



Building Sustainable Success Through Servant Leadership

Reginald Freeman is the 37th Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director for the City of Hartford, Conn. He spoke to attendees at NAIFA Nation Impact Week's Leadership Day on "Building Sustainable Success Through Servant Leadership."

When Freeman took over the fire department in Hartford, it faced a number of systematic problems that needed correcting, including unaddressed safety issues and alleged criminal activity by several members of the team. These were exacerbated by a lack of communication, guidance, leadership, and accountability. Team members did not feel empowered.

Freeman addressed these shortcomings using servant leadership.

Climate and Culture

Many people assume that an organization's culture is at the root of any problems, and a role of a leader is to install a strong culture. But the climate team members are operating under may be just as important.

"Before we address culture, we have to discuss climate," Freeman said.

An organization's climate is different from the culture. The climate includes things that impact individual team members on a day-to-day basis, Freeman said. COVID-19, for example, has changed nearly everyone's working climate.

The first step of developing addressing systemic problems as a leader is understanding the climate and any problems that may be rooted in it, because unaddressed climate difficulties can affect the overall culture of an organization.

"If you don't address problems before they get out of control, that becomes your cultural norm," Freeman said.

The Traits of Servant Leadership

Being in a position of authority does not necessarily mean that a person is a leader. You have to "know when to manage and know when to lead," Freeman says. A leader lays out expectations for the team and asks what the team expects from him.

He has embraced the elements of "servant leadership," as established by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, to change the climate and cultural problems he faced in Hartford.

The traits of servant leadership are:

- Empathy: Servant leaders must understand the needs of their team and how their leadership impacts others. "People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits," Freeman said.
- Listening: Strong communications, and especially active listening, is crucial to developing the required empathy
- Healing: Individuals and relationships can become strained in any organizational situation. A servant leader will use the healing of relationships as a tool to transform their organization.
- Awareness: "General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant leader," Freeman said. "Awareness helps one understand issues involving ethics, power, and values. It lends itself to being able to view most situations from a more integrated, holistic position."

- Persuasion: Servant leaders are successful by persuading their teams to buy in to their decisions, rather than by using power and authority to coerce compliance. "If we have to lead with our title, we don't have true followership," he said. "And without followership you will never be able to exercise true leadership."
- Conceptualization: Servant leaders "dream big dreams." They address problems by thinking "beyond day-to-day realities."
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- Stewardship: Serving the needs of others is a priority for a servant leader. "It means I care about you as individuals and I want you to be successful," he said.
- Commitment to the Growth of People: A servant leader will inspire his team to perform at its best by nurturing "the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues," Freeman said.
- Building Community: A servant leader recognizes the benefit of strong communities "as the primary shaper of human lives."

Servant leadership allowed Freeman to significantly improve the performance of the Harford Fire Department. Response times are down. Accountability is up and morale, along with pride in the department, has increased. More than 750 members of his team have obtained career-advancing professional development certifications.

"Servant leadership is critical to the success of 21st century persons in positions of authority," Freeman said. "With four different generations in the workplace, being able to lead and manage individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives is challenging. However, with an understanding of servant leadership, we can effectively communicate and accomplish goals. Lead with confidence. Lead with integrity. Lead with passion."