

Serviam! Cultivating a Servant's Heart Among Student Leaders



by Dr. David W. Montgomery

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.

~ Max DePree, businessman and author

Bands, like all organizations, have a culture. The culture of any organization deeply affects the experience shared by its members and ultimately determines its success and happiness. Often directors work to instill an overarching culture for the entire organization, yet the sub-culture of its leadership is the primary way in which the rest of the members learn the values and principles of the ensemble. Therefore, the most effective way to transform a band's culture is to focus on developing the student leaders.

There are a variety of leadership approaches and ideas, yet a style that deserves more discussion is the servant-leader model. Student leadership involves leading one's friends and peers, which is a complicated mine-field to navigate; therefore, identifying leaders who are seeking more than their own accolade is particularly important. Principles of servant leadership relate well to the challenges of student leadership in bands and form a leadership style that resonates with the universal needs of the human condition, especially teenagers.

The two broad areas of leadership are knowledge and communication. Knowledge includes the "hard skills" and technical information such as musical, conducting, and marching skills. Communication and interpersonal abilities such as influencing others, motivating and inspiring them, and eliciting their best are "soft skills." In my experience, the challenge for student leaders is not the "hard skills." Those are easy to develop,

and most people can do them well enough to lead; however, the separating factor for effective student leaders is their "soft skills." While the technical skills must be in place in order to be effective, students have to develop their interpersonal abilities in order to really lead. The focus of this article will be to discuss servant leadership, a proven style for getting the best from others and building strong cultures, and identify ways to cultivate servant leadership principles among student leaders and build their "soft skills."

Servant-leadership is all about making goals clear and then rolling your sleeves up and doing whatever it takes to help people win. In that situation, they don't work for you, you work for them.

~ Ken Blanchard, author

What is Servant Leadership? What is it not?

One of the first questions I ask potential student leaders when they are applying for leadership positions is "Why do you want to be in a leadership role?" The most common response is usually some variation of desiring to help the band become better or improve. Band students naturally think this way. They want to help and see others succeed. This is an important fundamental of leadership and is at the core of servant leadership.

The term "servant leadership" was coined by Robert Greenleaf in his 1970 publication *The Servant as Leader*. In this seminal essay, Greenleaf articulates the essence of servant leadership and contrasts it to power-based leadership.

The servant-leader is servant first
. . . It begins with the natural

feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such, it will be a latter choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.

Servant leaders do most of the same things that other leaders do. They articulate a vision, communicate, provide feedback, give direction, show courage, make tough decisions, and develop technical skills and expertise. The difference is that their focus is outward onto others, not inward onto themselves. They are motivated to see that others succeed and grow not just build their own résumé. These are the core principles to which students in band leadership positions should aspire and cultivate.

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For some, the discussion about servant leadership is uncomfortable or confusing. First, servant leadership is not about being a slave to others. Servant leaders are not doormats that others walk over and abuse. Rather, servant leadership is about identifying the needs of others, helping them realize those needs, working to their potential, and achieving their goals and dreams. Servant leaders can be very tough and hold others accountable to high standards. The difference is they help others achieve those standards.

The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly.

~ Jim Rohn, entrepreneur, author and motivational speaker

Leadership is a people process, not a power process.

The modern world focuses on selfish pursuits. For those in leadership positions, this often equates to building power and using that power for personal gain. Put differently, leadership is portrayed as 'being in charge' in popular culture. This false view leads many to believe that once they become a leader that it is *their* turn to be served. Students need to be told there is another way; that leadership is not about accumulating power, being in charge, telling people what to do, using people for your own goals, and résumé building. Instead, leadership should focus on the growth of others, helping them achieve success—and by extension seeing the band succeed. In this way, leadership is a people process not a power process. Jack Welch, former GE chairman and CEO, puts it this way, "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

In *The Institution as Servant*, Robert Greenleaf says, "caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built." It is also the rock upon which good band programs are built.

Furthermore, in *The Case for Servant Leadership*, Kent Keith states:

The servant-leader does not ask, "How can I get power? How can I make people do things?" The servant-leader asks, "What do people need? How can I help them get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization do it?"

