

# Serving People Through Crisis: A Better Way to Lead

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As COVID-19 continues its worldwide rampage throughout the first half of 2020, it has already left an indelible mark on the way we work. However, as vividly expressed by renowned organisational behaviour professor [Jeffrey Pfeffer](#): “COVID-19 changes everything – *and nothing* – about managing workers”.

Good people management principles and practices – pandemic or no pandemic – will and should produce good results. While the focus of C-suite executives would undoubtedly have shifted towards survival mode over the last quarter, the crisis has brought to the fore the persistent white elephant in the room – that employees are the most important asset in any organization.

In fact, [research](#) from over 15 years of crisis leadership reveals that the most challenging element of leading through crisis is not the technical know-how, but rather managing the people involved. This echoes the calls made by scholars and practitioners alike – that building human capacity and capability are crucial for organizational survival.

While the saviour-archetype of a charismatic and commandeering leadership approach tends to be romanticized as the epitome of *great leadership*, research indicates otherwise. In fact, somewhat counterintuitively, two recent studies shows that “[servant leadership](#)” actually [delivers better results](#) compared to other forms of leadership.

Servant leadership is a people centred leadership paradigm that is often mistaken as “soft” and not performance-oriented at all. In reality, it is an assertive but people-centred approach to leadership that focuses on developing and enabling those being lead. This in turn delivers high-level performance returns for the organization.

Servant leaders do not whip people to perform but instead focus on their holistic development – psychological and technical – which will naturally lead to higher performance.

Servant leadership comprises of [six dimensions](#), and in a recently published [state-of-the art review](#) on the topic, we demonstrate that not only does investing in servant leadership make sense empirically; it also brings both people and financial value propositions to the organization. Further, it is a leadership approach that works not only cross-culturally, but also across industries and contexts. From stock-exchange listed companies, educational institutions, to not-for-profits, these principles are not only translatable, they actually produce results.

With the backdrop of gloomy skies that COVID-19 brings, it is even more important that we invest in servant leadership. We know from research that servant leaders are likely to develop employee's [psychological capital](#) – their hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These are crucial resources both in times of crisis, but also outside of them – as it is linked with not only important organizational outcomes like [innovation and performance](#), but also contributes to employee outcomes such as [employee engagement and positive workplace behaviours](#). Further, servant leaders are also [climate architects](#) of their organizations, fostering not only employee performance but also [innovation and creativity](#). As leaders, serving your employees, simply put, works.

Once the sun shines again and the pandemic is nothing but a blip in our rear-vision mirrors –leadership during this crisis will have a big impact on every organization's future competitive advantage.

[Max DePree](#) once said that the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality, and the last is to say thank you. And in between, the leader is a servant.

As we navigate through this crisis, let us remember that we can only deliver value to our shareholders by focusing on and investing in our people. Yes, as leaders, we do need to set the vision and define our realities, for this is the value proposition that we bring into the organization. However, let's not forget that the very engine that runs the ship comprises of people. Not only are they our human capital, they are the reason why our organizations are able to do what they do.

As the saying goes – look after your employees, and they will look after your business for you.



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