

Servant Leadership

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How to run a successful surveying business with a servant leadership style.

Success as a business owner requires you to possess more than deep expertise as a Professional Land Surveyor: you must also be an effective leader.

As the generational transition occurs, millennials will comprise 75 percent of the global workforce by 2025 and are already emerging as leaders in technology and other industries. They want to work for companies that promote innovative thinking, develop their skills, and contribute to society. Additionally, many millennials are of the opinion that businesses are not doing as much as they could to develop their leadership skills and that leaders need to be nurtured, especially as they cannot wait for senior positions to become available to them.

The larger your business grows, the more important leadership skills become. Yet even when you run a business as a sole proprietor, you likely rely on the services of contract employees or a long-time mentor to help you—making leadership skills a valuable asset at every level.

While traditional views of leadership are characterized by a top-down, authoritarian approach, there is another style of leadership that has gained increased popularity in recent years: **Servant Leadership**.

What is Servant Leadership?

At its core, servant leadership takes the approach of putting team members and employees first.

Think of the patriotic call of John F. Kennedy urging Americans to *“Think not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”* Similarly, servant leaders don’t prioritize business gain above all else; instead, they look for where they can lend support to employees so that every individual—and therefore the business as a whole—can truly thrive.

While there have been servant leaders throughout human history, the concept was coined in 1970 in an essay by [Robert K. Greenleaf \(1\)](#).

Definition of a Servant Leader in Greenleaf’s Words:

“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.”

Greenleaf recognized that there is a spectrum of leadership styles. On one end of the spectrum are people who are “leaders” first, and on the other end are those who are “servants” first. Every business owner falls somewhere in between those two extremes.

Next, we will explain the value of the servant leadership approach and how you can begin to cultivate servant leadership traits in your own business.

The Value of a Servant Leadership Approach

Servant leadership is valuable because it places focus on the holistic well-being of employees, companies, and communities.





This is particularly relevant to land surveying businesses, which literally help to shape the physical form of communities and serve local cities and residents with quality work.

When done well, taking a servant leader approach isn't just good for society as a whole, it's good for business. Engaging team members, building trust, and improving team relations are all benefits of servant leadership that ultimately benefit business as well.. That's because servant leadership also has the ability to:

- Promote employee growth
- Promote staff retention
- Promote community goodwill

Servant Leadership Promotes Employee Growth

Servant leaders are interested in sharing power, not hoarding it. When it comes to employees, that means servant leaders want to ensure employees have what they need to thrive on the job, and beyond it.

Thriving on the job might mean that they need training in order to do their existing job well. It may also mean that they need mentorship to guide them to the next phase of their careers.

As Land Surveyors, we should all be acutely aware of the need to groom our existing talent for the next stage of their careers. When you make an effort to learn what resources and support your employees need, they will be empowered to take action to grow their knowledge and expertise. And the more expert your employees become, the better you can serve your clients and community.

Servant Leadership Promotes Staff Retention

There's a popular saying that people don't quit a bad job, they quit a bad boss. In the current land surveying climate, firms that have qualified staff simply cannot afford to lose them. Professional surveyors are retiring at a faster rate than they can be replaced, and many firms are experiencing a higher demand for surveying services than ever before.

According to [Harvard Business Review \(2\)](#), research has shown that when staff members choose to stay in the same job, it's typically because it's a job they enjoy. Specifically, a survey of employees who stayed at the same job felt that they used their strengths 33% more often and felt 37% more confident that they are developing skills that would progress their careers.

This is a strong case for a servant leader approach that prioritizes things like employee work-life balance, fair pay, skill progression, and career growth as described above.

Servant Leadership Promotes Community Goodwill

The best servant leaders look beyond the internal workings of their organization and to the greater community ecosystem in which it exists. As surveyors, the more visibility and goodwill we have with our local communities, the more our businesses can thrive.

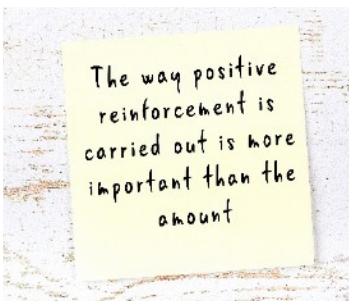
Often, supporting your community has the added silver lining of marketing your surveying business in the process. When you do things like sponsor youth sports and participate in career fairs and events, you educate others on the role of land surveyors and the value provided by your company.

