

# SERVANT LEADERSHIP

## *What is it and How Can it Help You?*

By Greg Luttrell and David Ngo

As a boy, David Ngo would hear a familiar saying over and over. The saying goes: “I humbly serve as a guardian to my fellow Americans, always ready to defend those who are unable to defend themselves”. The saying is the Navy SEAL creed and describes the essence of servant leadership. David heard this saying often from his father, a Lieutenant in the Navy.

Servant leadership is becoming more popular in places like Universities and nonprofit sectors. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid”, the servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.

Growing up, David would hear his father mention that leaders should not be afraid to share power. There were many lessons that outlined how servant leaders could lead *and* follow. There were lessons on how servant leaders wanted their teams to make independent decisions and keep moving forward until they feel they need assistance. As leaders, the servant leader’s job is to encourage and support team members in order to help them unleash their full potential.

Greg Luttrell had the opportunity to witness servant leadership during 22 years of military service. Greg retired in 2004 with the rank of Commander in the U.S. Navy. Greg’s experiences with servant leadership during that career included both opportunities for both leadership and followership.

Servant leadership training has benefitted Greg and David in their work as research administrators. There are many servant leadership princi-

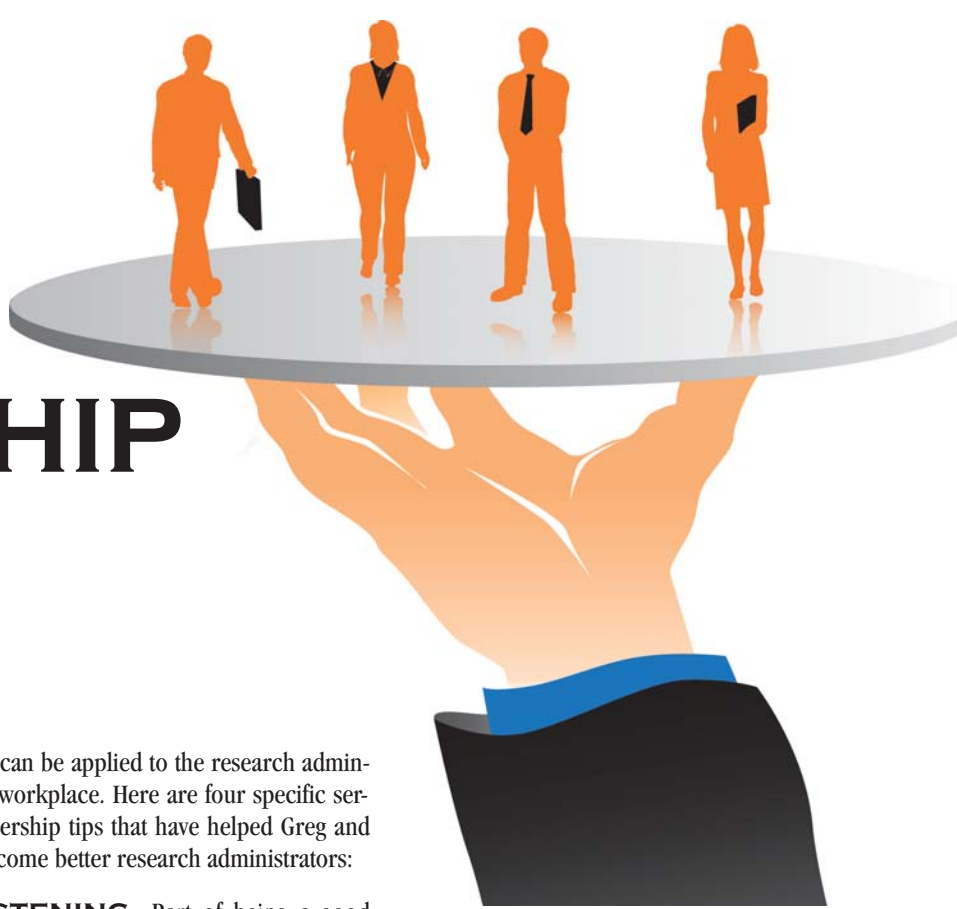
ples that can be applied to the research administration workplace. Here are four specific servant leadership tips that have helped Greg and David become better research administrators:

**1. LISTENING.** Part of being a good communicator is to be an active listener. Servant leaders are successful at putting needs of others first. In order to do this, a servant leader will listen to what their team is saying to fully understand their needs.

**2. AWARENESS.** Situational awareness is essential to making good decisions. Servant leaders will understand the current reality and communicate it to their team, while also having great self-awareness. Servant leaders will also acknowledge their own faults in order to make adjustments and better serve their teams.

**3. CONCEPTUALIZING.** Maintaining focus on organizational goals instead of getting caught up in the day to day minutia helps servant leaders work more *on* the tasks instead of working *in* the tasks. A key part of this delegation – servant leaders allow their team to do their jobs so the servant leader can be freed up to focus on both short term and long term goals.

**4. TRUE STEWARD.** Organizations develop quickly when teams develop even faster. Servant leaders provide their team members with support and development opportunities. This takes time, but if team members are encouraged through learning, they will be more engaged and will provide greater value to the organization. Employee retention will flourish, as well.



Intrigued? Want to find out what exactly is servant leadership? Want to understand what Greg and David have tried to implement into their day to day in the workplace? We recommend an excellent book on the topic of servant leadership entitled *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practicing the Wisdom of Leading by Serving*, by James W. Sipe and Don M. Frick (2009). In this book, the authors claim to have used the same metrics as described in the popular business book by Jim Collins entitled *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (2001) to measure the performance of eleven publicly traded companies that are considered to be servant led. The companies that were servant led outperformed the eleven companies that were considered “good to great” (p 2).

