

A LEADERPerfect Resource

Helping Others Succeed

Leading from a Servant Perspective



An Interview with
Dr. Mike Armour

Helping Others Succeed: Leading from a Servant Perspective

A LEADERPerfect Resource

Copyright 2014 Dr. Mike Armour

You are free to copy this booklet and distribute it at no charge to others so long as copyright notices and clarity of authorship is maintained. But no part of this book may be reproduced or distributed for commercial purposes without the prior written consent of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in reviews, newsletters, blogs, essays, or books.

LeaderPerfect is a registered trademark.

Published by LifeThemes Publishing
A Subsidiary of Leadership Development Corporation
Dallas, TX

Mailing Address
P.O. Box 595609, Dallas, TX 75359

www.LifeThemesPublishing.com

About Dr. Mike Armour . . .

Dr. Mike is the founder and managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International in Dallas. He has proven himself in far-ranging leadership responsibilities, including service as a Navy captain, a college president, the CIO of a national intelligence community, and the CEO of an international humanitarian organization operating in 18 nations.



He has also managed political campaigns, chaired numerous multi-million dollar fund-raising drives, founded a private school, and led several faith-based institutions. Today Dr. Mike brings this experience together in his work as a leadership coach, management trainer, and consultant for organizations of every size, including Fortune 100 companies. He is also a podcaster, keynote speaker, and an author. Having written or co-authored eleven books, six in the field of leadership, he has been published in over two-dozen languages. Learn more about Dr. Mike and his services at

<https://www.leaderperfect.com>

True servant leaders measure their own success by how well they help others flourish. Their humility uniquely equips them to promote the development of people around them. Why? Because leaders who are humble have no trouble letting someone else have the spotlight. They are not threatened when someone in their organization outperforms them. In fact, they bask vicariously in the accomplishments of those whom they have coached or mentored.

Helping Others Succeed: Leading from a Servant Perspective

An Interview with Dr. Mike Armour

This interview with Mike Armour appeared originally as a chapter in Leadership: Helping Others to Succeed, an anthology of in-depth conversations with top leadership experts first published in 2014 by Insight Publishing.

Interviewer

Mike, you've been training people to be leaders for decades. What are the most significant changes that you've seen in leadership during that time?

Armour

The most telling change, in my judgment, has been a shift in what is expected of leaders and what this shift implies for leadership styles.

There was a time, not so long ago, when people looked to leaders primarily to take charge, be decisive, and get things done. But now people also want leaders who will empower them, equip them for success, and position them to fulfill their complete potential.

As a result, people are less and less tolerant of leadership styles which smack of authoritarianism, even in the slightest. They are looking for leaders whose approach is collaborative rather than controlling. Leaders who communicate through dialogue rather than top-down directives. Leaders who see themselves more as coaches than as bosses.

Forty years ago, when I started teaching leadership, you never heard leaders and managers described as coaches. Today the concept of the leader-coach is so widespread that even MBA programs address it. I've taught several MBA seminars on this topic myself, and the classes always max out in terms of enrollment. Fifteen years ago almost no one would have signed up.

Interviewer

So, authoritarianism is dead?

Armour

No, not entirely. And it never will be. Certain leadership roles will always demand an authoritarian, top-down, command-and-control approach. This is particularly true in military and quasi-military organizations, such as law enforcement or fire fighting.



Because these professions put life on the line at a moment's notice, they demand the decision-making efficiency and the organizational discipline of a command-and-control culture. But elsewhere, fewer and fewer places welcome military style leadership.

Interviewer

Then what kind of leadership are workers looking for?

Armour

When you put that question to workers, they offer a variety of words to describe the ideal business leader. But their responses basically boil down to one thing: they are looking for leaders who are more driven to serve than to be served.

This doesn't mean that workers expect leaders to be servile or passive or unassertive. Quite the contrary. Today's workers want strong, self-confident leaders who exercise power and authority well.

But they also want leaders who use their power and authority to promote the success of their people, both collectively and individually.

Interviewer

But don't many authoritarian leaders care about their people's well-being?

Armour

Oh, absolutely. As a retired naval officer, and now as a leadership coach, I've worked alongside scores of authoritarian leaders. Many of them care deeply about their people, far deeper than popular stereotypes suggest.

But what we are talking about here goes beyond simply caring for people or being concerned about their well-being. We're talking about a depth of engagement between leaders and their people that is rare in authoritarian leadership.

