



# A Closer Look at Servant Leadership

“When people hear the phrase servant leadership, they are often confused,” says best-selling business author Ken Blanchard.

“Their assumption is that it means managers should be working for their employees, who in turn would decide what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and how to do it. If that’s what servant leadership is all about, it doesn’t sound like leadership to them at all. It sounds more like inmates running the prison, or managers trying to please everyone.”

That’s an incomplete understanding of servant leadership principles, says Blanchard.

“There are two aspects to servant leadership: A visionary/direction, or strategic, role—the *leadership* aspect of servant leadership; and an implementation, or operational, role—the *servant* aspect of servant leadership.”

**Ken**<sup>THE</sup>**Blanchard**  
COMPANIES

“The visionary role is about shaping a compelling vision, setting goals, and defining strategic initiatives,” says Blanchard. “While leaders should involve experienced people in setting direction, it’s ultimately the responsibility of the leaders. The traditional hierarchical pyramid is effective for the leadership aspect of servant leadership.

“Once employees are clear on where they are going, the leader’s role shifts to the task of implementation—the servant aspect of servant leadership. The question now is: How do we live according to the vision and accomplish the established goals?”

Blanchard says that most organizations and leaders get into trouble in the implementation phase of the servant leadership process.

“When the traditional hierarchical pyramid is kept alive and well for implementation, who do employees think they work for? The managers above them. The minute an employee thinks they work for the person above them for the implementation process, they believe their job is being responsive to that manager’s whims or wishes. As a result, all the energy of the organization is moving up the hierarchy, away from customers and the frontline folks who are closest to the action.”

Blanchard explains that servant leaders know how to correct this situation by philosophically turning the traditional hierarchical pyramid upside down when it comes to implementation.

“Now who is at the top of the organization? The frontline employees who work with the customers. Who is at the bottom now? The ‘top’ management.”

Although it seems minor, this one change makes a major difference, says Blanchard.

“When the organizational pyramid is turned upside down, rather than employees being responsive to management, they become responsible—able to respond—and the manager’s job as a servant leader is to be responsive to them. This creates a very different environment for implementation.”

## Some Examples of Servant Leadership in Action

In Blanchard’s new book, *Servant Leadership in Action*, co-edited with Renee Broadwell, more than forty leaders from diverse backgrounds and industries share their experiences with servant leadership and the impact it has had in their careers and organizations.

For example, Colleen Barrett, president emeritus of Southwest Airlines, explains how servant leadership has been a key principle of success since the airline’s founding.

“For more than forty years, all of the leaders at Southwest Airlines have tried to model servant leadership. Herb Kelleher, our founder, led the way clearly—although I don’t think he knew what the expression *servant leadership* meant until we told him. Herb and I have always said that our purpose in life as senior leaders with Southwest Airlines was to support our people. At Southwest, our entire philosophy of leadership is still quite simple: treat your people right and good things will happen.

“We try in every way to let our employees know they are important and empowered to make a positive difference on a daily basis. Servant leadership isn’t soft management—it’s simply the right thing to do.”

That level of support manifests itself in many different ways at Southwest. Barrett tells a heartwarming story of servant leadership in action that happened at Southwest a few years ago when a grandfather had to make last-minute reservations to be with a dying grandchild.

“The man was away from home in an unfamiliar city when he learned his grandson was dying and had only a couple of hours to live. The grandfather was desperately trying to get to him.

“Without any managerial intervention, our reservation agent directed the grandfather to head to the airport while she started working to clear obstacles from her end,” Barrett said. “She called the ground ops station at the airport, got hold of a ticket agent, and explained what the situation was. The ticket agent bought the grandfather a ticket with her own money, then went to the TSA checkpoint and told them she would be escorting a passenger who needed to make a flight. She then contacted the gate and explained the situation. The gate attendant, in turn, notified the captain on the flight.

“When it was time to push back, the pilot asked the ticket agent how close the grandfather was to arriving and learned the man was still about ten minutes away. The captain thought about it for a moment, then walked out of the cockpit to the front of the airplane and explained the situation to the passengers. He said, ‘We are going to wait for this gentleman. I think it’s the right thing to do.’ After listening to the captain’s explanation for the delay, the passengers broke into applause. When the grandfather arrived ten minutes later, he couldn’t believe the captain had held the plane for him. The captain’s response was, ‘Sir, this airplane wasn’t going anywhere without me—and I wasn’t going anywhere without you.’”

At Synovus Financial, former CEO James Blanchard (no relation to Ken Blanchard) shares how a servant leadership culture goes all the way back to 1888 when the founders of Columbus Bank and Trust Company were in the cotton mill business.

“One day when a woman was working on a loom in the mill, her skirt got caught on the machine,” begins CEO Blanchard. “The hem ripped and her life savings came spilling out on the floor. The hem of her skirt was the safest place she knew to keep her money. That day, the founders decided they could do better for their employees—so they started a bank that would serve as a trusted place for their workers’ life savings. The Synovus culture of service began the moment that woman’s savings spilled onto the floor.

“Over the years our name changed and we grew,” says Blanchard, “but our servant leadership culture endured and became even stronger. A few criticized us, saying the approach was too soft and permissive. So we had to prove it was the exact opposite—that people who were loved, respected, and prepared would perform better. Servant leadership led to higher performance and there was nothing permissive about it. We loved our people and we expected high performance. I believe when you truly care about someone, you not only love them but also expect the best from them and hold them to it.”

