

Servant Leadership: It Comes From the Inside

Discover Extraordinary Service

Excerpt from chapter 3 of *Inside Out*

The dictionary defines *trait* as “a distinguishing quality or characteristic as of personality.”¹ *Visual Thesaurus* defines it as “a distinguishing feature of your personal nature.”² If you were to type t-r-a-i-t into *Visual Thesaurus*, you would see dozens of descriptive words. Among them: *emotionless*, *frivolousness*, *distrustfulness*, *thoughtlessness*, *compulsiveness*, and many other not-so-positive descriptions of human nature.

But you would also find many positive words: *humbleness*, *resoluteness*, *trustworthiness*, *thoughtfulness*, *faithfulness*, and other positive descriptions of our natures. Servant leaders invariably exhibit humanity’s most positive traits. They build their lives around those traits, and they put the person they are into action. Their authenticity, being true to who they are, exists no matter what role they take.³

There’s no way we could possibly list all the traits of an effective servant leader. Some of them are as simple as “listening.” But here are the fifteen traits we believe are the most vital to any servant who wants to lead others toward positive change.

- They have a clear vision.
- They have absolute values.
- They are faithful.
- They are accepting.
- They are loyal.

- They are humble.
- They have integrity.
- They are compassionate.
- They are encouragers. They support one another.
- They are generous.
- They honor and respect one another. They value the contributions of others.
- They mentor one another.
- They are flexible.
- They “bounce back”—they are resilient, and they help others to bounce back.
- They are selfless. They are willing to give it their all.

You probably expected us to include “They love others” on our list. The fact is, we believe most of the traits we’ve listed are key manifestations of love: faithfulness, acceptance, compassion, encouragement, generosity, and selflessness among them. Even integrity, humility, mentoring, accountability, and resilience can be part of the overall package we call love.

You might also have expected us to include skills, abilities, or talents somewhere in the list. But skills, abilities, and talents are different from traits. We refer to these three things as gifts. It’s your job to unwrap them.

You may have the ability to teach—the gift of teaching—but if you aren’t teaching, you aren’t serving others with that ability. You may be a skilled carpenter, mechanic, or pilot, but if you’re not building to serve others, doing car repairs for nothing more than money, or flying a plane without providing acts of service to others, you aren’t using your gifts. Your traits are what empower you to apply your gifts . . . make them more significant by serving others.

Traits may be inherent in some individuals, or they may be the outcome of environment—good parents or schools, for example. For the most part, though, we believe they are cultivated out

of personal desire. If we want to be generous, we'll find a way. If we want to encourage others, we'll make it happen. If we want to mentor others, we'll take the time.

Traits are the motivation behind the gifts—behind the skills, abilities, and talents, behind the behaviors and attitudes generally present in all servant leaders.⁴

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¹ Michael Agnes and David B. Guralnik, *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (Cleveland: Wiley Publishers, 2007).

² Virtual thesaurus.

³ James A. Autry, *The Servant Leader* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

⁴ Larry W. Boone and Sanya Makhani, "Five Necessary Attitudes of a Servant Leader," *Review of Business* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 83-96.