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## Truth in Transformation

### Episode 2: Servant Leadership

**Paul:** Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Truth in Transformation*. My name is Paul Abramowitz, the CEO of ASHP, and I will be your host. With me today is ASHP President Tom Johnson. Before we get started, I want to talk about something important here at ASHP that relates to what Tom and I are going to be discussing in just a moment. We recently formed the ASHP Task Force on Racial Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to advise ASHP on specific, actionable steps to further address and take inventory of matters of racial diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Tom:** That's right Paul. The events that unfolded in response to the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and too many others, express the true urgency for individuals, communities, and organizations of all types to prioritize actions that lead to change. The critical work of this task force will ensure that ASHP is maximizing its capacity to affect social change in the pharmacy community and beyond.

**Paul:** We all must do better to combat intolerance of all forms and end the systemic racism at the heart of social injustice and inequality. This brings me to the topic that we'll be talking about today, which is servant leadership. What is servant leadership and how does it apply to so many of the vital discussions that are taking place in pharmacy and ASHP?

**Tom:** Servant leadership is basically about putting others first. Listening first. Being empathetic. Not assuming. Asking how you can help. And ideally, having others ask the same of you. That sure seems like a good way to start this kind of discussion.

In a broad sense, servant leadership centers on being a servant *first* and a conscious choice to aspire to lead, *second*. A leader who wants to be a *servant* makes it a priority to put others ahead of themselves and focuses on the well-being of the organization or community they lead. Some of the key elements of servant leadership include listening, empathy, awareness, and persuasion.

Now let's flip that idea. Someone who puts being a leader first focuses on accumulating power. That's a scenario we're familiar with, and of course, there are *many* nuances to that situation. We all know the "leader first" story, so I'm excited to walk us through the servant leadership model in this episode.

**Paul:** Servant leadership is certainly something we all aspire to in our positions, whether they are as frontline care providers or senior executives. Tom, could you please elaborate on how this specifically applies to our pharmacy profession?

**Tom:** Well, I'm glad you asked. I think the concept of servant leadership perfectly with what we as a profession aim to be – so to me, that's our starting point. As pharmacists and pharmacy

technicians – as healthcare workers – we are leaders simply by the nature of our vocation. People look to us for guidance and leadership around medication use – patients, physicians, nurses, really everyone on the healthcare team—they look to us.

I like to say, “In the hospital, every patient gets a medication,” – so that makes us leaders by definition on the healthcare team because right off the bat, we’re the experts on medications. And since our profession is built to serve others by providing guidance, information, and expertise –then we must be servant leaders, also by definition. Personally, I have always thought of myself as a servant leader, so it was important for me to always start there.

**Paul:** Tom, I know that you are passionate about servant leadership. I remember you sharing a story about how your grandfather inspired servant leadership in others. Can you tell me more about that?

**Tom:** You know, that story is part of who I am and how I lead, and it would have been difficult to tell it on stage without getting a little emotional, but I’ll try here. My mom’s nickname is Boo because her little brother couldn’t say Betty Lou – it just came out Boo – so Boo is what she’s known by in our family to this day.

Boo noticed that many people kept asking things of her dad, and he always helped people out. But she didn’t see others helping him – at least from her perspective. So she asked him about it. And his response was that he didn’t worry about any of that because he would get his reward later.

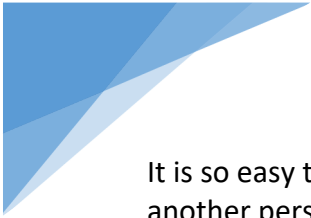
So when I was a kid, and I was complaining about how someone didn’t do this or that, she would remind me of that story. She told me that you don’t worry about rewards and recognition and other people. She said that I should just do what I could to help others, and that my reward will come later. Does that sound familiar?

I don’t think I understood that to be servant leadership, but as I’ve progressed through my career, I understand it now, and it has framed my approach to how I work with other people.

**Paul:** How has practicing servant leadership helped you overcome challenges in your career?

**Tom:** I think it is sometimes easier to identify your failures than your successes. And I will be the first one to admit that I am far from perfect. I have encouraged, counseled, and guided many students, residents, pharmacists, and leaders in my career on this type of topic. And yet I fail on probably a daily basis to implement these concepts.

Even if you bring the mindset of servant leadership of helping others to the table, it is challenging when the world around you doesn’t seem to be on the same wavelength.

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It is so easy to speak first, instead of listening, to get frustrated, or tell yourself stories about another person's intentions – about how they must be out to get you. The thing is, most reasonable adults are not out to get you.

They may have different pressure points, and they may be working on some level of self-preservation — but so are we all. So really, I just try to remind myself that everyone has their own thing that they are concerned about at that moment. They may have something going on in their personal life. They might have come to a meeting with me right after a really bad meeting with someone else. None of that really has anything to do with me or my ideas. But if I can put their interests first, and ask how I can help them, then we can usually find our way to a successful conversation. To me, that's an example of servant leadership.

**Paul:** Why is it important for pharmacy professionals to practice servant leadership?

**Tom:** There are many reasons. Let's look at the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic for an example. As the pandemic really started to take hold in the U.S., it seemed you were either in thick of being essentially overrun – in New York and Detroit, for example – or you were holding your breath waiting to be overwhelmed.


Those leaders in areas being overrun spoke about how they worked to support their staff, find resources, work with suppliers to get the necessary medications – yet I never heard them talk about how tired they were or how much they did personally. They all focused on their staff, their patients, and their colleagues.

Yet we all knew that they had put in a tremendous amount of effort themselves, and their recognition came later – because their staff made it through, and their patients got the care they needed. Servant leadership seemed to be the driving process.

And then the other servant leaders out there are all of the folks that never had a surge – and in fact, likely lost hours or even jobs because so many services had to be closed down. Supporting their staff and each other became a full-time job itself – and it wasn't just the formal leaders doing that – entire healthcare teams, pharmacy technicians, students, and residents all needed to step up as servant leaders to put other's interests ahead of their own.

**Paul:** That's a remarkable example of our profession practicing servant leadership. Tell me, Tom, how do you become a servant leader? What advice do you have for ASHP members interested in implementing servant leadership into their practices?

**Tom:** First – just get started. For example, asking what you can do for others is a great way to start a conversation. A lot of times in pharmacy, when someone is calling or looking for us, it's to let us know something didn't go well.

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By starting a conversation with “Hi, what can I do for you today?” it puts you in the right mind set and hopefully puts the other person in the right mindset too. It also puts you in a listening mode, which is also the right frame of mind.

Ending the conversation with “Is there anything you need from me?” ends in the right context as well. So it doesn’t have to be hard – it’s just getting started with a mindset. Then, do some self-reflection, which is what we will be talking about next time!

**Paul:** Well, that’s all we have time for today. Thanks, Tom, for sharing your thoughts and insights about servant leadership. I encourage everyone to read Tom’s inaugural address, which can be found on [ashp.org](http://ashp.org). Join us next time when Tom explores the topic of self-assessment – or as he likes to call it – how to Stand in your Truth.

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