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New Managers Need a Philosophy About How They'll Lead

by Carol A. Walker

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Being promoted to manager is a good sign you've been successful to date — however, the road from this point forward gets trickier to navigate. Your job is no longer just about getting the work done. You're more likely now to find yourself juggling conflicting demands, delivering difficult messages, and addressing performance problems. While there is no guidebook of straightforward answers to your new challenges, having a clear philosophy can provide a firm foundation from which to operate.

With respect to your career, a philosophy is simply a cohesive way of thinking about your role. Very few people take the time to establish one. Most managers live in a reactive mode, responding to issues based on gut feelings, past experiences, and examples set by others. The success or failure of this approach is often determined by your temperament (some people are naturally more gifted managers than others) and the caliber of your role models—two factors largely out of your control. Whether you've been lucky in these areas or not, having a core philosophy can help guide you through the day-to-day and the job's tougher moments.

The idea of "servant leadership" is a great place for new managers to start. Robert Greenleaf coined the term 35 years ago, but the concept is still vital and empowering. Granted, "servant" doesn't *sound* nearly as powerful as "boss," but it has the potential to deliver far more of what most of us are really after: influence. The reason is simple. When you have a servant mentality, it's not about you. Removing self-interest and personal glory from your motivation on the job is the single most important thing you can do to inspire trust. When you focus first on the success of your organization and your team, it comes through clearly. You ask more questions, listen more carefully, and actively value others' needs and contributions. The result is more thoughtful, balanced decisions. People who become known for inclusiveness and smart decisions tend to develop influence far more consistently than those who believe they have all the answers.

Servant leadership is most powerful when applied to managing employees. The first step in embracing this mindset is to stop thinking that your employees work for you. Instead, hold onto the idea that they work for the organization and for themselves. Your role as servant is to facilitate the relationship between each employee and the organization. Ask yourself, "What will it take for this employee to be successful in this relationship?" And, "What does the organization need to provide in order to hold up its end of the bargain?" When these questions drive your thinking, you advance both parties' interests. (The same principles apply to managing products, supply chains, and customer relationships, but we'll keep our focus on employees here.)

Does servant leadership prohibit telling people what to do or correcting their behavior? On the contrary, it means that you *must* do these things to facilitate an individual's success within the organization. The key is that your mind is in "servant mode" when you perform the daily tasks of management.

For instance, assigning work should be a thoughtful process that balances business goals with an individual's interest, skills, and development needs. Not every routine task has to be so thoroughly considered. But whenever significant assignments are made, putting them into context maximizes their impact. An employee who understands why she has been asked to do something is far more likely to assume true ownership for the assignment. When she owns it, you become more guide than director. You *ask* how you can support her and how she would like to report progress rather than *tell* her these things. An employee who believes her boss understands her strengths, values her input, and encourages her growth is likely to stick around for the long-term.

Clearly, the servant approach to assigning tasks requires more thought and preparation than simply dishing them out. It takes time. But remember that you are actually multitasking—you are making sure the work gets done while simultaneously strengthening the individual's relationship with the organization.

Adopting the servant philosophy should also make it easier to provide corrective feedback. You are merely a facilitator, and facilitators aren't angry, frustrated, or resentful when they deliver feedback, because it isn't about them—it's about the relationship between the two other parties. For that reason, exercising the servant frame of mind makes development conversations feel less personal. You aren't disappointed in your employee's actions; you are simply explaining how they get in the way of what he's trying to accomplish for himself and the organization. When your only agenda is setting someone else up for success, your words tend to be received more openly. True upset happens when either party's interests are allowed to suffer over time without intervention. It must be the manager's primary concern to balance those interests.

By definition, developing a reputation takes time. However, when you are consistent with the servant approach, people know what to expect from you and trust ensues. Trust, combined with the smart, inclusive decision-making discussed earlier is a surefire way of gaining influence.

We've just scratched the surface of the many challenges that you will confront as a first-time manager. There is simply no way to anticipate them all. But a core servant leadership philosophy will provide critical guideposts to help you manage in real time. Whatever your temperament, a serving mindset will keep you out of the reactive and self-protective patterns that can impede your success. Servant leadership may not appeal to those who are attracted to a more traditional idea of power, but it should be the choice of those interested in influence and results.

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