In authoritarian organizations, even the most benevolent ones, it's always clear that workers serve management and that management sets the agenda, pure and simple. The line between management and workers is clear and distinct.

- Workers have little voice, if any, in decision-making.
- Their personal development is given little priority.
- And communication is almost exclusively top-down.

To the outside observer, it appears that leadership is in place solely to be served. And each level of leadership sees its purpose as serving the levels of leadership above it.

Contrast this to leadership styles which are most effective with the majority of workers today. Here the line between the leaders and the led is far less visible and pronounced.

- Collaboration between leaders and workers is on-going and routine.
- The atmosphere is more collegial than coercive.
- Leadership consults regularly with employees, draws out their best thinking, actively looks for their creative ideas

and solutions, and builds strong networks of support and respect through the entire organization.

- Workers feel valued, not because they are praised or rewarded, but because they are invited to participate in the life of the organization at a meaningful level.

In this setting leaders still serve the priorities of leadership above them. But they are equally given to serving their peers, their people, and even the broader community which their organization touches. *For them the emphasis is not so much on serving as leaders as it is on leading to serve.*

Interviewer

What accounts for this shift away from authoritarianism?

Armour

Many factors have contributed. None has been more telling than rising education levels in the work place.

Since the Second World War we have purposefully opened the doors of higher education to everyone. And not without cause. The technical and operational sophistication of the modern

workplace puts a premium on an educated workforce. And in many lines of work, continuing education is both a requirement and a way of life.



By its very nature education ignites dreams, aspirations, and ambitions. It leaves people feeling that they have something significant to contribute. They are not content, therefore, to be treated as mindless cogs in a machine. They want to have input. They want to be heard. And they want to be appreciated.

Service industries have only accelerated the need for a well-educated work force. Jobs in the service sector require brain-power, not brawn. Workers in service industries are best viewed as information brokers. They take data and in-

formation from one source, add value to it by applying their own knowledge, then pass the enhanced information to a third party, either an internal or an external customer.

Workers in jobs like these cannot be motivated, managed, or mobilized using the same methods which prevailed in the blue-collar heyday of low-tech manufacturing and construction. Workers in service industries quickly realize that their personal success depends on endless collaboration with colleagues, with experts, and with co-workers in their company. *They therefore expect a management style which is similarly collaborative.*

Interviewer

Does this mean that leadership has changed in a fundamental way?

Armour

No, not really. What is called for today are new *styles* of leadership, not a fundamental change in the *function* of leadership. Just as new styles of architecture do not transform the underlying function of a house, new styles of leadership do not change the underlying nature of leadership.

From written records we can trace the work of leaders over thousands of years. Whatever the century, leadership has always performed the same basic functions.



Yet leadership styles have varied widely, even in the ancient world. That's because *effective leadership is always congruent with the culture and context within which it functions*. As a by-product of human progress, history routinely thrusts leaders into circumstances that mark a sharp break with the past. When this happens, leaders must

adopt new styles of leadership if they are to be effective in the new context.

That's what's happening today. With the emergence of the post-industrial economy, we have seen an extraordinary shift

in the nature of the workplace. This shift is so sweeping that it has few historical precedents. Perhaps the only equivalent in Western history was the transition from the agrarian and feudal society of the Middle Ages to the urban and industrial society of the modern world.

With change of such magnitude, we would expect new leadership styles to arise, and so they have. It's no mere coincidence that the information age opened by introducing us to new leadership terms, such as "servant leadership," "transformational leadership," "participative leadership," and others.

What is common to most of these newer leadership styles is that they put as much emphasis on helping workers succeed as they do on helping the organization succeed. Or to put it more accurately, they share a common belief that we assure corporate success only by ensuring employee success. From this perspective, leaders contribute directly to the company's enduring success by developing, equipping, and empowering workers.

What impresses workers today is not so much the successful people whom a leader has hired, but the successful people whom the leader has developed.

In the old days, leaders tried to recruit successful people for key positions. They still do. But what impresses workers today is not so much the successful people whom a leader has hired, but the successful people whom the leader has developed.

Interviewer

You've said that the underlying function of leadership remains constant over time. How would you define that function?

