

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.

Robert K. Greenleaf

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Mahatma Gandhi

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"

Martin Luther King Jr.

The Three Pillars of Servant Leadership

1. INTENTION

Know where you are leading families. Being a great leader is only as good as WHERE you are leading those who follow you.

Key Question: Am I leading toward THEIR goals or MY goals?

2. CULTURAL HUMILITY

Culture is a question, not an answer. Every person has a unique lived schema that we must discover through asking and listening.

"Do I love my people in order to serve them better? Am I humble and do I listen to everybody, to diverse opinions in order to choose the best path?" - Pope Francis

Key Question: What assumptions am I making before I ask?

3. EMPOWERMENT

Support their journey; do not rescue them. Build autonomy, not dependence. Success is when families feel capable of leading themselves.

Key Question: Will they leave more confident or more dependent?

The BRAIN Method for Decision Support

Use this framework to help families make informed decisions without making decisions FOR them:

B	R	A	I	N
BENEFITS	RISKS	ALTERNATIVES	INTUITION	NOTHING
What are the positives?	What are the downsides?	What other options exist?	What feels right to YOU?	What if we wait?

Cultural Humility Questions to Practice

- "What are your hopes for feeding your baby?"
- "What would success look like to YOU?"
- "What concerns do you have?"
- "Is there anything from your family's traditions that matters to you around feeding?"
- "Can you tell me more about what feeding looks like in your family?"

The Test of Servant Leadership: Do those we serve become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous? The best compliment is not "You were so helpful." It is "I feel like I can do this."

Three Characteristics for Our Work

- Listening:** Not just hearing words, but listening for what is beneath them. What are they not saying? What do they need that they cannot articulate?
- Empathy:** Assuming good intentions. They are doing the best they can with what they have. Every decision a family makes is based on their capacity, ability, and experience.
- Stewardship:** We are not saviors or fixers. We are stewards walking alongside THEIR journey. We hold space; we do not take over.

The Science of Presence

- Research shows continuous support during labor significantly decreases cesarean delivery, reduces need for pain medication, and 100% of women rate their experience positively.
- Doula-supported mothers are **four times less likely** to have low birthweight babies and **twice as likely** to initiate breastfeeding.
- What is a doula? A warm body in the room that cares.* Your genuine, caring presence is more powerful than you realize. Half of all newborns participate in WIC. YOU are shaping how half the families in America experience early feeding support.

Which Door Will You Open?

DOOR 1: The Checklist Door

- Focused on metrics and outcomes
- Gives advice without context
- Talks AT families, not WITH them
- Leads toward OUR definition of success
- Leaves families feeling like failures

DOOR 2: The Heart Door

- Asks "How are you doing, really?"
- Listens for what is beneath the words
- Builds a plan that fits THEIR life
- Leads toward THEIR definition of success
- Leaves families feeling capable

Every interaction is a door. Which door do you choose to open? Which door will you lead through?

Reflection Questions

- ? When was the last time I assumed I knew what a family needed before I asked them?
- ? How often do I listen for what is beneath the words, not just the words themselves?
- ? What does "success" look like in my practice, and is that MY definition or theirs?
- ? Am I protecting space for families, or rushing through my checklist?
- ? Do the families I serve leave more confident or more dependent on me?
- ? What biases or assumptions do I bring into interactions that I need to examine?
- ? How can I better honor the unique culture and lived experience of each family?

Action Items for Growth

- ☐ Before each appointment, pause and ask: "What assumptions am I making?"
- ☐ Start every interaction by asking what success looks like TO THEM.
- ☐ Practice using the BRAIN method with at least one family this week.
- ☐ Listen for what is unsaid, not just what is spoken.
- ☐ When you feel the urge to "rescue," pause and ask how you can empower instead.
- ☐ Find an accountability partner to check in with about your one commitment.
- ☐ Seek out resources and colleagues who can expand your knowledge and perspective.
- ☐ Reflect weekly: Did the families I served this week grow in autonomy?

My Commitment: Opening the Heart Door

Starting Monday, I will lead with heart by:

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Accountability Partner: _____

Check-in Date: _____

"Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." - Mother Teresa

References

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