

# THE IMPACT OF ALTRUISM ON A SERVANT LEADERSHIP CULTURE

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# THE IMPACT OF ALTRUISM ON A SERVANT LEADERSHIP CULTURE

The philosophy and leadership style go hand-in-hand in employee- and customer-centric environments.

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**S**ervant leadership is the backbone of many leadership development programs today. While the leadership philosophy is too complicated and involved to learn by glancing over an article, it is possible to identify servant leadership's ties to altruism and how that connection can help in boosting servant leader culture.

## Altruism Defined

Altruism is the practice of putting others before your own interests, even if that means

putting yourself in danger or at risk.

However, despite Darwin's own definition, altruistic behavior should not be confused with [benevolence or pro-social behavior](#) because these mentalities seek reward for a kind action.

For example, helping a stranger find their lost dog or an elderly person cross the road can present sacrifices and risk to yourself, but if you are only doing these things to make yourself look better to someone else, then these behaviors are considered pro-social

and not altruistic. Pro-social behavior is defined as doing something kind or good with the expectation of an external reward, like recognition or money.

Pro-social behavior, however, also should not be confused with benevolent behavior, which seeks an intrinsic reward for doing good. For example, someone might donate all of their cash to a charitable organization, which is self-sacrificing, but they do it because they know it will make them feel good, not purely to help. Therefore, how you perceive a situation or kind act is what determines the mentality behind the decision.

Altruism, then, is synonymous with selflessness to a degree. *It is about putting the needs of others above your own without expectation of reward or gratitude.* In terms of servant leadership and organizational culture, altruism is the concern for the growth and development of the company without the added agenda of self-interest. In other words, a servant leader's focus is on the company and others. This ambition is driven by the desire to grow the company and others first, not by the want or need for personal recognition, promotion and compensation.

## Altruism and Leadership Skills and Development

The scientific study of altruism identifies an evolutionary drive toward compassion and selfless behavior, though this does not mean that such behavior will manifest as dominant. In several studies, researchers noted that people often feel the need to help or make

others feel better, even if it means sacrificing their own interests. For example, imagine two children sitting on a park bench, each with their own ice cream cone. One child drops their ice cream on the ground and begins to cry. The other child observes the situation and then gives their ice cream to the other child.

In children, altruism is often a reactionary practice—it is not guided by substantial debate over the pros and cons. However, as people age and higher intrinsic value is placed on material things and emotional balance, altruistic tendencies become less dominant. Yes, some people will still hand over an ice cream cone without considering how it affects their life, but many others will not. Does this mean altruism is dead? No.

Altruism, while part of a person's conscious makeup, is still a skill or ideology. Therefore, it is something that needs to be honed and practiced.

Similar to servant leadership, which comprises many inherent [traits and philosophies](#), such as empathy, listening and community, altruism is a learned skill.

### Altruism and Servant Leadership

What does servant leadership mean to you and your organization? While often used

to define a company's leadership quality, the [term is frequently mischaracterized](#) or used to describe a plethora of management skills, which dilutes the meaning of the phrase.

How should servant leaders be described and why? Servant leadership is, by definition, altruistic. However, that also depends on how you interpret the definition of altruism. For example, while servant leaders have a deep desire to help others and the company without expectation of personal gain, they do also require employees to perform! Does that limit their altruistic nature? Sometimes self-sacrifice is necessary for the good of the team;

other times, it is counterproductive. Therefore, can a servant leader be truly altruistic?

I believe that they can, and there are several reasons why:

- Desire to serve a greater goal
- Drive to help others succeed
- Compassion and empathy
- Not motivated by external or intrinsic reward

### Altruism and Martyrdom

Many professionals will describe the quality of a good leader by listing those traits that make servant leadership such a sought-after management style—empathy, listening, foresight, etc. However, one term that is often left off of the servant leader list but tacked on

to altruism is “martyr.”

This tie to martyrdom is likely the reason that some business execs do not like to be classified as altruistic because they feel it makes them appear soft. Therefore, is martyrdom a requirement of altruism and by association servant leaders? No.

While altruism is defined in terms of selflessness, it is not necessarily the same as self-sacrificing. This is especially true in the world of business and communications. Sometimes a leader must take the blame

for certain mistakes made by their team, often in an effort to help the team grow. However, when one team member makes a mistake that compromises the whole, it is necessary to think of the good of the group. Therefore, while selflessness is an essential element of helping employees grow and develop, self-sacrifice is not always needed.

### Altruism and Organizational Success

[Servant leadership](#) is not only about management style, but it is also an ideology dedicated to the development of an altru-

istic culture with a focus on organizational success. The idea is that, as employees experience managers who are compassionate and involved in employee development and corporate growth and excellence, those principles will rub off and develop future leaders and further success. Altruistic principles help to propel corporate culture forward by demonstrating the importance and contribution of every employee. However, servant leadership goes beyond internal culture and communications. It can also be used to boost brand loyalty through customer service and representative interactions with consumers and clients.

### Altruism and Client Communications

Servant leadership is often most effective in areas of communication because it focuses on listening and empathy. These altruistic practices are especially useful in call centers and places where representatives have direct contact with clients.

In call center or customer service positions, employees need to demonstrate altruistic or selfless behavior, not showing anger or aggravation. They need to be accepting without being self-sacrificing, a skill that can be taught. With a mastery of listening and empathetic skills, call center and customer service representatives can help to establish brand loyalty and corporate growth, pushing servant leader culture beyond the organization and into the world.

Altruism and servant leadership go hand-in-hand. This philosophy and practice ensures an environment where team members and clients are listened to and heard, and where the needs of the company, customers and communities are put first. ♦



Matt Rocco, a 38-year veteran of the BPO industry, has held key leadership positions within Dun & Bradstreet, The Berry Company, Etech Inc. and Etech Global Services, a multinational outsourcing organization with over 3,000 employees that provides world-class solutions from its locations in the U.S., India and Jamaica. Servant leadership is at the foundation of Etech. ([www.etechgsg.com](http://www.etechgsg.com))

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