Embedded in each Pillar are three core leadership traits or competencies that we can easily see demonstrated by those we consider to be servant leaders. A Person of Character maintains integrity, demonstrates humility, and serves a higher purpose. A leader that Puts People First displays a servant’s heart, is mentor-minded, and shows care and concern. A Skilled Communicator demonstrates empathy, invites feedback, and communicates persuasively. A Compassionate Collaborator expresses appreciation, builds teams and communities, and negotiates conflict (p 4-6).

A Person of Character maintains integrity by returning phone calls, following up on details, keeping promises, and being willing to admit mistakes. He/she demonstrates humility by intentionally making themselves vulnerable to the possibility that they may not be right all the time (p 27, 29). How many of us can truly say that we take that courageous step in our daily leadership journey?

A leader who Puts People First displays a servant's heart by being willing to get his/her hands dirty helping the team, rather than just talking about it or standing back while others do the heavy lifting. Being mentor minded means letting the one being mentored take responsibility, take chances, and develop, rather than merely being the recipient of the mentor's expertise. Putting people first requires the servant leader to show care and concern. One of the most vivid examples of this occurred during my first deployment in a Navy fighter squadron. We were operating in the Indian Ocean and the state of the sea was causing the flight deck to pitch quite a bit, and airplane landings were challenging to say the least. One of our younger pilots flew a particularly poor approach resulting in an aircraft mishap. Had he been just a couple of feet lower, the mishap could have resulted in multiple fatalities and certain destruction of the aircraft. All of the junior officers watched the mishap on closed circuit TV in the ready room along with the Commanding Officer (CO). Once we realized that the aircrew were okay, our attention and curiosity were focused on the CO. How would he react when the pilot came back to the ready room, since an aircraft mishap might reflect badly on the CO's training programs? Would he be mad? On the contrary, when the young pilot showed up ashen faced, the CO went up to him, shook his hand, clapped him on the shoulder, and said "Welcome back, Bill (not his real name)! Your method of arrival leaves a little bit to be desired, but it's good to have you back." Rather than being angry at the young officer for a poor landing, he showed care and concern instead.

Skilled Communicators are first great listeners. They listen with empathy and seek first to understand, communicate respect, warmth, and unconditional positive regard (p 49). They also seek feedback by being open, responsive, thoughtful, and calm when receiving the invited feedback (p 65). They are very skilled at giving feedback as well. Lastly, the Skilled Communicator uses the power of persuasion, rather than the tools of coercion in leading.

The Compassionate Collaborator expresses appreciation and thus enables employees to feel valued by using varied and frequent forms of recognition in the workplace (p 85). Recognizing co-workers is not difficult, but I think many leaders do not take the time as their schedules are so full. We are not truly serving our co-workers, if we do not take the time to recognize them for their contributions. The Compassionate Collaborator

## THE SEVEN PILLARS ARE

- I: Person of Character**
- II: Puts People First**
- III: Skilled Communicator**
- IV: Compassionate Collaborator**
- V: Has Foresight**
- VI: Systems Thinker**
- VII: Leads with Moral Authority**

also demonstrates the ability to build teams and communities, all the while realizing that each team will have several leaders with different personality traits and methods of interaction (p 87). Lastly, he/she needs to be able to negotiate conflict by recognizing their own anger signs and those of others in order to come to a reasonable outcome. I find that in my own role as contract negotiator, taking the approach that the negotiation is collaboration, rather than a competition, invariably leads to better outcomes.

A servant leader demonstrating Foresight is visionary, displays creativity, and takes courageous, decisive action (p 104). We follow leaders because they always seem to be able to see a bit further ahead than the rest of us. When they share their vision, we are encouraged to join them on the path forward. How does one develop foresight? One must be able to analyze the past, gain complete understanding of the present, be patient in processing information, be open for breakthroughs, and share insights with trusted colleagues. This process cannot be rushed or the outcome will suffer (p 113-115).

A servant leader who is a Systems Thinker is comfortable with complexity and demonstrates adaptability. He/she is able to take a complex situation or environment and "zoom out" to grasp the bigger picture rather than focusing on the minute details (p 131). They demonstrate adaptability by realizing that reality is fluid, and new responses may be required in order to deal with that. Because the servant leader is a visionary, he/she can chart a course

to the ultimate destination, but like a sailboat can tack back and forth on the destination based on the prevailing winds of reality (p 141).

A servant leader has Moral Authority that is demonstrated by accepting and delegating responsibility, sharing power and control, and creating a culture of accountability (p 155). A servant leader is granted moral authority by their followers because they put people first through acts of care and concern, mentoring, and serving. Accepting responsibility and delegating it is difficult for many managers. The former is reflected in an attitude that someone else is in charge and I can't do anything about it. The latter is reflected in the manager that is convinced that they alone can handle the responsibility and do not delegate. As a young officer, one of the sailors with whom I worked told me that she appreciated that when I gave her a task to complete, I didn't "look over her shoulder" to make sure it was completed in a particular way. I had never thought about it before, but I did know that I did not appreciate being micromanaged and tried very hard not to do that to the folks with whom I worked. Give your folks clear guidelines, and be available if they have questions along the way. Otherwise, get out of their way.

Servant leadership has helped us out a great deal in the professional and personal settings. As you interact with your teams and colleagues, try to listen and ask your people how you can help and follow-up on your promises quickly. We think this will yield great results while allowing team members to carry out their duties with your full support. ■

Citations: Sipe, J.W. & Frick, D.M (2009). *Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership: Practice the Wisdom of Leading by Serving*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press



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