

Servant Leadership within the Division of Probation and Parole

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Management Development for the Future (2014)

Abstract

In contemplating management styles for leaders in the Missouri Department of Corrections Probation and Parole Division, Servant-Leadership appears to be a good fit. This paper looks at what it takes to be a servant leader and the values that should be displayed. The ten principles of Servant Leadership will be reviewed and how this can strengthen not only our leaders, but all employees as a whole. Also, I will explore the Servant-Leadership qualities I need to model. Finally, I'll consider what appears to be missing in the Servant-Leadership philosophy.

Servant-Leadership within the Division of Probation and Parole

Servant-Leadership was addressed by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader* essay he presented in 1970. ("What is Servant Leadership", n.d.). The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership online website lists Greenleaf's definition, "The servant-leader *is* servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first; perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types... The difference manifest itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.... Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" ("What is Servant Leadership", n.d.). This concept looks at sharing power and helping others develop the highest level of skills possible to be the best employee and servant of others.

There are ten principles of Servant Leadership. The first principle is “Listening” which Robert Greenleaf defines not only as a valuable communication tool, but a deep commitment to listening intently to others, clarifying the will of a group and listening to what is being said and not said. (Greenleaf, n.d.). Communication is the key to sharing power with your employees. When employees feel you genuinely listen to their concerns and ideas, they feel empowered and valued. This level of communication develops a workforce environment conducive to growth and great achievements.

Second on the list of principles is “Empathy”, accepting and recognizing the uniqueness of others. (Greenleaf, n.d.). People have different ideas about empathy; however, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives a great definition, “the experiencing as one’s own of the feelings of another.” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994, p. 249). When you can understand where another person is coming from, what motivates them, why they make the decisions they do; you can recognize the talents and strengths they have to draw upon to benefit the organization. You can put their talents to use. This attribute can only come about after taking the time to really understand the other person, recognizing their likes, dislikes and daily living/learning environment.

The third principle is “Healing”; a characteristic servant leaders have that gravitates others to them when something traumatic has happened. (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007, n.p.). Bad things happen to everyone. Emotionally it can drain a person. When a leader can uplift another’s spirit and encourage them, healing can begin. It is something that won’t be forgotten and instills confidence and trust in valuable leadership.

Fourth principle is “Awareness”, a keen sense servant leaders have to what is happening around them. (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007, n.p.). It is important for leaders to be aware not only of the direction the organization is headed, but aware of their own identity as a leader and motivator in moving others in that same direction. They are intensely aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and how others

can compliment them. Servant leaders know the advantage of teamwork.

This brings us to the fifth principle, “Persuasion”, wherein a leader seeks consensus in making a decision, rather than coerced compliance. (Greenleaf, n.d.). This principle distinguishes a servant leader from the traditional authoritarian leader. The servant leader gives convincing reasons and compels others to get on board with the same ideas, rather than using authority to intimidate or pressure others into conformity. The servant leader can persuade others to “buy into” the decision making process and take ownership in the results.

The sixth principle is “Conceptualization”, dream great dreams and avoid getting bogged down by day-to-day realities and operations. (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007, n.p.). Instilling in others the significance of looking beyond the here and now to see the future of the organization is a gift. It is important to have a creative environment where others feel comfortable exploring possibilities and sharing new ways of doing things. A “thinking outside the box” mentality opens up opportunities for growth and resourceful ways to solve problems. In this day and age of expecting more from less, economic wise, this is very advantageous.

The seventh principle of Servant Leadership is “Foresight”, a trait that enables servant leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision in the future. (Greenleaf, n.d.). Being able to examine patterns and predict future outcomes is a great skill to develop. We learn from past mistakes and current trends. When you combine experience, knowledge and direction, you can more likely anticipate future needs and foresee successfulness of ideas.

The eighth principle is “Stewardship”, a desire to prepare the organization to contribute to the greater good of society. (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007, n.p.). This characteristic is a natural calling to serve others and make a positive influence in their lives. As the Missouri Department of Corrections Vision statement reflects, “Our Vision is a safer Missouri and the standard of excellence in corrections.

We desire to be the standard of excellence in the field of corrections. Through innovation and collaboration, we want to embrace changes that better serve Missouri communities impacted by criminal behavior and achieve a safer State.” (MODOC Department Manual D1-1, 2009). Stewardship is very much a part of the Department of Corrections. All of our efforts and contributions would be nothing, if we didn’t believe we were making a difference for the citizens of our State. Change is not embraced just for the sake of change; it is an opportunity to make strides in the right direction for improving our environment and better serving our citizens.

