



A Natural Servant Leader Unlocks the Power of Employees at a Global Contact Center

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Have you ever had the opportunity to work with a natural servant leader: someone who serves the highest priority needs of those she leads (without being told), someone who really cares about the growth of her people, and delivers outstanding business outcomes? Natural servant leaders are not only found in humanitarian organizations. They can be found in all walks of life, even those you might not expect like a global contact center. This report describes what it's like to have such a leader and suggests how you can coach other leaders to become better servant leaders.

1. INTRODUCTION

You are sitting elbow-to-elbow in a converted concrete bunker with the smell of mildew emanating from the leaking ceiling, wearing your company issued uniform. You hear your manager yelling about why your co-worker is one minute late.

Several years later, you are smiling on the way to work. You check-in with the company doctor before seeing your manager in the hallway. He cheerfully greets you and asks what he can do to help you with your work today. It's the same company, just seven years apart. What happened? It was a natural servant leader.

2. BACKGROUND

Vistaprint is a \$2B e-commerce company focusing on mass customization of promotional and personal products for micro-businesses (10 employees or less). The company started in the CEO's apartment in Paris – a one-man shop. As the organization grew, so did the need to provide support for its customers when things did not go right for them. This led to the birth of the company's first contact center in Montego Bay, Jamaica.

There was a time in Vistaprint's history, when the customer was simply seen as a number – what we referred to as their LTV – lifetime value. Anything that could increase a customer's LTV, or reduce their cost to us, was seen as a positive thing. A customer with a challenge was simply seen as a cost and one way we eliminated that cost was by not allowing them to call us; the phone number was not even posted on the website. Even if the customer did manage to somehow speak with a representative, their primary focus was to get the customer off the phone as quickly as possible to keep their average handle time low. The customer's satisfaction was the furthest thing from anyone's mind.

Today, we guarantee to make it right, regardless of whose fault it is. The customer's satisfaction and ease of use are our primary measures. Representatives no longer need permission from their managers. They have the autonomy they need to make it right for the customer. This is reflected in our Net Promoter Score (NPS), which increased by 33 points over a six-month period in 2014. Our Customer Effort Score (CES) - a measure of how hard or easy it is to do business with us moved from 76% to 90% in 2016. Leaders throughout Vistaprint now see the contact centers as a driver of customer loyalty and repeat business.

There was a time in Vistaprint's history where our contact center resembled the classic contact center sweatshop. It operated like a militaristic bootcamp. Managers did not focus on growth opportunities for their people since employees could easily be replaced by the ten other people lining up for their jobs.

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Today Vistaprint has become a premier employer in every city where it operates contact centers. It is the employer of choice among contact centers in Montego Bay (their second largest industry). Local talent aspires to work there and current employees are frequently asked to help with job placements. Employees describe themselves as family and maintain relationships even when they move on to other things.

This is the story of how a natural servant leader reinvented the contact center experience at Vistaprint. We are telling this story from the perspective of Enterprise Agile Coaches. One of us, David Reichert, was previously a developer and architect of many of the tools used in the contact centers. He had an opportunity to speak with many of the associates as he developed and delivered those tools. He also visited the Montego Bay center several times. The other, David Grabel, coached and trained leaders and executives at Vistaprint with a focus on self-organization and self-management

3. OUR STORY

Our story takes place across several acts, but the star of our story is Serena Godfrey, natural servant leader. Serena was born and raised in Canada, but as luck would have it, she ended up in sunny Jamaica leading Vistaprint's contact center in 2014. For some, this would be a massive shift, but Serena was up to the challenge. The center would not be a mere stepping stone to greater heights on her journey, but the destination in itself - she would be in it for the long haul. Today her colleagues describe her as, "a true Jamaican"; she is one of them, although that was not initially the case.

In the first few months of Serena's tenure, her team found her shockingly open and willing to say, "I don't know." Some members of the team initially interpreted this as a weakness - "leaders are supposed to know." This mindset was the foundation for the transfer of trust - demonstrating vulnerability.

