship awareness theory, on which the SDI is based, we noticed that close to 50 percent of the LSI behaviors used to rate leaders were related to the strengths of the "Altruistic-Nurturing" value system. As noted earlier, the Altruistic-Nurturing value system is characterized by helping others and has strengths such as being supportive and trusting. Sample LSI behaviors include:

- gives encouragement to others;

- is someone people can trust; and

- is a good listener.

Sample relating styles of the Altruistic-Nurturing system:

- being open and responsive to the needs of others;

- seeking ways to bring help to others;

- trying to make life easier for others; and

- ensuring others are valued.

Given this correlation, what does a leader do to become a servant leader if they do not inherently have the Altruistic-Nurturing values? And, does having the altruistic value system automatically mean the leader only uses altruistic strengths or uses them well?

We learned that a leader from any value system can become a servant leader. The key is for the leader first to understand his or her value system and how they currently serve others. The leader can then choose to further develop altruistic behaviors and strengths to better serve the needs of others. In relationship awareness/SDI vocabulary, this is referred to as "borrowing" altruistic strengths. This does not mean the leader has to become someone different or stop being true to their own values. Here are examples of why a leader from each of the value systems would be motivated to use Altruistic-Nurturing strengths to serve others (Table II).

The following case study demonstrates why a leader who does not have an altruistic nurturing value would be motivated to serve others and to become a more effective servant leader.

Kate is a clinical leader with 24/7 responsibilities over 80 direct reports (Table III).

Motivation to serve: if I serve others, they will be more open to take my direction.

Table II	Reason to be motivated to serve others
Motivational value system	*Reason to be motivated to serve others*
Altruistic-Nurturing	Has a natural value of serving others
Assertive-Directing	Content employees will work harder to achieve results
Analytic-Autotomizing	Showing others I care will help them share information with me
Flexible-Cohering	Serving satisfies my drive to try out different ways of acting in relating to others
Assertive-Nurturing	Serving and supporting others so they are more likely to take my direction
Judicious-Competing	Supporting others helps me learn what they know, and add these thoughts into my strategy
Cautious-Supporting	When we serve others we help them to become self-sufficient

Table III	Case study: Kate
Assessment	*Kate's results*
SDI motivational value system	Altruistic-Nurturing: when things are going well, Kate values helping others by getting results
LSI opportunities	Top strengths: first, holding others accountable; second, sets high goals; third, confronts people with problem situations as they arise
	Lowest rankings: first, domineering, patience, and self-control; and second, publicly embarrassing others were rated as potential or urgent problem areas

The SDI helped Kate understand that in her zeal to get results now, her Assertive-Directing strengths of "quick to act" and "forceful", often over-powered her Altruistic-Nurturing strengths coming across to others as rash and dictatorial.

Her SDI results helped Kate recognize that by balancing her Assertive-Directing strengths with Altruistic-Nurturing strengths she could satisfy her drive for results because serving and supporting others would make them more open to taking her direction. She worked on growing Altruistic-Nurturing strengths of active listening and trust, seeking first to understand others' thoughts and feelings, providing the support they needed to get results.

By involving others in clarifying reasonable expectations, and agreeing together on solutions, she showed others she respected their contribution and rebuilt trust. She practiced asking open-ended questions and using Altruistic-Nurturing language, for example "What **support** do you need from me to succeed with this?" or "How do you **feel** about this assignment?"

In a follow-up LSI after six months, Kate's problem ratings improved, and she reported that practicing patience and using more supportive language were regular habits.

2nd case study: Thomas is a leader with long company tenure in a support services department (Table IV).

Motivation to serve: I value serving others.

Table IV	Case study: Thomas
Assessment	*Thomas' results*
SDI motivational value system	Altruistic-Nurturing: values supporting others
LSI opportunities	Top strengths: first, giving appreciation and encouragement; second, patience and self-control; third, ability to make decisions; and finally, flexibility
	Lowest rankings: first, holding others accountable; second, timely coaching and counseling; third, staying close to subordinates; and finally, being sensitive to the impact of his decisions on others

Through his SDI and LSI results, Thomas learned he needed to use his Altruistic-Nurturing differently by not overdoing them.

The SDI tells us that when overdone, strengths become weaknesses. For instance, helpful can be smothering, and supportive can be self-sacrificing.

Thomas recognized he was not serving others when he failed to coach them and hold them accountable. By "smothering" them with kindness, he was not helping them to grow and become the best they can be.

To better balance his strengths of kindness, caring, and caution, Thomas focused on using behaviors from the Assertive-Directing value system such as: first, quick to act – getting things started without delay; second, persuasive – urge, influence, and convince others.

By balancing these strengths, he was able to better satisfy his own values of supporting others to ensure their maximum growth.

Conclusion

As organizations strive to excel and achieve more with less, engaging and retaining staff are key success factors. An employee is more likely to stick with an organization and leader when the leader pays attention to the "soft, emotional stuff" that builds employee morale including behaviors that respect and promote two-way communication. Teaching leaders to value serving and become servant leaders helps them create a work environment where the top three rungs of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization "on the job," can be realized.

We sought out to explain and demonstrate how the key to helping leaders reframe how they think about the "soft, emotional stuff" is by having them focus on values – specifically, focusing on values in the context of serving their employees. If a leader does not value directly helping others, they may be motivated to help in order to get something else.

By utilizing the SDI assessment from Dr Porter and Jim Hunter's LSI 360 evaluation tool, we see how one may practice behaviors that support servant leadership, and not necessarily hold those behaviors within one's own value system.

Like all practice or behavior change, as first, it may feel awkward for the leader to use these new behaviors in becoming servant leaders – learning new behaviors is not always automatic or easy. The leader understanding how he or she is currently using strengths and how "borrowing" strengths that will better serve the needs of staff and others is the first step in the leader's journey to become a servant leader. It takes maturity to practice new behavior, risk failing, and "start afresh" to continue to progress. With support, leaders can learn from their failures and continue to mature and become servant leaders. This support may include coaching, peer discussions, mentoring, blended learning, and reading servant leadership literature.

As leaders become servant leaders they learn and appreciate how the practice of deeply listening to understand and serve their employees' concerns connects to their own values. Learning what motivates individual employees leads to a boost in employee engagement and allows leaders to do more with less. This is a win-win for the leader, the staff, and the organization.

Notes

1. www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-savage/people-dont-leave-companies_b_4277535.html (accessed January 3, 2015).

2. www.shrm.org/Research/benchmarks/Documents/Trends%20in%20Turnover_FINAL.pdf (accessed January 3, 2015).

References

Greenleaf, R.K. (1991), *The Servant as Leader*, The Robert K. Greenleaf Center, Indianapolis, IN, p. 7.

Greenleaf, R.K. (1998), *The Power of Servant Leadership*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco, CA, p. 87.

Hunter, J.C. (1998), *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, Crown Business, New York, pp. 91-125.

Hunter, J.C. (2004), *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader*, Crown Business, New York.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (2013), In Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia, available at: http://en. wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title = Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs&oldid = 585592400 (accessed February 23, 2014).

Porter, E. (1996), *Relationship Awareness Theory: Manual of Administration and Interpretation*, 9th ed., Personal Strengths Publishing, Carlsbad, CA.

Online resources

Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI), available at: www.jameshunter.com (accessed January 3, 2015).

Servant leadership, available at: www.greenleaf.org (accessed January 3, 2015).

Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI), available at: www.personalstrengths.com (accessed January 3, 2015).

Corresponding authors

Tina Mertel can be contacted at: tina@meaningfulcoaching.com; Carol Brill can be contacted at: carolfragalebrill@comcast.net