

Servant-Leadership Revisited

KEN BLANCHARD

*Dr. Ken Blanchard is the coauthor of the best-selling book, *The One Minute Manager*, which sold more than 9 million copies worldwide. He coauthored *The Power of Ethical Management* with Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. Blanchard is chairman of Blanchard Training and Development Inc., a management training and consulting company that he and his wife, Dr. Marjorie Blanchard, founded in 1979. He has received many awards and honors for his contributions to the field of leadership and management. Blanchard is a recipient of the Golden Globe Award from Toastmasters International, and in 1992 he was inducted into the HRD Hall of Fame by Training magazine.*

In this essay, Blanchard directly addresses the misconception that servant-leadership is somehow leadership without direction. He makes an important contribution to the understanding of servant-leadership as both a visionary and implementation role.

For a long time, students of leadership like myself, have been talking about servant-leadership. I first heard about the concept from Robert K. Greenleaf when I was a young assistant professor of management at Ohio University in the late 1960s. Bob had come to campus to talk to the student leaders. I was fascinated by his thinking and began to include a discussion of servant-leadership in my teaching.

My aim in talking about servant-leadership has always been to encourage managers to move from the traditional direct, control, and supervise approach to the roles of cheerleader, encourager, listener, and facilitator. In the past, managers have emphasized judgment, criticism, and evaluation rather than providing the support and encouragement that people need to be their best.

The Past Will Not Work in the Future

The past approach to management worked when companies had no competition for customers or for

good employees. Today, mistreated customers go next door, followed shortly by the best employees. I have always loved the quote attributed to Benjamin Franklin, "You can't expect an empty bag to stand up straight." That translates in this context into an important concept. If your managers don't support and take care of their people, you can't expect them to stand up with integrity and serve your customers well.

Too many companies inappropriately use "bicycle leadership." The visual picture implied in bicycle leadership is that managers bend their back to those above while they trample those below. Somebody criticizes the top manager. Then that person attacks one of his or her managers, which motivates the latest victim to hit someone below him or her. This negative chain reaction eventually moves down the hierarchy to a frontline/customer-contact person who has only one person to kick – your customer. Norman Rockwell illustrated this beautifully in one of his classic Saturday Evening Post covers. The first frame showed a man being reprimanded by his boss, the second frame had to disciplined manager yelling at his wife, the next frame showed her screaming at their young child, and the final frame showed the young boy backing the cat into the corner so he could kick the helpless animal. Bicycle leadership is a relic of the past while servant-leadership is the way to manage people today and in the future.

A Misconception about Servant-Leadership

In talking about servant-leadership at a recent conference of corporation presidents, I sensed some real resistance to the concept. In talking with those managers, I found a misconception about servant-leadership that needs to be cleared up. Their assumption when they heard the term was that managers should be working for their people, who would be deciding what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and how to do it. If that was what servant-leadership was all about, it didn't sound like leadership to them at all. It sounded

more like the inmates were running the prison.

I think it's important for us to correct the misconception. Leadership has two aspects – a visionary part and an implementation part. Some people say that leadership is really the visionary role (doing the right thing), and management is the implementation role (doing things right). Rather than getting caught in the leadership versus management debate, let's think of these both as leadership roles.

Leadership is an influence process in which you try to help people accomplish goals. All good leadership starts with a visionary role. This involves not only goal setting but also establishing a clear picture of perfection – what the operation would look like when it was running effectively. In other words, leadership starts with a sense of direction. In the book I coauthored with John Carlos and Alan Randolph, *Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*, we said, "A river without banks is a large puddle." The banks permit the river to flow; they give direction to the river. Leadership is all about going somewhere; it's not about wandering around aimlessly. Even Alice in Wonderland learned that concept when she came to a fork in the road and asked the Cheshire cat which road she should take. He replied by asking her, "Where are you going?" She essentially said, "I don't know." His response was quick: "Then it doesn't matter what road you take." If you aren't sure where you are going, your leadership style won't really matter, either.

I want to make it clear that when we're talking about servant-leadership, we aren't talking about lack of direction. Although emphasis in most servant-leadership discussions is on implementation, I think servant-leadership involves both a visionary role and an implementation role.

The Hierarchical Paradox

Most organizations are typically pyramidal in nature. Who is at the top of the organization? The chief executive officer, the chairman, the board of directors. Who is at the bottom? All the employees – the people who do all the work. The people who make the products, service the products, and the like. Now there is nothing wrong with having a traditional pyramid for certain tasks or roles. The paradox is that the pyramid needs to be right side up or upside down depending on the task or role.

It's absolutely essential that the pyramid stay upright when it comes to vision, mission, values, and

setting major goals. Moses did not go up on the mountain with a committee. People look to leaders for direction, so the traditional hierarchy isn't bad for this aspect of leadership. While the vision and direction might start with the leader, if you're dealing with experienced people, you want to get them involved in shaping and refining that direction. Some companies, such as W.L. Gore & Associates, do not even have appointed leaders. They think leadership is a follower-driven concept. Therefore, leadership should emerge rather than be appointed. But no matter how the leadership is determined, providing direction is an important aspect of servant-leadership.

