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The Servant Leader: A Higher Calling for Dental Professionals

Fred Certosimo, M.S.Ed., D.M.D.

Abstract: The dental profession is guided by normative principles that provide guidance to our leaders and practicing dentists in addressing the needs of patients and the profession, yet there is room for incorporating new ideas that help dental professionals meet their professional obligations. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the concept of “servant leadership,” especially in contrast with “self-serving leaders,” and to suggest that servant leadership is consistent with the high ethical and professional ideals of the dental profession. The servant leader is the antithesis of the self-serving leader, who incessantly seeks more power and acquisition of material possessions. The servant leader’s highest priority is the people (patients/students/customers) he or she serves. The concept of the servant-leader can take us away from self-serving, top-down leadership and encourage us to think harder about how to respect, value, and motivate people and ultimately provide better service to our patients.

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**“The people elect leaders not to rule,
but to serve.”**

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Over the years, the American Dental Association (ADA), American Dental Education Association, and American College of Dentists have worked closely with national, state, local, and academic leaders to help dental professionals earn the esteem of the patients and communities we serve through our professional skills, dedication, and ethical values. The ADA code contains five fundamental principles: patient autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and veracity.¹ These normative principles, which embody the special obligations oral health care providers profess, provide guidance to dentists in establishing a foundation to better address the needs of their patients and our profession. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “profession” is from the Latin verb *profiteri*, to declare aloud or publicly. Pellegrino² states, “The act of profession is a promise made to another person who is in need and therefore existentially vulnerable. The relationship between the professional and those he or she serves is characterized by an inequality in which the professional holds the balance of power. The inequality of power poses special obligations of

the person who professes” (p. 114). We must never take this public trust for granted and must pledge to always keep the patient’s best interest ahead of personal gain.

This principle is in stark contrast to recent news about instances of rampant greed in our most prominent national institutions in banking and finance. Even in the for-profit, corporate world, standards of behavior and regulations have been designed by professional organizations and oversight agencies to prevent abuses of power. Yet certain self-serving leaders have ignored these standards: their aim is to win (i.e., maximize profits) at all costs and propel themselves to even greater heights. In that pursuit, they have little regard for their subordinates and the public they allegedly serve. As a result of these recent abuses, the financial sector is now having to work to regain the public’s confidence in its effectiveness and leadership.

The “win-at-all-costs” attitude of self-serving leaders may result in great harm to others and even to themselves. In their book *Why Smart People Do Dumb Things*, Feinberg and Tarrant³ cite several reasons for incredibly talented people acting in what turn out to be incredibly destructive ways. These reasons are arrogance, hubris, narcissism, and an unconscious need to fail. Arrogance is an exaggerated

sense of pride and self-importance. Aristotle referred to hubris as “hamartia,” a tragic (fatal) character flaw that distorts the inner moral compass of even the smartest among us. Sanders⁴ has said that “the single biggest threat to an organization’s success is pride.” Narcissists typically lack connectivity to the world in which they live. Many exhibit such a lack of connection that they speak of themselves in the third person. Narcissists often believe that they are better than others and therefore not subject to the same basic rules and social norms. They develop a sense of entitlement, which may eventually lead to their unraveling. The harmful effects of such narcissists may extend beyond their immediate circle and the organizations of which they are a part if they achieve a high profile in the public eye. Pinsky and Young in their book *The Mirror Effect*⁵ explain how narcissistic entertainers have negatively altered what are considered “normal” behavior patterns of young people.

Self-serving leaders may possess some or all of these personality flaws. Often they do not realize that although their natural talents make them capable of achieving many things, they are not able to do all things. Instead, as Hogan et al. have written,⁶ self-serving leaders develop “the expectation of special privileges and exemptions from social demands, feeling omnipotence in controlling others, intolerance of criticism, and a tendency to focus on one’s own mental products and to see others as extensions of oneself.”

In contrast to the self-serving leader, consider what is often called the “servant leader.” Sanders⁴ states that the key element of a servant leader is a demonstrated commitment to “helping others realize their potential by focusing not on their weaknesses but on their strengths.” Servant leaders excel in building consensus among all levels of the organization. They seek and value the opinions and perspectives of others, especially their subordinates and customers. They realize the “people are always more important than the process” and strive to “empower people to make decisions based on the organization’s vision, mission, and commitment to sustainability” (pp. 179–80).⁴ Ultimately, servant leadership improves the ability of all members of the organization to contribute to the attainment of the mission and builds “communities connected by an emotional bond that shall prevail for generations” (p. 57). It is important to understand that servant leadership is not a mere pipe dream for organizational do-gooders, but may be considered a survival strategy. Goleman⁷ states,

“As knowledge-based services and intellectual capital become more central to corporations, improving the way people work together will be a major way to leverage intellectual capital, making a critical competitive difference. To thrive, if not survive.” Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, not thought of as a “touchy-feely” kind of guy, once said: “I don’t have to like my players and associates, but as a leader I must love them. Love is loyalty, love is teamwork, love respects the dignity of the individual. This is the strength of an organization.”⁸