While Serena was ready to place her trust in her team, her team was still learning how to place trust in her. In a typical Jamaican contact center, the boss is seen as someone who always knows the answer. The boss tells people what to do and the subordinates do so without question. This sort of blind obedience also means that people on the bottom rung feel ignored by those above them. The structures result in leaders who don't know their employees, managers who see their delegates as cogs, and agents who don't know who their leaders are and even lack the interest to find out. Each level is only focused on their own responsibilities, further intensifying the gap between each group.

Serena turned this mindset on its head. During these early months she started by creating a culture in which employees were relied upon for their ability to make decisions. This started with setting expectations for the managers and supervisors themselves. Their roles were no longer one of rules enforcement, but rather developing the ability within their employees to make good decisions. As part of that, she started asking questions and intently listening to what employees confided in her. She made an effort to know who actually worked for her and to greet people by name. These actions became contagious, with other managers starting to slowly behave in the same manner.

Creating an environment to allow conversations to occur is but half the battle as it was also important for employees to focus on listening. Serena encouraged her leaders to question themselves and question assumptions. This helped leaders like Nigel Thomas to become better at resolving conflicts by first listening and then asking curious questions to understand what type of difference was being held. Nigel believes that he has become more self-aware and better able to serve his team due to this shift in stance.

Serena brought a mindset of experimentation that led to a shift in culture. Previously managers were expected to know everything because they had to approve everything. A trust-based culture moved the decision authority to the workers, relieving the managers of the burden of approval. This required the managers to become curious.

The next step was to tear down the walls around management - quite literally - by moving leaders out of their offices. Serena and some members of her leadership team converted their offices into brainstorming areas and sat in cubes. They became visible and available. In the past, the hierarchy and silos meant that complaints and suggestions lost their impact as they traveled further away from the source. Now individuals could go anywhere with a problem or idea. This was a fundamental change in the role of the managers, from one in which managers were either worshipped or feared to one where the managers provide coaching and become a person with whom you can speak and build a real relationship. While this may sound typical in many organizations, this was a revolutionary change for the Jamaican culture. Regardless of level, members across the organization were able to implement improvements rather than simply make suggestions to their supervisor.

With many of the physical barriers removed, Serena sought to foster transparency and accountability. She did this by introducing daily standups to her teams. This brought people into the loop from both the operational and project teams. This focus also shifted work from the individual to team related goals, with all members moving in the same direction towards a shared outcome. Collaboration was no longer an afterthought, but something foundational at the beginning of each day. Over time these lines continued to blur and both project and operations work were seen as equally important to the success of Vistaprint. Team members saw their responsibilities expand and they were excited to take on novel work allowing for career growth at non-peak times. Additionally, an important aspect of the standups was the daily cadence. This made it clear that these were ongoing practices that they had to keep working on.

Serena's next shift was to measure staff not only by KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) as is common in most contact centers, but also with qualitative feedback from customers. Agents were instructed to simply do the right thing for their customers. This resulted in a major shift in behavior. They began to empathize with the customers, put themselves in the customer's shoes and take the right action from that perspective. The agents had always wanted to do the right thing for the customer, but often had to work around the system and enter inaccurate information to justify the action. An unexpected benefit of encouraging them to do the right thing was the value of data discovered by transparency. The company used this information to address root cause issues and improve the initial delivery.

Next, Serena wanted to show that employees matter. She created an employee engagement group (2 full time employees) whose mission was to "make work more fun." Serena wanted to, "be able to do right by the people," and she told her leaders that they were here to serve the employees. She wanted her employees to understand that the organization takes care of them because they take care of the customers. In the spirit of experimentation, the team created a 100-point survey to assess team members around their level of satisfaction and engagement in their work. The team knew that by tracking the changes in the survey responses they could determine how close they were to their goal. The program was an overwhelming success and moved employee engagement from the mid 60s to the high 80s. The program continued to grow further and eventually expanded into five full time employees participating in this role.

Through this program Serena learned that many of the impactful activities of a cultural transformation are free. As this transformation continued managers smiled more often. They began to establish new relationships with their team members. Managers and supervisors greeted employees by name throughout the day. These types of interactions were contagious and led everyone to being friendlier and more open with each other. This translates into better customer interaction. One visiting organization had remarked how friendly all the people were while touring the contact center and wanted to know what went into creating this sort of culture.

