
What Servant Leadership Is Not



By Renita Kalhorn (INSEAD MBA '95J), Leadership Development and Executive Coach

There's no magic formula for servant leadership, but there are a few common misconceptions about what it means to put your team's needs first.

Steffen Heilmann is a firm believer in empowering his people and giving them opportunities to grow. In his early weeks as CTO at [Aroundhome](#), he and his staff were heading into an important negotiation with their data centre provider to take over responsibility of a mission-critical database.

Steffen had confidence in the abilities of his Head of Ops to take full ownership of the process so he said something to the effect of "You handle it".

A few days later, however, he sensed something was off. When he sat down with his Head of Ops to learn more, Steffen realised the misunderstanding. Instead of feeling empowered, his Head of Ops felt abandoned – as if Steffen were simply offloading all the responsibility and pressure onto his shoulders.

This was far from the case. In fact, Steffen had plenty of negotiating experience and was only too willing to share his expertise.

Ah, the challenge of translating leadership concepts from theory into practice.

A nebulous concept

As the world becomes increasingly complex and volatile, the nature of effective leadership itself is changing fast:

- From maintaining power and control to empowering others.
- From using employees as a means to maximise efficiency to enabling learning and innovation.
- From the leader as hero(ine) on a pedestal to the team as the driving force.

This approach is often called "servant leadership" because leaders see themselves as serving – rather than commanding – the people around them.

But there's nothing *servile* or obsequious about it. In fact, being a "servant leader" requires:

- Confidence and courage to break away from the more familiar "command and control" style of leadership.
- An expanded range of emotional intelligence skills – curiosity, humility, vulnerability – as well as flexibility and intuition in expressing them.
- Situational awareness and the ability to adapt quickly – it's not a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

There's no magic formula: Servant leadership is a nebulous concept that, in practice, could mean less interaction with team members or being more hands-on, depending on the context.

It also means different things to different people and, by the same token, can be misapplied and misinterpreted. Despite the best intentions, it can often backfire at the time of implementation. That's why, perhaps, it's useful to make distinctions around what doesn't work, i.e. what servant leadership *isn't*.

Empowering is not about ceding all responsibility

As Steffen quickly realised, he couldn't expect his team to read his mind. He thought he was giving them autonomy; they thought he didn't care.

Now when a member of his team is taking on a new or critical project, Steffen makes sure to give them context, by explicitly stating the overarching goal and defining strategic priorities (e.g. speed versus cost). He also sets up regular touch points, not simply to get a status update but to check in with the team member at a personal level and give them an opportunity to voice any concerns or ask for support.

As his focus on high-level priorities makes him less available on a daily basis, Steffen finds that he's taken on more of a coaching and mentoring role and his team appreciates his autonomy-based delegation approach.

Being inclusive doesn't mean losing objectivity

Sharyanne McSwain, COO at [Echoing Green](#), has more than 20 years of experience as an inclusive leader. She knows it's more effective than simply passing orders down the formal hierarchy.

So when she wants information that hasn't been filtered, she doesn't limit communication to her direct reports. She'll go to the source and connect with them as a human being.

When there was a lack of compliance with an internal payment request process, for example, Sharyanne reached out directly to one of the junior team members, saying: "I hear there's a problem and I'd like to understand better. Can you tell me how the process is supposed to work?"

Before the Covid pandemic, these interactions happened organically: She could go into the bullpen and "manage by wandering around". Now that the staff is working remotely, Sharyanne takes advantage of openings in her schedule to "Zoom bomb" team members with a friendly check-in.

For team members who live in her neighbourhood, she also does "stoop meetings", socially distanced one-on-ones on the front stairs of her Brooklyn brownstone. Meeting in her home environment gives the team another way to see her as a human being, not just the "big boss".

Still, despite the friendly nature of these interactions, Sharyanne maintains a professional context through her language and dress, and often reiterates that her first obligation is to act on behalf of the organisation. "You're probably not going to like this" she'll say when communicating a decision that's not open to discussion.

Taking care of others doesn't mean being a martyr

Sebastian Sujka is CEO at [xbird](#), an AI healthcare start-up with a team of 20. Taking to heart the tenets of servant leadership, he consistently put everyone else's needs before his own. His mantra was: "It's my job to give people what they need."

So when an unexpected problem came up, he would say to the team, "You guys go home, I'll take care of it."

If a client situation blew up, he'd step in and take the heat.

Over the course of several months, the team got used to Sebastian coming to the rescue. There were more and more nights where he found himself sitting alone in the office at 10 pm. Not surprisingly, he started to feel unappreciated and resentful and lose his sense of joy in building the company.

That's when he came to the realisation: "I could work until 10 every night and it wouldn't be enough." If he wanted the business to succeed, he had to change his approach.

The team, as it turns out, had been feeling left out. So when Sebastian told them he was going to stop putting out fires, they were eager to take more ownership.

Now, when a team member comes to him with a problem, Sebastian focuses first on guiding the person to better understand the problem so they can come up with the solution, rather than jumping in immediately to "save the day".

He's also more sensitive to the emotional dynamics. If he detects anxiety or hesitation, he uses encouragement (and a bit of reverse psychology), saying: "I think you can do this. And, it's an iterative process so you won't be on your own, I'll be here. Still, if you feel it is too much to take on, I could try to squeeze it into my schedule, but the result will probably be worse because I cannot dedicate enough time to it." People usually answer with a confident smile, "No, I can do it."

So yes, servant leadership means being comfortable with ambiguity. It requires great self-awareness and ongoing calibration of what's best for the greater good.

But here's how leaders will know they've gotten it right:

- Instead of alerting them to burning fires, their team says: "This was the problem and here's how we solved it."
- Tasks they've delegated don't land up back on their plate.
- People tell them: "I thought about how you would handle it."

And when leaders and teams have each other's backs, it creates a powerful virtuous cycle that allows everyone to achieve more with less.

Which just might mean being able to shut down the laptop at 6 pm more often to enjoy a leisurely dinner with family.

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