Armour

Once you start reading books on leadership, you quickly realize that leadership is defined in dozens of ways. For myself, I prefer a definition which is equally valid for leadership wherever you find it. This includes leaders at every level of organizational life,

in both profits and non-profits, and in emerging economies as well as established ones. Many definitions of leadership, I find, fail this test of universal applicability.

I therefore developed the following definition, which I use in training and coaching and in my keynotes:

Leadership is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it.

From what I can tell, this is what leaders in every age have done. All leadership enterprises center on some shared purpose.

The name which we give to this purpose depends on the size of the undertaking. The purpose can be called a cause, a vision, a mission, a campaign, a quest, an outcome, a challenging goal, or a set of objectives. Whatever the name, all leadership pursues some purpose which others find valuable, so valuable that they rally around the leader to achieve it.

Interviewer

And how does this definition relate to the new styles of leadership that you have mentioned?

Armour

The new styles of leadership do not differ significantly from earlier styles in terms of pursuing a shared purpose or pressing to achieve it. Where they do differ – and significantly so – is in the way that they rally people, motivate them, and mobilize them.

Let's take the rallying component, for instance. Traditionally we have thought of rallying as the process of bringing people together in a common place, in the manner of pep rallies or political rallies. The purpose of rallies is to build esprit de corps and to unite people emotionally and psychologically around the leader and the leader's goals.

In business it was far easier to develop such unity and esprit in a day when workers shared a common workplace. Increasingly, however, workers are dispersed far and wide. Frequently they work out of their homes. And members of work teams may be scattered across the nation, or even around the world, having



never met most of the other team face-to-face. Rarely, if ever, will all of them be together in the same place.

The task of building unity and esprit is considerably more daunting in this kind of environment. It requires leaders and managers to be astute in their people skills and in their ability to engage and motivate

people, even at vast distances. It also calls for solid mastery of communication skills in order to maintain clarity, avoid misunderstandings, and keep everyone pulling in the same direction.

This puts a premium on things like emotional intelligence and trust-building, which are commonly called “soft skills.” This term is often used derogatorily, to suggest that soft skills have only secondary importance. But given globalization and today’s workplace realities, skills in engaging people effectively, even at great distances, are hardly secondary.

This is the very thing which Alvin Toffler foretold decades ago in his book *Future Shock*. Toffler warned about the advance of technology and its threat to interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

Modern technology has given us a world in which people can work in relative isolation, yet still be productive. As they depend more and more on smart machines rather than other people to get things done, the quality of human interactions and connections inevitably erodes.

Yet organizations are at their best when people are deeply connected with one another. For this reason, Toffler argued that the upcoming generation of leaders would need a “high touch” style of leadership.

He famously coined the phrase, “high tech, high touch.” His counsel has indeed proven prophetic. If anything, he actually understated the challenge, for even Toffler failed to anticipate the scope and scale of today’s workplace technology.

Interviewer

It sounds like leaders must now be people-centered, above all else.

Armour

Well, leaders have always needed to be focused on people. Leadership is a uniquely people-centric enterprise. That's the primary thing which separates leadership from management.

We speak of leading people and managing people. We also speak of managing budgets, managing inventories, and managing deadlines. But we would never speak of leading a budget or leading an inventory. We only lead people.



What's different today is the make-up of the workforce and what people expect of their leaders. People look to the workplace for two pay checks. One is a monetary document that they can deposit in a bank account. The other is an emotional deposit in the form of finding fulfillment and meaning in their work. And they look to leadership to create the environment and opportunities in which they secure both pay checks.

Leadership is a uniquely people-centric enterprise. That's the primary thing which separates leadership from management.

Now, this concept of receiving two pay checks is hardly foreign to business leaders, because they have always wanted fulfillment from their work, too. While they may seem to seek success for financial or political gain, they also pursue success to fulfill drives deep within them. That's why so many of them keep working long after they have fully achieved financial security.

Yet only decades ago few business leaders gave much thought to whether their workers felt fulfilled. Leaders could safely ig-

nore this issue because workers themselves were not demanding fulfillment from their job. But that situation has changed. Completely.

Interviewer

Are you saying that today's workers are more self-focused than workers in the past?

Armour

No, I'm saying that workers are humans. They have multiple levels of needs, as Maslow points out in his famous model of motivation with its hierarchy of needs. What workers look for from leaders depends on where the workers themselves reside on Maslow's hierarchy.