The next principle is “Growth”, believing that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. (Greenleaf, n.d.). Everyone has something to offer others, from their personal experience and professional experience. Servant leaders are committed to seeing those around them grow professionally and personally. They want to find ways to meet the needs of others and help them discover purpose in their life.

The tenth and final principle is “Building Community”, believing an organization needs to function as a community. (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007, n.p.). The sense of belonging to a community helps boost the morale of those in the workforce. We’re there for each other during the ups and downs of life. Considering the amount of hours devoted to the workplace, it becomes our home away from home. We build lifetime friendships. We work together for a common goal; building a better organization. Coworkers and the atmosphere of the workplace can make the difference between one just tolerating their job or actually enjoying their job.

Servant Leadership is an ongoing learning experience made up on various characteristics, some of which are obtained naturally and others that are learnable skills. These traits all come together to enrich the lives of others, putting the needs of those around you first and foremost, with the ultimate goal to build a better organization. When you take selfishness and need for recognition out of the leadership equation, you can build a servant leader and hopefully a better society.

In exploring the Servant Leadership concept and principles, I recognize the need to pursue these qualities in my own leadership style. In the beginning of my career, I pursued employment with the Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole Division, with a calling to serve others and to make a difference. As I've moved up the chain from Institutional Probation and Parole Officer, then Unit Supervisor, to District Administrator I and finally to District Administrator II, I embraced the opportunity to impact the lives of others and help them find real meaning and purpose in their life. I'm a "behind the scenes" type person, who does not like recognition; so I gravitated to the Servant Leadership concept with genuine interest. I felt I was a good listener who could appreciate the diverse characteristics of those I work with and value their opinions. But there is so much more to the disbursement of power within the organization and enhancing the life of others as a servant leader. This sense of stewardship and community creates an environment of intuitive and creative minds working together for the good of the organization. It takes a lot of time and energy to research past patterns, current trends and have the ability to foresee future needs. It takes a natural gift to encourage healing and motivate change. It takes a lot of charismatic flare to persuade fellow staff members to buy into new concepts and make them their own. Being aware of not only your strengths and weaknesses, but recognizing and accepting the strengths of others to compliment you as a leader sounds easy, but it is an ongoing learning process.

A couple of areas not addressed by the servant-leadership philosophy that I felt left gaps in the concept are motivating the leader and dealing with problem employees. Keeping leaders motivated and helping them take care of themselves is not mentioned. When giving so much of yourself to others, you have to take time to address your needs as well. This is where it is important to have a great administration team in place that not only motivates, but takes time to listen and encourage other supervisors. Especially in the Department of Probation and Parole, on a daily basis we deal with symptoms and substitutions others use in place of finding true purpose in their lives. Many barriers

keep us from finding purpose, including low self-esteem, untreated mental illnesses, substance abuse, no goals, hopelessness/despair, financial hardships, no support systems, no positive role models and not being educationally prepared. Not only do our clientele run into these barriers, but to an extent, so do our employees and supervisors. Sometimes as employees in a professional field, like Probation and Parole, we do a better job of masking these issues in our own lives. Instilling hope and encouragement becomes a continuous battle which drains the emotional state of our leaders.

Dealing with staff problems/issues zaps leaders' emotional state and strength as well. They might be a small number in your workforce, but those few who constantly have problems or cause problems, take up a majority of a leader's time. There is no pleasing some individuals, no matter how hard you try. Some employees whine and complain incessantly, making it appear they thrive on turmoil. Chaos in the workplace makes it hard to create a teamwork approach. Employees keep an eye out on the work patterns of their co-workers. The strengths of some employees are many and they can contribute more to the organization than others. Knowing how to not take advantage of their talents can be tricky and how to empower others who struggle even harder.

For the most part, servant leadership appears to be a good fit for the leaders of Missouri Department of Corrections, Probation and Parole Division. Our profession is made up of individuals who feel a calling to serve others. Our department offers opportunities for career advancement and selects supervisors not only based on their qualifications, but their professionalism and natural talent. Servant leadership focuses a lot on the inherent characteristics that come naturally to some individuals. These distinct characteristics make a great leader who in turn impacts a better tomorrow for our organization.

References

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