

So You Want to Be a Servant Leader ...

Don't let your ego trip you up • BY KEN BLANCHARD



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As someone who believes servant leadership is the best way to lead, I often get asked what the biggest obstacle is for someone who wants to become a servant leader. Simple: The biggest obstacle in the path to servant leadership is the human ego.

For some people, the letters in ego can stand for “edging good out” or “everything good outside,” where self-serving leaders put themselves first and want to be served by their people. Ego can also stand for “exalting good only,” where leaders with humility put their people first and want to serve and support them.

This second option is what servant leadership is all about. It's not just another management technique — it's a way of life for a leader with a servant's heart. Groups of leaders who share this philosophy create organizations with a culture of service. In a service culture, people who are treated well pass that caring behavior to their customers, which results in not only levels of satisfaction for the people involved but also success for the organization. It's the only way I know to achieve both great relationships and great results.

But servant leaders are human beings who are far from perfect. When we get off track, it usually involves our ego, which can trip us up in two ways.

The first is when leaders develop a false sense of pride. They take credit for work done by others. They push and shove for the benefit of their own interests. They act as though all the brains are in their office, and they aren't interested in anyone else's ideas.

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How do people acting out of false pride get away with it? This is where the second type of ego problem comes in: when leaders operate out of fear or self-doubt. On the surface, this may not seem to be the work of a misdirected ego. But if you look closer, you will see a self-serving leader who is trying to protect their own interests — their reputation and their job — so they don't speak out. They are afraid to say some-

thing, even in defense of their own people, when they see others operating in self-interest. Under pressure, they will often defer to whoever has the most power. These people do what I call “quit and stay.”

People whose egos veer off course don't feel good about themselves. And when you don't feel good about yourself, you have two choices: You can either over-compensate and try to control your environment or you can hide and hope nobody notices you. Neither is acceptable for a true servant leader.

Servant leaders have no problem giving credit to, listening to or building up others. They have their people's backs and give support when it is needed. They don't see praising others as a threat to themselves. Effective servant leaders operate in a way that may be best described by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: “A leader is best when people barely know he exists — when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, ‘We did it ourselves.’ ”

So how do we as servant leaders resist the human ego that's waiting every day to trap us? Take a look inside yourself and answer these questions: Why am I leading? What am I doing to bring out the magnificence in those around me? Am I here to serve or be served?

The antidote for false pride is humility. One of my favorite phrases is: People with humility don't think less of themselves; they just think of themselves less. Servant leadership requires a certain humility — a vulnerability that elicits the best from people. Colleen Barrett, former president of Southwest Airlines and a lifelong servant leader, put it best when she said, “People admire your strengths, but they love your vulnerability.”

The antidote for fear and self-doubt is unconditional love and self-acceptance. When you really think about it, you know you'll never have enough power, sell enough, make enough money or achieve a high enough position to gain any more love. What if you accepted that unconditional love for yourself?

When I was young, my mother used to say, “There's a pearl of goodness in every person — but sometimes you have to dig until you find it.” So when your ego gets off track (and it will), always remember there is a pearl of goodness in everyone — even you. You can be a servant leader who puts others first. It's simply a better way to lead. **CLO**