

The Unusual Management Style Of One Of The Most Highly Rated CEOs In Tech



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SendGrid

Sameer Dholakia has an unconventional leadership style.

Sameer Dholakia, CEO of email delivery platform [SendGrid](#), is one of the most highly rated chief executives in tech. His Glassdoor approval rating is 98%, the same level Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg garner [among their ranks](#). Users of careers site Comparably [recently rated](#) Dholakia the number-one tech CEO among companies with fewer than 1,500 employees — he even beat out Slack's widely revered CEO, Stewart Butterfield.

So what's Dholakia's secret? A management style called servant leadership.

The term was coined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf worked at AT&T for nearly four decades, once serving as its director of management development. In his first essay on servant leadership, Greenleaf [wrote](#), "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." Anyone who was more motivated by power or financial gain wasn't a servant leader, he explained. And the best way to determine if someone fit the mold lay in a simple question: "Do those served grow as persons?"

Dholakia brought his servant-leadership style to Denver-based SendGrid when he joined in 2014, after leaving his job as an executive at software firm Citrix. SendGrid's main business is to automate email delivery — when you make an Airbnb reservation or call an Uber, the automated message you receive comes from SendGrid. When Dholakia first arrived, the five-year-old startup's growth was slowing. But over the next three years, he changed that trajectory. Sales grew nearly 40% in 2015 and 2016, and he [has said](#) revenue is on track to reach \$100 million this year. Servant leadership has helped SendGrid to get where it is today, according to Dholakia.

Being a servant CEO means inverting the traditional organizational chart and putting the CEO at the bottom, he says. He acknowledges his job is difficult, "but the folks doing the hard rowing of the business are not the CEO ... I don't have to take a phone call from a customer who's upset about a bug. I don't have a sales quota." He thinks a leader's primary job is to empower others.

To try to serve his employees, Dholakia spends much time meeting with them. "Many leaders — if you look at their calendars, where they spend their time will be an indication of how they think about servant leadership," he says. He spends about half of his working hours meeting with SendGrid employees.

He typically does several meetings a week where he simply checks in with different people and teams. Both managers and front-line employees attend. "We'll have no agenda. I just want to know how things are going. I'll ask if anyone has any questions about our strategy," he says.

He tries to show the team he's there to help. "I end just about every meeting with, 'Is there anything I can do for you? Anything our leadership team or I can do? Any problems that we're not capitalizing on, but should be?'" He says this practice spawns great ideas for how to run the business better.

But are employees truly willing to be honest with the CEO, the person who holds their career in his hands? "You'd be amazed," Dholakia says. One of SendGrid's four cultural values is honesty, and employees often invoke that value by saying "honest H" before delivering critical feedback. "It's like a safe word," he says. "Everyone knows you're coming at this conversation from a place of good intention."

How did Dholakia get the idea to become a servant leader? "As a young kid, I grew up in a family where my mom had a worldview that life is about giving, not taking." He gets choked up when he talks about her. When he was 15, she was tragically killed in a burglary in Los Angeles.

To this day, he remembers an Indian parable she often recited, and it serves as his inspiration:

When we enter this world we all enter as babies with our fists clenched, kicking and screaming and crying. When we leave, we all leave at peace, with our hands open. There's a reason why this is: we all carry into this world a special and unique gift — a gift you clench in your fists as a baby. Your job, the point of your life, is to discover what that gift is and then give of that gift. When you are done giving of that gift, then it will be your time and you will pass at peace.

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