We need to show students that there is a better way to lead. Listening to the world's ideas on leadership to often has an unhappy and unhealthy end. Because it is intrinsically "other-centered," servant leadership moves us away from our selfish tendencies and cultivates a heart of joy, gratitude, and peace.

The task of leadership is not to put greatness into humanity, but to elicit it, for the greatness is already there.

~ John Buchan, author and historian

Eliciting the best from others

Leadership is also about results, and leaders must maximize the abilities of those around them to achieve high results. This intangible quality is the leader's ability to elicit the best from others. What are the things that highly effective leaders do that motivate others to perform at their best? We all have a tendency to exert the least but expect the most, yet that is not how excellence works. To achieve excellence, people must extend themselves beyond their minimalist tendencies. The role of leadership plays a significant part in this process. Traits and actions found among servant-leaders are particularly well-suited for eliciting the best from others. These need to be discussed, cultivated, nurtured, and rewarded in leadership candidates. Below are five traits and actions of servant-leaders to be cultivated and emphasized among your own student leaders.

Be the Example

Leadership begins with the example set by the leader. In other words, actions

speaking louder than words. Leaders have to fully understand this and ensure that they conduct themselves according to the values and principles being promoted in the band. This includes everything the leader does: arriving to rehearsal early, being prepared, hustling and working hard, being positive in their approach to rehearsal and their encouragement of others, avoiding gossip and drama, staying late to see what else needs to be done, and everything in between. Being a great example includes on-the-field and off-the-field behaviors. Someone is always watching and people are eager to see if the leader is a person of integrity or if they only talk-the-talk. It also includes being willing to do the mundane jobs that it takes for the band to succeed. Peter Drucker says, "No leader is worth his salt who won't set up chairs."

Coach, not Boss

For most of what leaders do, they are wise to see themselves as coaches who create conditions where quality work can happen and then offer feedback and encouragement along the way. James Autry in *The Servant Leader* says, "Leadership is less concerned with pep talks and more concerned with creating a place in which people can do good work, can find meaning in their work, and can bring their spirits to work." This view is in contrast to the controlling and power-based style of leadership that often is associated with being the "boss." People who feel controlled are more likely to rebel, especially teenagers. Beyond that, leadership that focuses on control also focuses on compliance in order to maintain control. Compliance, by its nature, is limiting to human potential. In *The Business Case for Servant Leadership*, James Showkeir says,

Compliance is not commitment. Compliance does not create passion. Compliance does not make individuals wiser. Compliance does not encourage choosing accountability. Compliance does not lead to creativity,

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flexibility, differentiation, and speed. Compliance does not create meaning and purpose. Compliance does not breed freedom. Meaning, purpose, and freedom ensue from struggle, risk, engagement; compliance cuts us away from these.

People respond better when they are held to high standards but given the information and feedback to excel. This is what coaches do. Kent Keith, in *The Case for Servant Leadership*, states, "People do their best work when they are taught, mentored, and coached, benefitting from both positive and negative feedback as they make their daily decisions about their work." Student leaders would be much more effective by approaching their colleagues and friends in the band as coaches that build positive energy and relationships through facilitating an environment where everyone can work to their potential, and avoid the tendency to boss and control them.

Listening

One of the most important human needs is the desire to be heard. We live in a noisy and selfish world. It is hard to get a word in, and there is heavy competition for our attention. Servant-leaders work to become great listeners because they understand the value of allowing people to feel heard, and of what the leader may learn while listening that could affect performance. Great listeners have the ability to stop, look at the person speaking, and let them say all of what they need to say while giving them their full attention. They resist the temptation to multitask during the conversation, or begin speaking over top of the person. Sometimes leaders need to have the solution, and sometimes they need to listen to the issues of their people and let them express their concerns. People who feel they have been heard feel empowered, loved and appreciated. As a result, they are motivated to work hard. Listening also allows the leader to constantly learn and understand the realities of issues that need to be corrected or refined as the season goes along. Good

listeners are always asking questions and observing. This allows them to respond in the best way possible.

Love

The world in which our students are being formed generally has a one-sided and distorted view of love. Servant-leaders understand love as a verb instead of a feeling. They know that expressing love means sacrificing for those in their care. It means going out of your way to ensure those you lead have the information and tools needed to do their part. It means extending yourself to solve problems that help those you lead to improve. In general, we do not like to talk about love, but we are all desperate for it. We are particularly in need of authentic love that helps us grow in our achievements, hopes, and dreams.

