

## Definition of Servant Leadership

[Robert K. Greenleaf](#) never specifically defined servant leadership but, based on the writings of Greenleaf and others, it can still be defined as a management philosophy which implies a comprehensive view of the quality of people, work and community spirit. It requires a spiritual understanding of identity, mission, vision and environment. A servant leader is someone who is servant first, who has responsibility to be in the world, and so he contributes to the well-being of people and community. A servant leader looks to the needs of the people and asks himself how he can help them to solve problems and promote personal development. He places his main focus on people, because only content and motivated people are able to reach their targets and to fulfill the set expectations.

In his essay *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf said:

„It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first; perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature." <sup>[1]</sup>

### Servant Leadership in the context of leadership styles

The most common division of leadership styles is the distinction between [autocratic](#), participative and [laissez-faire](#) leadership styles. The authoritarian style of management requires clearly defined tasks and monitoring their execution and results. The decision-making responsibility rests with the executive. In contrast to the autocratic, the practice of a participative leadership style involves employees in decision-making. More extensive tasks are delegated. The employee's influence and responsibility increases. The laissez-faire style of leadership is negligible in practice.

Servant Leadership can be most likely associated with the participative management style. The authoritarian leadership style does not correspond to the guiding principle. The highest priority of a servant leader is to encourage, support and enable subordinates to unfold their full potential and abilities. This leads to an obligation to delegate responsibility and engage in participative decision-making. In the [managerial grid model](#) of Blake and Mouton, the participative style of leadership is presented as the approach with the greatest possible performance and employee satisfaction. However, there is the question whether a management style can be declared as universal and universally applicable. <sup>[2]</sup> Situational contexts are not considered. <sup>[3]</sup>

The servant leadership approach goes beyond employee-related behavior and calls for a rethinking of the hierarchical relationship between leaders and subordinates. This does not mean that the ideal of a

participative style in any situation is to be enforced, but that the focus of management responsibilities is the promotion of performance and satisfaction of employees.

## Characteristics of being a servant leader

Larry C. Spears, who has served as President and [CEO](#) of the [Robert K. Greenleaf](#) Center for Servant Leadership since [1990](#), has extracted a set of 10 [characteristics](#) that are central to the development of a servant leader:

- [Listening](#): Traditionally, and also in servant leadership, [managers](#) are required to have communication skills as well as the competence to make decisions. A servant leader has the [motivation](#) to listen actively to subordinates and support them in decision identification. The servant leader particularly needs to pay attention to what remains unspoken in the management setting. This means relying on his inner voice in order to find out what the body, mind and spirit are communicating.<sup>[4]</sup>
- [Empathy](#): A servant leader attempts to understand and empathize with others. Workers may be considered not only as employees, but also as people who need respect and appreciation for their personal development. As a result, leadership is seen as a special type of human work, which ultimately generates a competitive advantage.<sup>[5]</sup>
- [Healing](#): A great strength of a Servant Leader is the ability for healing one's self and others. A servant leader tries to help people solve their problems and conflicts in relationships, because he wants to encourage and support the personal development of each individual.<sup>[6]</sup> This leads to the formation of a business culture, in which the working environment is dynamic, fun and free of the fear of failure.<sup>[7]</sup>
- [Awareness](#): A servant leader needs to gain general awareness and especially [self-awareness](#). He has the ability to view situations from a more integrated, holistic position. As a result, he gets a better understanding about [ethics](#) and values.
- [Persuasion](#): A Servant Leader does not take advantage of their power and status by coercing compliance; they rather try to convince those they manage. This element distinguishes servant leadership most clearly from traditional, authoritarian models and can be traced back to the religious views of Robert Greenleaf.
- [Conceptualization](#): A servant leader thinks beyond day-to-day realities. That means he has the ability to see beyond the limits of the operating business and also focuses on long term operating goals.<sup>[8]</sup> A Leader constructs a personal vision that only he can develop by reflecting on the meaning of life. As a result, he derives specific goals and implementation strategies.<sup>[9]</sup>

