

Servant Leader

The term of Leadership has changed.

Gone are the days of command and control as we revert to more of a Servant Leadership model. This does not mean that we need to run our organizations by committee ... which can be very dangerous.

I reflect on my days sailing with my father ... we had a crew of amazing minds on board. My father invited their inputs but always stated at the end of the day their was only one Captain and since he was the Captain his decision was final but thanks for the input.

In early 20th century manufacturing, leadership happened from the top down. It was not only dirty, dark and dangerous, it was paternalistic. Good paychecks and solid pensions meant the boss gave orders and everyone else took them. Henry Ford kept tabs on his employees on their off hours and bought out his investors when he didn't like their advice. Forrest Mars, founder of Mars candy company, docked the pay of everyone, including executives, who arrived a minute late for work, and "was legendary for his extreme temper, and his fanatical behavior," according to his New York Times obituary.

A great manufacturing leader:

1. Builds trust

Manufacturing leaders must put in some real roll-up-their-sleeves effort to regain the trust of their workforce, says Steven Blue, CEO of rail parts manufacturer Miller Ingenuity and a best-selling business author. Trust disappeared 30 years ago when companies eliminated the defined benefit pension plans that took care of loyal workers when they became too old to work (or had put in their time and just wanted to hit the road in an RV with their grandkids).

Trust does not come from declaring a company's values and putting them up on professionally printed signs around the plant. It requires the real work of building a culture around teamwork, creativity and enthusiasm.

2. Has high expectations for their people (and gives them the tools to meet those expectations)

For example: Create new plants without hourly workers. "Everybody had a key to the front door, everybody is on a salaried basis, everyone is a manager—except they were eligible for overtime if they were non-exempt." They sought to fill plant manager positions with people "who recognized that everyone working there was an adult and should be treated with respect."

If you always do what you have always done, then you will always get what you have always got.

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Leadership Traits

3. Inspires passion

The ability of a leader to spark passion—in employees, in customers—was the most-mentioned desired quality in interviews for this story. Perhaps that's because manufacturing has such a hard time shaking the trope of being repetitive and soul-killing. "There's a lot of sense from people that manufacturing is not very exciting," says Malcolm Thompson, executive director of NextFlex, Manufacturing USA's flexible hybrid electronics institute. "It's not sexy like research where you invent something that is totally revolutionary. The reality, though, is those inventions that take research only really have value when you create a product from them."

4. Has a strong entrepreneurial spirit

When investing in a manufacturer, we need a leader "who has moon-shot ideas, who wants to be innovative, who understands their customers' needs and focuses on the problems and opportunities in the industry and finds solutions for them." A great widget can quickly become outdated, and if you don't have another idea, you're sunk.

Entrepreneurialism, is legacy manufacturing's lifeblood—it can catapult a company that already has capital, an established supply chain and a manufacturing footprint ahead of any startup.

But that spirit can't stay at the top—it has to spread throughout the entire organization. You can't just drive results by giving people a policy and procedures manual. That is not entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurial is giving them a job description that allows them to be innovative, to be efficient and to optimize the business.

5. Is a change agent

Sometimes you want a status quo leader, a Pope Benedict to make sure everyone's sufficiently bored into submission and the trains run on time before a Pope Francis steps in. Other times, you've already got a solid base to build on and you need a change agent who's going to shake things up to get to the next level.

A rare breed, change agents have a vision and make big changes that are difficult for competitors to reproduce, says Paul Ericksen, a consultant, IndustryWeek contributor and former supply chain executive at John Deere. They look for team members whose skills and ambition fit the plan. They mentor employees, give them credit and advancement for successes, advance them in the organization and protect them from employees who resist change.

7. Encourages cross-functional teams

There are so many possibilities with digital tools and the opening of markets and supply chains, great manufacturing leaders can't just think in a straight line. In just the past two years, it's become more important that a manufacturing leader—specifically an operations leader—"can work with marketing, with R&D, work with finance to really help shape a vision strategically for a company. Saying 'Hey, if we simplified our product portfolio, we could cut costs by 30% and enter a market that used to be too expensive.'"