

**Servant Leadership as Exemplary Leadership:  
Credibility, Empowerment, and Values in Practice**

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## **Servant Leadership as Exemplary Leadership**

Leadership is not a rank or a title. Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the term "servant leadership," argued that it begins with a natural feeling rather than a strategy (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). In Chapter 1 of *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf (2002) writes, "[t]he servant leader is servant first" (p. 26). Kouzes and Posner (2007) echo this sentiment from a different angle, arguing that leadership begins with credibility, and credibility begins with what leaders actually do. Together, these frameworks reveal a unified picture: exemplary leadership and servant leadership are not distinct ideals. They are the same calling, manifested in daily behavior.

### **Credibility as the Foundation of Leadership**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) present this idea as their First Law of Leadership, arguing that a leader's credibility must be established before their message is accepted. This credibility is built through consistent and observable actions. Kouzes and Posner (2007) summarize this principle with the phrase "Do What You Say You Will Do" (p. 26). Behaviorally, this principle means:

- Transparent communication and keeping one's word are examples of honesty.
- Competence demonstrated through skilled decision-making and purposeful vision-setting.
- Inspiration earned by connecting people to a meaningful shared purpose.

Greenleaf (2002) reframes what leadership success actually means, arguing that a servant leader's effectiveness is measured not by personal achievement or organizational metrics but by the tangible development of the people in their care over time (Greenleaf, 2002). A leader is not credible because of their title or track record of results alone. They are credible because the people around them are developing. The first two commitments, Clarify Values and Model the Way, provide the observable foundation upon which a leader's credibility is built. Eva et al. (2019) find that servant leadership can be measured and distinguished from other models because of its consistent emphasis on follower development over leader self-interest.

Liz Theophille illustrates behavioral credibility in action. Rather than delegating difficult news about a data center consolidation to human resources, she personally spoke with all 400 affected employees. After she could no longer support her team from within the organization, she left to protect her integrity. She explained her decision: "I decided to go to my boss, and I said, 'Once this transition is complete, I will leave the organization'" (Theophille, 2018, 10:33). Theophille's story is "Model the Way" at its most powerful: not communicating values, but embodying them at personal cost.

### **Empowering Others as a Leadership Practice**

Commitments seven through ten (Foster Collaboration, Strengthen Others, Recognize Contributions, and Celebrate Values and Victories) share a single purpose: creating conditions where people can do their best work, which is also the defining aim of servant leadership. Greenleaf (2002) cautions that leaders should never assume their intelligence or good intentions automatically make them good listeners or genuinely open to others. Those capacities must be cultivated with intention. Eva et al. (2019) confirm that servant leaders consistently produce higher follower performance and engagement because they invest in their team's growth rather than directing people toward their own goals.

Ali Fett offers practical frameworks that bring these commitments to life (Fett, 2020):

- **Puzzle Piece:** The leader's job is not to shape people to fit a mold but to create conditions for individuals to become who they should be, a direct expression of the commitment to strengthen others.
- **Goalposts:** Set clear expectations, then allow team members creative freedom to achieve them. Structure without micromanagement is what genuine empowerment looks like.
- **Praise and Acknowledgment:** Filling people's metaphorical buckets with specific feedback directly reflects encouraging the heart and signals that their work matters.

Theophille adds a critical dimension: psychological safety (Theophille, 2018). People cannot take risks, grow, or contribute fully if they fear punishment for speaking up or failing, which aligns with Greenleaf's (2002) vision of servant leadership as a model that helps individuals grow toward greater autonomy and their capacity to serve others, a transformation that is impossible in a culture of fear. Creating psychological safety is itself an act of empowerment, and it must be modeled from the top.