- **Foresight:** Foresight is the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation. It enables the servant leader to learn about the past and to achieve a better understanding about the current reality. It also enables the servant leader to identify consequences about the future. This characteristic is closely related to conceptualization.
- **Stewardship:** CEOs, staffs and trustees have the task to hold their [institution](#) in trust for the greater good of society. In conclusion, servant leadership is seen as an obligation to help and serve others. Openness and persuasion are more important than control.
- **Commitment to the growth of people:** A servant leader is convinced that people have an intrinsic value beyond their contributions as workers. Therefore, she should nurture the personal, professional and [spiritual](#) growth of employees. For example, she spends money for the personal and professional development of the people who make up her organization. The servant leader will also encourage the ideas of everyone and involve workers in decision making.
- **Building community:** A servant leader identifies means to build a strong community within his organization and wants to develop a true community among businesses and institutions.<sup>[10]</sup>

As a result it has to be emphasized that these 10 characteristics are by no means [exhaustive](#).<sup>[11]</sup> They should not be interpreted as a certain manner to behave and they do not represent the best method to gain aims. Rather every person shall reflect if these characteristics can be useful for his [personal development](#).<sup>[12]</sup>

## History of Servant Leadership

The general concept is [ancient](#). [Chanakya](#) wrote, in the 4th century B.C., in his book [Arthashastra](#):

“the king [leader] shall consider as good, not what pleases himself but what pleases his subjects [followers]” “the king [leader] is a paid servant and enjoys the resources of the state together with the people.”

There are passages that relate to servant leadership in the [Tao Te Ching](#), attributed to [Lao-Tzu](#), who is believed to have lived in [China](#) sometime between 570 B.C. and 490 B.C.:

The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware. Next comes one whom they love and praise. Next comes one whom they fear. Next comes one whom they despise and defy. When you are lacking in faith, others will be unfaithful to you. The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words. When his task is accomplished and things have been completed, all the people say, ‘We ourselves have achieved it!’<sup>[13]</sup>

The concept has been included in many religious text such as this quote from the Christian New Testament (Authorized King James): “But ye [shall] not [be] so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve” or this quote from Islam’s texts: “the leader of a people is their servant”.

The term of modern Servant Leadership and servant leader were coined by [Robert K. Greenleaf](#) in 1970. He coined this phrase in his essay, “*The Servant as Leader*“. Greenleaf worked a long time at [AT&T](#) and spent most of his career on management studies, management development and management training. After working at AT&T he started a career as visiting lecturer and management consultant for many companies, universities, churches and non-profit organizations, for example at the [Harvard Business School](#), [University of Virginia](#), [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) (MIT) or [Ford Foundation](#). In 1964 he founded the international non-profit foundation named Center of Applied Ethics, which was renamed to *The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership* in 1985.

The idea for his essay, "The Servant as Leader," came out of reading [Hermann Hesse](#)'s [Journey to the East](#). The story is about a travel group on an exceptional mythical journey. The main character of this story is Leo. Leo is the companion and servant of the group, but he also sustains them with his charisma and spirit, and gives them well-being. Everything was going well until Leo disappeared; the group fall apart and the journey had to be prematurely interrupted. The group cannot exist longer without their servant Leo. After reading this story Greenleaf comes to the knowledge that a good leader is primarily a servant. A good leader must first be a good servant. Therefore he wrote down in his essay, *The Servant as Leader*, which has sold over 500 000 copies.

## Models of Servant Leadership

Most writers see servant leadership as an underlying philosophy of leadership, demonstrated through specific characteristics and practices. The foundational concepts are found in Greenleaf’s first three major essays, "The Servant as Leader", "The Institution as Servant", and "Trustees as Servants."

Larry Spears, who served for 17 years as the head of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, identified ten characteristic of servant leaders in the writings of Greenleaf. The ten characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community. Leadership experts such as Bolman, Deal, Covey, Fullan, Sergiovanni, and Heifitz also reference these characteristics as essential components of effective leadership.

The Center for Servant Leadership at the Pastoral Institute in Georgia defines servant leadership as a lifelong journey that includes discovery of one’s self, a desire to serve others, and a commitment to lead. Servant-leaders continually strive to be trustworthy, self-aware, humble, caring, visionary, empowering, relational, competent, good stewards, and community builders.

Kent Keith, author of *The Case for Servant Leadership* and the current CEO of the Greenleaf Center, states that servant leadership is ethical, practical, and meaningful. He identifies seven key practices of servant leaders: self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight. James Sipe and Don Frick, in their book *The Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership*, state that servant-leaders are individuals of character, put people first, are skilled communicators, are compassionate collaborators, use foresight, are systems thinkers, and exercise moral authority.

