

Unleashing Organizational Talent *through* Servant Leadership AND Discretionary Performance

By Mike Blevins

Early in my career as a young engineer, I worked on a team tasked with starting up a new power plant. We tended to do things alike, not knowing that our management was already watching for differentiators among us. My goal was to be as good as my teammates were. It never entered my mind that if I could, I should do better...even if it made me stand out. Later, I realized that my manager was encouraging me to be myself, to pull away from the group, to share my ideas, to suggest changes in the processes we were using. This became evident to me in one conversation.

In making a report to my manager, I went into great detail about the steps taken to address a problem. My manager said, ***"Don't tell me about the labor pains, just show me the baby."*** While this common country saying meant something to most folks, I had not heard it.

But at that moment, I understood what my manager had been telling me for months... *"I have confidence in you. I trust you with the*



details. Just tell me the end of the story so I can make a judgment about the final answer, accept it, or ask for more information or action."

I was fired up from that day forward and amazed at how much extra energy I had to do the job. I struck out more on my own but still supported the team.

That **trust** caused me to give a great deal more in **discretionary effort**. Servant-leaders provide that trust which unleashes discretionary effort, and often times, extraordinary performance.

Going from Average to Extraordinary Performance

In most organizations employees work at some level of performance that is reasonably expected to maintain employment. This level is rarely outlined by the organization or employer; it's something everyone knows either from experience or intuition. It's one of those unwritten norms of an organization. However, most employees are capable of performing at higher levels than the minimum expectations. Many are capable of performing at *significantly* higher levels than the minimum. The difference in minimum expectations of performance and the higher levels of performance is referred to as **discretionary performance**.



Discretionary performance is more under the control of the worker than of the organization. It can be seen in levels of satisfaction, rewards,

self-motivation or even happiness to the employee. The internal motivators are seldom visible to the organization. However, servant-leaders can motivate an employee to higher levels of performance. Trusting those being supervised with the details, providing meaningful work, assuming goodwill, and creating an encouraging environment, set the stage for discretionary performance to flourish.

Engage Employees and Boost Performance

Provide Great Leadership, Meaningful Work, and Other Benefits That Lead to Engaged Performance™

People who believe their jobs are meaningful channel their "discretionary effort" into their work. Hay research and studies by leading business schools confirm the engagement/productivity link. Strong leadership is the ultimate perk.

Figure 1: Difference in value-added discretionary performance between "superior" and "average" performers

The more difficult challenge for companies is capturing the hearts and minds of good, reliable employees who are not stars but who are significantly more productive when engaged.

Type of Job	Performance Difference
Low-complexity jobs	19%
Moderate-complexity jobs	32%
High-complexity jobs	48%
Sales	48% - 120%

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One of the business reasons that I support Servant Leadership is I believe it helps establish a culture that motivates employees to a higher level of discretionary performance. Many employees respond personally to servant-leaders in a way that gives that extra effort, discretionary performance, to the organization. Is it worth it to the organization? A Hay Group study indicates that the extra effort available from motivated employees ranges from about 20% to as much as 120%. So a highly motivated employee can provide more than

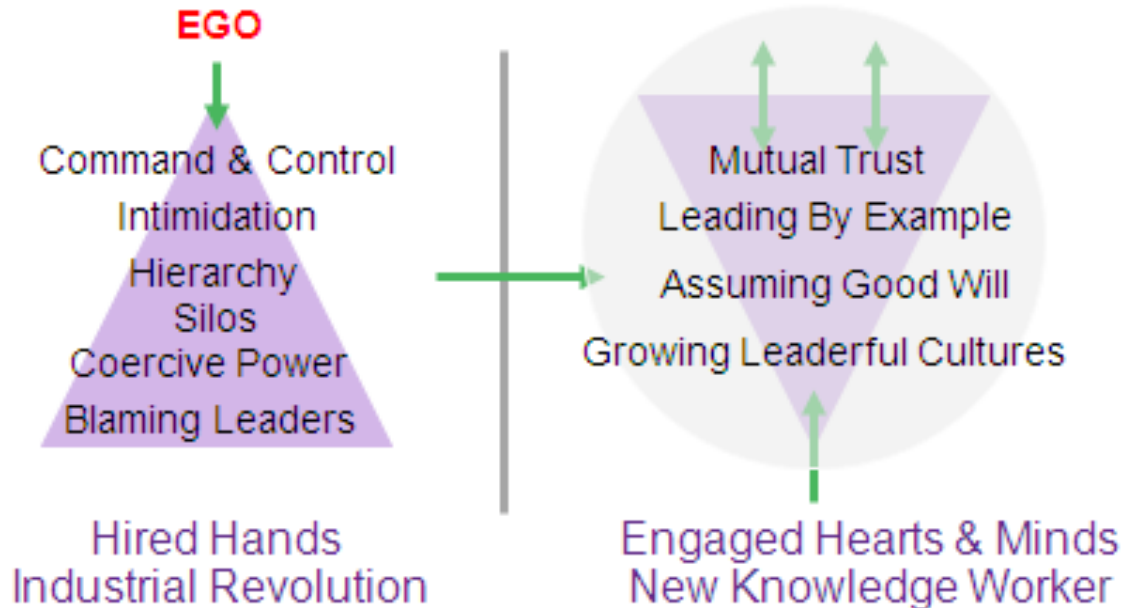
double their normal effort in the right environment. Realize this level of output may be many times the minimally expected performance.

Leveraging the Area in the Circle

AMCA describes the transition from traditional leadership to Servant Leadership with the figure shown below.

Growing from Traditional Boss/ Subordinate to Mentor/Coach Shared Leadership

What changes in a culture when it transforms from a top-down hierarchy into a truly leaderful culture?



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Servant Leadership and Discretionary Performance

The figure not only contrasts the traits of traditional leaders and servant-leaders, it also symbolizes the difference in normal performance and discretionary performance. If the area in the triangle indicates the amount of employee performance available in a traditionally- led organization then the area in the circle indicates the amount of employee performance available in a servant-led organization. The difference is discretionary performance. (For you math wizards, the Hay Group study previously mentioned would say that the area inside the circle but outside the triangle is an extra 20% to 120% over the area in inside the triangle.)

So, is Servant Leadership worth it? High performance organizations that have started the journey to Servant Leadership would say yes. Yes for the many positive cultural aspects of an organization led by servant-leaders and also for the positive results seen in productivity of employees contributing their discretionary performance to the organization. I would argue that Servant Leadership can be the foundation for sustaining high levels of performance, a truly elusive outcome.

Mike Blevins is Adjunct Partner for Senior Executive Coaching and Development. He is the former COO of Luminant, the power generation subsidiary of Energy Future Holdings. Mike is a champion of servant leadership, has developed winning teams, and is a highly respected leader in the nuclear industry. He now works with profits and non-profits in leadership development.



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