

## The Meaning of Servant Leadership

*Simon Chadwick*

I write this in the waning hours of the day on which Queen Elizabeth II died. While she is celebrated for having reigned longer than any other British monarch, it is her last written message to her subjects that sticks in my mind. The message was signed “Your Servant, Elizabeth R”.

Why would a leader of state, monarch of thirteen realms across the world, describe herself as their servant? And what on earth does this have to do with the insights industry?

Elizabeth was a model servant leader. And it is known that servant leaders are far more likely than their autocratic counterparts to achieve lasting success and impact. This is a lesson that all business leaders, not just those in the insights industry, would do well to learn. In my long career, I have served under inspirational leaders, autocratic leaders, totally unhinged leaders and servant leaders. Of all of them, the servant leaders had the longest lasting impact, by far.

As we observe the modern-day insights ecosystem, we see long-established research companies, new venture capital-backed technology entrants, private equity-owned aspirational conglomerates, and a diminishing set of privately held firms. Each category houses different leadership styles, some more successful than others. But I am willing to bet that, in the long run, those with servant leadership at their core will last longer than those with thrusting, cut-throat, conquer all and damn-the-consequences leaders. We have seen this time and again in the wider world – just look at Uber, Theranos and possibly even Tesla (time will tell).

So, what is Servant Leadership?

Here are my seven (totally non-scientific) elements that go to make up servant leadership and why they are important:

1. *Mission:* A Servant Leader has at his or her core an overriding mission that is bigger than themselves and the organization that they lead. In Elizabeth’s case it was to serve all the realms for which she was Head of State to ensure harmony, cooperation and peace. In the case of a young insights entrepreneur that I know, it is to change marketing so as to ensure global sustainability. Whatever your mission, it has to supersede the pursuit of profit and growth for their own sake, and it has to be something to which all your stakeholders adhere and in which they believe.
2. *Clear-sightedness:* A Servant Leader cannot exist in a world of fantasy. They have to be grounded in reality and have a clear understanding of both challenges and opportunities, not only for themselves but for all their stakeholders. So many leaders suffer from Corner Office Delusion Syndrome (CODS), where they believe that everything is going swimmingly, oblivious to the concerns and despair of their

management teams and employees. In Cambiar research among U.S. insights companies, CEOs were 50% more likely to believe their Employer Brand was strong than were their employees (including their managers!). A true Servant Leader does not fall for this – they keep in touch with not only their clients but those whom they lead, they recognize the issues, and they deal with them.

3. *Knowledge and Awareness:* Queen Elizabeth had fifteen Prime Ministers serve under her (one for only two days). Many are no longer with us but, among those who are, all acknowledge that she was always not only aware of the issues facing the government but completely knowledgeable about those issues. A Servant Leader is not only clear-sighted but also immerses herself in all the issues that affect her stakeholders, whether they be clients, employees, suppliers or the wider socio-economic environment. Only then can she take decisions or (in a constitutional monarch's case) advise on the best way forward.
4. *Welfare of all stakeholders:* The Servant Leader will always recognize that they are part of an ecosystem consisting of employees, clients, suppliers and shareholders. You can't put customers first if you treat employees like crap. Suppliers won't support you in times of need if you insist on 120-day payment terms. All have to be equally important and there has to be a realization that if you downgrade one, you risk losing the others as well.
5. *Empathy:* If you are to understand how to meet the needs of all stakeholders, you need to have empathy. This, unfortunately, is a quality marked by its absence among CEOs. While sociopathy is a condition found in 5% of the general population, it is present in 40% of corporate leaders (and, yes, that probably applies in the insights industry as well). Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in the shoes of others and to feel and imagine their dreams, issues, problems, fears and environments. A Servant Leader has this ability as it applies throughout all levels of their organization as well as among their clients. This last point is critical in the insights industry – one of the most common complaints among clients is that their suppliers just don't understand the world in which they live.
6. *Team Leadership:* David Ogilvy had a famous saying (and I am paraphrasing): "If we hire people smaller than ourselves, we will end up with a company of dwarves. If we hire people bigger than ourselves, we will end up with a company of giants". The team is more important than the individual. A CEO or Head of Insights who builds a diverse team of individuals who are better than he is in a variety of roles will invariably leave behind an organization that can survive and thrive without him.
7. *Self-suppression:* A true Servant Leader never makes it all about themselves. It's about the clients, the organization, the employees. It's about the mission. Servant Leaders are not self-serving; they don't seek out fame or stardom. They may become stars, but that is because of their organization's achievements, not theirs as individuals.

Servant Leaders are few and far between, whether it be in politics or in business. But that doesn't mean that we should not aspire to be one, if only because servant leadership has been shown time and again to be the long-term road to sustained success.