



# LEWIS CENTER TOPIC BRIEFS



## Servant Leadership

Lately, several new terms related to the workplace have popped up in the news. In specific, terms like “quiet-quitting” and “quiet-firing” have become mainstream. These are terms that were created to help us understand the reality of what it means to be employed in the United States. For example, quiet quitting refers to doing the minimum requirements of one’s job and putting in no more time, effort, or enthusiasm than absolutely necessary. In essence, the worker doesn’t actually leave their position and continues to collect a salary.

Some are quick to point in the direction of generational differences to explain the apparent lack of “work ethic” that Millennials, Zennials, and Zoomers (individuals born between 1986 and 2010) display at work and that may have led to quiet-quitting. While it is undeniable that cultural differences do exist among generations, it seems it does not wholly address the reality of the situation. It may be worth looking into a different culprit playing an important role: leadership style.

### Workforce Reality

If you follow the news you are well aware of massive firings by some of the most recognized organizations in the world. Twitter reportedly fired roughly half of their

7,500 workers in early November. Most of these employees found out they were no longer employed when they could not log into their work email. Another huge tech company, Meta, forecasted they would fire 11,000 employees, or 13% of their worldwide workforce, at around the same time; these companies are, sadly, not outliers and one can understand why their workers are most likely not exuding confidence in their leaders.

Perhaps a more telling example is what happened to railroad workers in the United States. The 12 freight rail unions voted down an agreement that already increased their wages by 24% in 5 years. One of the main reasons? Railroad leadership would not grant paid sick days. These are workers asking for better, more humane working conditions, not a rise in pay. At the end the US government had to intervene and mandated the workers not to strike.

A simple internet search or management textbook read would show that several leadership styles exist and are taught all over the world. Depending on your source you can find anywhere between 4 to 8 “common” leadership styles; some of the most popular ones are authoritarian, democratic, delegative, and transactional. However, all these leadership styles share a commonality

ty: they place an emphasis on the leader.

### **A Different Focus**

There is a leadership style that, contrary to the others, puts the employee first: “servant leadership.” The term Servant leadership was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, although the idea of servant leadership is much older than that. The key difference between Servant leadership and the traditional leadership styles is the premise that the (future) leader is a servant first. That willingness to serve and be of service will bring the individual to make a choice: I can serve others by leading them to meet their, and our, common goals. The reason to be a leader is to be of service. This is in contrast to a leader who strives to lead due to internal or external pursuits like need for power or control, the interest in enhanced material possessions that would be the result of leadership position, or the thriving of their company or organization.

A leader focused on service is willing to share power, prioritizes the needs of their employees, and aids in the development of people so they are able to perform to their potential. Employees of an organization led by a servant leader do not work to serve said leader; the leader’s main purpose is to serve the employees. Therefore, a servant leader focuses not only on the professional growth of the employees, but their personal growth, as well. Greenleaf summarizes the benefits of this philosophy with the following statement: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

### **Servant Leadership in Latin America**

Examples of servant leaders in the workplace abound. Some recent ones include Howard Schultz (Starbucks), Richard Branson (Virgin Group), Tony Hsieh (Zappos), and Anne Mulcahy (Xerox). They have focused on their employees’ needs to create a supportive and collaborative working environment.

In Latin America, however, servant leadership is just beginning to gain traction. Ricardo Semler has written about his experiences implementing “liderança servi-

dora” with Semco Partners in Brazil. In Colombia, the consulting firm “Líderes en Acción” has trained business leaders with a focus on placing the needs of employees first and creating a culture of trust and collaboration.

This apparent lag in adoption of servant leadership principles in Latin America compared to the rest of the western world may come down to cultural differences. The strong emphasis Latin American cultures place on authority and hierarchy makes it more challenging for servant leaders to emerge and gain influence.

### **Conclusion**

Leadership styles are not meant to be a black or white issue. These are extremes in a continuum that encompasses all leaders. Some will be more interested in service but still expect a worthy remuneration; others will want the rewards but also accept the service challenge. Cultural values will also dictate whether a certain leadership style is better suited in different societies.

Nevertheless, there is a certain allure to a servant leadership style. Mainly that when a leader changes their paradigms and strives to serve first, their employees will acquire personal growth, while the organization grows as well due to the employee’s commitment and engagement. Theoretically, leaders, employees, and organizations will all benefit from this leadership style, and the current state of the labor market certainly justifies a change in perspective.

## More Information

“Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.” Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2022, [www.greenleaf.org/](http://www.greenleaf.org/).

“Servant Leadership: Characteristics, Pros & Cons, Example.” Investopedia, 2023, [www.investopedia.com/terms/s/servant-leadership.asp](http://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/servant-leadership.asp).

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## About the Author



**Dr. Alberto Rubio** is Professor of Marketing in the HEB School of Business and Administration (HEBSBA) at the University of the Incarnate Word. He holds a Ph.D. in Consumer Behavior from Purdue University and serves as the HEBSBA International Liaison. Dr. Rubio has deep cross-cultural experience in education, marketing, selling, and general business consulting. This has led him to believe that, to a certain extent, all humans are ethnocentric. Cross-cultural experiences have, however, allowed Dr. Rubio to understand that value systems are not better or worse, just different, an imperative in today's classroom.