

# EMBRACING THE SPIRIT OF A SERVANT IN BUILDING GREAT ORGANIZATIONS

**BY ERIC LAU**

The term servant leader seems to be an oxymoron. How can one be a leader and a servant at the same time? Is it possible? The answer is a resounding yes!

## MAHATMA GANDHI IS AN EXAMPLE OF A GREAT SERVANT LEADER.

Exemplary leaders like Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela have all demonstrated to us that impactful leadership, which makes a lasting difference, lies in servant-hood.

Gandhi once stated that, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

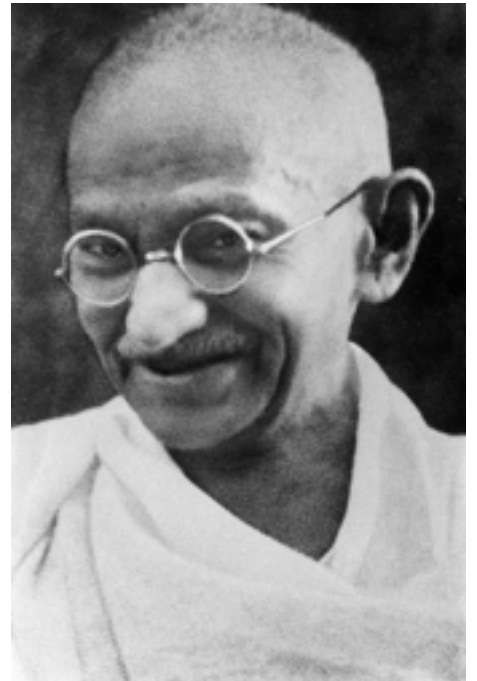
Although the principle of servant leadership has been a timeless practice, the modern understanding of this term was first pioneered by Robert K. Greenleaf back in the 1970s.

Greenleaf teaches that a servant leader leads by serving others. They place the interests and needs of others ahead of their own interests and needs.

In short, servant leaders place others before self. They are servants first and leaders second. In fact, they make such great leaders because they simply know how to serve.

Let’s bring a little more clarity to the practice of servant leadership. When one is a servant leader, we are not saying that he or she has to make coffee for their team members, wash the office toilets, or come early into a meeting to ensure that all the chairs are being arranged properly.

What matters is how leaders serve, and not about leaders being servants. Servant leaders are those who embrace the spirit of a servant in their leadership expression.



## A CASE STUDY: TONY HSIEH AND ZAPPOS

Tony Hsieh, chief executive officer of Zappos—one of the world’s largest online shoe and clothing company—is known for his servant leadership.

As a company that records over US\$1bil (RM4bil) in sales revenue, Hsieh sits at a desk that is of the same size and model as the ones given to new employees at the company’s call center.

He sits with other executives in the same row, within an open space where he is easily accessible to all employees.

Hsieh is known for his humility and authenticity as a leader. His modeling of servant leadership is simple: We’re all here for the same reason and no one in this operation is more important than anyone else.



CEO of Zappos, Tony Hsieh speaking speaks at Big Omaha 2010, an annual conference for entrepreneurs. Photo credit: Malone & Company Photography | Flickr.

This is demonstrated in the construct and design of the Zappos office. The moment you enter the Zappos office, you hear upbeat music pumping and you would observe employees engaged in recreational activities.

The interior design and environment in the 11-storey office building is cool and appealing. There are refreshment stations on every floor, and if employees are hungry, the cafeteria offers free and other affordable food. Hammocks can be found everywhere for employees to take a nap if they are tired.

All this is intentionally done because Hsieh is a big believer in building the right organizational culture.

As a servant leader, he is always thinking about what is best for his people, and he places much emphasis in building an environment where his employees are being served well.

One of Zappos’s core values is to build a positive team and family spirit. Here is how they express this value:

“At Zappos, we place a lot of emphasis on our culture because we are both a team and a family. We want to create an environment that is friendly, warm, and exciting. We encourage diversity in ideas, opinions, and points of view.

The best leaders are those who lead by example and are both team followers as well as team leaders. We believe that, in general, the best ideas and decisions are made from the bottom up; they're influenced by those on the front lines who are closest to the issues and/or the customers. The role of a manager is to remove obstacles and enable his/her direct reports to succeed. This means the best leaders are servant-leaders; they serve those they lead."

The last sentence above encapsulates Zappos's view on what makes a great leader.

### How does this translate to organizational success?

At Zappos, the heart of a servant leader is effectively transferred to the way he serves his customers. For example, if a customer calls Zappos because he couldn't find the product he was looking for on Zappos's website, the customer representative will then search the company's inventory database. If the product is truly unavailable, Zappos will convey it to the customer.

In a traditional sales approach, this is the moment where most sales representatives would take advantage of the situation to cross-sell a different product to the customer in order to close the sale.

However, in Zappos, the standard operating procedure is for the sales representative to search online on their competitors' website, and once the product is found, they will refer the customer to their competitor's website.

Zappos' servant-leadership approach is simple: We exist to serve our customer and therefore, we will do whatever it takes to please them, including losing a sale.

You may say this does not make sense, from a business point of view. But, let results and statistics speak for themselves. With a sales turnover of over US\$1bil (RM4bil) and a 10mil customer database, 75% of Zappos' business comes from repeat customers. This is any organization's dream. Zappos' customers are no ordinary customers. They are die hard raving fans!

When there is authenticity in the way that we put others first before self, the expression of this type of leadership can truly be amazing.

Take a look at this scenario: There was a woman who bought a pair of boots for her husband at Zappos. Sadly, her husband never received the gift as he was killed in a car accident on his way home from work.

When the woman called Zappos to inquire about the return policy and told the Zappos representative what had happened, the Zappos representative ordered flowers to be sent to her in order to offer their condolences.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

The practice of servant leadership is all about putting others before self. This is in total contradiction to many of the tragic leadership practices we see today where the focus is on the leaders' personal self-serving agenda.

Famous businessman and writer, Max De Pree, says that, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."

Great leaders possess the heart of a servant. Serving others leads to leadership greatness.

So, my question to you is, what kind of a leader do you want to be? What kind of an organization are you building?

Eric Lau is a strategic leader with a relentless belief in people. His personal mission is to inspire and influence others to rise up to their full potential and calling. He is a Leaderonomics faculty trainer who regularly leads training sessions in the areas of leadership, management and personal development.

