

THE TOP-DOWN ATTITUDE

The Number One Leadership Hang-up



- The top-down attitude comes naturally to most people.
- Servant leadership is much more rare.
- Effective leaders see themselves at the bottom of an inverted pyramid.

I intended to save the best for last, like a David Letterman top-ten countdown. But on second thought, I realize that this top-down attitude problem is like the mother of all leadership hang-ups. If you have it, you will spread it to everything your leadership hands touch. So it must come first as the foundation to everything else I will observe about how not to lead.

At a leadership conference for pastors and their wives in northern California several months ago, I was speaking on the theme of top

leadership mistakes. One man came up to me after a session and asked the obvious question: “Which is the top of the top ten?” That was an easy question for me to answer. I believe that the number-one leadership sin is that of *top-down autocratic leadership*.

You would think people would have learned by now, yet it still keeps cropping up: that age-old problem of domineering, autocratic, top-down leadership. Of all the sins of poor leadership, none is greater and none is still committed more often, generation after generation.

“He that thinketh he leadeth
and hath no one following him
only taketh a walk.”

—Dr. John Maxwell

The top-down approach to leadership is based on the military model of barking orders to weak underlings.

It goes something like this: “I’m in charge here, and the sooner you figure that out the better!” Take, for example, this story related to me by one of my students when I was teaching a course on leadership:

My organization was looking for a new regional leader. Those making the decision had somebody picked out. However, before finalizing it, they were going to meet with different people to receive feedback on the individual they had chosen. I gave them my serious concerns and observations. Even though they took the time to listen to us, they really didn’t hear what we were saying. In the end, our input and feedback was rejected. And our predictions came to pass. How did this whole situation make us feel? We concluded that the leaders at the top had already made up their minds regarding their choice, and that, almost as an afterthought, they had decided to talk to us “underlings” to try to get our rubberstamp approval. It made me feel as if they didn’t really want or need my input. If they would have listened to us, we would have been

spared the pain, misunderstanding, and hurt when it became obvious to everyone that this individual was the wrong choice for leadership.

One blatantly irritating practice of some leaders who exercise a top-down style is the use of knowledge—or really the lack thereof—to keep people in line and in place.

Knowledge in an organization is power. A leader can use this power to dominate underlings by keeping them guessing and in the dark.

Dictators have long recognized that others' knowledge is their worst enemy. I grew up in Alabama in the Deep South, where the whites kept the blacks ignorant so their knowledge could not become dangerous. I'll never forget the day our governor stood before the entrance to the University of Alabama to bar a young black girl from becoming our state's first black student at a white university. It was a sick and mistaken attitude of arrogance that, fortunately for us all, soon crumbled.

If people are kept in the darkness of ignorance, they are less likely to revolt against a ruthless ruler. For that reason, for years communist border guards were ordered to confiscate current magazines and newspapers from Western tourists. In the years when I traveled in Eastern Europe, the border guards always asked us if we had three categories of "contraband": *weapons, books and magazines, and Bibles*. They knew that if the truth got into the hands of the citizens, the task of maintaining tyranny would become more difficult.

WHERE TOP-DOWN SHOWS UP

- Abusive authority
- Deplorable delegation
- Lack of listening
- Dictatorship in decision making
- Lack of letting go
- Egocentric manner

The *Royal Bank Letter*, a Canadian publication, made this observation:

A prophetic expert on the subject of tyranny through ignorance, Adolf Hitler, wrote in *Mein Kampf* that propaganda, to be effective, must operate on the level of the “most stupid” members of society. Hitler, who loathed universal education, knew that ignorance goes hand-in-hand with gullibility. He realized that he could best “work his wicked will,” as Winston Churchill put it, when his audience was kept in the dark.

Top-down leadership can become like a chain reaction. The boss barks orders to the employee. The employee goes home and barks orders at his spouse. The spouse barks orders at the children. The children kick the dog, and the dog chases the neighborhood cat! It comes so naturally to most of us to be autocratic, but it also happens to be a great leadership mistake.

Why do a lot of people fall into the trap of top-down leadership attitudes? For at least five reasons:

1. *It's traditional.* Historically, autocratic, top-down leadership has been the most commonly practiced method. This is true in most of the more than one hundred countries I have visited. Far too many people simply learn this method by default.
2. *It's the most common.* Even though much has been written about alternative forms of leadership, top-down leadership is still the most common kind.
3. *It's the easiest.* It is much easier to simply tell people what to do than to attempt other, much more effective leadership styles.
4. *It comes naturally.* For some reason, the natural self prefers to dominate others and to try to amass power that can be

held over other people. Leadership, by nature, seems to entail one person lording over another.

