



Servanthood

The critical difference

One basic principle in leadership, as great leaders practise, is ‘to get ahead, put others ahead first’. To know all about the qualities of *servanthood*, and why it is critical to a leader, read on...

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Competence and courage - on the character quality of a leader - the column published in the May 2007 issue of ‘*Modern Machine Tools*’, referred to the story of Vir Chakra winner colonel Ravindranath Magod and how his battalion helped win the Kargil war by taking back Tololing from the Pakistan army. By his actions, he had in many ways demonstrated that his concern for his people and the country was far bigger than himself, and to be able to do that one has to love the people more than his position.

You are all familiar with the terrorist attack on Mumbai on the November 26, 2008. You have seen it reported almost live on the television. There are many great stories of *servanthood* in there. Few

have been told while most remain untold. Kuljeet Kaur was having dinner at the Taj on 26/11 along with her daughter, son-in-law and their less-than-a-year-old baby when the terrorists struck. People in the restaurant slipped under the tables initially and stayed there until sometime during the night when the staff moved them into a back room.

Display of courage

Kaur’s challenge and perhaps those present there too was to keep the baby quiet or prevent it from either crying or making any sound, by any means, even by cupping her palm over the baby’s mouth if required. Imagine the fate of a nine month old! The uppermost thought in Kaur’s mind at that time was the safety of the baby and others



and to save them from the terrorists, by not letting them know of their presence. The thoughts in her mind and her actions put the safety of others before herself. As providence would have it, they were helped out of the hotel the next morning, though not everyone was as fortunate.

Karambir Kang was the general manager of the Taj Mahal Hotel and Towers on that fateful day and continues in the job today. He, along with his entire staff at the hotel, was busy protecting the guests and looking after their needs. In the wake of a terrorist attack, they did not panic but put service above self; true love & concern for their guests above their own safety and well-being.

Kang lost his entire immediate family in this attack and while on duty - his dear wife and children - and while this news reached him, he conveyed it to his mother and continued to look after the safety and well-being of his guests to prevent them from becoming victims to the horrible terrorists. Was he heart-broken? Was he saddened? Was he angered? It is anyone's guess. The epical teaching is, "yours is not to win, but yours is to do the best you can," for the ambition to win can sometimes bring in the negative emotions of ego and greed.

The story of every employee at the Taj and Oberoi hotels during those two-and-a-half days of life's testing and trying moments will tell the tale of sacrifice, service and concern all for the other above self. This is *servanthood* in leadership. It knows no ranks and no designations. Had these employees not displayed their levels of leadership abilities, love and concern for others, perhaps the story would have been quite different.

Yet another story that exhibits this very quality is that of major Unnikrishnan. The country has paid tribute to this courageous man, but no words can convey the sacrifice he and his family have made. He lost his life while trying to bring one of his injured teammates to safety. He obviously knew of the dangers he would face if he went back into the line of fire, no one would have held it against him

had he not gone back. But he held the life of his teammate above any danger to himself at that critical moment - the moment when he held duty and concern for another above everything else.

Doing the right thing

What sets such men and women apart? Is it their courage and forbearance? Definitely, but more so their willingness to do that little bit extra for others around them. If these same actions had been performed in other circumstances, all that could have been said about these men would be that they were honest and conscientious. What makes the critical difference in this case is their willingness to do the 'right' thing in spite of the 'huge' personal cost. A common man would probably have broken down, when he heard about the death of his family, and none would have held it against him. A more common man might not have run out into danger again and again, no one would have blamed him. This is exactly what makes servant leaders, and what sets them above other men.

President of Taylor University and author Eugene Habecker (known for titles *Rediscovering the Soul of Leadership* and *The Other Side of Leadership*, etc) best puts it as: "The true leader serves. Serves people. Serves their best interests, and in doing so, will not always be popular, may not always impress. But because true leaders are motivated by loving concern rather than a desire for personal glory, they are willing to pay the price."





Put others before self

Schwarzkopf was an officer in the American army that was at war in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. He was given charge of the First Battalion of the Sixth Infantry. This battalion had acquired the reputation of being the worst battalion in the Sixth Infantry. Schwarzkopf changed it all and led it to make it an effective fighting force from a one-time laughing stock. On one fateful day in May 1970, this battalion was chosen to perform a difficult mission in the Batangan Peninsula, which was now a war-struck area for three decades and was covered with land mines and booby traps that had constantly produced casualties.

