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How Humble Leadership Really Works

by Dan Cable

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Summary. Top-down leadership is outdated and counterproductive. By focusing too much on control and end goals, and not enough on their people, leaders are making it more difficult to achieve their own desired outcomes. The key, then, is to help people feel purposeful, motivated, and energized so they can bring their best selves to work.

One of the best ways is to adopt the humble mind-set of a servant leader. Servant leaders view their key role as serving employees as they explore and grow, providing tangible and emotional support as they do so. They actively seek the ideas and unique contributions of the employees that they serve. This is how servant leaders create a culture of learning, and an atmosphere that encourages followers to become the very best they can.

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When you're a leader — no matter how long you've been in your role or how hard the journey was to get there — you are merely overhead unless you're bringing out the best in your employees. Unfortunately, many leaders lose sight of this.

Power, as my colleague Ena Inesi has studied, can cause leaders to become overly obsessed with outcomes and control, and, therefore, treat their employees as means to an end. As I've discovered in my own research, this ramps up people's fear — fear of not hitting targets, fear of losing bonuses, fear of failing — and as a consequence people stop feeling positive emotions and their drive to experiment and learn is stifled.

Take for example a UK food delivery service that I've studied. The engagement of its drivers, who deliver milk and bread to millions of customers each day, was dipping while management was becoming increasingly metric-driven in an effort to reduce costs and improve delivery times. Each week, managers held weekly performance debriefs with drivers and went through a list of problems, complaints, and errors with a clipboard and pen. This was not inspiring on any level, to either party. And, eventually, the drivers, many of whom had worked for the company for decades, became resentful.

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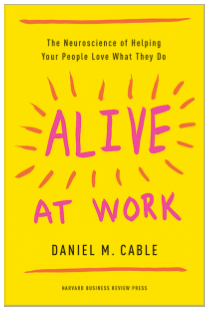

Alive at Work

Book by Daniel M. Cable

$ 30.00

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This type of top-down leadership is outdated, and, more importantly, counterproductive. By focusing too much on control and end goals, and not enough on their people, leaders are making it more difficult to achieve their own desired outcomes.

The key, then, is to help people feel purposeful, motivated, and energized so they can bring their best selves to work.

There are a number of ways to do this, as I outline in my new book *Alive at Work*. But one of the best ways is to adopt the humble mind-set of a servant leader. Servant leaders view their key role as serving employees as they explore and grow, providing tangible and emotional support as they do so.

To put it bluntly, servant-leaders have the humility, courage, and insight to admit that they can benefit from the expertise of others who have less power than them. They actively seek the ideas and unique contributions of the employees that they serve. This is how servant leaders create a culture of learning, and an atmosphere that encourages followers to become the very best they can.

Humility and servant leadership do not imply that leaders have low self-esteem, or take on an attitude of servility. Instead, servant leadership emphasizes that the responsibility of a leader is to increase the ownership, autonomy, and responsibility of followers — to encourage them to think for themselves and try out their own ideas.

Here's how to do it.

Ask how you can help employees do their own jobs better — then listen

It sounds deceivingly simple: Rather than telling employees how to do their jobs better, start by asking them how you can help them do their jobs better. But the effects of this approach can be powerful.

Consider the food-delivery business I previously mentioned. Once its traditional model was disrupted by newer delivery companies, the management team decided that things needed to change. The company needed to compete on great customer service, but, in

order to do so, they needed the support of their employees who provided the service. And, they needed ideas that could make the company more competitive.

After meeting with consultants at PricewaterhouseCoopers and some training, the management team tried a new format for its weekly performance meetings with the drivers.

The new approach? Instead of nit-picking problems, each manager was trained to simply ask their drivers, “How can I help you deliver excellent service?” As shown in the research of Bradley Owens and David Heckman, leaders need to model these types of servant-minded behaviors to employees so that employees will better serve customers.

There was huge scepticism at the beginning, as you can imagine. Drivers’ dislike of managers was high, and trust was low. But as depot managers kept asking “How can I help you deliver excellent service?” some drivers started to offer suggestions. For example, one driver suggested new products like Gogurts and fun string cheese that parents could get delivered early and pop into their kids’ lunches before school. Another driver thought of a way to report stock shortages more quickly so that customers were not left without the groceries they ordered.

Small changes created a virtuous cycle. As the drivers got credit for their ideas and saw them put into place, they grew more willing to offer more ideas, which made the depot managers more impressed and more respectful, which increased the delivery people’s willingness to give ideas, and so on. And, depot managers learned that some of the so-called “mistakes” that drivers were making were actually innovations they had created to streamline processes and still deliver everything on time. These innovations helped the company deliver better customer service.

What it comes down to is this: employees who do the actual work of your organization often know better than you how to do a great job. Respecting their ideas, and encouraging them to try new approaches to improve work, encourages employees to bring more of themselves to work.

As one area manager summarized: “We really thought that we knew our delivery people inside out, but we’ve realized that there was a lot we were missing. Our weekly customer conversation meetings are now more interactive and the conversations are more honest and adult in their approach. It’s hard to put into words the changes we are seeing.”

Create low-risk spaces for employees to think of new ideas

Sometimes the best way for leaders to serve employees — and their organization — is to create a low-risk space for employees to experiment with their ideas. By doing so, leaders encourage employees to push on the boundaries of what they already know.

For example, when Jungkiu Choi moved from Singapore to China to start his gig as head of Consumer Banking at Standard Chartered, he learned that one of the cultural expectations of his new job was to visit the branches and put pressure on branch managers to cut costs. Branch staff would spend weeks anxiously preparing for the visit.

Jungkiu changed the nature of these visits. Instead of emphasizing his formal power, he started showing up at branches unannounced, starting his visit by serving breakfast to the branch employees. Then, Jungkiu would hold “huddles” and ask how he could help employees improve their branches. Many branch employees were very surprised and initially did not know how to react. But Jungkiu’s approach tamped down employees’ anxiety and encouraged ideation and innovative ideas.

Over the course of one year, Jungkiu visited over eighty branches in twenty-five cities. His consistency and willingness to help convinced employees who were sceptical at first. The huddles exposed many simple “pain points” that he could easily help solve (for example, training for the new bank systems, or making upgrades to computer memory so that the old computers could handle the new software).

Other employee innovation ideas were larger. For example, one of the Shanghai branches was inside of a shopping mall. In the huddle, employees asked Jungkiu if they could open and close the same times as the mall’s operating hours (rather than the typical branch operating hours). The team wanted to experiment with working on the weekends. Within a few months, this branch’s weekend income generation surpassed its entire weekday income. This was not an idea that Jungkiu had even imagined.

These experiments paid off in terms of company performance. Customer satisfaction increased by 54 percent during the two-year period of Jungkiu’s humble leadership. Complaints from customers were reduced by 29 percent during the same period. The employee attrition ratio, which had been the highest among all of the foreign banks in China, was reduced to the lowest among all foreign banks in China.

Be humble

Leaders often do not see the true value of their charges, especially “lower-level” workers. But when leaders are humble, show respect, and ask how they can serve employees as they improve the organization, the outcomes can be outstanding. And perhaps even more important than better company results, servant leaders get to act like better human beings.