5. *It reflects the dark side of human nature.* For those of us who believe what the Bible teaches, humans don't need any help to be depraved. A naturally sinful nature moves us toward dominating others and lording over them whenever possible.

CONTRASTING TWO APPROACHES

Much has been said in recent years about new styles of leadership that oppose the top-down, autocratic style. They come with new labels like “participatory management,” the “flat” organizational style, “democratic leadership,” or the model I prefer, called “servant leadership.” Servant leadership embraces all these new models and is built on principles that were laid out by perhaps the greatest leader this world has ever known—Jesus Christ.

A classic source book on this different kind of leadership is *Servant Leadership*, written thirty years ago by Robert K. Greenleaf. The book is subtitled, *A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. He defines the whole process of servant leadership in these terms:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. (9–10)

It is refreshing to me to realize that servant leadership is not new, even in secular management writings. More than forty years ago a landmark

UNDERSTANDING YOUNG WORKERS

With more and more emerging-generation workers on the scene, managers need to understand what turns them on and off.

TURN-ONS

- Recognition and praise
- Time spent with managers
- Learning how their current work is making them more marketable
- Opportunities to learn new things
- Fun at work—structured play, harmless practical jokes, cartoons, light competition, and surprises
- Small, unexpected rewards for jobs well done

TURN-OFFS

- Hearing about the past—especially yours
- Inflexibility about time
- Workaholism
- Being watched and scrutinized
- Feeling pressured to convert to traditionalist behavior
- Disparaging comments about their generation's tastes and styles
- Feeling disrespected

—Lawrence J. Bradford and Claire Raines, *Twenty-Something*

book began the revolution away from dictatorial leadership. In 1960 Douglas McGregor published *The Human Side of Enterprise*, in which he outlined what became known as “Theory X versus Theory Y” leadership style. Basically, McGregor believed that people really did want to do their best work in organizations, and if properly integrated into ownership of the goals of the organization, they would control themselves and do their best.

To fully understand this notion one must look at the book in the context of the times in which it was written. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a backlash against strong, centralized, authoritarian leadership styles. McGregor rode the wave of that changing attitude in our society and developed his Theory Y

leadership model. It was based on respect for individual workers and gave them much more participation in their supervision and direction, with less rigid direction and control in the hands of their supervisors.

McGregor began what I see as a healthy trend toward servant leadership in the business world and helped move organizations toward a healthier model of leadership. His early theories are at the foundation of many popular management philosophies in the 1990s. I have summarized his Theory X versus Theory Y approach in the following chart. As you note the two columns, it is easy to see that Theory X entails the top-down leadership attitude. It never ceases to amaze me that all these years later, the awareness of Theory Y and other leadership alternatives still has not penetrated the mind-set of many world leaders.

Based on a new look at human nature and drawing heavily from motivational theory, Theory Y says that work can be enjoyable, and

THEORY X	THEORY Y
➤ Work is inherently distasteful to most people.	➤ Work is as natural as play, if conditions are favorable.
➤ Most people are not ambitious, have little desire for responsibility, and prefer to be directed.	➤ Self-control is often indispensable in achieving organizational goals.
➤ Most people have little capacity for creativity in solving organizational problems.	➤ The capacity for creativity in solving organizational problems is widely distributed in the population.
➤ Motivation occurs only at the physiological and safety levels.	➤ Motivation occurs at social and self-actualization levels, as well as physiological and security levels.
➤ Most people must be closely controlled and often coerced to achieve organizational goals.	➤ People can be self-directed and creative at work, if properly motivated.
	—Hersey, Blanchard, and Dewey, <i>Management of Organizational Behavior</i>

workers can do their best when trusted to motivate themselves in their work. *Workers should be allowed to self-direct and self-control their tasks* out of the respect and trust coming from management.

Theory X focuses on tactics of direction and control through the exercise of authority. Theory Y, on the other hand, focuses on the nature of human relationships—the integration of personal goals with the success of the enterprise.

SUPERIOR OR SERVANT?

What does servant leadership look like in the real world then? Let me give you a couple of examples from my own recent experiences.

Most mornings at the office begin pretty typically for me. I usually have many items on the agenda: read important papers, write important letters, call several important meetings, make numerous important decisions, and answer only the important phone calls. The idea is that I should sit behind my big desk, and others will come to me with their requests.