Until fairly recent times, most Americans gave their daily lives to meeting needs at the lower end of Maslow's hierarchy. Although fortunes were to be made from the earliest days of American history, relatively few people made them. Well into the twentieth century – beyond the economic throes of the Great Depression and the rigors of the Second World War – the vast majority of working Americans struggled to secure the basic necessities of life and to find safety.

With connections to family, church, and community no longer what they once were, people now turn to their work as a place to find affirmation and appreciation. Here, too, is where they focus their search for self-fulfillment.

These needs form the lowest two levels of Maslow's hierarchy. To meet these needs, people relied primarily on their relationship with family, church, and community. Work was just a place to get money for basic necessities. Through these same institutions – family, church, and community – people also satisfied needs at the third level of Maslow's hierarchy, the longing to belong and feel affirmed.

Then, within a generation, this all changed. Post-war prosperity in the 1950s and 1960s expanded the base of wealth in the U.S. immensely. For the first time millions of workers had enough financial security that basic necessities and safety were no longer a daily preoccupation. They were free to move to Maslow's fourth level, which is the drive to find self-esteem, respect from others, and a sense of fulfillment.

Ironically, at that very moment profound social change began breaking down the very institutions that had long provided a sense of belonging and affirmation. Career mobility took away the proximity of extended family. Denominational loyalties weakened, so that churches held less of a claim on the lives of adherents. And the bond of neighborhood and community atrophied.

With connections to family, church, and community no longer what they once were, people now turn to their work as a place to find affirmation and appreciation. Here, too, is where they focus their search for self-fulfillment. Leaders who fail to recognize this reality and respond to it appropriately are curtailing their ability to motivate and fully mobilize their people.

Interviewer

So, it's in helping workers experience appreciation and self-fulfillment that leaders function as servants?

Armour

Among other things, yes. Robert Greenleaf, who popularized the concept of servant leadership in the 1980s, would have said that leaders need to serve every element of the organization, not just their people. But a litmus test for servant leadership is the nature of the relationship between the manager and the managed.

From Greenleaf's perspective the ideal leader is someone whose primary motive is to



serve. Only secondarily does this person want to lead. Indeed, for Greenleaf the desire to lead should itself be rooted in the desire to serve. *In other words, true servant leaders are drawn to leadership, first and foremost, to gain greater leverage for their service.*

Greenleaf contrasted the desire to serve with historic motives for wanting to lead, such as satisfying a desire for power or meeting deep ego needs or achieving social prestige. These types of motivation are self-serving at base. They yield leadership styles which benefit the leader above all else. And they also foster organizations in which the leader is the focal point of everything.

True servant leaders measure their own success by how well they help others flourish.

One reason that leaders slip so easily into authoritarian styles is that authoritarianism is perfectly designed to accommodate the leader with strong ego needs.

This is not to say that all authoritarian leaders are ego driven. Many are not. I've worked with dozens of leaders who combine an authoritarian style with the outlook of a servant. But for leaders who are indeed ego driven, an authoritarianism that is self-centric and self-serving is an ever-present enticement.

Interviewer

You have contrasted leaders whose first desire is to serve with those whose leadership springs from self-serving needs. Except for servant leaders, are the motives to lead always ego-centric?

Armour

Not at all. Many great leaders have shouldered the responsibility of leadership out of a sense of duty or a high sense of responsibility. They feel honor-bound to see a cause, a company, or a particular group succeed rather than fail for lack of leadership. Their motivation is not self-seeking. They lead only to serve the interest of something beyond themselves. Their driving moti-

vation is closely akin to the desire for service which Greenleaf idealized.

Whether they are truly servant leaders, at least in Greenleaf's sense of the word, depends on the nature of their commitment to serve. If their sense of duty or responsibility centers entirely on serving the cause, they may approach their service to the cause with a management style void of servant leadership. That is, they may have a passion to serve the cause, but little or no passion for serving their people.

When this happens, leaders may easily opt for a more self-centric authoritarian style than an empowering style. By contrast, Greenleaf's servant leader is committed to serving every aspect of the organization, especially its people.

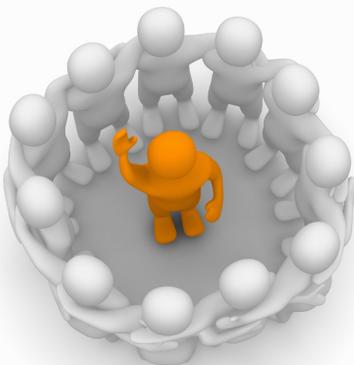
Servant leaders resort to authoritarianism in only two scenarios. The first is an extreme situation (like a sudden disaster) where the exigencies of the moment demand the quick decision-making of an authoritarian approach. The second is when they lead in organizations like fire and police departments or the military, where an authoritarian structure is essential.