Unlike leadership approaches with a top-down hierarchical style, servant leadership instead emphasizes collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power. At heart, the individual is a servant first, making the conscious decision to lead in order to better serve others, not to increase their own power. The objective is to enhance the growth of individuals in the organization and increase teamwork and personal involvement. A recent behavioral economics experiment demonstrates the group benefits of servant leadership. Teams of players coordinated their actions better with a servant leader resulting in improved outcomes for the followers (but not for the selfless leaders).<sup>[14]</sup>

## Advantages

- This concept is seen as a long-term [concept](#) to live and work and therefore has the potential to influence the [society](#) in a positive way.<sup>[15]</sup>
- The exemplary treatment of [employees](#) leads to an excellent treatment of [customers](#) by employees of the [company](#) and a high loyalty of the customers.
- There is a high employee [identification](#) with the enterprise.
- An excellent [corporate culture](#) is developed.
- Leaders of a company define themselves by their significance to the people.
- Servant Leadership can be used as a principle to improve the return on investment of staff, in all economic sectors. Managers who empower and respect their staff get better performance in return.<sup>[16] [17]</sup>

## Disadvantages

- The many characteristics of a servant leader may seem excessive.<sup>[citation needed][18]</sup> There are only a few leaders who can fulfill these attributes.<sup>[neutrality is disputed]</sup>
- Servant Leadership is seen as a long-term application and therefore needs time for applying.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Other consultants

The Servant Leadership idea of [Robert K. Greenleaf](#) is supported by many leadership and management writers such as James Autry, [Ken Blanchard](#), [Stephen Covey](#), [Peter Block](#), [Peter Senge](#), [Max DePree](#),

Scott Greenberg, Larry Spears, [Margaret Wheatley](#), James C. Hunter, Kent Keith, Ken Jennings, Don Frick and others.

## Case study: Southwest Airlines

This is an example of how the very theoretical leadership approach of Servant Leadership can be implemented in the [corporate culture](#) of a company.

[Southwest Airlines](#) is one of the largest and consistently profitable airlines in the U.S. and often mentioned in relation to servant leadership. Co-founder and former CEO [Herb Kelleher](#) and former vice president [Colleen Barrett](#) have successfully established the management style of servant leadership in the airline's corporate culture. The pyramid of the company's priorities is built upside down compared to other companies. The employees are at the top of the pyramid and the executives deliver proactive customer service to them.<sup>[20]</sup> If they do a good job, the employees can spend their time to service the second important group, the customers. As result of good service to the customers the company will make a good profit which is of interest of the [shareholders](#). [Herb Kelleher](#) compares [leadership](#) with customer service: "Just as Southwest has their customers, the passengers, the [management](#) has their customers, the employees. If the customers are not satisfied, they will not fly again with Southwest. If the employees are not satisfied, they will not deliver the required performance."

[Leadership](#) expectations at Southwest: develop people, build great teams, think strategically, excellent results and the identification with the values of the company.

Based on these expectations it becomes clear how the theoretical approach to specific guidelines and principles of conduct was formulated. Therefore very careful attention is paid to whether potential employees meet the values of the company: "Hire for attitude and train for skill". The value system consists of three core values: "warrior spirit", as defined by the desire to get excellent results, "a servant's heart" or "to put others first", as well as "a fun-loving attitude," which means not to take themselves too seriously.<sup>[21]</sup> The executive's purpose is also to create a very positive and familiar working environment. The "fun" image of Southwest has become an important part of the corporate culture. It's also in the company's best interests to communicate this to their customers. These are also characteristics of the behavior of a servant leader: active listening, empathy, healing and the formation of a community.

Another important executive function at [Southwest Airlines](#) is the development of people. The employees are motivated to participate in decision-making. They should be encouraged to solve problems themselves and to grow by personal success.<sup>[22]</sup> The obligation to develop the individual also corresponds to the concept of Servant Leadership.

Further expectations of the managers are strategic thinking and outstanding results. The following guidelines serve to guide: strive for continuous improvement, understanding of the context of current



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actions and implications for the future, strategic goals into specific action plans and future-oriented view of things.<sup>[23]</sup> The courage to conceptualize and far-sighted visions are also within the meaning of the servant leadership approach. Through the personal identification with the goals of the company, performance and commitment increases.

