

Servant Leadership and Agile



"A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim is fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves"

Lao Tzu



Kaushiki Roy

One often hears the terms "servant leadership" and "servant leader" being used in the context of Agile practices.

SO WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP?

The term "servant leadership" was originally coined by Robert Greenleaf in his essay "The Servant as a Leader" published in 1970. The concept has its roots in ancient philosophies with advocates in Lao Tzu (China) and Chanakya (India) with references to it existing in the Bible as well. Modern day examples of this form of leadership may be found perhaps in leaders like Gandhi, Mandela, Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama. Essentially there is an element of altruism underpinning this leadership style which focuses on the needs of others rather than on one's own needs.

According to this philosophy, the primary goal of the leader is to serve their people. It subverts the more traditional autocratic, command and control definition of leadership. Under this principle, instead of people working to serve the leader, the leader exists to serve the people. A servant leader puts people first, empowers them and helps them develop and perform at their very best.

WHAT ARE THE MAKINGS OF A GOOD SERVANT LEADER?

Larry Spears¹ listed the following ten characteristics of servant leadership: empathy, listening, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. A good servant leader steers their people from behind, is future focused, takes responsibility and engenders trust through collaboration and by respecting other people's perspectives. She must be responsive, adaptive and care for customers, team as well as the business.

WHY IS THE CONCEPT OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO AGILE?

The Agile manifesto prioritises individuals and interactions over processes and tools; and customer collaboration over contract negotiation. The underlying principles are:

- Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organising teams.
- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.

¹ Spears, L. (1996), "Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership", Leadership & Organizational Development Journal, Vol. 17 No. 7, pp. 33-35.

It is easy to see why an autocratic, command and control leader is not the right fit in an Agile environment and why servant leadership is more successful in this scenario as the leader's role here is largely to steer, support and encourage the team to perform at their best.

The Scrum Guide describes the Scrum Master as a servant leader who focuses on serving the needs of his team and their customers. He is not the master of the team but the master of the Scrum process which boosts team performance by supporting individual growth. A Scrum Master is not a commander – he is a coach, mentor, nurturer, teacher, critical friend, facilitator and enabler. He drives collaboration and self-organisation, protects the team from “noise”, removes obstacles, and helps the team to maximise its potential. Finally, he helps the team to deliver the best outcomes for the business. Like a servant leader, a good Scrum Master is humble, leads by example, influences without authority and takes responsibility for the team without claiming the accolades and achievements as their own. Whilst the Scrum Guide specifically mentions the Scrum Master, the principles apply to anyone performing a leadership role on the project eg. the Agile Project Manager, Product Manager or Development Lead.

The key questions a servant leader needs to ask are:

- What can I do to **serve my team** better and help them **achieve their goal**?
- What can I do to **develop the skills** of my team members and help them **perform at their best**?
- How can I help product owners and management to **prioritise better** and focus on business value and organisational goals?

Would you like to delve deeper into the behaviours associated with servant leadership, why servant leadership is effective, how to use servant leadership in Agile environments, and how to grow and apply servant leadership behaviours in your project or organisation? Lets talk!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kaushiki is a delivery and outcome focused project and portfolio management professional with a wide range of qualifications, including MoP® Foundation, PMP® and is a Certified Scrum Master (CSM®). Kaushiki has over 20 years' experience across diverse domains in both the public and private sector on complex, integrated, cross-government projects.

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