Interviewer

Apart from wanting to serve, what are the general characteristics of servant leaders?

Armour

It goes without saying, I suppose, that they must be good leaders. Having a heart to serve is a necessary prerequisite to servant leadership. But in and of itself, a heart to serve does not assure success as a leader.



This then takes us back to our definition of leadership itself. Like any leader, servant leaders must be adept at rallying people around themselves and around a shared purpose, motivating those whom they have rallied, and mobilizing them for action.

By “mobilizing,” I mean seeing that all of the plans, resources, and support are in place for people to accomplish what they are being asked to do. Think of everything that goes into mobilizing an army, and you get the general picture.

Beyond this, the fundamental hallmark of servant leadership is healthy humility. I use the modifier “healthy” because the word “humility” is so widely misunderstood. It doesn’t mean being soft or being timid or being unassertive. It simply means having your ego in check, so that ego does not get in the way of helping others succeed.

True servant leaders measure their own success by how well they help others flourish. Their humility uniquely equips them to promote the development of people around them. Why? Because leaders who are humble have no trouble letting someone else have the spotlight. They are not threatened when someone in their organization outperforms them. In fact, they bask vicariously in the accomplishments of those whom they have coached or mentored.

Because humble leaders have ego in check, failure doesn’t humiliate them. And achievement doesn’t go to their heads. They avoid ego-driven traps like arrogance and condescending attitudes. Yet they are confident and self-assured, in the best sense of the word.



Their healthy self-confidence allows them to acknowledge their fears and short-comings without embarrassment. Yet it gives them the ego strength to make tough decisions, hold people accountable, and bear patiently with difficult and demanding circumstances.

Leaders given to humility are especially effective at building strong interpersonal connections because they are not prone to actions and attitudes which poison relationships. They don’t feel a need to react defensively when challenged, to be judgmental

when exercising discipline, or to make a show of their authority, their prowess, or their intellect.

Interviewer

Is this kind of humility just natural to some people? Or does it have to be learned?

Armour

I think everyone has to learn humility. Some people are fortunate enough to learn it early in life, so early, in fact, that we see it as natural for them.

But we all start life as a pretty selfish, self-centered lot. How many times have we seen toddlers throw a tantrum or create an ugly commotion simply because they failed to get their way? Or failed to get it fast enough? That's why we call this age the "terrible twos," isn't it?

As this child grows older, we will insist that he learn self-control and good manners, but not necessarily humility. Our culture gives lip-service to humility, largely because Christian teachings on humility helped frame the Western conscience. But genuine promotion of humility is not commonplace.

As a result, many aspiring leaders, not to mention millions of men and women already in leadership, do not see humility as a personal priority. Unknowingly they subscribe to a view of leadership which traces to Greek and Roman precedents.

While the Greeks were quick to criticize overweening pride (a regular theme in their dramas), they never went so far as to actively advocate humility. To the contrary, a "real man," in their view of life, was the individual who settled scores on his own terms, in the fashion of Ulysses coming home after 20 years and summarily slaying the men who were wooing his wife.



Yet we have all known and admired men and women of greatness who were also men and women of humility. Somewhere along the way they learned how to abandon the instincts of their “terrible twos.” Just as they learned to do it, we can, too. Thus, none of us is excused from practicing the traits of servant leadership simply because we lack humility. Humility can be learned at any time in life.

Interviewer

So, you're saying that people don't have to start with Greenleaf's servant motivation in order to have a reputation as service-oriented leaders.

Armour

Precisely. The best of all worlds would be one in which every leader has the spirit of service as his or her primary motivator. That's the ideal. The truth is, the world has always known leaders who sought positions of influence in order to satisfy ego needs or self-serving drives. And it's naïve to think that this pattern is soon to change.

The challenge therefore is for leaders to learn how to serve the needs of their people well, even when the primary motive for leading is a desire for power, achievement, or some type of personal gain. Such leaders can learn to lead from a servant perspective, even if they have not developed all the virtues of a servant leader's heart.

Interviewer

What does it take for leaders to make this change?

