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SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Much-sought-after executive trait hard to define—but doesn't mean blind obedience

By William Ehart

The phrase “servant leadership” has been kicking around for 40 years, and may seem at times little more than a buzzword executives use to describe themselves.

But forget the buzz: The quality of servant leadership is much sought after in associations.

At least three recent chief executive job descriptions posted on CEOupdate.com specifically use the term—including that for CEO of the \$123 million-revenue National Restaurant Association.

What is “servant leadership”?

The concept was introduced in 1970 by former AT&T executive and consultant Robert Greenleaf in his essay, “The Servant as Leader”:

“The servant-leader is servant first. ... It begins

with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”

Search consultant Kimberly Archer of Russell Reynolds Associates said different hiring organizations define servant leadership differently. In fact, several people CEO Update approached for this article asked us how we were defining it.

“Whenever I have a client tell me, ‘We really need a servant leader,’ I always say, ‘Define that for me. What does that mean?’ Because I do feel it sometimes is used as a buzzword.”

But, she said, the desire of search committees for servant leadership as a qualifying characteristic is “not a fad.” In fact, she sees the concept

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Servant leaders wanted, even if concept is hard to define

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gaining currency in the for-profit world, too.

Key underlying components include character, integrity and self-awareness, she said. "It's not about your agenda, it's about the agenda of the entire industry," she said.

Many aspects of servant leadership are innate, but CEOs can learn on the job, she said.

Still, the style is not for everyone, said Spencer Stuart executive recruiter Leslie Hortum, who is conducting the restaurant association search.

"I consider it a style of leadership represented by people who know how to work with boards and build consensus among groups of leaders.

"I have met CEOs who operated one way in a corporate environment, and then had to come into an association environment where they had to adapt their style," Hortum said.

"Not all of them like it. Not all of them naturally take to it. So some people just find it frustrating," she said.

Leave group stronger

Philip Jaeger, search consultant for Isaacson, Miller, said that in assessing executives for servant leadership, he focuses on organizational impact.

"We're looking for evidence of what is stronger, or more durable, in the organization because of (the executive's) time there," he said.

Sharon Swan, 20-year CEO of the \$3.5 million-revenue American Society for Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics, embraced that view.

"Part of (servant leadership) is creating an environment for the team to be successful, and valuing their individual contributions, and supporting professional development and continuing education for them," she said.

For Mona Miller, executive director of the \$7.6 million-revenue American Society of Human Genetics, servant leadership is about humility. ASHG's annual meeting is successful and important to the organization, but meetings were not her core competency when she arrived in 2017. She had been deputy executive director for programs and finance at the Society for Neuroscience.

"It's really important, coming in, to honor the knowledge of the team," she said.

Rather than telling the meeting staff what to do, she asks, "What are you seeing?"

"I feel like the request for the data is something that I can contribute, but then put it back in service to somebody else's growth. ... As I've moved into new roles, I've tried to get better each time at stopping short of getting the answers and doing more to elicit the

questions," Miller said.

But being a "servant" in this context does not mean being obsequious, or blindly following direction.

"It's active work," Miller said. "It's not passive, and it's not invisible; it really is about leadership."

Hortum, of Spencer Stuart, sees servant leaders as "thoughtful provocateurs."

They help build consensus "by adding value to the conversation, providing leadership to the group in terms of identifying challenges and opportunities and potential solutions," she said.

"So they're not just note-takers, but are ever mindful that it's not their organization, they are also there to serve the board," Hortum said.

Swan, of ASCPT, said she provides her board with a range of options, but embraces the decisions it makes.

"I certainly provide them the full picture and what I believe to be the implications of option A and option B," she said. "I don't go in with one option. They certainly prefer that, and it gives you a good opportunity to talk about the pros and cons. You're obligated as a CEO to make certain that they're aware that if they go down a certain path, these are some of the things that we can anticipate happening."

Mark Golden, executive director of the \$12 million-revenue National Society of Professional Engineers, ties his understanding of essential leadership characteristics to author Jim Collins' 2001 book, "Good to Great." Collins broke down leadership effectiveness into five levels. At Level 5, the highest, he said great leaders blend humility, modesty and "ferocious resolve, an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done to make the company great."

Golden said the chief executive must straddle the spheres of volunteer leaders and staff.

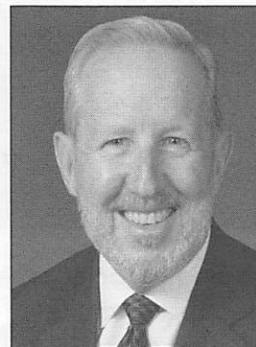
"You become the custodian of the big picture,"



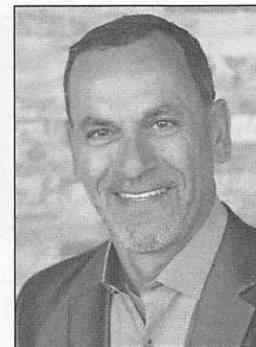
Swan



Miller



Golden



Eshkenazi

Golden said.

"You're most important to continuity, because volunteers come and go, other staff come and go. You're the individual who has to remember what happened before, and what you were trying to get done and sort of keep things going."

"Volunteers and staff always are going to be approaching things from different perspectives and talking in different languages," Golden said. "The CEO is the one who has to keep all the gears working in mesh."

Abe Eshkenazi, CEO of \$28 million-revenue Association for Supply Chain Management, pushed back on the term "servant leadership," saying it might be more apt for smaller organizations where each board member is more in tune with overall operations.

"We are leaders in our own right. Obviously, the (association executive) profession calls for significant management skills. The concept of leading from behind is to push the organization to greater performance," he said.

Eshkenazi said his job is to leave the organization stronger, both at the board and staff level.

"You want individuals in the organization to take ownership of not only the decisions, but the outcomes as well," Eshkenazi said. "My responsibility as a leader is to prepare that next layer of leadership to take on the role of not only strategy, but implementation. ... If I'm doing my job, I'm developing the leaders of the organization, whether it's staff or volunteer, to take responsibility for the outcomes of the organization and the decisions that we make."

"It is important to note that I do have ultimate accountability for the success of the organization," he said. "But let's make no mistake about it. It's only through a qualified competence that I'm able to do what I do, (along with) a trust-based relationship with the board." ■