Insights: Publications

The Virtuous Cycle: Servant Leadership in a Law Firm

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"Inculcating an ethic of servant leadership in a law firm, no matter how big or small, isn't just an exercise in feel-good jargon. It's a tried-and-true precept (with military origins) that can offer enormous benefits to partners, associates and clients alike.

Now more than ever, practicing law is a team sport. Clients expect smooth, effective coordination across practice areas, seniority levels, dispersed offices and different firms—even in stressful circumstances with tight deadlines and high stakes. A “servant leadership” culture is essential to promoting the sense of empowerment, appreciation and support that yields peak performance.

The term “servant leader” might sound soft. Yet it's at the heart of Navy SEAL culture, with the head of a group assuming “extreme ownership” of every team member's actions, including mistakes and failures. The animating mantra is “no bad teams, only bad leaders,” which pretty much eliminates finger pointing or excuse making at the top.

In the corporate world, a servant leadership ethic has been embraced by large, operationally complex companies such as Delta Air Lines to shape their business around the globe. Delta CEO Ed Bastian describes its culture as a “virtuous circle” of putting people first, which means taking care of employees so they take care of customers, who give Delta loyalty, which pays off for ownership, which then invests more in the company. In short, servant leadership as he describes it creates wins for everyone it touches."

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