

Servant Leadership in the Veterans Health Administration

Ruth W. Mustard, MSN, RN, NEA-BC

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has determined that servant leader characteristics are desirable and have chosen servant leadership as their leadership model. Servant leadership is alive and well within the largest health care system in the United States, and this model has been a guiding force for many nurse leaders to survive and thrive in a challenging, complex, and transparent health care system.

Serving the men and women who have honorably served our country in the military is an awesome responsibility. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has adopted servant leadership and its characteristics as the preferred leadership style. Servant leadership is alive and well in the VA health care system, and thousands of examples occur every day. Servant leadership has sustained many nurse leaders and others to survive and thrive in a challenging and complex system.

WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP?

Servant leadership was first described by Robert Greenleaf¹ when he emphasized that leaders are servants first. The title in and of itself could lead to some confusion and perception that this style of leadership is subservient and could have a negative connotation. This is not the case. Servant leaders have strong minds and servant's hearts. I have worked with and continue to work with staff within VHA who are true servant leaders. Servant leaders possess and demonstrate 5 key practices² to include:

- Developing your vision
- Listen and learn before speaking and acting
- Envision and invest in others' greatness
- Give away your power
- Build community by cultivating strategic relationships

Servant leadership is not confined to health care organizations. Fifty percent of the top ten best companies to work for in 2017 were also identified as companies that practiced servant leadership.³ Ten characteristics identified by Spears⁴ (*Table 1*) can be seen in companies such as SAS Shoes, Wegman's Food Market, and Zappos.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

The Veterans Health Administration has determined that the servant leader is desired and created a way of measuring it with the servant leader index. The servant leader index was added to the annual all employee survey (AES) in 2015. The servant leader index is a weighted composite of ten AES items in two content areas of supervisor and workgroup perceptions. The items comprise an overall score from 0 (worst) to 100 (best), and include fairness, advocacy, favoritism, psychological safety, employee development, performance goals, conflict resolution, workgroup communication, and accountability.

The VHA⁵ defined servant leadership based on Sipe and Frick's⁶ seven pillars:

- Pillar 1: Person of character
- Pillar 2: Puts people first
- Pillar 3: Skilled communicator
- Pillar 4: Compassionate collaborator
- Pillar 5: Has foresight
- Pillar 6: System thinker
- Pillar 7: Leads with moral authority

KEY POINTS

- **The largest health care system in the United States has adopted servant leadership as its preferred leadership style.**
- **Servant leaders are servants first. They have strong minds and a servant's heart.**
- **Servant leadership is the guiding framework to serve those "who have borne the battle" and the dedicated staff who care for them.**

The Servant Leader Index indicates the manager's ability to accomplish organizational goals through the empowerment of others.⁷ Staff perceptions of managers with higher servant leadership orientation demonstrate significant positive impact ($r^2 = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) on employee job satisfaction.⁸

The Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health care system in the United States with 1242 health care facilities of which 171 are medical centers and 1062 are community-based outpatient clinics.⁹ The VHA provides comprehensive health care, including primary care, specialty care, mental health, and long-term care. The VHA plays a major role in educating many health care professionals to include physicians, nurses, and other clinical professionals. Research is a high priority within the system, and the VHA provides extensive support in response to national emergencies.¹⁰ The VHA is a pioneer in technology with examples such as the electronic medical record, bar code medication administration, and telehealth.¹⁰ In a recent Rand Corporation study, the VA system performed similarly or better than non-VA systems on most of the nationally recognized measure of inpatient and outpatient quality.¹¹

Despite its size and quality of care, the Veterans Health Administration can be a challenging system to work in. The VHA is clearly a very large government bureaucracy. The board of directors is Congress. Tremendous oversight exists with numerous regulatory bodies conducting surveys, inspections, inquiries, and requests for information that require intensive and detailed responses. The VHA is arguably the most transparent health care system in America. When bad things happen, as they unfortunately do in all health care systems, facilities, leadership, and staff can be brutally characterized by the press. Staff often find themselves in a position of being unable to defend themselves.

The majority of VHA staff give kind, caring, and highly competent care to Veterans. They are dedicated to the most noble mission in health care—that of caring for those who have borne the battle.

In late 2015, the National Leadership Committee adopted servant leadership as the leadership model for VHA.¹⁰ To espouse, train, role model, measure, and most importantly, practice servant leadership is just what VHA has been doing.

REAFFIRMING SERVANT LEADERSHIP— A PERSONAL COMMITMENT

I will be the first to say that there is always room for improvement. Our Veterans deserve the best. Having worked in the VHA for 42 years (22 years as a VA nurse executive), and after much soul-searching, I can honestly say that I have strived to be a servant leader all of those years. I, too, have room for improvement.

Table 1. Servant Leadership Characteristics

- Listening
- Empathy
- Healing
- Awareness
- Persuasion
- Conceptualization
- Foresight
- Stewardship
- Commitment to others' growth
- Community builders

Adapted from Spears.⁴

I have always used 2 guiding principles in making decisions: first, what is best for the Veteran, and second, what is best for the staff. Maintaining a positive attitude has been important. Resilience is key to keeping my eye on what is most important and who is counting on us the most—the Veteran. I have survived many difficult situations with self-talk and advice to my staff to keep focused on the Veterans and staff that are counting on us for strength, support, guidance, and love. I'm a better nurse leader because of it. In this massive health care system, it is important to focus on what we can control and what we can't. We do have control over how we treat our staff and how we treat our patients.

When I came to the VA as a new graduate all those years ago, I think I realized that VA nursing was my calling sometime during my first year. I still remember some of my very first patients and the staff that took me under their wing. I was really hooked on VA nursing by the time I became a nurse manager in the intensive care unit. It was then that I realized the extent and importance of our mission. So many of the patients and their families became my extended family. I have comforted my patients and staff and have shared many happy and sad times with them. I have cried with them and celebrated with them. I have learned to listen to them. My patients have helped me understand the impact and sacrifice of military service, in peace time or war time. There is simply nothing more gratifying than serving others. Staff at the bedside all the way to senior leadership and leaders in Washington can be servant leaders. They are everywhere.

SUMMARY

Servant leadership is quite visible in the Veterans Health Administration, and the tenets of servant leadership are a guiding force in our care of Veterans. There are many servant leaders, both formal and informal throughout this health care system. The recognition by VHA to provide tools and measurement of servant leadership is inspiring. There is always room

for improvement, and being a positive role model for all staff is very important. A servant leader is what I aspire to be. I want to influence others to be a better person, a better nurse, a better physician, or a better caregiver with a strong mind and a servant's heart. The ultimate outcome is to provide the leadership that fosters a work environment that produces the best outcomes for Veterans. It may be a cliché to talk about passion, as sometimes it is merely lip service. However, as I write this with tears in my eyes, I once again affirm and commit to my true passion to serve—for our Veterans' health and well-being and for the people who care for them. They deserve no less.

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Ruth W. Mustard, MSN, RN, NEA-BC, is Associate Director, Patient Care/Nursing Services, at the Columbia VA Health Care System in Columbia, South Carolina. She can be reached at rmustard@sc.rr.com.

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