The perils of war are unavoidable. Schwarzkopf introduced procedures in an attempt to reduce casualties. Every time a soldier was injured in a mine blast, he flew to the location to meet the injured, even lending his helicopter to evacuate them and talk to the other soldiers to boost their morale. On this day in May 1970, when the injured were being evacuated, another soldier stepped on a landmine leading to severe injuries to his leg. Screaming and writhing in pain, the man thrashed around violently. This was when the others realised that it was not a lone mine but they were all in the middle of a minefield.

Schwarzkopf believed that the soldier's life and leg could be saved if he stopped thrashing around. But for this he had to immobilise him. Years later Schwarzkopf

wrote: "I started through the minefield, one slow step at a time, staring at the ground, looking for telltale bumps or little prongs sticking up from the dirt. My knees were shaking so hard that each time I took a step, I had to grab my leg and steady it with both hands before I could take another ... it seemed like a thousand years before I reached the kid."

Schwarzkopf was heavily built and a wrestler before the war. On reaching the soldier, he pinned him down to the ground saving his life, and later evacuating him out of the minefield. One might call Schwarzkopf's act as an act of heroism, courage or even foolhardiness. But, what perhaps best describes his act is *servanthood*. On that day in May, the only way Schwarzkopf could be effective as a leader was to serve this soldier, who was in trouble. Today, you know General Norman Schwarzkopf for having led the Persian Gulf War.

It is an attitude

So, what is this *servanthood* all about? Who demonstrates such qualities? *Servanthood* is not about a designation, rank or office of position. It is not about skill, degrees or competence. But it is completely about one's attitude. Why is this kind of leadership so critical? One of the primary characteristics of a leader is putting his team or others before him, yet taking responsibility for the team in case of failure. This is only possible if a leader has the quality of *servanthood* in him. You can easily sense whether a leader has a servant's heart or not; true leaders do.

Who is a true servant leader?

Here are a few ways to distinguish a true servant leader from the crowd:

He puts others ahead of himself:

Putting others ahead of oneself and one's own personal desires is the first mark of *servanthood*. It involves demonstrating a willingness to put personal agenda on hold. The attitude on display is genuinely being aware of others' needs and being available to help them by being able to accept that their desires are also important.

Possess the confidence to serve:

A person who thinks he is too important to serve is basically an insecure person. How we treat others is a reflection of how we treat ourselves. So, the heart of *servanthood* is security. Only secure leaders give power to others and only secure leaders exhibit *servanthood*.

Initiate service to others: When a NSG Commando came out of the Taj Hotel after the encounter, and was about to call his loved ones, was asked by a TV media channel whether he was scared when he was inside the Taj searching for the terrorists. As a true professional, he turned his head to the camera and said: “Not at all. Call us when ever you need us, wherever you need us and we will be there to look after your safety,” and went back to his cell phone to make that call. Anybody will serve when compelled, while some only serve in a crisis. But you can really see the heart of someone who initiates service to others. Great leaders see the need, seize the opportunity and serve without expecting anything in return.

Do not focus on rank or position: A servant leader is not position-conscious. When Karambir Kang stepped in to save the lives of his guests, his rank was the last thing on his mind. He went in as a person trying to help another. Being a leader only gave him a greater sense of obligation to serve.

Serve out of love: The *servanthood* in Kaur, Kang and Unnikrishnan was fuelled by love. The extent of your influence depends on the depth of your concern for others. And, that is why it is so important for leaders to be willing to serve.

The take away: If you want to become a better leader, reflect on: where is your heart when it comes to serving

others? Do you desire to become a leader for the perks and benefits? Or are you motivated by the desire to help others? If you want to become the kind of a leader that others will follow, you will have to settle the issue of *servanthood*. If your attitude is one of to be served rather than to serve, you are heading for trouble. If this is an issue in your life, the following three advices may be of help:

- ◉ Stop bossing or lording over people; start listening to them
- ◉ Stop role-playing for advantage; start risking for the benefit of others
- ◉ Stop seeking your own way; start serving others

The epical lesson here is one who wants to be great must be like the least and the servant of all. A few suggestions to improve in this area would be:

Perform small acts: Start with small acts of kindness. Start with those closest to you, family and friends. Find ways to demonstrate through small acts or deeds that you care.

Learn to walk slowly through the crowd: When you meet people, attend meetings or functions or are in a public place with lots of people, try to circulate. Talk to people; focus on each person you meet. Learn his name; know his needs, wants and desires. When you go home make a note of it to do something that will benefit at least some of them.

Move into action

If *servanthood* is absent from one’s life, the best way to improve it is by beginning to serve the people. Start serving with your body; your heart will eventually catch up. Keep making the effort until your heart changes. Leadership is practised not so much in words as in attitude and in actions. **MMT**



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