

Jim Hunter on Servant Leadership by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Jim Hunter. Jim is the author of two internationally bestselling books: *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, and *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader*. Jim's books are used in many MBA and other higher education courses, have been translated into two dozen languages, and have sold well over 4 million copies worldwide.

With *Sounds True*, Jim has created an audio program called *The Servant Leadership Training Course: Achieving Success Through Character, Bravery, and Influence*, where he gives listeners the keys to leading with integrity, authority, and compassion. In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Jim and I spoke about how hard it is to actually change and put into action the principles of servant leadership, and what he's discovered through his 30+ years of work as a trainer in organizations about what supports the change process. We also talked about the importance of authenticity in creating genuine community, and about love in organizational life. Here's my conversation with Jim Hunter.

Right here at the beginning of our conversation, I would love it if you would define for us servant leadership, and give us your sense of your current definition. Perhaps your definition of the term has evolved over time. Where are you at now when you have this challenge of defining servant leadership?

JH: Yes. You know, I guess I'll just break it into two words, which it is, "servant" [and] "leadership." And I'll take the second one first, "leadership," because it's a very misunderstood word.

A lot of times people associate leadership with being the person who is in charge, or somebody who's a good manager. And really, leadership is more synonymous with the word "influence." Leadership is a skill, that's a learned or acquired ability. It's not something you're born with. But it's the ability to be able to inspire and influence people to action, the ability to get the fire going within somebody, where I want to do it now. So leadership is about inspiring and influencing people to action.

The servant part—it's not about being a slave. Being a servant leader is not about doing what people want. It's about doing what people need, and there is a huge difference. It's not about being a slave, it's about being a servant. What my children want [laughs] sometimes is not exactly what they need. What my employees want may not be necessarily what they need.

So what servant leaders are about [is] the business of identifying and meeting people's legitimate needs, seeking their greatest good so that they can grow. So the test of servant leadership is, do people leave you better than they found you? Do you leave

things better than you found them? So am I going to grow as a result of being under your leadership? Am I going to have a better career? Am I going to be prepared when I leave my home, mom, dad? [Laughs] Am I going to be little bit better when I leave then when I got there? So leadership, really, is influence.

TS: And all kinds of people influence us. I mean, we can be very, very influenced by someone that we meet in the grocery store. So really, in your definition, you're not just talking about CEOs or people who lead organizations.

JH: Yes, and I want to make sure we're distinguishing between good influence—you know, Hitler influenced people. But again, the test at the end of the day is, are we well-served at the end? Have we left better than when we arrived? And so leadership, yes, is influence. Herb Kelleher, who founded Southwest Airlines, he was a great servant [leader]. A crazy dude to be sure: I mean, he was a Wild Turkey-drinking, chain-smoking, Harley Davidson-driving—in fact, when he retired, they said it would take two people to replace him; one to do the smokin' and one to do the drinkin'.

TS: [Laughs]

JH: But Herb built Southwest Airlines on servant leadership, and when he retired—he's still the honorary chair at Southwest—a reporter asked him, he said, "Herb, which leaders at Southwest are most responsible for your phenomenal success?"

Now, keep in mind, Southwest Airlines is the largest domestic carrier in the United States. It's been profitable for 40 straight years, including the 10 or 11 since 9/11, which have been disastrous for the airline industry. I mean, I don't think there's a more difficult industry in America to make money [in] than flying airplanes. And almost all have been in Chapter 11 or 7 or merged or failed. But Southwest Airlines—profitable. This is year number 40.

So this reporter says to Herb on his retirement day, "Which leaders were responsible for your phenomenal response?" And classic Kelleher, looked at the reporter—you can see this on YouTube—and said, "Well that's a pretty stupid question." And the reporter said, "Well, what do you mean?" And Kelleher said, "We're all leaders at Southwest. We just have different responsibilities, that's all. And the job market chooses to pay those responsibilities differently, that's all."

Kelleher said, "You know, as I'm thinking here, those guys changing the tires on the tarmac out there are really important leaders in my company." And he said, "You know, as I'm drilling all the way through here, I've got an answer for you. Really, my most important leaders at Southwest are my flight attendants." And the report was incredulous, he said, "What do you mean your flight attendants? That's about as low on the food chain as you can get!" And Kelleher said, "Not at my airline. They're influencing thousands of my customers every day, people that I'm never going to talk to."

You see, that's the essence of it. The difference, what separates Southwest Airlines from all the others—I've spent a lifetime on airplanes, doing what I do. What separates Southwest Airlines from all the others is when you get on board a Southwest plane, there's a young flight attendant that's kind of standing there—sometimes not so young—but they look you in the face when you walk through the door and they say something like this: "Welcome to first class. Welcome to my living room. You're going to have a little different experience today. Now sit down and shut up and I'll bring you your peanuts in a minute. This airplane belongs to me."

They see it as their personal responsibility to influence your experience that day. That's the essence of leadership. Leadership is the mark you leave. We all leave a mark.

TS: It's interesting, because as I'm listening to you, what I'm thinking about is how anybody who's listening to this conversation who wants to leave a positive influence on other people—[anyone who] wants to make a positive influence in any moment with the people they interact with—in that sense, would be interested in this topic of servant leadership. This isn't just for people who are in some certain kind of position.

