



# Your Brand Is What You Do: A Serving Leadership Story

By Ken Jennings, Ph.D.

In times of adversity, the actions of leaders become memorialized in the minds of others. Cultures are built; reputations and brands are revealed.

I've been fortunate to help implement effective leadership, team, and culture change in high-stakes, challenging environments in over 2,500 operating locations. Ultimately, in my experience, when using the five serving leadership principles and actions, I've seen great success in teamwork, respect, and outcome. What are the philosophies and actions behind this effectiveness? Here I'll provide a self-assessment framework for your personal and professional use.

I've always had a lot to learn about leading and been humbled many times.

In August 1979, Hurricane David formed near Cape Verity off the African coast in the eastern Atlantic. It hit Dominica and the Dominican Republic with near obliterating force. Further north in Fayetteville, NC, at Pope Army Airfield inside Fort Bragg, a newly minted brown bar Second Lieutenant and team in the 82nd Airborne loaded onto a mission-ready C-130 cargo aircraft. This was to be a large-scale deployment to help those in harm's way.

The deployment did not go as planned.

Most of the first wave of senior officers and supplies were delayed. As one of the first medical helicopters began its climb, a heavy power generator managed to break loose from its restraints and tumbled to the back in the cargo hold. The sudden imbalance flipped and crashed the helicopter.



Nearby, and on the ground unharmed, the same rookie lieutenant took stock and asked, "Okay team, who's in charge in this area?"

They looked at each other and replied, "Well, for the moment, you are, sir." They didn't look very happy.

After a thoughtful pause the lieutenant replied, "This will go a whole lot better if we do it together."

Thus began the lesson for me as that rookie officer. The team reorganized on the fly, kept each other safe, manufactured resources almost out of thin air, rewrote operating plans, and got the job done.

Those lessons learned, with much subsequent study, resulted in five actions of serving leaders laid out in my book, *The Serving Leader*, co-authored by John Stahl-Wert.

## Action 1: Run to Great Purpose

Serving Leaders run to great purpose by holding out in front of their team, business, or community a "reason why" that's so big it requires and motivates everybody's very best effort. But in times of adversity, the actions of leaders become the billboards that showcase purpose and action.

Sure, every company has mission and vision statements, as well as values, written down somewhere. But what leaders do during times of adversity is their real mission, vision, and values.

At times like these, what values do you see leaders putting into action in your organization? Do their actions reinforce your brand? Do they keep your promises to employees and customers? Is love for your employees and customers on display?

At the individual level, you can ask yourself: What do I owe my fellow teammates in challenging times? What unique set of strengths and experiences am I obligated to make available to my teammates during times of adversity? How can I help my teammates who are hurting just like I am?

### Action 2: Upend the Pyramid

Serving Leaders upend the pyramid of conventional leadership thinking. They put themselves at the bottom of the pyramid and unleash the energy, excitement, and talents of the team, the business, and the community. Amy Edmondson, professor at the Harvard Business School, persuasively made the case for creating psychological safety within teams, especially during times of challenge.

Times of adversity call for out-of-the-box solutions, which are more likely to emerge when leaders make room for people to contribute with confidence. During difficult times, the best leaders are seen:

- Making room for others to contribute, express opinions and ideas, and disagree without fear of ridicule or reprisal
- Serving teammates in order to help them achieve more in pursuit of the mission
- Keeping one's own ego under control
- Sacrificing self-interest for the good of the group
- Involving others in shaping plans and decisions, even when time seems short
- Delegating responsibility and authority to move more quickly in times of trouble
- Recognizing others for their contributions and performance
- Sacrificing on behalf of others

### Action 3: Raise the Bar

Serving Leaders elevate expectations by setting hard, specific, and clear goals for achievement. They're equally specific in selecting leaders for key positions based on their ability to role-model achievement with and through others. They select leaders based on



character and competence. Especially during times of adversity, these leaders raise the bar by:

- Reinforcing and rewarding a culture of team achievement, but highlighting individual contributions to that collective achievement
- Steering tasks to those who have the strengths and abilities to accomplish them
- Giving feedback on performance and using this to imagine what future good performance looks like—they envision winning and communicate what that looks and feels like
- Role-modeling and demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity—they display realistic optimism about the future
- Becoming truth tellers, earning trust and encouraging others to represent reality—they decline to hide tough news but celebrate genuine wins along the way
- Going to work breaking through the barriers that impede team performance
- Using information to create insights into problems, statistically validated constraints, chokepoints, and opportunities—they sponsor action against them
- Framing teamwork as a journey of learning and discovery, and expecting meaningful team-based relationships to grow and be productive

Caption



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- Getting to the root cause of unhealthy drama at work and helping to eliminate it

What about innovation during challenging times? Data would suggest recessions, national crises, or significant company-specific challenges can yield dramatically higher levels of innovation. Good leaders recognize that times of extraordinary pressure can be used to sponsor new ways of doing the work.

#### Action 4: Blaze the Trail

Serving Leaders make it possible for others to perform at their best. They do this by teaching what really works, putting in place capable processes, and turning information into insight that guides performance. Most important, they identify and remove obstacles that stand in the way of individual and team performance.

How does a leader know what obstacles most stand in the way? They relentlessly observe, collect data, and get to the root cause. Then they set to work with teammates to eliminate those obstacles. In *The Serving Leader*, we propose concrete “blaze the trail” kinds of actions:

- Disseminating organization-wide surveys that ask, “What stands in the way of, or prevents, you and your team from performing with excellence?”
- Performing after-action reviews during and after projects that celebrate success and analyze the barriers—learning to identify underlying assumptions to test, improve, and let go of them when they fail us
- Replacing limiting assumptions with new possibilities—charging teams with designing and leading corporate-wide actions to permanently disable barriers in the service of teams that will follow
- Rewarding the elimination of barriers

- Using barrier-busting ability as a criterion for selecting leaders for advancement
- Learning the disciplines of continuous improvement, closed-loop corrective action, Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, and other tools to identify and eliminate barriers to success

There seems to be an order of magnitude improvement in the impact of these kinds of programs when they are deliberately coupled with serving leader tools and actions.

#### Action 5: Build on Strength

In the crucibles of difficult times, many handle stress by turning *on* each other. Great teams turn *to* each other and draw on the strengths of each teammate, matching strength to strength in order to achieve an even higher level of effectiveness. In *The Serving Leader* we put it this way:

“We build on strength when we invest ourselves in learning what our strengths are. Taking assessments, talking to our colleagues, and seeking feedback and evaluation are concrete ways we can learn more about where our shoulders are the broadest.

We build on strength when we bring others around us who can be strong where we’re weak, so that our team can be strong together. After all, the strengths we need don’t have to come from us. This is why we work with others.

We build on strength, also, by stretching ourselves, taking risks, and putting ourselves into new and challenging assignments ... Each of us have strengths that we haven’t yet discovered, and only life and testing will bring these things into the light.”

When the team knows and purposely finds ways to allow each other to live out their collective strengths, trust strengthens, and results accelerate.

There’s no doubt that this pandemic is among the most challenging times most of us will face as leaders. But it’s also one of the biggest opportunities we’ll have as leaders, teammates, and organizations. What we do now will be remembered.

Thank you for considering how you can serve and lead others.

■ **Editor’s note:** Find a bonus “Serving Leader Self-Assessment” at [smpls.org/resources/marketer-journal](http://smpls.org/resources/marketer-journal).



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