

THREADS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP: Pixar

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When I ran across an interview on innovation in the *McKinsey Quarterly*¹ with Pixar's director Brad Bird (*The Incredibles*, *Ratatouille*), my interest was immediately piqued. In today's fast-changing business environment, it's innovate or become obsolete, and Pixar's phenomenal rise shows that they know a thing or two about innovation. I also know that a culture of servant leadership is an excellent tool to foster innovation. But would Brad's insights and experiences line up with the servant leadership philosophy and values? Though he does not use servant leadership terminology, the answer is a resounding yes. At every turn in his interview, he credited his success to some of the same core values that a servant-leader naturally exhibits, viewing his employees with ultimate respect for their individuality, capabilities, and choice to support and follow him.



Brad knew that in order to foster innovation in his team, he first needed to create an atmosphere where it was safe to share ideas. He asked his team, "Show me what you're thinking. I might not have it right. You might. [...] Everybody saw that he didn't get his head chopped off. And our learning curve went straight up." By treating people with respect, and not ignoring or belittling them for risking an idea, he opened up their creativity.

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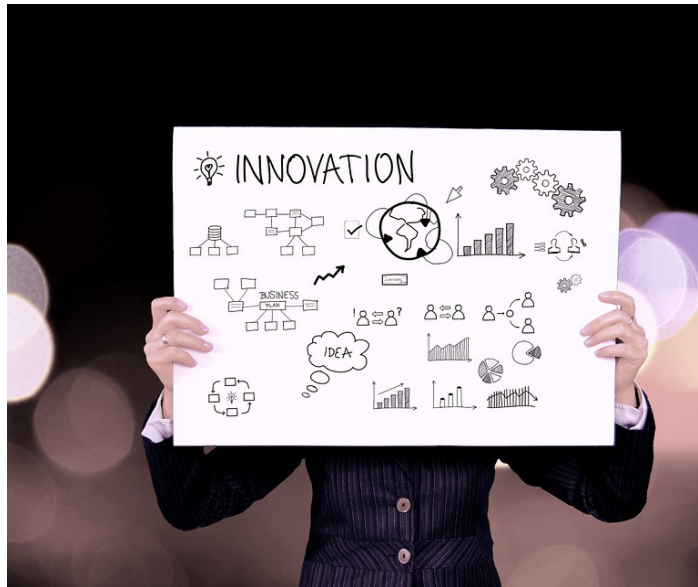
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An atmosphere of safety is the first prerequisite to an innovative team. Without it, innovation is limited to one source—the leader. What Brad did—listening to others with respect and openness and being slow to judge and respond—are core practices of servant leadership. It means encouraging people to stand up and stand out with personal contributions and rewarding them with appreciation when they do so. Brad does add a caveat: “It took two months for people to feel safe enough to speak up.” It takes time to build trust. But the payoff is worth it. Only when people feel safe do they venture their best ideas and best work. And Brad thereby accessed the key resource of collective intelligence and ingenuity. With the attitude of a student and servant, he was able to create a safe culture receptive to the highest levels of innovation possible.

Brad exhibits another key servant leadership value when he talks about the importance of tapping into people’s unique strengths for an innovative team. He started his first project at Pixar by asking for the “malcontents”: “Give us the black sheep. I want artists who are frustrated. I want the ones who have another way of doing things that nobody’s listening to.” Brad looked for people who were already thinking differently. He didn’t punish them for not being “team

players” or for having different methods. He assumed that marginalized ideas had value that he could find and utilize, and he went searching for them first. He validated the so-called outsiders’ value to the team and invited them in. He demonstrated one of the primary practices in servant leadership, which is not just the willingness to listen to ideas but to look for and honestly believe there are valuable contributions from *everyone*, including those with opposing or minority points of view. A servant-leader understands that we each have strengths and weaknesses and respects the ability of others to teach and

lead in their area of giftedness, regardless of hierarchy. Later in the interview, Brad reveals again his belief in strength through difference. He says, “I think the best leaders are somewhat subversive, because they see something a



different way. And I’m not leading by myself [...] [my producer] John says, ‘Look, I’m just trying to get us across the line.’ And I say, ‘I’m trying to get us across the line in first place.’ [...] I love working with John because he’ll give me the bad news straight to my face. Ultimately, we both win.” Brad gives a classic example the conflicts that can arise between people with “opposing” strengths. However, rather than thinking poorly of someone who is

uncooperative or “doesn’t get it,” he points to the difference as a benefit to both of them. His attitude is entirely in line with that of a servant-leader because it shows that he cultivates a certain level of humility which allows him to see past ego, see the true landscape of talent and potential around himself, and more effectively serve his team and the organization by using those resources.

Brad also talks about how authenticity is required for successful innovation and how a leader should have sincere investment in their work. He says, “If you say you’re making a movie for ‘them,’ [...] the implication is, you’re making it for a group that you are not a member of—and there is something very insincere in that. [...] My goal is to make a movie I want to see.” Brad argues that if he is sincere and honest with himself, that it will put him in touch with the common ground between us all—our common thoughts, feelings, and problems— and that will make his creative efforts relevant to others and ultimately a success. Seeing and caring about our common humanity is also a fundamental piece of servant leadership practice. When the leader knows and honors these thoughts and feelings in themselves, they may then serve others by fostering this authenticity in them as well. According to Robert Greenleaf, a servant-leader “begins with the natural feeling of wanting to serve first...” A “natural feeling” must be sincere; the servant-leader must be authentic in their passion, vision, respect, and desire to serve, or they will lose not only trust with others but the creative capacity of the team. If the team sees the leader is not being authentic, they will not feel safe to be authentic either, and they will not offer their

ingenuity. Authenticity, then, is a necessary characteristic of both the leader who nurtures an innovative team and the servant-leader who seeks to support the growth and wholeness of those within their circle of influence.

A final link with servant leadership in Brad’s interview is that he communicated the *why* in his decisions instead of just issuing orders. He used this as one of his strategies to create space for innovation. He relates, “One of the guys challenged me. He said, ‘I want to know why you’re doing this.’” Brad had to stop himself from answering, “Because I’m the director” and think about what his team had been through on the project before he joined. It would have been easy for him to only be concerned with their obedience. But instead he treated them like equals; he had empathy for their frustration, he implicitly acknowledged that they had a choice about supporting him, and he displayed his high regard for the intangible value of their intellectual and emotional support. Once Brad shared his reason for the new direction, “...*everyone* felt, ‘OK, we’re on this ship and we’re going toward a definite destination.’” As a servant-leader would, he pulled the team together and got them behind his vision because he treated them like he would want to be treated, as people with the same stake and status. He perceived their question “Why?” not as a threat to his authority but as an opportunity to motivate them and invite their full ownership of the new creative direction and all the downstream efforts that would be required to bring it to life. Brad exemplified a core characteristic of the servant-leader:

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automatically and pervasively viewing others first as autonomous individuals and equals.

Whether consciously or intuitively, Brad chose to use servant leadership to foster innovation at Pixar. He protected a safe culture for sharing ideas, he valued unique strengths, he modeled and welcomed authenticity, and he provided not just *what* but *why*. With these advantages, his team couldn't help but rise to the occasion to create technically and artistically cutting edge productions. Brad demonstrates that the servant leadership philosophy is more than a nice after-thought—it's a ubiquitous and essential thread woven into the fabric of the most successful, innovative teams.

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Sources

1. Rao, Hayagreeva, Robert Sutton, and Allen P. Webb. "Innovation Lessons from Pixar: An Interview with Oscar-winning Director Brad Bird." McKinsey & Company. Apr. 2008. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.