There are clear differences between self-serving leaders and servant leaders. Blanchard and Hodges⁹ state that “One of the quickest ways you can tell the difference between a servant leader and a self-serving leader is how they handle feedback, because one of the biggest fears that self-serving leaders have is to lose their position.” Self-serving leaders spend inordinate amounts of time preserving and promoting their status. Investment in the training and development of subordinates is usually not the order of the day. Self-serving leaders lead by talking and not doing. They can be identified by the cliché “they can talk the talk, but don’t walk the walk.” Blanchard and Hodges⁹ say further that “self-serving leaders are driven by pride and have a fear of intimacy with others” (p. 29). Like the Wizard of Oz, they create false façades and barriers between themselves and their subordinates in an attempt to hide their flaws. In seeking their goals, these leaders use fear as a means to manipulate and control their subordinates, but management by fear generally leads only to short-term results that quickly fade. Self-serving leaders do not welcome the advice of “truth tellers” in decision making processes; they prefer to hear only from those who agree with them, so “shooting the messenger” is commonplace in their management style. Lastly, self-serving leaders tend to focus on the processes rather than the people, and they are suspicious of empowering their employees to make decisions. As Blanchard and Hodges⁹ say, “Fearful leaders may hide behind their positions, withhold information, intimidate others, become ‘control freaks’ and discourage honest feedback” (p. 27). These actions can only detract from the achievement of the organization’s long-term goals.

Kahn¹⁰ states that self-serving leaders place very little credence in the ability and judgment of their employees and prefer the advice of experts, who “have the tendency to proliferate new forms of expertise and specialists who are drawn largely from a very special social and cultural milieu. The more

expert—or at least the more educated—a person is, the less likely that person is to see a solution when it is not within the framework in which he or she was taught to think. When a possibility comes up that is ruled out by the accepted framework, an expert—or well-educated individual—is often less likely to see it than an amateur without the confining framework.” Feinberg and Tarrant³ refer to this phenomenon as “educated incapacity” and state: “Experts so often turn out to be mistaken because they are experts: they know the past and present in such detail, and have formed such ironclad assumptions, that their knowledge prevents them from anticipating surprises.” The destructive result of this blind spot found in experts is that they are unable to see or even imagine the good ideas that may arise from anyone in the organization. Unlike the experts, individuals new to the organization can provide valuable insights since they have no blind spots. However, Sanders⁴ concludes that it is ultimately the culture of the organization and its leaders that will determine if these good ideas surface.

In contrast to self-serving leaders, the fundamental and timeless principles of servant leadership are relevant in modern times and should play an increasing role in government, business, organizations, and the health professions. Though the term “servant leader” is fairly recent, the concepts it embraces are not. Thirty years ago, Covey¹¹ envisioned the future demands of a global economy that focuses on producing goods and services in the most cost-efficient environment. “We’ve got to produce more for less and with greater speed than we’ve ever done before,” he wrote. “The only way to do that in a sustained way is through the empowerment of people.” Covey further stated that empowered employees can thrive only in high-trust organizations, in which the leadership philosophy transforms traditional bosses into servant leaders and coaches: “Low-trust culture that is characterized by high-control management, political posturing, protectionism, cynicism, and internal competition and adversarialism simply cannot compete with the speed, quality, and innovation of those organizations . . . that empower people.”

If leadership is viewed in a traditional hierarchal pyramid with the boss at the apex and subordinates at various levels below, it follows that the subordinates are always looking up to the boss for direction and away from the customers. Hunter¹² has perceptively asked, “While everyone is focusing on keeping the boss happy, who’s focusing on keeping the customers happy?” Now, let’s invert that pyramid and imagine an organization in which the focus is on serving the

customer, who now appears at the apex. The effective implementation of this upside-down hierarchy would place the contact personnel just below that of the customer, because they are in the ideal position to best serve the customer’s needs. Those front-line workers would be encouraged to make local decisions and respond to customer concerns. It is logical that the farther away leaders are from the customer, the more out of touch they are with the customer’s desires. Leaders are thus most effective when they serve the needs of customer contact personnel and provide them the support to accomplish the mission of the organization.⁹ The servant leader’s job is to remove obstacles in his or her subordinates’ way as they serve the customer. While acting in this role, the servant leader serves both his or her subordinates and customers, but also the community at large—a win-win-win situation.

In his chapter in *The Servant Leader Within*, Spears¹³ lists ten characteristics of a servant leader (Table 1). Although this list by no means provides a complete characterization of the servant leader, it offers a foundation for further investigation into this growing leadership style. Servant-leadership, according to Spears, is “based on community, one that seeks involvement of others in decision making, one strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, and one that is attempting to enhance the personal growth of workers while improving the caring and quality of our many institutions.”

Can it be that “the times, they are a-changin’,” as Bob Dylan sang, so that servant leadership can make a contribution in the realm of dentistry and dental education? Spears¹³ notes that “the servant leader concept continues to grow in its influence and impact. In fact, we have witnessed an unparalleled

Table 1. Ten characteristics of a servant leader

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing
4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualization
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship
9. Commitment to the growth of people
10. Building community

Source: Spears LC. Understanding the growing impact of servant leadership. In: Greenleaf RK, ed. *The servant leader within*. New York: Paulist Press, 2003:13–9.

explosion of interest and practice of servant leadership in the past decade.” Servant leadership can provide an environment in which our workers (dental professionals) serve their customers (patients) and their communities and help to realize the vision of the organizations of which they are a part. In these rapidly changing and tumultuous economic times, servant leadership offers a style of leadership that is consistent with the high ethical and professional ideals of the dental profession.

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