

Servant Leadership: The Two Personality Traits that Derail Well-Meaning Leaders

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Best-selling business author Ken Blanchard believes leadership is an inside-out proposition.

“It begins by asking yourself a tough question: ‘Am I here to serve or be served?’” he says. According to Blanchard, the answer to this question will reveal your fundamental approach to leadership.

“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-centred. 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.”

Blanchard believes the best leaders have a servant leadership philosophy. He explains that servant leadership requires a two-pronged approach that combines strategic leadership—vision and direction—with operational leadership—strong day-to-day management practices.

“At its core, servant leadership means that once vision and direction are set, the organizational pyramid is turned upside-down and leaders work for their people.”

There are two huge challenges to being a successful servant leader, according to Blanchard.

“One is false pride—when you think more of yourself than you should. When this occurs, leaders spend most of their time looking for ways to promote themselves. The other is fear and self-doubt—when you think less of yourself than you should. These leaders spend their time constantly trying to protect themselves.”

Surprisingly, the root cause of both behaviours is the same, explains Blanchard: “The ego. It’s just part of the human condition. Any time I hear someone say that their ego has never gotten in their way, that they are never prideful and never experience self-doubt, I usually say, half-jokingly, ‘I’ll bet you lie about other things, too.’ We all have times when we get off track.”

To help executives identify ways that ego may impact their leadership, Blanchard often incorporates an “Egos Anonymous” exercise into some of his work with clients.

“The Egos Anonymous session begins with each person standing up and saying, ‘Hi, I’m Ken, and I’m an egomaniac. The last time my ego got in the way was ...’ And then they share a false pride or self-doubt moment or example.”

Egos Anonymous sessions have become so popular with executives that some use the technique to kick off meetings back at their workplace.

“They find it really helps their teams operate more freely,” says Blanchard. “It’s very powerful when people can share their vulnerability and be more authentic and transparent with one another.”

For leaders looking to get started with an inside-out approach to addressing and improving their leadership abilities, Blanchard has one final question: “What are you doing on a daily basis to recalibrate who you want to be in the world?

“Most people don’t think about that. This could include how you enter your day, what you read, what you study—everything that contributes in a positive sense to who you are.

“Consider your daily habits and their impact on your life. 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. Your leadership journey begins on the inside—but, ultimately, it will have a tremendous impact on the people around you.”