That approach has paid off for Synovus. In 1999, the company was named Fortune’s No. 1 Best Place to Work in America. They were on the list so often after that, the magazine asked them to stop entering and made them the first inductee into the Best Places to Work Hall of Fame.

“It was a great validation of our aspirations and our actions,” says CEO Blanchard. “I have been retired from Synovus for years but the pursuit of a servant leadership culture at Synovus was my greatest and most favorite satisfaction.”

When Cheryl Bachelder accepted the role of Popeyes CEO in November 2007, the company had been struggling. Relationships with franchisees were not at the level they needed to be. Even so, a comment from a veteran franchisee caught her by surprise: “Don’t expect us to trust you anytime soon.”

Bachelder and her team decided to focus on servant leadership principles for turning around business performance.

“We began calling the franchisees our ‘number one customer.’ More important, as servant leaders, we began treating them that way. Our first principle was to respect and admire our owners’ passion for their work. Next, we listened to their needs and we accepted our roles and responsibilities in making things right. Finally, we put our owners’ interests above our own.”

The approach was a huge success. Relationships and business outcomes flourished. During the period from 2007 to 2016, under Bachelder’s leadership, Popeyes became a prosperous enterprise again. Franchise owners were served well: 95 percent rated their satisfaction with the Popeyes system at good or very good and 90 percent said they would recommend Popeyes to another franchisee.

**“When we started, we didn’t know servant leadership would drive our success,” says Bachelder.**

“We didn’t have a plaque in the office that stated our purpose and principles. What we did have was a team of leaders who were willing to put the success of the people and the enterprise before their own interests.”

## Moving from a Servant Leadership Mindset to a Servant Leadership Skill Set

For leaders considering a shift to a servant leadership approach, Ken Blanchard suggests they begin by asking themselves this question: Am I here to serve or to be served?

“If you believe leadership is all about you—where you want to go and what you want to attain—then your leadership by default will be more self-focused and self-centered. On the other hand, if your leadership revolves around meeting the needs of the organization and the people working for it, you will make different choices that will reveal a more others-focused approach.”

From there, Blanchard suggests leaders ask themselves one additional question: What am I doing, on a daily basis, to recalibrate who I want to be in the world?

“Consider your daily habits and their impact on your life,” he says. “Take time to explore who you are, who you want to be, and what steps you can take on a daily basis to get closer to becoming your best self. You want to move from a servant leadership mindset to the practice of a servant leadership skill set. Now you are looking at the day-to-day management behaviors your people need from you to succeed.”

Blanchard shares some examples from his company’s flagship program, SLII®, as an example of how servant leadership principles can be taught as a part of a larger leadership development curriculum.

“In SLII®, we teach three skills that generate both great relationships and results: goal setting, diagnosis, and matching.”

“All good performance starts with clear goals—which, for a manager, are clearly part of the leadership aspect of servant leadership.”

“Once clear goals are set, an effective situational leader works with their direct report to diagnose the direct report’s development level—competence and commitment—on each specific goal. Then together they determine the appropriate leadership style—the amount of directive and supportive behavior—that will match the person’s development level on each goal. This way, the manager can help them accomplish their goals—the servant aspect of servant leadership. The key here is for managers to remember they must use not just different strokes for different folks but also different strokes for the same folks, depending on the goal and the person’s development level.”

## Leading by Serving

Servant leadership is a journey, says Blanchard. It’s both a mindset and a skill set.

“Saying you’re a servant leader is a good start, but it is your behavior that makes it real for people. Servant leadership is a combination of mindset and skill set that focuses on serving others first so that organizations develop great relationships, achieve great results, and delight their customers.

“The world is in desperate need of a new leadership model,” explains Blanchard. “Too many leaders have been conditioned to think of leadership only in terms of power and control.”

Blanchard tells a story about a letter he received from a man in New Zealand after a presentation on servant leadership. The man said, “Ken, you are in the business of teaching people the power of love rather than the love of power.”

Blanchard encourages aspiring servant leaders to begin by asking, “How can I help?”

“Servant leaders are constantly trying to find out what their people need to perform well and to live according to their organization’s vision,” says Blanchard.

“Rather than wanting employees to please their bosses, servant leaders want to make a difference in their employees’ lives and in their organizations. In top organizations, leaders believe if they do a good job serving their employees and show they truly care about them, the employees will, in turn, practice that same philosophy with customers. That’s a win-win for everyone!”

The Ken Blanchard Companies is a global leader in management training, consulting, and coaching. For more than 40 years, Blanchard® has been helping organizations develop inspired leaders at all levels and create cultures of connection that unleash talent and deliver extraordinary results. Blanchard's SLII® powers inspired leaders and is the leadership model of choice for more than 10,000 organizations worldwide. Blanchard also offers a suite of other award-winning leadership development solutions through flexible delivery modalities to meet the specific needs of its clients.

To learn more, visit  
[www.kenblanchard.com](http://www.kenblanchard.com)

**THE KenBlanchard®**  
COMPANIES

**Global Headquarters**

125 State Place  
Escondido, CA 92029 USA

**From anywhere:** +1 760.489.5005

**Within the US:** 800.728.6000

For a list of our offices worldwide, visit  
[www.kenblanchard.com](http://www.kenblanchard.com)