Wrong! On one particular morning, within an hour of arriving at the office I found myself in the basement, helping clear out shelves and throwing away trash. I was helping my facilities manager prepare a new area for a library that we would build—a directive I had initiated. A servant leader must be willing to get down and dirty with his troops in the implementation of his objectives.

The top-down attitude is defined by people who believe that everyone should serve them, as opposed to believing they should be serving others within the institution. In reality, it seems to me that everyone in our organization rests on my shoulders—I am at the bottom of an inverted pyramid. I spend countless hours helping others be effective by providing them the facts, the energy, the resources, the networks, the information, or whatever else they need to do an effective job. Most of

my day is spent laying aside my own priorities to help others fulfill theirs. Sometimes that requires hours of nitty-gritty work alongside others to help them get their jobs done. Recently I spent half an hour searching through a hard disk for a lost file that a secretary desperately needed. Since I knew the most about how to find the files within that computer, I deemed it important to take my time to look for it. (I did find it, by the way, to everyone's great relief!)

My wife Donna works with passion for a company called NSA, based in Memphis, Tennessee. It is a forty-year-old company that deals with the direct sales of nutritional products. Donna has been in love with this employer for years because she is her own boss and the company's mission is to make her successful. She has achieved the top position of National Marketing Director. This company exists for the worker! Unlike so many companies in corporate America that are out to enrich the shareholder and the corporate elite, this company spells out in their mission statement what is most certainly bottom up servant leadership:

THE MISSION OF NSA

*“To build a stable and lasting company
that helps as many people as possible
realize their dreams.”*

Servant leadership is about caring for others more than for ourselves. It is about compassion for everyone who serves the group. It enriches everyone, not just those at the top. Servant leadership requires us to sit and weep with those who weep within our organizations. It requires getting down and dirty when hard work has to be done. There is nothing in my organization that anyone does that I should not be willing to do myself if it promotes the good of us all.

THE ONE WHO SHOWED US THE WAY

People follow leaders for many reasons. The chart on page 39 shows “The Five Levels of Leadership” as described by Dr. John Maxwell. He points

NO DESIRE TO LEAD

A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead, but is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of the external situation. Such were Moses and David and the Old Testament prophets. I think there was hardly a great leader from Paul to the present day but that was drafted by the Holy Spirit for the task, and commissioned by the Lord of the Church to fill a position he had little heart for. I believe it might be accepted as a fairly reliable rule of thumb that the man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader. The true leader will have no desire to lord it over God’s heritage, but will be humble, gentle, self-sacrificing, and altogether as ready to follow as to lead, when the Spirit makes it clear that a wiser and more gifted man than himself has appeared.

—A. W. Tozer

out clearly that the most effective and authentic type of leadership is that which is based on one’s personhood—respect for the leader. People follow you because of who you are and what you represent.

And so when it comes to servant leadership, there is no better model than Jesus Christ. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus showed his followers just how much he loved them. We read in John 13:1 that he “knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” At that moment Jesus gave us the ultimate demonstration of servant leadership: he washed his disciples’ feet!

The first thing I always notice in this scene is Jesus’ all-encompassing power and authority. The foundation for his servanthood was a true realization of his power, position, and prestige. He was God himself in the flesh and

had every right to be a dictator. In fact, in my opinion, he is the only man who has ever walked the face of the earth who has had the right to be an absolute autocrat!

Having this foundation, Jesus demonstrated servant leadership by taking off his robe, picking up a towel, and washing his disciples' feet. If I had been there that night, I would have been embarrassed beyond words the moment I saw him kneel before the first disciple. I would have been embarrassed and humiliated, because I had not been willing to lower myself to the same dirty task. Yet Jesus demonstrated that the greatest among his followers would have to become servant to all.

The explanation of Jesus' servant leadership comes at the end of the story, when he says, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (vv. 15–17).

Another place in the New Testament that speaks eloquently about servant leadership is 1 Peter 5:1–7:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; *not lording it over those entrusted to you*, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. *All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*, because,

“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (emphasis mine)

FINAL THOUGHTS

What are the alternatives to the top-down attitude hang-up? In terms of leadership style, I would summarize them as:

1. *Participatory management.* Give a group of employees the privilege of input before you move on a course of action. This can be messy and time consuming, but it motivates and inspires people.
2. *Facilitator style.* See your role as that of a facilitator who makes it possible for those who work for you to be successful. You are there to empower others to effective work.
3. *Democratic leadership.* Build a leadership team with a democratic process that enables the group to have a vital role in the nature and direction of the organization.
4. *Flat organizational characteristics.* View yourself as working side by side with others or as leading the charge, but not as being on the top of a giant pyramid. More on this in chapter 5.
5. *Servant leadership.* If Jesus was a servant of his followers, how can I, in my right mind, think that I should be served by those I lead? This is what Jim Collins calls “Level Five Leadership” in his book *Good to Great*. This leader seeks what’s best for the organization

over his or her own well-being.