Armour

It usually requires them to have a strong conviction that leading from a servant's perspective pays meaningful and worthwhile dividends.

Let's take leaders who are driven to achieve, for instance. If they can see that using servant principles enhances their organization's level of accomplishment, then choosing the perspective of a servant seems a wise decision.

Or to take another example, consider people who seek leadership in order to attain social prestige. If the techniques of servant leadership can improve the impact of their organization and thus add to their prestige, they can be motivated to give servant perspectives a try.

When skeptical leaders genuinely adopt servant perspectives, they experience such positive feedback that the principles of servant leadership are authenticated for them.

Now, purists will argue that I've just reduced the elevated principles of servant leadership to mere pragmatism and tactics. And in one sense I have. But it's not the principles of servant leadership that I'm downplaying. I'm merely looking for an adequate rationale to get otherwise skeptical leaders to give servant leadership a serious test run.

I'm convinced (and experience has deepened my conviction) that when skeptical leaders genuinely adopt servant perspectives, they experience such positive feedback that the principles of servant leadership are authenticated for them. As a result, they begin pursuing servant perspectives, not for pragmatic benefit, but because they fully accept servant leadership principles.

Interviewer

So, let's imagine that you are trying to persuade a leader to give servant perspectives a try. What benefits would you point to as incentives?

Armour

Well, as a matter of fact, I've had this very conversation many times with clients. I've also been in countless discussions with CEOs and COOs who were themselves convinced of the merits of servant leadership, but who were unsure how to gain broad acceptance of it in their organization.

The most powerful argument, I believe, comes from the thesis of my book *Leadership and the Power of Trust*. There I outlined

extensive research which underscores the superior performance of high-trust organizations. This performance is superior whether you measure it by profitability, return to investors, employee satisfaction, retention rates, customer loyalty, efficiency, or speed to market.

Such stellar performance results from the productive and motivating atmosphere which high-trust settings engender.

- Communication is open and honest.
- Ideas are more freely exchanged.
- Turf-protection is kept to a minimum.
- People take risks with greater confidence.
- Morale is resilient.
- And everyone feels assured that they can count on everyone else to follow through on promises and commitments.



All of these advantages, along with dozens of others, allow high-trust organizations to be quick, nimble, and innovative.

Now, what does this have to do with servant leadership? My book points to other research which shows that an employee's trust of the organization is largely a function of the employee's relationship with immediate management. And when employees describe the management traits that make it easiest for them to trust, their answers form a perfect overlay on the principles of servant leadership.

Interviewer

And what are these traits?

Armour

First, in order to trust, we need to be in an atmosphere conducive to trust. In high-trust settings, there is a certain "feel" in the air. To be specific, people feel safe, informed, respected, valued, and understood. And the safety I'm speaking of is more about emotional and psychological safety than about physical

safety. People do not tend to trust when the setting leaves them feeling emotionally and psychologically vulnerable.

It's immediately apparent that someone with the perspective of a servant will also work to help everyone feel safe, informed, respected, valued, and understood.

Servant leaders tend to see more capability within people than these people may see in themselves.

Moreover, in our earlier discussion of Maslow's hierarchy, we noted that workers today seek both a sense of belonging and a sense of self-esteem from the workplace. Helping people feel safe and valued strokes their sense of belonging. And when they are treated with respect and kept informed, and where management is interested enough in their viewpoint to want to understand them, their self-esteem is stroked.

Second, employees want to be trusted themselves. They want management to believe in them. And this includes believing in their promise and potential as well as their current abilities.

That's why workers pay such close attention to the developmental opportunities offered them. When they seem excluded from developmental opportunities which are extended to others, they conclude that leadership does not truly believe in them.

A primary servant perspective is that every person is valuable and has untapped potential which it is the duty of the servant leader to help develop. Servant leaders tend to see more capability within people than these people may see in themselves. And because servant leaders believe so strongly in people, it's easy for their people to reciprocate with trust.

Interviewer

You mentioned earlier talking with CEOs who want to move their organization toward a servant leadership model. What advice do you give people like that?

Armour

My primary advice, whether to CEOs or any other leader, is to start small and move incrementally. By starting small, I mean first start with yourself. Unless you are embodying servant perspectives in your attitudes, actions, and decisions, you can't persuade others to be servant-minded.



