

Coach Calipari: A Winner and a Servant Leader

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The world is in a desperate need of a different leadership role model. Everyone has seen the effects of self-serving leaders in every aspect of our society. What we need today are leaders who are *servant leaders*.

When people hear the phrase *servant leadership*, they are often confused. They immediately conjure up thoughts of the inmates running the prison, or trying to please everyone. Others think servant leadership is only for church leaders. The problem is that they don't understand leadership. They think you can't lead and serve at the same time. From my experience, not only is it possible, it's the only way over the long run to get great performance and human satisfaction. To prove my point, I'm always looking for good servant leader examples.

As an ex-basketball player and coach, I love March Madness and the NCAA basketball run. This year was especially sweet with Coach John Calipari leading his Kentucky Wildcats to the National Championship. I have known Cal since his coaching days at the University of Massachusetts. He considers me part of his "kitchen cabinet." What I admire most about Cal is that he is a classic servant leader. He proves season after season that you can lead and serve at the same time if you understand the three aspects of servant leadership: the servant, the steward, and the shepherd.

As a *servant*, Coach Cal realizes that leadership is not about him; it's about the people he is serving. When asked how he felt about winning the championship, Cal was quick to say, "This is not about me. This is about these thirteen players. This is about the Big Blue Nation." He always focuses on the kids and the fans who support the Wildcats.

As a *steward*, Coach Cal knows that he doesn't own these kids—they are "on loan" to him to nurture, support, and help develop. Some people criticize him because a number of his players are "one and done"—they leave after their Freshman year and go straight into professional basketball. Last year, four members of his team were drafted in the first round and this year there likely will be two. He is pushing the NBA to not draft any college players until they have completed a minimum of two years of college. Whatever Coach Cal does, though, it's all about his kids and what's best for them and their families. If he feels a player such as Terrence Jones is not ready for the pros after one year, he encourages the player to stay—which is what Terrence did. The Terrence Jones who played in the Final Four this year was very different from the Terrence Jones who played last year. Coach Cal does whatever he can to help each player develop to his own highest level of performance.

As a *shepherd*, Coach Cal thinks every one of his players is important. This year's team had six players who averaged 25 points or better in high school—in other words, they were all stars. The great gift that Coach Cal has is to get them to subvert their ego and realize that “none of us is as smart as all of us.” Different players in every game stepped up when they needed to. Anthony Davis, who was chosen the most outstanding player in the NCAA Final Four tournament as well as being the recipient of several National Player of the Year awards, realized the importance of everyone as well. When he was interviewed after the game about what a great game he had played even though he only scored six points, he said, “Well, it’s not me. It’s these guys behind me. They led us this whole tournament. This whole game, I was struggling offensively, and I told my team, ‘Every time down, you all score the ball; I’m just going to defend and rebound.’” What a great example of everyone depending on each other. Just think of these young people, who have learned to recognize that:

- As servants, life is not about them but about those whom they serve;
- As stewards, they don’t own anything—everything is on loan and they need to nurture and support what is given to them; and
- As shepherds, every human being is important.

These are life lessons, whether they stay in college one year, two years, or four years.

As Reid Cherner recently said in *USA Today*, “John Calipari persuaded teenagers to put others first, play unselfishly, and believe the whole is better than the sum of its parts. Every parent of a teen has to be in slack-jawed awe of that.”

Does servant leadership work? You bet it does—and Coach John Calipari proves it. The result is great performance along with great human satisfaction. Not a bad outcome for a servant leader.

HOW WE READ AT MCKAY HIGH SCHOOL:

STEP 1: # the paragraphs

STEP 2: Read the text with your pencil down!

STEP 3: Circle (or Highlight) the Key Words, Terms, Numbers cited by the author.

STEP 4: Underline (or Highlight) the author’s claims and relevant information.

STEP 5: Re-read the text and take notes in the margins.

STEP 6: Write down the title, author’s name, and date of publication.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN THE “ACTIVITIES” SECTION OF YOUR NOTEBOOK:

1. Based upon what you’ve just read, how does the author of this article define Servant Leadership?
2. According to the article, how does Coach Calipari act as a Servant?
3. According to the article, how does Coach Calipari act as a Steward?
4. According to the article, how does Coach Calipari act as a Shepherd?
5. Use the definition and answers above to explain what Servant Leadership looks like, as a leader of your team?