The Problem Occurs with Implementation

Most organizations and managers get in trouble in the implementation phase of the leadership process. The traditional pyramid is kept alive and well. When that happens, who do people think they work for? The person above them. The minute you think you work for the person above you for implementation, you are assuming that person – your boss – is responsible, and your job is being responsive to that boss and to his or her whims or wishes. As a result, all the energy in the organization is moving up the hierarchy, away from customers and the frontline folks who are closest to the action.

People tell me all the time that the worst thing that can happen to you is to lose a boss, particularly one you have just figured out. Because now you have to figure out a new boss and what he or she wants. People think their career depends solely on the quality of their relationship with their boss. As a result, the most important people in your organization – those individuals who have contact with your customers – spend all their time looking over their shoulder trying to figure out what their boss wants rather than focusing on the needs of the customer. They respond to customer requests by saying things like, "I'm sorry. We can't do that. It's against our policy." And the customer says, "What do you mean it's against your policy? It's a stupid policy." And the reply: "I'm sorry. I just work here. I don't make the policies." These people end up defending policies rather than serving customers. Why? Because they think that's what the boss wants them to do. After all, they're not paid to think. Sad, isn't it?

To put this situation in perspective, consider how

Seeing Eye dogs are trained to work with the visually impaired. Trainers take two kinds of dogs out of the program – the completely disobedient and the completely obedient. You'd expect the first group to be dismissed, but why the second? Because the only dogs trainers keep are the ones that will do whatever the master says unless it doesn't make sense. Imagine letting dogs think! And yet, it would be a disaster if a Seeing Eye dog and his or her master were waiting on the corner and the master said, "Forward." The dog, seeing a car speeding in their direction, shrugs his shoulders and thinks to himself, "This is a real bummer" as he leads his master into the middle of the street. Frontline/customer-contact people are asked to do that all the time – do what they're told, follow policy, even if it doesn't make sense for the particular situation.

My wife, Margie, and I experienced a perfect example of this during a trip to Australia. We arrived early on a Sunday morning and were picked up by our Australian partners, Trevor and Leonie Keighley. As we left the airport, they told us it was a holiday weekend in Australia and all the hotels overlooking the Sydney harbor were booked. Therefore, we wouldn't be able to get into our room until after 2:00 p.m. They suggested we stop by the hotel anyway to check in and drop off our bags. They had put us on the 32nd floor – the concierge level, where the best service was provided. When we arrived at the hotel, we were told to check in on the 32nd floor. There we were greeted by an energetic, enthusiastic customer-service person. She said, "Welcome to the concierge floor. You are very important customers." Then she gave us a letter from the general manager reiterating how important we were.

After we checked in, we asked her if she could watch our bags as we were going to wander around the harbor and have brunch. We would return after 2:00 when we could check into our room.

She said, "No problem." And then she asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" I said, "Yes. Could you cash a traveler's check?"

She put her head down and said, "I'm sorry, I can't. I don't have your room number yet."

"Room number?" I echoed.

"Yes. I have to write your room number on the back of the traveler's check."

"But you have our bags," I responded.

"I know," said the woman. "But I need your room number. It's our policy."

"I think it's a good policy," I said, "but not when you have people's bags. This is ridiculous."

She said, "I'm sorry. I just work here. I don't set the policies."

The Solution: Invert the Pyramid

How do you correct this situation? One way is by turning the pyramid upside down when it comes to implementation and giving your customer-contact people responsibility. Remember, the word responsible means "able to respond."

When you turn the pyramid upside down, who is at the top of the organization? The customer-contact people. Who is really at the top of the organization? The customers. Who's at the bottom now? The "top" management. When you turn a pyramid upside down philosophically, who works for whom when it comes to implementation? You work for your people. This one change, although it seems minor, makes a major difference. The difference is between who is responsible and who is responsive. With the traditional pyramid, the boss is always responsible, and the staff are supposed to be responsive to the boss. When you turn the pyramid upside down those roles get reversed. Your people become responsible and the job of management is to be responsive to their people. That creates a very different environment for implementation. If you work for your people, what is the purpose of being a manager? To help them accomplish their goals. Your job is to help them win. Wonderful examples of this kind of management abound in legendary service organizations like Nordstrom. This Seattle-based retail store chain is wiping out competition wherever there is a Nordstrom department store. Why? Because they are beating everybody to the punch when it comes to customer service.

My daughter Debbie worked as a sales cashier for Nordstrom in San Diego when she was in college. After about a week on the job, I had dinner with her and asked, "What is it like to work at Nordstrom? Tom Peters and everyone is talking about Nordstrom and their tremendous service." She said, "It's very different." I asked, "What's different about it?" She said, "Well, the first thing that is different is their orientation program. Every employee has to go through an orientation program before they can start work. The whole emphasis in the first part of the program is to teach everyone, all the employees, how to say 'No problem.' The number one thing they want coming out

of your mouth is 'No problem.'"

To give you an example of this philosophy in action, a friend of ours wanted to buy some perfume for his wife's birthday as she was running low on her favorite brand. He went to Nordstrom to purchase this gift.