With the engine of employee engagement running, Serena leveraged their passion and built a system to encourage cross-skills training. She highly values cross-skills training as not only does it provide a growth path for her employees, it also gives the contact center flexibility in staffing to changing requirements. The classes are offered through an extensive in-house training team. She told us that she gives employees bonuses whenever they complete a program and demonstrate that they have added a new skill to their portfolio. She makes time for this training by utilizing the slack during their off-peak season. The six months leading up to the holidays are the busiest time of the year for the contact centers. She could save money by handling the peak with seasonal workers, but having highly trained teams of knowledgeable, long-term associates delivers more value. I was amazed hearing a senior leader doing all of the right things just because they were right. The actions and values that I had been teaching to leaders in other organizations which were frequently meeting resistance, were being described to me by Serena as just the way she runs her part of the business. According to Robert Greenleaf, the best test of a natural servant is, "do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, free, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" Serena Godfrey passes this test with flying colors. When I first met Serena during a tour of the Montego Bay office she mentioned that she had hired on-site nurses and doctors for all employees. She arranged for a branch office of a local bank (typical wait times in regular bank branches in Montego Bay is 2-4 hours). I recognized that I was in the presence of the first natural servant leader that I ever knew. When she asked for our help with educating her leaders and other sites about Agile, we wanted to help. This was such a unique opportunity to work with a senior leader who genuinely believed in the Agile principles that we wanted to what we could to succeed.

Everything that took place was not through a royal decree, but rather through the modeling of behavior. Approximately two years after this transformation had begun, Serena explicitly asked her leaders to become a self-managed team. She started by creating a bounded authority for her team to allow members the freedom to

act as if they didn't have a boss, even though they were part of an organizational hierarchy. One of the members of her leadership team, Kishman Spence, was expected to model this behavior and cascade it into the organization. Initially he was apprehensive of this approach and held concerns that people would meddle in others' affairs. He soon realized that establishing good boundaries allows members to act appropriately.

Autonomy, self-organization and self-management are the guiding principles for Serena and her leadership team. This encourages the front line employees to come up with better ways to provide service to their customers, effectively becoming servants to the customers. They formed Scrum teams to organize around the work to be done. They used a prioritized backlog to ensure they were focusing on the highest value items. The sprint time boxes offered an opportunity for members to narrow their focus towards smaller, achievable goals and have time to reflect on their successes or struggles.

A few months later, Serena brought her world-wide management team - the leaders of the contact centers in Montego Bay, Berlin, Tunis, and Manila - to our corporate headquarters and asked the Agile coaches to help them learn self-organization, servant leadership, and self-management. She made it clear to her staff that the role of the manager as they knew it was gone. They had to become servant leaders and coaches. She expected the contact center leaders to bring self-organization to the all of the contact centers. I was amazed to hear her tell her leaders that if this meant that she worked herself out of job, she would be fine with that - she would find another company and do the same thing there. Every one of those managers, independent of site or background, from Tunis to Manila, enthusiastically agreed. They followed closely as we, the coaches, taught them about the attributes of servant leaders (from Robert Greenleaf [Greenleaf]), the value of giving control rather than taking control (from David Marquet [Marquet]), and the benefits of motivating people through autonomy, purpose, and mastery (from Daniel Pink [Pink]). They created a leadership model based on these principles and, by modeling these behaviors, it is permeating the entire organization. Encouraged by Serena, each of these leaders invited the Agile coaches to visit each site for up to 2 weeks and train the trainers at their sites to enthusiastically advocate for Agile values and practices at their sites. We were amazed at how ready the supervisors were for Agile. They convinced themselves and could help each other work through the struggles of embracing Agile. This had become a self-reinforcing culture, making the transformation sustainable.

The success of this system all boiled down to a single question at each level - the same question whether you were part of the front line staff or a top level manager reporting into Serena. This question was, "do you have sufficient autonomy to do your job correctly the way you want to?" This question ultimately tied back to Vistaprint's own leadership model, which has strong ties to the intrinsic motivators around autonomy, mastery and purpose.

4. WHAT WE LEARNED

Starting with trust and assuming good intent is more powerful than waiting for people to earn your trust. This makes it easier for others to model this behavior and for these behaviors to reverberate throughout the organization. When employees live this behavior they can better empathize with their customers and trust that the customers' problems are legitimate.

