

# Servant Leadership

conceptualization  
building community  
leadership healing foresight  
persuasion listening  
stewardship awareness  
empathy commitment

## *In Service of Servants*

If you had to sum up your profession in a single word, which word would you choose? Though some of them would undoubtedly make for amusing responses on an episode of Family Feud, I'm guessing most of you reading this just had a number of different terms come to mind. I recall a very similar question being asked of me some years ago, and thinking back, and I don't clearly recall my response. I was a young, recently certified (primarily distribution) water operator then, and I'm sure I made some ridiculous attempt at a witty, half-answer response. Through the years that followed, however, I have repeatedly found myself imposing similar conceptual questions on myself pertaining to the public utilities industry. How does one take a year, a decade, or a lifetime of professional experience and distill it down to a singular term or idea?

For that matter, can such notions as installation, maintenance, and repair even come close? Production, collection, distribution, treatment, excavation, or management, then? How about "adaptability" or some variation of the "as deemed necessary" clause found in nearly every job description in the industry? I'm confident my answer to that initial question would differ at each stage of my career, but I would rarely have been satisfied to offer

a solitary one of them as a sufficient descriptor. Indeed, most utility operators would need at least half a dozen cap racks to store all the different hats they must don throughout a typical work week – let alone the course of a lengthy career. That being said, I do believe a few of these singular terms do a better job than others of summarizing the ways many of us tend to view our time and impact in the industry

– perhaps even to the point of influencing how we come to hold those views in the first place. The most obvious among them is, of course, maintenance. So, let's kick off there.

Some of you might remember my allusions to maintenance as lying somewhere between the gospel and a four-letter word in a previous article. Still, regardless of preference, the term hits a healthy helping of points squarely on the nose as it concerns utility

operations. Not only does a little preventive effort go a long way in mitigating or even preempting future headaches, but in many cases, it's quite literally a requirement in the eyes of the state. It's not precisely unfitting, as descriptors go, either. Everything from cutting grass to flushing lines, exercising hydrants and valves, cleaning tools, painting, greasing equipment, and servicing vehicles fall neatly into the maintenance category. One might even say that repairs to water or sewer lines and replacing failed components occupy a space on the opposite side of the same coin. New construction and system improvements notwithstanding, I would say "maintenance" is a fair pick among answers to the question I was asked all those years ago. Still, after all my time in the industry, I'm not sure it tells enough of the story.

To pose a more-encompassing question, I would ask what it means to be an operator. On a surface-level analysis, that term might be sufficient, but I find that digging just a little deeper into the notion of what it entails to be a utility operator or manager suggests there's something more to this

**How does one take a year, a decade, or a lifetime of professional experience and distill it down to a singular term or idea?**

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particular breed of professional. In addition to a general dedication to the physical duties of the position (or perhaps due to as much), the value of mindset becomes quite difficult to overstate. Having personally interacted with hundreds of public servants (likely over a thousand at this point), I feel reasonably confident in speaking to a consistent pattern of mindset that I have observed in most men and women of all ages in this field.

Whether the result of frequent physical and mental exercise (not to mention good, old-fashioned, natural sunlight and more germs than you could find in a university bio lab) or an innate characteristic of the sort of person willing to endure as much, operators are a tough breed. Not only do they tend toward industrious work ethics and the integrity that often accompanies overall responsibility for public health and safety, but they typically demonstrate a sort of grit and resolve reminiscent of a bygone era.

Digging deeper, this line of thought still reveals what I believe to be the true nature of the sort of man or woman who decides to spend his or her life in this industry—a servant’s heart. It may seem a little too “on the nose,” given the overarching position category of “public servant.” Still, one doesn’t have to look too keenly in the direction of today’s grander politics to understand the difference between a public servant in name and one at heart. It isn’t

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the benefits, it isn’t the hours, and it almost certainly isn’t the compensation keeping most people in this line of work for decades of their lives. It’s something more than that. I believe that “something” is the sense of meaning and purpose that a person can derive from long-term dedication to the service of his or her community. Maybe I’m a little on the idealistic side of things, but day after day I speak with and assist operators all over the state,

only to find that the pattern persists.

Thinking back now, the only answer I want to offer to the question posed at the onset of this article is “service.” It was one of the most significant factors in my consistent desire to show up and continue to grow in the field I stumbled upon eleven years ago. It’s what the industry means to me and, obviously to many others. It’s why I joined KRWA. To that point, I still don’t think I can overstate how grateful I am to find myself in the business of providing service to servants.

*Javon Baker began employment with KRWA in August 2022. He holds a Class IV water operator certification and has worked in the public water supply sector for ten years - most recently with the city of Valley Center, and previously for the cities of Goddard and Haysville.*



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