



# The Case for Servant Leadership

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*With this issue of Nurse Leader, we are celebrating a new design for the journal. Our goal is to continue providing you with the same valuable content using a more updated and professional look. We will no longer be using stock photographs but encourage our authors to submit colorful graphics and photographs to accompany their work.*

A young nurse leader recently asked me which leadership framework I would recommend to guide her practice. She understands that as a manager, she is a critical linchpin in staff recruitment and retention. I suggested that she should review the literature on servant leadership. I believe a strong case can be made today for adopting a servant leadership mindset and way of being.

These are challenging times in health care. Dr. Donald Berwick, the former chief executive officer of Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), observed that it seems paradoxical in health care where caring should be the focus that so many health care professionals are experiencing burnout and a loss of joy in their work.<sup>1</sup> It is frontline staff who bear the brunt of the unprecedented level of change and turmoil in health care. The heavy lifting that they do to ensure that patients receive excellent care is taking a toll. In the white paper, *The IHI Framework for Improving Joy in Work*, the authors noted that if burnout in health care was described in clinical or public health terms, it might well be called an epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the role of the nurse leader is to help their staff to be as productive and effective as they can be. An unfortunate outcome of the value-based expectations that have come with health care reform is that some health care leaders are not perceived as caring. Nurses complain about a lack of advocacy from leaders who seem more focused on costs and performance measures than on care. Humility comes with the understanding that you are not alone in your leadership. Everyone in the organization has a role to play. A servant leadership approach can be a powerful antidote to help combat staff burnout, disengagement, and turnover.

The concept of servant leadership was popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf<sup>3</sup> who described a servant leader's mindset as one who views themselves as a servant. Greenleaf contends that servant leaders achieve results for their organizations by attending to the needs of those

they serve. A hallmark of a servant leader is their focus on encouragement through empowering and uplifting those who work for them. A nurse servant leader looks to the needs of his/her staff and continually asks how they can help them solve problems and promote their personal development. The following 10 characteristics are critical to the development of a servant leader:

1. **Listening**—the servant leader actively listens to the needs of staff and helps to support them in their decision making.
2. **Empathy**—the servant leader seeks first to understand the needs of others and empathize with them.
3. **Healing**—the servant leader helps staff to resolve their problems, negotiate their conflicts, and encourage the formation of a healing environment.
4. **Awareness**—the servant leader has a high degree of emotional intelligence and self-awareness. He or she views situations from a holistic, systems perspective.
5. **Persuasion**—the servant leader does not use coercive power to influence or persuade but instead uses their powers of persuasion.
6. **Conceptualization**—the servant leader sees beyond the day-to-day operations of their unit or department. They can focus on the bigger picture and build a personal vision.
7. **Foresight**—the servant leader can envision the likely outcome of a situation and is proactive in attempts to create the best consequences.
8. **Stewardship**—the servant leader is a good steward of the resources and staff that they are given. They feel an obligation to help and serve others without focusing on their own rewards.
9. **Commitment to the growth of people**—the servant leader is inclusive of all staff and sees value in everyone. They attempt to maximize the strengths of all who work with them.
10. **Building community**—the servant leader recognizes the importance of building a sense of community among staff.

There are many aspects of change that we have little control over, but we do have the power to adopt behaviors and approaches that will help staff. Servant leadership is caring leadership. It helps to build trust because followers believe that their leader genuinely

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cares about their welfare. This psychological safety leads to higher levels of employee engagement. It is a leadership philosophy worth embracing.

**Editor's Note:** We are featuring a new column beginning with this issue. The column is *The Career Coaching Corner* written by Dr. Beth Brooks. Beth is an accomplished health care executive who has a unique blend of leadership experiences from 3 distinct sectors of the health care industry: for-profit companies (tech startup, global advertising agency, nurse staffing agency), academic administration, and nursing operations within health care systems. She is an internationally recognized expert in quality of nursing work-life who won the AONE mentor award. Beth is also a career transition coach. We are excited about the addition of this column to *Nurse Leader*.

## References

1. Berwick DM. Foreword. In: Perlo J, Balik B, Swensen S, Kabcenell A, Landsman J, Feeley D. *IHI Framework for Improving Joy in Work*. IHI White Paper. Cambridge, MA: Institute for Healthcare Improvement; 2017.
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3. Greenleaf RK, Spears LC. *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness 25th Anniversary Edition*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press; 2002.

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