The actions taken at any level spread throughout the organization. The actions of the leaders will impact everyone, including the customer. Allow culture to spread naturally over time. This organic shift is more effective and less expensive than large-scale initiatives with a big rollout.

It's more than bringing in new programs. Other companies, particularly large contact centers in Montego Bay, have tried and failed. That's because it's not about the programs, it's about the people.

Employees are more likely to grow when they are allowed to do so. They become proud to be working at Vistaprint. Their peers outside the company envy them. This improves employee engagement and retention. Ultimately, they deliver a high level of service and value to the customer.

Working with servant leaders makes you want to help others grow. This breeds servant leadership. Eventually, everyone is a servant leader. This goes beyond work. Giving back to the community becomes a norm. We are not only building a better company, we are building a better society.

A natural Servant Leader is not always seen as a positive quality in organizations that have not seen it before. Many of the qualities can appear to be counterproductive as the servant leader introduces change into the organization. Serena sought advice from others regardless of their level. In some organizations this could be seen as a weakness or failing. In this case, Serena was just moving the decisions to be closer to the work. If this view is not appreciated, servant leaders might choose to leave and go elsewhere.

What makes it clear that Serena is a natural servant leader is that she holds fast to her beliefs. She followed the principle of giving people the support they need and trust them to get the job done. If we follow through and persist in our beliefs good things will happen.

5. WHAT'S NEXT FOR SERENA

As Serena and the rest of the CARE contact centers begin to consider what's next, their focus is the journey rather than the destination. They know the path on which to start, but do not know where they will end. They will model new behaviors and try new things. The teams have experienced the value of experimentation. This has become the norm in the organization.

Many areas within the org are already familiar with self-organization - the teams select their work from a prioritized backlog. To get to the next level, Serena has asked the HR leads to self-manage given a mission and a purpose - not just working from a prioritized backlog. The team is working towards that outcome. This team has demonstrated some success. Serena has doubled down on coaching to help her leaders follow through on the ideas they've explored.

While Serena has started this move towards self-management it is becoming self-sustaining. As they continue on it could mean that Serena's role is no longer necessary. This would frighten many leaders. Instead, it is her definition of success.

Other leaders recognize that as their old roles become irrelevant, they can still find ways to bring value to their customers. They can continue to make changes in the organization through servant leadership. The managers and supervisors (now known as coaches) are adopting their new leadership model based on autonomy, mastery, and purpose. There is good work still to be done.

This journey is not just about the Montego Bay location. Other contact centers - Tunis, Berlin, Manila, are experiencing what it's like to work in this environment. Once they've seen it it's hard for them to imagine any other way to work.

Serena wants to give back to the community - not just for Vistaprint. These experiences are being reported - not only here, but also in the article, "Clearing Managers from the Path to Higher Employee Engagement" which was recently published by the American Management Association [Lauritson] which described experiments with Scrum.

However, Serena and her team will have to rely on a smaller, CARE contact center focused coaching team to help her get there. In July of 2017 the company shifted several of the Agile coaches' priorities to the technology and marketing teams, leaving one full time agile coach in Serena's organization. As of December 2017, David Reichert began coaching agile teams in technology and David Grabel left Vistaprint for consulting in other companies.

With a dedicated agile coach, Agile Champions in the each location, and committed servant leaders, the contact center organization will continue this journey and ensure that Serena's vision takes hold in all 5 locations around the world.

6. WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU

You may ask yourself, "How can these lessons be applied to my organization?" If you are lucky enough to work with a natural servant leader, cherish them and hold them close. Few senior managers and executives are natural servant leaders; however it is possible for those who desire to become servant leaders to genuinely act as one. It is our responsibility as coaches to guide them along that path. A successful transformation that delivers stunning business outcomes awaits you.

While many leaders are comfortable speaking about servant leadership, creating a call to action and being true to that call is more challenging. Some may adopt servant leadership because it's the right thing to do. Others will respond better to the more successful business outcomes seen in places like Vistaprint. All of them will feel the difference that they are making.

As you consider your next steps, we challenge you to ask both yourself and your leaders the following:

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

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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