### **Modeling Values Through Transparency and Candor**

Commitments three through six (Envision the Future, Enlist Others, Search for Opportunities, and Experiment and Take Risks) require a leader who is genuinely self-aware and willing to challenge their assumptions. Greenleaf (2002) argues that even excellent leaders cannot assume they are really listening to or open to others. That kind of openness must be practiced, not presumed. The discipline of honest self-reflection is not optional for a servant leader. It is foundational. Envisioning the future requires a leader who can articulate a shared direction with enough clarity that others want to follow it, and that kind of vision only carries weight when it is grounded in self-awareness and honest communication. Enlisting others depends on the same foundation: people commit to a direction when they trust the leader casting it, which means the leader must first demonstrate the openness and candor that Greenleaf (2002) identifies as essential to genuine servant leadership.

Ali Fett's frameworks operationalize this principle at the interpersonal level (Fett, 2020):

- **Cork:** Pause before reacting. This discipline of reflection prevents reactive patterns that kill trust over time.
- **Ladder of Assumption:** Check your assumptions before they harden into poor decisions or damaged relationships, a direct expression of challenging the process.

- **Transparency:** Establish a culture where openness is protected, and feedback is shared without hesitation. This is a strategic behavior, not a soft skill, and it requires intentional practice, reflecting Greenleaf's (2002) emphasis on listening and genuine care as the bedrock of servant leadership.

Theophille's professional evolution provides the most compelling instance of challenging established systems from within. She describes a deliberate shift from fear-based leadership to a model grounded in compassion and listening (Theophille, 2018). That transformation required honest self-examination and the willingness to lead differently, which is itself a servant leadership act. Externally, she encouraged her teams to embrace an experimental mindset: try new approaches, accept failure as part of the learning process, and treat false starts as data. This reflects Kouzes and Posner's (2007) commitment to experimentation and risk-taking, filtered through the servant leader's belief, shared by Greenleaf (2002), that genuine growth requires the freedom to fail.

### **Recommendations**

For organizations that are serious about employee development, the frameworks in this paper have direct practical implications.

First, organizations should invest in developing leaders at every level, not just at the top. Greenleaf (2002) measures servant leadership by whether people are growing in capability and confidence, a standard that cannot be met by a small executive tier alone. Fett's Puzzle Piece framework reinforces this idea: the leader's job is to create the conditions for individuals to become who they are capable of becoming, rather than to shape them to fit a mold (Fett, 2020).

Second, rather than focusing only on results, leaders should be assessed based on their behavior. The Ten Commitments, each of which describes observable behavior rather than abstract virtue, give this approach a tangible framework (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Eva et al. (2019) confirm that servant leaders produce measurably better results precisely because they

invest in their team's development. Organizations that measure only output are asking the wrong question. The right question is whether the people around a leader are growing.

Third, psychological safety must be treated as a leadership responsibility. Theophille (2018) clearly illustrates this point by modeling a safer workplace at personal expense rather than just advocating for it. Greenleaf (2002) argues that one must deliberately cultivate genuine openness to others. A team that cannot be honest or admit failure cannot grow, and that starts with the leader.

### **Conclusion**

Both exemplary leadership and servant leadership rest on the same foundational premise: that the purpose of leadership is not self-advancement but a genuine commitment to the growth and well-being of others. Greenleaf (2002) traces its origin to an internal orientation, a natural impulse to serve that precedes any desire to lead. Kouzes and Posner (2007) translate that orientation into observable behavior, showing that credibility is built through consistency and the willingness to model values under pressure. Eva et al. (2019) provide the empirical confirmation: servant leadership consistently produces better outcomes because it centers the growth of people over the advancement of the leader.

Fett (2020) and Theophille (2018) provide the proof of practice. Fett shows that these commitments can be operationalized in the concrete interactions of everyday leadership, how expectations are set, how feedback is given, and how assumptions are examined. Theophille shows what it looks like to hold those values under real organizational pressure. When taken as a whole, they show that servant leadership is not an idealized picture. It is a set of choices, made consistently, that determine whether the people around a leader are becoming more capable and more prepared to lead and serve others in turn. That outcome is both the measure and the meaning of exemplary leadership.

## References

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