Servant Leadership in Practice: Putting the Team First Without Losing Authority

Leadership - 6 October 2025 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

A widely used, often misunderstood term

Servant leadership is sometimes dismissed as a gentler, less commercial style of leading, more suited to non-profits than to competitive businesses. That reading misses the point. Servant leadership is not about being agreeable. It is about a specific ordering of priorities: the leader's role is to remove obstacles, build capability, and create the conditions for the team to succeed, rather than to be the one who personally drives every outcome.

What it looks like day to day

A servant leader still sets direction and still holds people accountable. The difference shows up in how they spend their attention. Instead of asking "what do I need from this team today," they more often ask "what does this team need from me to do their best work." That might mean clearing a bureaucratic blocker, protecting the team from an unreasonable deadline, or simply asking a direct report what is getting in their way before offering an opinion.

A simple framework: Ask, Remove, Develop

Ask. Before assuming what a team needs, ask directly. What is slowing you down? What decision are you waiting on? This alone surfaces obstacles a leader would otherwise never see.

Remove. Use your authority to clear what the team cannot clear themselves, a resourcing gap, a conflicting priority from another department, an unclear mandate.

Develop. Treat every interaction as a chance to build someone's capability, not just complete a task. This is the part most often skipped under time pressure, and the part with the highest long-term return.

Where leaders get it wrong

The most common failure is confusing service with the absence of standards. A servant leader who never gives direct, sometimes uncomfortable feedback is not practising the model; they are avoiding a part of the job. The other common failure is over-functioning: doing the team's work for them in the name of "helping," which erodes their capability rather than building it.

Why it works

Teams led this way tend to take more ownership, because they are trusted with real responsibility rather than managed task by task. It also builds a form of authority that does not depend on constant oversight, people follow because they trust the leader is genuinely working in their interest, not only their own visibility. That trust becomes valuable precisely in the moments when a leader needs the team to go further than the job requires.