



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Leadership: To Serve or To Be Served?

With the holiday season in full gear, we are reminded of the benevolent aspect of serving others. Yet, the rest of the year, it appears that most would rather be served than to serve. Much has been written about “servant leadership”, a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s and espoused by others over the past few decades. In reality, the concept of serving others through leadership and its principles have been in practice and encouraged for centuries. But on a day-to-day basis, how does a corporate leader or manager reconcile the ideas of “leading” and “serving”? To start, one must look at their attitude, their actions and their aspirations.

Attitude

What one believes about being a leader and serving will in large part drive their ability to adopt such principles. Take for example, Ken, a VP at a major technology company, whom I coached. Ken’s approach to managing his unit was that his staff exists to help him reach the division goals. In fact, while he could not initially see nor admit it, his attitude was one of “you are here to serve me” rather than “I am here to serve you”. It was no surprise, therefore, that Ken experienced significant turnover in his group and complaints about his autocratic management style ran rampant throughout the organization. With a heavy dose of feedback, Ken realized the benefit of flipping his script. If he could channel his energy to helping his team achieve the goals rather than seeing his staff solely as a means to his end, his results as a leader would have far better yield.

Action

While attitude is the place to start, follow through is critical. How does a leader’s day-to-day actions embrace the principle of serving? At its core, a servant leader’s actions demonstrate consistent consideration of others’ agendas besides his/her own. This is achieved by the acts of listening, dialoguing, clarifying expectations, and making integrity-driven decisions. Ken, in his efforts to improve his leadership impact, began modifying his actions. He spent time listening to the concerns and ideas of his staff and peer stakeholders. He brought transparency to his decision making whenever possible making it clear that he was taking into consideration what was best for the organization and the relevant stakeholders involved. Over time, his consistent actions enabled him to more strongly lead his group through stressful, ambiguous situations.

Aspirations

Holding a posture of servant leadership requires one to examine their goals: what do you hope for? These are aspirations beyond the immediate business deliverables at hand. Rather, they reflect a desire to make an impact that remains long after the leader is gone from the position. When I asked Ken what he wants to be remembered for in this role once he moves to another opportunity, he realized that beyond over exceeding the business objectives, he wanted his team and clients to remember him as someone they would want to work with again because of what they learned from him. As a servant leader, one must aspire to make an impact beyond one’s own ambitious or material needs. It is this ability to look and strive beyond self-focus that enables a person to lead by serving.

As the holiday season of giving ultimately quiets down, take some time to examine your leadership approach. What changes can you make in your attitude, actions, and aspirations, to allow serving to be part of your leadership repertoire all year long?

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins

Quarterly Reflection: Leading by Serving

Great ambition without contribution is without significance. What will your contribution be? How will history remember you? – From the movie “The Emperor’s Clothes”

Leading by serving means looking beyond oneself to the contribution you can make to others. This does not necessarily mean following in the world-changing footsteps of a Mahatma Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Rather, every manager has the ability to make contribution in their day-to-day role.

Reflection Questions:

1. What drives you to lead?
2. What would it mean for you to “serve rather than be served” in your current role?
3. How would serving strengthen your leadership impact?

Quarterly Book Selection: Taking Our Places

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here’s our book selection for this quarter:

“Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up”

By Norman Fischer

In this inspirational book, Norman Fischer recounts his moving experience mentoring four adolescent boys in his Zen community. Fischer brings to life the lessons learned from this experience clearly outlining and bringing forth competencies, which underlie true maturity and growth. While not an explicit book about leadership, the lessons for leaders are invaluable. Maturity gives leaders the resilience, agility, and decisiveness needed to shepherd today’s organizations through uncertainty, change, and marketplace demands. Fischer’s insight and descriptive writing about listening, persistence, connection, vows, and conduct bring a new and fresh perspective to these commonly held leadership qualities. Ultimately, the reader finishes the book realizing that true maturity does not have a linear relationship to time or the number of years on the job. Instead, *“to take our place is to mature, to grow into what we are. Really growing up...this takes openness and receptivity, inspiration, a loving heart, stability and persistence, trust in the world and in yourself. It takes a peaceful mind, but also an active, decisive and courageous mind. It takes knowing how to live, knowing how to choose, and knowing how to share those choices with others.”*

From the Coach's Corner: "The Four 'E'lements of Updating Leadership Perception"

From the Client:

"I am currently on the brink of a significant promotion to director where I will have increased exposure and opportunity to impact my company's strategic priorities and initiatives. I am very excited having spent many years with this organization and have more than "paid my dues." While I have supporters internally, I also feel there are others who still perceive me as junior given our history together when I first joined the company. Given that I am "home-grown" in the organization, how do I update others and have them see me as a more senior leader?"

From the Coach's Corner:

Your situation is one that at some point in time we all face – you have grown, you have changed yet some people in your life would rather you stay the same. They have a hard time seeing you as anything more than the original first impression or who you were in the original relationship. The good news is you are onto a critical part of leadership success – that in fact, perception becomes reality. Updating perceptions and becoming comfortable in one's growth requires paying attention to four important "E"-lements.

Embody your growth: How well do you embody your growth and change as a leader? How deeply do you believe in who you are now? Have you updated your view of self? You cannot expect others to embrace you as a leader if you are not comfortable with it either. Stepping into one's "power" requires a quiet confidence based on a clear assessment and acknowledgement of present day strengths, accomplishments, and voice. Consider the last five years of your career progression. Note the new skills acquired, the key leadership experiences attained, and the new value added to the organization. I often advise clients to update their written biographies to further anchor in the evidence of how far they have come.

Allow Others to Experience the new you: Also, consider how others currently experience you. When you are with others who knew you when you were just "starting out" – do you still play by the old rules, norms, and behaviors that once dictated the relationship? My client, a principal in a professional services organization realized that in front of partners she knew fresh out of graduate school – old behaviors indeed continued to play out. Out of habit, she used a more accommodating presence and tone showing deference to their authority. Over the next 6 months, she consciously began to interact with them more as a peer. She was more courageous and willing to show her business perspective, speak her managerial insights, and communicate up a level.

Engage in update conversations: In addition to having others experience you differently, it may be important to directly engage them in conversation regarding your new role or growth as a leader. In engaging others in such a way, you work to create a shared and mutual understanding of new norms, expectations, and structure for the relationship going forward. Transparency takes away the possibility for misattribution or misunderstanding.

Engaging is not the same as "over-explaining" or over-compensating. Engaging comes from a place of building relationship, goodwill, and self-confidence. Over-compensating on the other hand comes from a place of insecurity, grasping, and a need for approval – communication stances others sniff out right away.

Evaluate your network of support: Ultimately, evaluate for yourself who are the colleagues and friends that are true supporters and allies of you and your growth. Continue to invest in those relationships. As stated above, make and allow for time for others to experience and engage with you in new ways. Be careful of putting all of your energy into the "nay-sayers" and resisters versus placing your energies with those who bring out the best in you. In addition, continue to look for and build new relationships in the organization (where you have a fresh, clean start) given the increased exposure and visibility your new role could provide.

- Amy Jen Su

If you have a particular challenge or question you would like for us to address, feel free to email it to us at info@isisassociates.com.