

The Servant Leader

by

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“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2: 3-5

I live in Wal-Mart country, for the Home Office is in Bentonville, AR where I live. The store where Sam Walton fostered his retail career in Bentonville, is an old Ben Franklin store that he once ran on the town square. In that setting is where Sam had a great idea about a new retailing concept. So, he went to the Ben Franklin chain of command to see if they would join him with his idea. They declined. He then opened the first Wal-Mart store only a few miles from my office. Boy did Ben Franklin lose on that one. We know what happened next, as his idea eventually created the largest retailer in the world. But, not only did Sam have some great ideas about marketing and retailing from supplier to customer, he also had some great ideas about how to treat people, especially his “associates.” Note I didn’t say “employees” for Sam made a point of emphasizing things that would esteem a person, and make him or her feel part of something bigger than just working for a company. I am told that the people around him that he hired and nurtured came to love him, because he communicated something unique and special in joining him. In fact, they say that he might have been one of the first major retailers to consider a management philosophy that saw the goal of every manager, and every executive to be that of a *servant* of the ones that fell under their authority. It was a flip-flop from most management strategies that promote a hierarchy of authority that looks like a pyramid with management on top. His management philosophy was to present the pyramid to be upside down, where the higher levels of management stood under the associates, and in fact led them by serving them. This philosophy worked pretty good, wouldn’t you agree? Wonder where Sam got his idea about servant leadership? You know, he wasn’t the first to present it and model it. No, that came over 2,000 years before he saw it as a way to value people who he needed for his company. Whether it came from his knowledge of the Bible or not, Sam saw something in it that all people need from people they respect. He saw it give them vision, value and invite commitment to join with his vision of building a company. He saw a human law that reveals our need for someone to value us enough that he will serve us and help us grow into the men and women we long to be. This is why Jesus modeled servant leadership in the way He reached people, and through this method He built His Church.

Now don’t get me wrong. I admire Sam Walton a lot for what he did in building his company and building up people. But, I also know that he was just a man with an idea about building a company, by helping people be successful in their jobs. He was good with his message, for it is a message that employees need to hear from their employers. This message in itself creates value in managing people. ***But far greater***, is to hear this message spoken to us by the way our Creator modeled His life. Just think. Jesus, our Creator, came to serve us and lead us this way. The fact is, He was the first *Servant Leader*, and His message is the purest of all, for it is not about how it helps us get on the same agenda in business, but rather how to get us into His kingdom and His family.

Skip Prichard who is a CEO and business leader points out that there are Nine Qualities of a Servant Leader. They are:

1: Values diverse opinion – 2: Cultivates a culture of trust – 3: Develops other leaders – 4: Helps people with life issues – 5: Encourages – 6: Sells instead of tells – 7: Thinks you, not me – 8: Thinks

long-term – 10: Acts with humility

I think this is an accurate observation of the qualities of a *servant leader*. But, I would also suggest that these qualities could be forced and unreal and fake if the heart of the person doing the “serving” is not lining up with his or her true value that is felt for another person as an individual. If it does not, then this form of servant leadership simply becomes a management tool, which is used only if it works its way to a company’s success. If not, another tool will be used. This form of *servant leadership* can become a hidden agenda in serving someone if a true concern for the person being served is not about them, but about me. Let’s look at the difference with *Jesus the servant leader*, understand His motivation for serving, and contrast the difference with other forms of *servant leadership*. We find it from the passage above:

- **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” - Jesus, as a servant leader, had no selfish ambition or conceit.** He obeyed His Father and left His throne, laid down His crown, and came to serve by fulfilling His mission at the cross. As a servant leader, do you have any personal ambition attached to your reason for serving? If so, it is not like Jesus.
- **“but in humility” - Jesus, as a servant leader, was truly humble.** We often fake humility, and try to give an impression that this godly characteristic is truly ours. But, we know it is really true when we have a crown like Jesus, or even the rights we claim for our self that we abandoned for another person that we are serving. Jesus laid down His crown to serve us. As a *servant leader*, do you abandon your position of authority over someone in order to lift someone up? Jesus did. If not, you are not serving like Jesus.
- **“count others more significant than yourselves” - Jesus, as a servant leader, counted others more significant than Himself.** This is a major contrast in that Jesus had no hidden agenda for serving us. He was showing us the way to Heaven and was a living example of the tender love He feels for us. The message was clear in that it is all about us, the ones He was serving, as far as He was concerned. As a *servant leader* do you count the person you are serving more significant than yourself? If not, you are not serving like Jesus.
- **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” - Jesus, as a servant leader, is truly interested in you and me as a person.** This is where the hidden agenda shows itself, for if our serving another person is only about what we get out of it, then our interest in the person is tied only to our agenda for that person. Jesus’ only agenda in serving us was to obey His Father, to please Him, and to help us. If our serving of another person is to please our Savior and to obey Him, then we are a *servant leader* as Jesus was. If this is so, our interest in another person is pure, and it makes us persuasive, for they sense it is real. As a *servant leader*, if your serving is ultimately tied to your own agenda, you are not serving like Jesus.

I did not know Sam Walton personally, so I cannot speak for him in any way, and I hope that you do not think I am doing so. But, I know some godly people who were very close to him. They tell that his motivation and inspiration for promoting *servant leadership* in his company was in fact biblically based, and was something he and his wife Helen valued personally. I believe this is true. I also recognize that for some reason there has been an amazing growth in a company that was born under very humble circumstances, and then grew to greatness. Could there be a connection? It also seems to me that the humility that existed in the beginning stages of the company still remains part of its DNA even to this day. From my personal experience with them, I have observed this humility in many of this company’s highest levels of leadership. Could it be that God loves seeing things being done that are inspired by the way His Son Jesus did things, even if it is a retail giant like Wal-Mart, or you and me and our endeavors? Do you think God would be delighted in us if we would also take on the roll of

a *servant leader* like Jesus did? Are you willing to embrace it like Jesus? Maybe that is the biggest thing that will change your world around you, for they will see Jesus in you in its purest form. I know it sure changed me when some people served me like that. But, that is what *servant leadership* will do. It will change people, and it starts in us when we serve others as Jesus did.