

7 characteristics of servant leadership

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I think it is so important for the church to understand the real meaning of servant leadership.

So important.

“But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Matthew 20:25-28).

“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:8-12).

Here are seven characteristics of a servant leader.

- 1. Puts the needs of the followers first**—not themselves or the preservation of their own power. (This, counterintuitively, results in more influence.)
- 2. Transfers as much authority as possible to the followers**—enabling them to make their own decisions in as many areas as is possible. Other words for this are empowerment and decentralization. These are not only popular buzzwords, but they are essential concepts for the proper functioning of society and any organization.
- 3. Seeks the growth of their followers to their maximum potential.** This is another reason that top-down oriented leadership is not right or helpful: it stunts the growth of followers by making most of their decisions for them.

4. Recognizes they are accountable to those they lead. This is an implication of the equality of all people. Without this accountability, leaders are by definition in a special “higher class” than the followers, which is unbiblical, wrong, and prideful at its very root. We see a very good, albeit imperfect, example of this in modern democracy. The leaders in government are ultimately accountable to the people, and the best governmental leaders see themselves as public servants in the fullest sense.

5. Seeks to lead chiefly through influence and persuasion, not authority or coercion (threat of punishment or bad consequences for not doing what the leader wants). Note that this requires the servant leader read and study, for there is no other way to have the knowledge needed to operate according to persuasion. Often when people lead by coercion, they take the easy way and try to make up for their lack of true knowledge, and thus, real influence.

6. Recognizes their limited authority. No individual ever has total authority over another. That is by definition a form of dictatorship, even if the “leader” who thinks he has such authority has good intent. This, again, stems from the fact that we are all in the image of God and thus ontologically equal. Ontological equality does not necessarily negate *functional* differences, but it *must* be reflected in the way those functional differences operate (such as through accountability to the led, principle 4, and recognizing the limited scope of authority, this principle).

7. Has concern for the poor and marginalized. This is a fundamental biblical responsibility, and the servant leader recognizes that this is not to be forgotten in the way they go about anything, including the way they lead.

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