



Leading well starts with servant leadership and paying attention to the details that matter. In both peacetime and wartime, effective leaders guide their Soldiers by being present and leading by example. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Alex Higgins)

# Leading Well Through Servant Leadership

*By Sgt. Maj. Riley S. Seau Sr.*

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*“All soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.”*

– The NCO Creed (Department of the Army, 2020, para. 2).

**G**en. Colin Powell was a model servant leader who served as the first African American chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State. After his military career, he continued to serve. He put others’ needs before his own, founding America’s Promise Alliance to help children of all socioeconomic levels receive the necessary resources to succeed.

In 2020, the Army News Service noted how a servant leadership-style approach reinforced then-Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James C. McConville’s No. 1 priority: people (Brading, 2020).

In 2022, an AUSA piece reported on how then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston emphasized service in his “This is my squad” initiative. Michelle Tan wrote how he advocated for “leadership by walking

around” – being “present, showing up, and talking to soldiers ” (Tan, 2022, para. 19).

A closer examination of servant leadership reveals how to achieve it properly. The key lies in paying attention to details and leading yourself well.

Effective military leadership is grounded in the principles of servant leadership, which calls for leaders to prioritize others’ needs and well-being, attend to the details that build trust and morale, and demonstrate self-discipline and resilience in their own lives. By doing so, leaders not only foster strong, motivated teams but also create an environment where both individuals and the collective can thrive.

## Servant Leadership

Through my military journey, I’ve seen sergeants do a great job leading Soldiers in peace and war using the concept of servant leadership. A 2013 *NCO Journal* article, ‘Sergeant’ Means ‘Servant’: How NCOs Typify the Servant Leader by Jennifer Mattson, highlights how the close relationship between sergeants and servants reveals itself etymologically:

*“Servant leadership ... is ingrained in Army culture and within the NCO Corps. In fact, the very word sergeant comes from the French word for servant. It’s the type of leadership that all NCOs should aspire to if they want to lead in today’s Army, said Command Sgt. Maj. Rory Malloy, commandant of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.”*  
(Mattson, 2013, para. 2)

As I progressed through the ranks, I learned many leadership competencies and attributes from my leaders. What’s more, the concept of servant leadership is a popular writing topic. According to Emily Corinne Carter, author of *Servant Leadership* and Robert Greenleaf in the Penn State Leadership Psych 485 blog:

*“The servant leadership approach emphasizes the leader focusing on the needs of the followers and placing followers’ needs first. The approach is deeply rooted in ethics, valuing honesty, equality, and justice.”*

(Carter, 2014, para. 2)

The U.S. Army provides leaders who coach, teach, and mentor its Soldiers to be successful at their jobs. Leaders learn to do the small things well before they’re challenged to do more demanding tasks. They ensure Soldiers are cared for, especially if they’re new to the Army.

## Leading is Paying Attention to Details

Strong leadership involves sensitivity to the small stuff. Leaders often get caught up in their work and need to take the time to remember that details matter.

When prioritizing tasks, little things of great significance can get neglected. For example, failing to recognize birthdays can hugely impact morale and loyalty. As a result, I’ve learned to put birthday reminders on my phone and calendar. Celebrating them matters.

I’ve also learned a leader’s job is not to use people but to motivate them. When they know you care about



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them because you pay attention to the details that matter to them, they'll be inspired to do their best for the team and the organization.

*Leadership: A Communication Perspective* notes how Southwest Airlines prioritizes its employees:

*"Southwest understands that when people feel loved, they develop a greater capacity to love others. Employees bear out this belief every day in the kindness, patience, and forgiveness they extend to each other and their customers."*

(Hackman & Johnson, 2013, p. 13)

## Leading Yourself Well

How many of you look forward to your Monday morning alarm clock, telling you to rise and shine for physical training (PT)? Few, I'd wager. However, leading well begins with the man in the mirror. You must first lead yourself well.

Our operational environment can pull you in several directions. If you're not careful, you'll become overwhelmed. You must confront those adversities with resilience.

According to *The Resilience Factor: 7 keys to finding your inner strength and overcoming life's hurdles* by Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte, Ph.D., "research shows that the essential ingredient in steering through chronic stress is self-efficacy – the belief that you can master your environment and effectively solve problems as they arise" (Reivich and Shatte, 2003, p. 19).

You are a leader, leading Soldiers daily and making decisions affecting them. Leading yourself well requires self-efficacy and discipline.

I want to share four areas as you continue to lead yourself well:

1. **Listen to learn!** Listen to what others say without getting offended to understand the

issues and find real solutions.

2. **Express thanks often!** Show gratitude to others and let them know they're valued so you can build strong teams.
3. **Attend to disjointed relationships.** Do so personally and professionally so you're always moving forward.
4. **Dedicate time to spiritual fitness/wellness.** It nurtures resilience.

According to Capt. Chad E Cooper, author of *Spiritual fitness is one of several components aimed at promoting health and well-being in the Army*:

*"Spiritual growth will be different for each person – what works for one person may not work for another – but activities such as belonging to a worship community, prayer and meditation, and deliberate study can help contribute to growth."*

(Cooper, 2018, para. 7)



The servant leadership approach emphasizes leaders placing followers' needs first. Servant leadership involves ensuring Soldiers feel supported, valued, and motivated to give their best. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Ronald Bell)

## Conclusion

The secret to leading well lies in daily habits. Leading well begins with attitude, work ethic, and resilience, because they're displayed to everyone every day.

Leading well is rooted in the practice of servant leadership, where prioritizing the needs of others, paying attention to detail, and cultivating personal resilience are key. Leaders who invest in their own development and foster strong relationships with their Soldiers can inspire their teams to reach their full potential.

Ultimately, leadership is about setting an example through daily actions, creating a positive and supportive environment that benefits both individuals and the organization.

Leading well is a choice that requires commitment, discipline, and empathy – qualities that define truly successful leaders. Choose wisely! ■

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