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Answering Your Question: Walking the Talk of Servant Leadership

Dale Zevenbergen

Dordt College, dale.zevenbergen@dordt.edu

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Answering Your Question: Walking the Talk of Servant Leadership

Abstract

"Servant leadership is a behavior, not just words. Words do matter."

Posting about putting servant leadership into practice from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-walking-the-talk-of-servant-leadership/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Answering Your Question: Walking the Talk of Servant Leadership

[all inallthings.org/answering-your-question-walking-the-talk-of-servant-leadership/](https://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-walking-the-talk-of-servant-leadership/)

Dale Zevenbergen

You've had a few articles about being Christian in business and servant leadership lately. Can you address the issue of when Christian organizations or businesses "talk" about servant leadership and act as if they "walk the walk" but in actuality are rigid, hierarchical, demanding, and not interested at all in serving those who work for them?

Thank you for your question, you make a great point! Allow me to respond with a few thoughts from my experience, and also to throw out a challenge.

In my previous article, ["My Favorite Part of Business,"](#) I shared my appreciation for the ideas of lean management and servant leadership, and how these two concepts can come together to create a great place to work. But to your point, for either of these movements to work, behavior is required—not just talk. Pursuing a lean organization is hard work. This is why most organizations don't do it. Lean management requires years of work, discipline, and relentless pursuit of making processes better and eliminating waste. Lean management is often referred to as a *journey*.

Similarly, servant leadership is a behavior, not just words. Words do matter. Words have meaning and impact, so how we talk about things within an organization certainly does matter. But it can't be just words, there has to be attitude and behavior first. An organization does not simply implement servant leadership one day with a big announcement: *"Announcing an exciting new initiative: servant leadership! We're removing layers from the organizational hierarchy. Everyone will now behave with humility, we'll all row in the same direction, and everyone will be happy. Rainbows and butterflies will be everywhere! Starting Monday."* That's not how it works. It's actually a very subtle thing that often starts with one person choosing to behave differently. And after leading by example, he or she can then, with credibility, begin to challenge other leaders to change their attitude and behavior as well. Then structural things in the organization will begin to change, and slowly, over time, servant leadership can become a culture. And that is what it really is: culture.

Perhaps a visual will help. In [my article](#) I mention a presentation Denny Van Zanten gave on servant leadership.¹ Denny shared this picture of how culture comes together – at the intersection of people, norms and behaviors, and programs, policies, and processes.

For a culture of servant leadership to flourish, all three areas need to be working in that direction. **People** with a humble attitude are selected and promoted. **Norms and behaviors** involve the daily life of the organization – catching people doing things right and celebrating those efforts in small and large ways. This can be a simple expression of gratitude and appreciation for effort. Or a small token of appreciation for extra effort can have an impact on how a team works together.

Programs, policies and procedures are also critically important, including things like tools and processes for evaluation, promotion, suggestions, etc. One powerful way to promote a "one team one

dream” mentality in a for-profit business is profit sharing. When a firm shares the profits earned by the collective team, a powerful spirit of teamwork is created.

Your point is well taken. Servant leadership cannot be faked. It has to be genuine and real, backed up by behavior and structure. And sometimes different people might need to be put in place. But realize, a culture of servant leadership does not mean that everyone in the organizations is “happy.”

Servant leadership does not mean “making everyone happy.” It does mean meeting their needs, and empowering them with meaningful work to do as image-bearers. My dad, who passed away in 2006, would often say that some people are “pleased to be dis-pleased”. No matter how healthy an organizational culture might be, some still will be unhappy. That’s just how it is.

Another aspect of leadership I would point out is that it is that leadership is not simply the leader’s responsibility. Leadership is a *relationship* between leaders and followers. Almost everyone in an organization is simultaneously a leader and a follower. We often think as followers, that our leader needs to be the one to behave with integrity, to walk the talk, and to be flawless in their performance as our leader. But effective leadership requires strong humble leaders **and** cooperative humble followers. And by humility, I don’t mean *thinking less* of ourselves, but *simply thinking of ourselves less*.

As followers of a leader, sometimes we tend to look at high level leaders – the business owners, CEO’s and other executives in businesses or other organizations – as if they’ve won life’s lottery. We think, “they are just so lucky to be where they are.” We often don’t realize or appreciate the burden they might be carrying. Little things – like making payroll, staying competitive, staying in compliance with the myriad regulations, and even fighting legal battles. Many business owners I’ve interacted with feel a tremendous burden for the families they employ.

At all levels, leadership is a relationship. I’ve seen many people (myself included at times) who work hard to be good leaders, but then we put very little thought or effort into our role as followers. We can be critical and cynical all the while thinking that we’re great leaders. Seems like Jesus share a couple stories about taking [planks out of our own eyes](#), and [forgiving a debt when a debt has been forgiven](#)...

And that leads me to my challenge: I think before we get too critical of leaders in our lives, we should hold up a mirror and evaluate our own attitude and behavior as a follower. This is gut-check time: Am I making life easier for leaders in my life? Or am I a thorn in their side? Do I participate in positive conversation and behavior? What do I say about my organization and my leaders publicly? I would even go so far as to say that we all should work hard at being a humble supportive follower **first**, and **then** working at becoming a servant leader. We reap what we sow.

Thanks again for your question, I hope to have clarified my thoughts on lean management and servant leadership.

Footnotes

1. Van Zanten, Dordt College, October 2014, presentation. [↩](#)