How to Become a Servant Leader

The ultimate goal of servant leaders is to promote a working environment that satisfies team members both personally and professionally. When employees are happy and supported, they can do their best work to help your firm succeed.

Here are five concrete ways that you can pursue a servant leadership approach.

1. Provide Positive Reinforcement



When employees are aware of the positive impact they are making at work, it creates a sense of confidence and pride that spills over into the subsequent work that they do. Don't hold back from telling employees where they did a good job and how their actions contributed to the overall success of an organization or project.

For example, did a recent client have kind words to say about an individual team member or a job well done? Make sure that you pass those comments on to the employees involved. Even when something bad happens such as an accident on a job site, you may be able to highlight the quick thinking of an employee and how they kept a bad situation from becoming worse.

According to [Forbes \(3\)](#), this type of consistent feedback serves to build resilience and keep

morale high.

Positive reinforcement can also take shape beyond words. [Entrepreneur\(4\)](#) recommends showing employee appreciation with reward programs or events that teams can look forward to. For example, we hold multiple companywide events throughout the year. From renting a suite at the local baseball park, Top Golf Events for just adults, or a private event for the entire family at the local waterpark, while other companies might take a second look at their bonus and benefit programs.

2. Keep Two-Way Communication Open

Servant leaders excel at making the voices and opinions of others feel heard. This means you can't succeed with just a top-down communication approach, where all updates and instructions come from you as the business owner. You also need to make sure employees can contribute to the conversation.

Perhaps this takes the shape of a weekly "all hands" meeting where each employee has a moment to bring up their workload and any associated challenges. Or perhaps it's a recurring one-on-one check in every week or month to align with your key team members.

Most importantly, these conversations should offer an opportunity for employees to provide honest feedback. Employees should feel their concerns and questions are heard—and they should have confidence that you'll do something about them. You never know when an employee will have an insight or idea that transforms one of your processes or your entire business model for the better.

3. Encourage Professional Development



As mentioned previously, servant leaders aren't obsessed with being *the* one and only leader. They also want to provide their team members with a path to leadership and growth as well. In surveying, there are logical paths to advancement that you can encourage, such as education and certifications that will take an employee closer to their career goals, or by enabling your team to attend professional conferences.

Sometimes, passing on your own expertise and mentorship can be powerful in itself. Brandon Montero, a senior survey manager at Okland Construction in Arizona, likened mentoring to the factor that can help your employees truly thrive, versus just get by.

"We could picture a plant just coming up in a patch of dry dirt, all by itself," he said. "On its own, maybe it'll thrive. Maybe it's going to make it, depending on the conditions. Or could we add water regularly? Could we add nutrients regularly? Sure, it could grow on its own, but could it really thrive?"

The more we invest in mentorship and professional development, the more we equip the next generation of surveyors for lasting success.

4. Care About People on a Personal Level

Caring about your employees goes beyond providing them with a steady paycheck and giving them tools to succeed on the job. The best bosses also show an interest in employees on a personal level.

If an employee is struggling at work, chances are there are external causes, such as the health of a family member or a financial hardship. When you are in tune with employees on a big-picture level, you can better support them and learn their lasting loyalty and trust.

Today's workforce wants to feel valued and have an element of being autonomous. Consider providing flexibility so that employees can better manage work-life balance. Why not let employees head home from the job site, and email their data back to the office via VPN? As long as you get the results that you need, it may be less critical that all work happens from the confines of the office.

You'd also be surprised what employees will share with you if you give them an opportunity to open up. For example, one surveyor noticed he had an employee struggling to get to work on time every morning. It turns out that his family only had one car. He solved the problem by letting the employee use a company truck. It took an incredible burden off of the employee, and showed that his employer truly cared.

5. Lead by Example

Most importantly, being a good servant leader means identifying the type of business owner you want to be and then leading by example.

During a business crisis or recession, what attitude and outlook do you want to share with your team? If a team member is struggling due to personal reasons, what level of compassion and empathy do you want to convey?

Encourage your team to follow your lead in putting others first. Don't be the type of leader that says one thing in a company mission statement or employee handbook, but then they turn out to be empty words.

Make an effort to live out your philosophy where everyone can see.

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1. <https://www.greenleaf.org/products-page/servant-leader-download/#:~:text=Powerful%2C%20poetic%20and%20practical.,in%20the%20quality%20of%20society.>
 2. <https://hbr.org/2018/01/why-people-really-quit-their-jobs>
 3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/05/26/why-servant-leadership-is-more-important-than-ever/?sh=68eb51f82861>
 4. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/422764>