How then can I lead without the arrogance of a top-down attitude? If my desire is to be a servant leader as I maintain my responsibilities of authority in the organization, what are my guiding principles? Try these practices on for size:

- Not abusive authority, but servitude (see John 13).
- Not deplorable delegation, but freedom for people to be themselves (see Eph. 4).
- Not lack of listening, but focus on the needs of others (see Phil. 2).
- Not dictatorship, but partners in the process (see 1 Peter 5:1–4).
- Not holding on, but letting go with affirmation (1 Thess. 5:11–14).
- Not egocentrism, but power for others (Col. 3:12, 13).

“Christ Jesus ... made himself nothing. He made himself nothing, emptied himself—the great kenosis. He made himself no reputation, no image.

“I can recall my father shaking his head and repeating over and over to himself, ‘If I only knew what this meant. There is something powerful here. If I only understood it.’ Maybe that is why this Scripture has glued itself to my mind and equally disturbs me. Reputation is so important to me. I want to be seen with the right people, remembered in the right light, advertised with my name spelled right, live in the right neighborhood, drive the right kind of car, wear the right kind of clothing. But Jesus made himself of no reputation!”

—Gayle D. Erwin, *The Jesus Style*

In closing, this ancient legend illustrates perfectly the significance of quiet servant leadership:

As construction began on a magnificent cathedral, an angel came and promised a large reward to the person who made the most important

contribution to the finished sanctuary. As the building went up, people speculated about who would win the prize. The architect? The contractor? The woodcutter? The artisans skilled in gold, iron, brass, and glass? Perhaps the carpenter assigned to the detailed grillwork near the altar? Because each workman did his best, the complete church was a masterpiece. But when the moment came to announce the winner of the reward, everyone was surprised. It was given to an old, poorly dressed peasant woman. What had she done? Every day she had faithfully carried hay to the ox that pulled the marble for the stonecutter.

THE FIVE LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP

“Why People Follow Other People”

5. POSITION (Title) “Rights”

People follow because they have to. Your influence will not extend beyond the lines of your job description. The longer you stay here, the higher the turnover and lower the morale. People begin to limit you, to put fences around you. You can't stay here more than two years.

4. PERMISSION “Relationships”

People follow because they want to. People will follow you beyond your stated authority. This level allows work to be fun. Caution: Staying too long on this level without rising will cause highly motivated people to become restless.

3. PRODUCTION “Results”

People follow because of what you have done for the organization. This is where success is sensed by most people. They like you and what you are doing. Problems are fixed with very little effort because of momentum. (Don't let the momentum stop!)

2. PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT “Reproduction”

People follow because of what you have done for them personally. This is where long-range growth occurs. Your commitment to developing leaders will ensure ongoing growth to the organization and to people. Do whatever you can to achieve and stay on this level.

1. PERSONHOOD “Respect”

People follow you because of who you are and what you represent. This step is reserved for leaders who have spent years growing people and organizations. Few make it. Those who do are bigger than life!

—Dr. John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*

QUICK TIPS FOR LEADERS ON THE GO



THE TOP-DOWN ATTITUDE

The Number One Leadership Hang-up

Big idea: Human nature leads all of us to want to dominate others. The top-down leadership style is all about command and control, and is the opposite of empowerment. When we first move into positions of leadership, we tend to view ourselves on “top” because we have the smarts, personality, and gifting that got us there. The temptation is to dominate followers and oppress them with the habits of command-and-control cultures. The top-down attitude places the leader as the most important person at the top of the organizational pyramid.

- *The top-down attitude comes naturally to most people.* It is human nature’s default position.

- *Servant leadership is much more rare.* This is the person who puts the organization’s well-being ahead of his own.

- *Effective leaders see themselves at the bottom of an inverted pyramid.* There are many ways to draw organizational charts. The servant leader carries the organization on his or her shoulders as makes it a goal to make everyone else a winner.

The idea of an opposite style leadership that is more servant oriented is not new. For decades some business writers (notably Greenleaf and McGregor) have advocated this approach, but it has only recently gained traction in the halls of mainstream corporate America and the church. Jesus Christ is the greatest example we have of servant leadership in all of history, which he modeled when he laid down his very life for the benefit of his followers.