Humility

Humility is perhaps best discussed in contrast to its opposite—pride. Leaders who are prideful become arrogant. Pride and arrogance are two of the most selfish traits a leader can have, and they demoralize a team. They feed the power-based style of leadership that views others as objects for the leader's own use, and interactions with others as purely transactional. As a result, people are turned off by prideful leaders. They are not motivated to do their best work by this style. Humility, on the other hand, puts the focus on *what* is right instead of *who* is right. The humble leader knows that the most important goal of our time together is improving and getting things done right. Moreover, humble leaders are comfortable seeing others get the credit because their priority is on the mission not on the medal.

Another question I often ask candidates during the staff interview process is, "Of all the leaders you have had, who do you model yourself after and why?" This question forces them to think about leadership style, and it gives me an insight into what to expect from candidates if selected. Students often share that the leaders who make the biggest impact are the ones that "go above and beyond to help

us get it" and "makes it about us instead of about them." Humble leaders invest themselves into other people's growth instead of thinking about their own position in the band. People are motivated by this approach, and their output demonstrates it.

When the leader lives by their conscience, guided by universal values of fairness, honesty, and respect, their behavior echoes in everyone's soul. People instinctively feel trust and confidence toward them.

~ Stephen Covey, author

Developing servant leadership traits

It has been said that "leaders are made, not born." I believe this is true. The skills needed for effective leadership can, indeed, be learned and developed; however, because so many of the skills required are "soft" in nature, it is very difficult to *teach* leadership. The majority of learning in this area is based on the student's ability to observe others and be curious about ways that impact people for the better. It is also based on the student's ability to develop a compassionate and empathetic heart, and have the courage to treat others with fairness, justice, and dignity—even under difficult circumstances. As a result, many of the traits of servant-leaders are products of their character, and this is what draws others to them and makes them effective. Therefore, all aspiring student leaders must understand that leadership and character development are the same. In order to become a better leader, you must become a better person. As said earlier, leadership is a people process, and that process begins with understanding how to relate to and inspire other people's needs, hopes, and dreams. This is done through the core parts of character.

For directors who seek to develop these traits in their student leaders, the process is both very simple and very difficult. The concepts of servant leadership are

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universal to the human condition which makes them simple to understand, but they require discipline and sacrifice to cultivate which makes them difficult to do. In its simplest form, developing leaders is no more complicated than focusing on The Golden Rule—treat others as you would like to be treated.

Directors can facilitate servant leadership development for their students in a few important ways. First, students are generally a mirror of their band director. The director's example goes a long way in influencing how students will respond to problems and challenges. When the director models servant leadership, the students will generally imitate it.

Next, spend time with current and prospective leaders discussing the principles of servant leadership. The concepts are easy to understand, and we have been taught them from a young age. The challenge is to place value upon them in the band culture, and then live by them as a leadership team. There are many good books and articles that can be used to facilitate discussions. Among my favorite books are *Wooden on Leadership* by John Wooden and Steve Jamison, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle* by James Hunter, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell, and *The Case for Servant Leadership* by Kent Keith. One of the most effective strategies for me has been to host a book club for student leaders. There are also quality leadership camps that students can attend to become immersed in servant-leader based ideals and strategies.

Finally, when staff decisions are made, directors should place a high value on selecting students who demonstrate a commitment to servant leadership. There is an old saying that "whatever we reward, we get more of." When students see the kind of people being chosen for staff positions, they start to emulate those traits as they work to become leaders in the program. This creates a positive cycle that, over time, will build and grow into the kind of culture that truly creates an atmosphere of excellence. ■

As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.

~ Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft

Conclusion

Those in leadership positions should always be concerned about effectiveness: their own and those under their leadership. We live in a time where the days of dictator-style leadership has lost the effectiveness it once had, especially with young people. While the desire to have purpose and meaning to your work has always been important, it is especially important to the current generation. People yearn for an environment where they can feel success but also feel that they are making a contribution. Those who follow a servant-leader approach will thrive in this environment, and so will the people around them. ■

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