The woman behind the perfume counter said, "I'm sorry. We don't carry that brand. I know where I can get it, though, in the mall. How much longer will you be in the store?"

He replied, "Another half hour."

She said, "Fine. Stop by here on your way out of the store and I will have your perfume gift wrapped."

This woman left the Nordstrom store, went out into the mall, bought the perfume her customer wanted, brought it back, gift wrapped it, and charged him the same price she had paid at the other store. In other words, Nordstrom did not make a cent on this sale. But what did they make – a raving fan customer.

At Nordstrom, they will take back anything that you have a problem with. One of Debbie's jobs as a cashier was taking back merchandise. She said, "You wouldn't believe some of the junk people bring back." At Nordstrom the assumption is that the customer is always right. In most cases, Nordstrom gives cash back for returns. The company doesn't want its customers to go through all kinds of paperwork. The assumption of Nordstrom's top management is that 90 percent of the people in America are honest and want good service for being a customer. The other 10 percent will rip you off. The problem is that most organizations are set up to stop the 10 percent minority rather than serve the 90 percent majority of honest customers.

I asked Debbie, "What else is different about working at Nordstrom?" She said, "My boss. About three or four times a day he comes up to me and says, 'Debbie, is there anything I can do for you?' He acts like he works for me." The reality in the Nordstrom philosophy is that he does. Every manager works for his or her people. It's in relation to this responsive, serving role that the effective manager now encourages, supports, coaches, facilitates, and does everything possible to help his or her people be successful. This is where servant-leadership really takes over.

Jesus as an Example of Servant-Leadership

A few years ago I followed best-selling Christian

author Charles Colson on a leadership program for Christian leaders sponsored by Bob Buford and The Foundation. Colson ended his speech by saying "All the kings in history sent their people out to die for them. There is only one king I know who decided to die for his people."

That closing remark set up my talk on leadership because what Jesus did struck me as the ultimate in turning the pyramid upside down. In fact, when people talk about servant-leadership, Jesus is often a model, without even referring to his ultimate sacrifice. So let me talk about him as an example of servant-leadership.

Regardless of your religious background you'll have to admit that Jesus was a leader. In fact, he's the only religious leader I know of who built a management team. And yet he went out and "hired" inexperienced people. He could have recruited good preachers. None of the disciples he chose had the kind of background that you would have expected him to need. And yet he built them into quite a team. For a long time I've been saying the important thing about being a leader is not what happens when you are there; it's what happens when you're not there. You can usually get people to do what you want when you are there; the real test is what do they do on their own. When Jesus was gone, his disciples carried on quite successfully. How did he make that happen?

Jesus was continually asked questions like, "How do I become first?" or "Who is the greatest?" His responses were consistent "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (*Mark 9:35*). "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is the least among you all – his is the greatest" (*Luke 9:48*).

It was important to Jesus that his answers be clear to his disciples in both word and act. How many of you have been invited to your boss's house recently and the first thing he or she did was ask you to take off your shoes and socks so he or she could wash your feet? When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he was symbolically telling them about servant-leadership.

To call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you

should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

-John 13:13-17

Jesus wanted his disciples to get this important message. And yet, while Jesus wanted his disciples to be servants of all, was he sending them out to serve without clear direction? Absolutely not. He got his direction literally from the top of the hierarchy. Once the vision, and how people could be “saved,” was clear he wanted his disciples to go out and support, encourage, teach, and facilitate other people, making the necessary commitment to get that same salvation. In other words, the essence of Jesus’ servant-leadership symbolized in his washing of the disciples feet only began once the vision and direction were clear.

Leaders Need Their People

When I talk about being a servant-leader in organizations, I’m not suggesting you die for your people. But you might want to listen to them once in a while or praise them, encourage them, and help them win. But remember, the servant aspect of leadership only begins when vision, direction, and goals are clear. It emphasizes that leaders cannot accomplish goals all by themselves. They need their people. When I wrote *Everyone’s a Coach* with Don Shula, the winningest

coach in National Football League history, he made it clear that as a coach he couldn’t throw one pass, he couldn’t make one tackle, he couldn’t throw a single block; therefore, his goal accomplishment as a coach depended on his effectiveness in helping his people to be their very best.

The year before Don retired in 1996 he tore his Achilles tendon and missed his first practice in 25 years as a Dolphin coach. When I asked him why he felt he needed to be at practice all the time, his reply was, “You can’t coach from the press box.” You want to be where the action is, so you can observe what’s happening and respond in a way that helps people be their very best. Servant-leaders are one who move among their people in a way that helps them be as responsible as they can in doing their job. The hierarchy can help set the direction, but effective servant-leaders in the future, when it comes to implementation, will figuratively and literally turn the pyramid upside down and work side by side with their people in a supportive way. Their eventual goal is to help their people increase their skills to the point that they will be able to perform just as well when their leader is not there as when he or she is there.

That, to me, is what servant-leadership is all about: making goals clear and then rolling your sleeves up and doing whatever it takes to help your people win. In that situation, they don’t work for you – you work for them.