

Serve It Up

While servant leadership is not a new concept, solid evidence in the form of the first quantitative study recently published by researchers in Canada begins to explain a connection between servant leadership and improved individual performance. Eric McNulty, the director of research at the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative writes in a March 2016 strategy + business blog that this new evidence may help move servant leadership from a niche practice to a more mainstream model.

McNulty cites a study conducted by Myriam Chiniara and Kathleen Bentein, professors in the Department of Psychology and the School of Business Administration, respectively, at the University of Quebec at Montreal. The researchers looked at three aspects of success at work: people's ability to get things done and done well, ability to collaborate with others, and focus on accomplishing the organization's mission. Extensive research they cite shows that employees must have three basic psychological needs met in order to achieve these goals.

- **Autonomy:** Individuals prefer to make choices and initiate action themselves. They want the freedom to think and do.
- **Competence:** Employees derive satisfaction from building skills and using them effectively. People like to feel that they know what they are doing and that they are improving over time.
- **Relatedness:** People like to feel connected to other people. They enjoy being part of a team or a community where they can care for and be cared for by others.

This study showed that servant leaders are distinctly equipped to meet each of these three needs. At the core of servant leadership is a belief in the inherent value of each person and their "feelings, interests, views, and opinions." Such an attitude predisposes a leader to providing an autonomous environment rather than expecting cold conformity.

Because servant leaders believe in their people, they invest in them. That means ensuring that employees have the necessary skills and resources to do their jobs and helping them grow over time. This approach helps guarantee that competence needs are met.

As servant leaders cultivate trust-based relationships with their followers as part of developing an understanding of the followers' needs, they tend to build cultures high in social and psychological safety. This fosters strong feelings of relatedness. Put another way, it makes the company a great place to work.

The authors of the study introduce quantitative evidence to support what has always been a qualitative argument for a humane, others-centric approach to management and leadership. McNulty summarizes that historically, servant leadership has been seen as more about the heart than the head. He believes that this study adds to the growing body of evidence that it is time for the head to catch up.