



# The 'One Thing' Management Approach

Becoming a more effective manager one task at a time

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The advent of steam-powered machines, most notably locomotives, ushered in the Industrial Age nearly 200 years ago. The early leadership of railroads and other business enterprises was drawn largely from the ranks of the military. Not surprisingly, these top brass brought with them the hierarchical, authoritative leadership model that had served them well in their former military careers.

This top-down style of leadership also served their companies well, until the dawn of the Information Age, which reflected the social and political upheavals of the day. In 1970 Robert K. Greenleaf, founder of the servant leadership movement, published "The Servant as Leader," inspired by his reading of "Journey to the East" by Herman Hesse, a favorite of the counterculture at the time.

Greenleaf subsequently wrote "Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness," in which he posited that the power of leaders arises from the consent of the followers, hardly a new idea, but one whose time he felt had come. His philosophy was best summarized in another work, "Essentials," where he wrote, "The servant leader is servant first. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first. The best test...is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

The concept of servant leadership as envisioned by Greenleaf has been characterized by 10 key attributes: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth and building community.

Collectively these attributes comprise more than a leadership model, but a spiritual framework for achieving its objectives. Greenleaf believed that central to servant leadership is a desire to serve a higher purpose, something beyond ourselves “to strive for, to move toward, to become.”

As Joseph Jaworski, a Greenleaf disciple and author of “Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership,” put it, “I have come to believe that leadership is much more about being than doing. It is about orientation of character, our state of inner activity.”

This concept of leadership calls for embarking on a journey toward self-discovery and lifelong learning to fulfill our own unique purpose and help others fulfill theirs. Those of us who consider ourselves to be servant leaders may feel we’re making pretty good progress on this journey. At least I did, until I recently read an article on grief counseling that suggested saying, “I’d like to make dinner for your family tomorrow,” rather than “Let me know how I can help.” Even if the person doesn’t want dinner, they are much more likely to tell you how you can help.

However, I had already sent a note thanking and offering to help a group of employees who attended a weeklong program on self-awareness and leadership development. I received no responses other than to thank me for the conference. My offer to help had been construed as an empty platitude that didn’t warrant a response. When I subsequently rephrased the question asking them in person rather than by e-mail, “What one thing can I do to help you on your journey?” I received entirely different responses – responses like, “Would you share books on leadership that have helped you?” “Can you help me to identify those areas where I can become truly exceptional?” “Would you help me with a problem involving a direct report?”; “Could you help us hold bimonthly meetings to continue to work with each other on leadership skills?” “Would you be a mentor to me?” “Could you help me to communicate with someone I haven’t been able to connect with?”

It was then I realized the greater specificity of the “One Thing” approach was not only more effective, but more consistent with the tenets of servant leadership as well. Since my epiphany, I have used this approach in other ways, asking my colleagues things like,

“If you could change one thing about our marketing communications program, what would it be?” “If you could think of the one thing to most improve our employee communications, what would it be?” “What is the one thing you would do differently if there is another recession?” “What one thing can I do to make for a better working environment?”

This technique has elicited extremely specific and actionable responses, and my team knows if they ask me to do “one thing” for them, I will even if I have to stay up all night to do it. The “One Thing” approach captures the very essence of servant leadership, which can indeed make our employees “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.”

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