

The Servant Leader is not a Servant

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Managing Partner @ Progress-U Ltd.



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Andy is a smart manager in his late thirties who climbed through the ranks quite quickly. He is now Sales Director at his company, a mid-sized footwear company, and reports directly to the CEO.

After a restructuring, his sales team, including sales support, grew from 12 to 28 people. To deal successfully with the challenges resulting from this change process, he hired me as his coach.

Within the first two sessions, it became quite obvious that his biggest challenge was time. For several weeks, he had been working every day from 8.00 a.m. until 9 or 10 p.m., often even on Saturdays and sometimes even Sundays.

Is it poor time management that led to this situation? Or is the challenge too big for Andy? Or is it normal to work that many hours if one's responsibility considerably increases?

Andy seemed quite tired when I met him and I could easily see that this pattern was not sustainable for him and that he needed to find ways to achieve the same results with less time spent in the office. He fully agreed – a good basis to start from.

When asked what is particularly important to him at work, he responded that he wants to be perceived as an excellent role model, professional, ambitious and successful.

Andy said that he felt that he achieves all these but unfortunately at a very high cost.

When asked what the ideal situation would look like for him, he surprisingly said that he actually enjoys working long hours as long as it's not too much. Too much meant for him more than 10 hours a day and working late on Saturdays. Also, he would prefer not to work on Sundays at all.

Now that his ideal outcome was established, we started to dig a bit deeper into his daily modus operandi. We first looked at the structure of his new organization. It seemed to be appropriately set up with three team-leaders, one for frontline sales, one for after-sales support and one for back-office support for the frontline sales people.

Then we had a look at his daily work. I asked him to record for one week how he spends his time. It didn't have to be very accurate but should approximately describe what he's actually doing every day.

After one week we reviewed his list. I asked him then to mark each item according to the categories "should be done by me", "should sometimes be done by me" and "should not be done by me".

We noticed that about 80% of the activities were marked with "should sometimes be done by me". So I asked him what this tells him.

Andy responded that actually all of these tasks should be done by his three team-leaders but that they are too junior to do the tasks independently. That's why in most cases he would just do them by himself as that seemed the fastest and safest way.

Andy felt that doing the tasks by himself would be best for the company and for him to achieve his goals.

When asked how this approach affects his team-leaders, he paused and then realized that it actually hindered them from developing into real leaders and that being a servant leader is different from being a servant.

Andy realized that he needed to change his approach. First, he needed to spend more time helping his direct reports grow and be able to handle more responsibility. Second, he needed to trust them more and accept that things would occasionally be done differently than the way he would do them.

Besides, Andy realized that he must allow his team-leaders to make mistakes as long as the impact is not too big and as long as they learn from their mistakes.

These were difficult changes for Andy to make. I asked him to observe his CEO and think about what would happen if the CEO would “serve” in the way he did so far. Andy joked that in this case the CEO would need to work 24/7 and that might not even be enough.

Andy then objected that the direct reports of the CEO were all experienced managers – so it would be much easier for the CEO to transfer responsibilities to them. I countered with the question: “What is your goal as Sales Director?”

“To consistently grow sales for the company and to assure high customer satisfaction.” Andy responded.

He knew that his current approach would not allow him to attain this goal. He would need to put more focus and time into developing his team-leaders to ensure their competence and as a result to be able to delegate more of his responsibilities. Working more reasonable hours would then become a natural consequence of this effort.



Charlie Lang is the founder Progress-U Limited, established in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate executive coach and mentor, public speaker and trainer, and author of books and over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and corporate coaching.

His book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com/Groupness-Book.htm>), published in August 2005, talks about corporate success culture through first class leadership. Charlie's articles appeared in Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive, A Plus, and Career Times. He was interviewed by RTHK and Cable TV.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/8 and 2008/9) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community and currently authors his second book, a business fiction on Corporate Coaching Culture.