

Developing servanthood in leadership

by Jeff Iorg

Servant leadership is, in its essence, an attitude. It is defined more by who you are than what you do. Defining servant leadership by any performance category or job description needlessly limits the possibilities. The key to establishing the proper attitude for servant leadership is developing the proper motive for ministry.



“While motives are difficult to describe or define, they are not difficult to discern! Followers have an innate sense of the true motives of their leaders.”

Jeff Iorg, The Character of Leadership

What drives you as a leader? There are some bad, albeit common motives. Guilt, duty, and money come to mind. But, if those are poor motives – what is the best motive for ministry? The Bible is clear – love for God. Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment.” (Matt. 22:37-38 HCSB) Jesus’ audience for this pronouncement was significant - the Pharisees – the prominent religious leaders at that time.

Jesus told these religious elitists loving God was the first commandment, the greatest good, and the highest priority. Nothing about this has changed over the past two millennia. Jesus says the same thing to you. Love for God must be the driving force motivating your ministry.

But closely connected with loving God is loving people. Jesus also told the Pharisees the second commandment was to love their neighbor. He said, “The second (commandment) is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:39 HCSB) This was a startling revelation! The Pharisees enjoyed the prestige of membership in an elite class. They would not normally even acknowledge their neighbor, unless it was another Pharisee. Yet, Jesus was clear. Love God. Love people. That sums it all up!

Some people think proper motive just happens. It doesn’t. You can shape your motives as a leader. You can choose to serve others, sense the purity of your motive in those moments, and draw on that resource in other leadership settings. While motives are difficult to describe or define, they are not difficult to discern! Followers have an innate sense of the true motives of their leaders.

Here are some choices you can make to shape your ministry motives.



Choose to do a dirty job. Most leaders are not expected to do dirty work – like cleaning toilets, changing diapers, or mowing the lawn. And, frankly, most of the time leaders should not do these jobs. Good leaders recruit, employ, and empower people to do all kinds of things like this. Part of being a good leader is realizing how different people can make a meaningful contribution and utilizing them appropriately.

But one way to do a “motive check” is to choose a dirty job and do it. One church leader, struggling with his motives, contacted his pastor and said, “The next time

you have a really dirty job – like a toilet backed up or something – call me.” Within days, plumbing that always worked backed up badly! The opportunity to do some really dirty work presented itself, and with it, came a cleansing of both a bathroom and a young businessman’s heart. Choosing to do a job normally beneath this store manager’s dignity humbled him and helped him reconnect to love as a motive for ministry.

Choose to serve anonymously. A second scenario that sharpens motive is choosing to do something anonymously. I was once responsible for a prolonged volunteer building project. For about two years, I spent every holiday weekend helping build a major ministry facility. Each time I worked with a different set of volunteers. Most did not know I was the CEO of the organization building the facility. I always tried to join a work crew, keep my identity quiet, and grind out the work.

One day, while moving multiple piles of plywood into position for decking, my co-worker asked, “What do you do for a living?” When I told him, he replied, “Wow, and you’re out here working?” My cover was blown!

But while it lasted, it was a great opportunity to work without recognition. I worked hard because of love – for the Lord, his work, and for the building’s ultimate purpose. I worked anonymously without recognition or reward other than purified motives. It felt good and reminded me all my work should be done with this spirit.

Choose to serve an enemy. Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” (Matt. 5:44 HCSB) Since he did not give pointless instructions, Jesus’ admonition means you will have some enemies to love! Leaders have opponents and critics who can become enemies. One way to learn to love others is to choose to serve an enemy.

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Once, another leader asked me to help him with a family crisis. He had been a vocal, public critic of my ministry. Instead of referring him for help, I decided to help him personally and quietly. God used the circumstances to remind me how to love someone, no matter how they had treated me, and deepened love as my motive for ministry.

Something spiritually profound happens when you care for someone who doesn’t care much for you. God is often giving you a major motive check and the opportunity to sharpen your love for him and his people.

Choose to make someone else successful. A unique dynamic for ministry leaders is how much our work is empowering others for success. For example, for about ten years, part of my job was negotiating church planting funds from a national missions agency. Those funds would often flow to new churches many months after the negotiations had been completed. By the time the money arrived, my role would have been completely forgotten (if it was ever known!). The church planters who received the funds and the converts and churches that resulted often never knew about my role in the process.

A good way to purify your motives for leadership is to find ways to make others successful. Leaders can make decisions, launch processes, create systems, and empower people to be successful without any hint of their involvement. Making others successful, and choosing to do it without expecting any recognition, is a surefire way to purify your leadership motives.

Servant leadership is a worthy model. But don't be fooled into thinking servant leadership is about the job, the title, or the amount of the paycheck. Servant leadership is about the heart. It's primarily about motive. A servant leader is driven by his or her love for God and people.

Servant leadership is a character issue. As you achieve success in ministry – however you define it – the temptations to self-reliance or self-promotion grows greater. Leaving a leadership legacy requires resting your service on proper motives. When you're finished, you want people to remember the person you were more than the tasks you accomplished.

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