SERVANT LEADERSHIP
AND ITS APPLICATIONS IN SPORT

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Servant leadership is a leadership theory first established by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader.” Greenleaf’s initial description of the servant leader, although broad, set the foundation for decades of research and study into the theory of servant leadership.

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”[1]

Greenleaf remarks that, under the leadership of a servant leader, persons will become “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous,” and more likely to become servants themselves.[1]

But what exactly does servant leadership look like? What does a servant leader do? A recent systematic review of servant leadership provides a new definition for the theory. Eva et al. establish servant leadership in a three-part definition:

Servant leadership is an:

1) other-oriented approach to leadership
2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests
3) and outward reorienting of their concern for others within the organization and the larger community.[2]
Servant leadership challenges the status quo on leadership as it runs in paradox to the traditional theories on leadership. It is the only leadership theory in which a leader leads through service and puts the needs of the followers above their own. Transformational leadership is most similar to servant leadership because it also places emphasis on the needs of the followers; however, what separates servant leadership from transformational leadership is that servant leaders view these needs as a number one goal and transformational leaders view these needs as a number two goal acting in pursuit of the top goal (i.e. organizational success).

The theory of servant leadership outlined above fits well into the sports industry; sports have the power to teach life lessons, mold character, and inspire greatness in athletes of all levels. Viewing athletes as merely a means to an end or a tool necessary for victory does a disservice to the athlete’s needs. When servant leadership is used in sports, the psychological and physical needs of the athlete are placed at the forefront and winning is a bonus.

10 Characteristics of a Servant Leader

Servant leadership is a complex leadership paradigm that flips traditional leadership styles on their head. Instead of leading from the front, servant leaders lead from within, motivating others by making each member of the team feel known, seen, heard, and valued. Servant leaders embrace diversity, understanding that differences are a vital ingredient in helping any team to maximize its potential. When servant leadership is present in organizations its impact can be felt throughout.

Here are 10 key characteristics of servant leaders:

Listening
Servant leaders believe that all influential conversations begin by listening first. It isn't until leaders are able to understand the needs and perspectives of the individual that they can appropriately leverage their influence.

Empathy
Servant leaders empathize with their followers by stepping into the shoes of their followers. They gain a new perspective of how others feel and perceive the world, thereby transforming their own perspectives and informing their decisions.

Healing
Servant leadership unlocks a unique form of healing. The healing is not only for the followers because they are finally understood, but also for the leader. By putting the needs of the follower above their own, servant leaders find healing as do the followers. Since both parties’ care about the entirety of the other person they are both able to experience healing.
Awareness
Servant leaders have an awareness about themselves that few others have. They understand the impact their presence can have on others and are carefully aware of the environment around them. They are thoughtful about how they interact in certain settings to protect the needs of the followers.

Persuasion
Because servant leaders listen first, empathize, and are self-aware, they rely on persuasion more than coercion when they need their followers to make changes or complete tasks. Servant leaders seek to engage followers in thoughtful, two-way conversation rather than dictation.

Conceptualization
Servant leaders have an ability to understand complex problems and situations and provide clear direction to achieve and overcome these situations. They engage a variety of people to gain perspective on how to overcome complex problems. They seek new and creative solutions to complex issues.

Foresight
A leader’s ability to understand the past and present allows them to have the necessary foresight to predict what is going to happen in the future and the choices that need to happen as a result. Greenleaf’s view of foresight is that all leaders need to be held accountable for “failure to anticipate what could be foreseen.”

Stewardship
Servant leaders own the results. They are stewards and guardians of everything that occurs within their reach. They take responsibility for their role in failures and seek to turn attention for any success back toward their followers and the team as a whole.

Commitment
Servant leaders view their followers holistically. This commitment causes servant leaders to invest in the needs of their followers both professionally and personally. Team members’ lives inside of work and outside matter equally to the servant leader.

Building Community
Servant leaders have an innate desire to build community. They realize that community is full of variety, fusing together people from different backgrounds who have different experiences and different ways of seeing the world around them. Servant leaders understand the strength which stems from this diversity and take steps to ensure that each team member feels a sense of belonging and contribution to the collective pursuit of something great. [5]
The Coach as SERVANT LEADER

The fundamental purpose of a coach is to train, mentor, lead, and teach. Since the outcomes of a coach’s purpose are athlete-centered, it is fitting that a coach may take on the role of a servant leader. Some coaches may be skeptical of this leadership model at first because of its focus on the athlete rather than the outcome of winning.

However, servant leadership and winning are correlated, as researchers have found a positive relationship between leadership style and organizational performance.[3] The coach as a servant leader is serving his or her athletes and giving them the best chance at succeeding in their sport and life. This, in turn, gives the team the best chance at succeeding as well.

Here are questions a coach can reflect on to become a stronger servant leader:

- What is my purpose and reason for coaching?
- Are the athletes my main priority?
- How can I better prepare my athletes for life outside of athletics?
- Am I instilling important values in my athletes?
- Am I prepared to have great success and not seek any credit for it?
The Athlete as SERVANT LEADER

All athletes on a team can be servant leaders, regardless of their role on the team. An athlete as a servant leader works to ensure that the environment they create and the energy they bring to their sport allow for their teammates and coaches to thrive. An athlete recognizing that the good of the team comes before any personal goals embodies the selflessness associated with a servant leader. When athletes act as servant leaders, they are increasing the levels of trust and communication on their teams.

Below are questions an athlete can reflect on to become a stronger servant leader:

- What am I doing to help my teammates improve?
- Am I encouraging them to be their best?
- Does it bring me joy and happiness to see my teammates and competitors succeed?
- Am I giving my best effort and acting as an example to those around me?
- How will my teammates remember me?
Servant Leadership

IN ACTION

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Humility - Know who you are, strengths and weaknesses;
Passion - Do not be lukewarm, commit to excellence;
Unity - Do not divide our house, team first;
Servanthood - Make teammates better, lead by giving; and
Thankfulness - Learn from every circumstance

Servanthood and unity perfectly exemplify the theory of servant leadership, and servant leaders are humbled by making it a passion to put others before themselves and being thankful for the opportunity to do so.

Why Servant Leadership MATTERS

A flower can only bloom if it receives sunlight, water, and nutrients it requires. A similar philosophy is true of people. People thrive and find success when they are given the tools they need. A servant leader embraces this and leads by serving others. Servant leadership is a style of leadership that is selfless, caring, and giving, and necessary in the development and growth of young people and athletes. Half a century after Greenleaf’s initial essay, the athletic world is quickly opening its arms to the theory of servant leadership. This should be seen as a positive because athletes led by servant leaders will be given the room and resources to flourish both in their sport and, more importantly, in life.
References