Once your own example is congruent with servant perspectives, move down one tier in your organization. Begin coaching your direct reports on the benefits of servant leadership. And make it unequivocally clear that your eventual goal is for servant outlook to permeate the entire organization.

Admit that it may be years before your vision is fully realized, because entrenched habits must be transformed. But affirm your determination to see this effort through to completion. And enlist your direct reports to become role models of servant leadership for the rest of the company.

Again, acknowledge that it will take time, and no small amount of energy, for the leadership team to feel ready to take servant leadership principles to their own direct reports. But also affirm that you are resolved to keep this process on track.

At this point you have a powerful opportunity to model a servant perspective for them. If your organization is typical, at least some of the people in this leadership circle will be less than comfortable with what you are asking them to do.

So, put out the question, "What are the things which I can do to help each of you individually become better at servant lead-

ership?" Then wait for a response. Don't let this question come across as merely academic or a rhetorical device. Let them know that you are genuinely taking the posture of a servant in helping them develop the perspective of servants.

Next, create a circle of accountability between yourself and your leadership team, as well as within the team itself. Together negotiate ground rules by which everyone has the freedom to hold everyone else — including you — accountable for acting in accordance with servant perspectives.



Long-range, your implementation plan is to continue this process, level by level, down through the entire organization, with each leader modeling the way for his or her team and coaching them until they are ready to begin developing servant perspectives in their own people.

Resist the temptation to announce servant leadership as a company-wide initiative and try to implement it in all quarters at once. You're doomed to fail. There are simply too many points of resistance or misunderstanding for your initiative to overcome. Start small. Move incrementally. Think long-term.

Interviewer

Can you offer a practical example of how a senior executive has implemented this approach.

Armour

Yes, I could actually offer several examples. One of the most striking occurred in a global company, one of the largest privately held companies in the world. A major division in the company happened to be my client at the time that a new CEO came aboard. Even though he was a Naval Academy graduate with an impressive record as a naval officer, he was convinced that ser-

vant leadership needed to replace the company's long-standing top-down style.

Knowing that the management culture did not align well with servant perspectives, he was fully aware that changing the leadership climate was a long-term task. So, he undertook his initiative following the incremental approach which I outlined earlier. And he began by doing something very striking.

A cornerstone principle of servant leadership is to be open and transparent. He therefore opted to model openness and transparency for his leadership team, and to do so in a way that exemplified humility in an unforgettable fashion. He asked the HR department to arrange for a 360-review of his performance. Then he sat down with his leadership council, laid out the findings, unedited and unvarnished, for the group to peruse.



Without making excuses, he talked about the areas in which his performance had been evaluated as sub-par. And he enlisted their assistance in meeting new performance criteria that he was establishing for himself. He was empowering them, he said, to call him to account whenever he fell back into his old ways of doing business.

Once he had shared his 360 results with his team, and once he had asked them to help him improve his performance, he announced that eventually each of them was to do the same thing with his or her own direct reports.

No doubt some around the table swallowed hard when they heard these words. But I got to see the process as it was working down into the third and fourth tiers of management. And by then both the CEO's resolve regarding servant leadership and the wisdom of his approach was universally respected in the organization.

As an aside, let me say that the most vulnerable spot in this process was when he asked his team to hold him accountable.

If an executive makes such a request of direct reports, they will studiously monitor the response the first time someone takes a stab at holding the boss accountable.

If the executive responds defensively, with excuses, or worst of all with anger, the gig is up. The commitment to servant leadership has been invalidated before it was seriously underway. If the leader is unwilling to walk the talk, why should direct reports take the initiative seriously?

Interviewer

One final question. Is interest in servant leadership on the increase in the business community? Or is the interest stagnant and in decline?

Armour

From what I observe, interest is on the increase. Servant leadership figures prominently in the writings of management gurus like Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, and Peter Senge. They have been joined by ardent advocates of servant leadership across the consulting community. The success of Southwest Airlines, the Container Store, and Starbucks — all advocates of servant leadership — proves that servant leadership is fully compatible with profitability, even in the world's most competitive industries.

Interestingly, I find a particular receptivity to servant leadership among today's younger executives. Coming from a generation with an anti-hierarchical bias, they have a disdain for authoritarianism to begin with. And the people-centric values of servant leadership appeal to their instincts. As these young men and women rise through the corporate ranks, they have the promise of being a transforming force, infusing corporate life from top to bottom with servant perspectives.