JH: I think you're absolutely right, Tami. I do believe there's a small percentage of the population [that] leadership is not available to. My wife is a psychologist, she'll tell you about those people. There's about 2 or 3 percent of the population who have serious character disorders or narcissistic-type personalities. I mean, if you [are] unable to handle a relationship, you're not going to be able to handle leadership. Because leadership is all about people, and people are relational.

So assuming you can handle a relationship, you definitely can be a leader. I don't think the good Lord would create all the different leadership positions we're going to be in in our lives—I mean, think of all the different roles that we take on in our lives, leadership roles impacting people in huge ways—as brothers and sisters and coaches and teachers and bosses and parents. Just all these different roles. I mean, if it was only available to a few people at the top of the food chain, that leadership was somehow some special skill that only somebody in a C-suite in a board room has, I think that's crazy.

The good news is that leadership is a learned or acquired ability. It's available to the vast majority of the population and all it takes is a little bit of knowledge about what it is as a practice. You've got to start practicing these behaviors, these skills, until it becomes a habit, until you can get it into your game. That's the good news. The good news is leadership is a skill. It's a learned or acquired ability. The bad news: You've got to be willing to change. And that's the hard part.

TS: Why do you say that's bad news? If we weren't willing to change, we wouldn't get anywhere.

JH: Yes, but the problem I find is that most people don't want to change. I've been teaching servant leadership for—this is year number 33. And I've written a couple of books on the topic and [I've] been around the block a bit. And I can go in and I can preach servant leadership to people and everybody gets excited.

In 33 years of teaching all over the globe, I have never had a person at the end of the seminar raise their hand and say, "I disagree." The principles of servant leadership are self-evident. I mean, "Which part do you disagree with, Bill? Respect? Honesty? Commitment? Patience? Kindness? Humility? I mean, which part do you disagree with, Bob?" This is apple pie and the flag. Everybody agrees with this stuff.

But the difficult part, Tami, is that people listen to these things, they agree with these things, they even aspire to it, but when they go home, the world hits them. It hits them right between the eyes. And how many have a sustainable change a year later? Maybe 10 percent. That's been my findings.

Edward Thorndike, the educational psychologist back in the '40s, used to say, in leadership development and training, if you get a 10 percent transfer of training, you had

a really good day. And I used to think, “Oh, Edward’s never been to one of my seminars! You ought to see these wonderful evaluations we get! ‘Oh, I love servant leadership, I’m going to be a servant leader.’” But I start checking those numbers, and 10 percent—33 years later, I would tell you I think 10 percent is pretty aggressive number.

It’s not easy to change. I can have people come in to a seminar and show them PowerPoint presentations about how to appreciate people. They ought to be kind, they ought to hold people accountable to excellence. But if I haven’t been doing that the last 20 years of my life, do you think it’s really going to change because you showed me another PowerPoint slide? That’s not how people change.

TS: So let’s get into this, because this is a topic I’m very interested in. I mean, here’s Sounds True, the business that I’ve run for 27 years, [and it’s] in the transformation business. You could say we’re in the change business. So I’m very curious, when you look those 10 percent of people who do change, what’s going on with them? Why are those people changing?

JH: Great question. Just as an aside, do you know what the success ratio is for Alcoholics Anonymous?

TS: No idea.

JH: Ten percent. The Journal of the American Medical Association recently came out with a study. They’d done a longitudinal 20-year study of patients who had had double bypass surgery or more—a surgery that literally takes you apart. And they check how many had a change in their diet after 12 months. Guess what the percentage was.

TS: Now I have a guess. Ten percent.

JH: Ten percent. Yes. They even did a longitudinal study of Billy Graham Crusades. Remember the old Billy Graham Crusades, where Billy would preach and people would go up after he was done? Well, they did a longitudinal study on those people who went forward, and do you know how many people were practicing Christians after five years? [Sighs] There’s that number again. About 10 percent.

I don’t know what it is about that number. [Laughs] Well, maybe I do know what it is. You know, there are people who send me emails, and they’ll say, “Jim, I read your book, and the angels sang to me and I’m going to change.” And I think that does happen for some people. There are some people who will listen to a podcast or listen to a Sounds True tape, and they will have a significant emotional event. I have had a significant emotional event, one or two, in my life. They really have that moment where they see it and they change. It does happen.

But for most of us, we need more. [Laughs] Most of us, the 90 percent, are going to need more than going to a leadership seminar on servant leadership to get significant change in our life. Because it’s not easy to change. We’ve got to start hitting the ball [differently].

You know, one of the questions I ask in my seminars is I’ll say, “How many of you believe in continuous improvement?” And most of my audiences are military and business audiences, and they all raise their hands. Of course, everybody believes in that. Then I say, “Well, can you improve if you don’t change?” Well, no. I mean, Einstein said the definition of insanity is continuing to do what you’ve always done AND hoping for different results.

So I say, “OK, so what you’re telling me is, if you believe in continuous improvement, you’re going to change this year, is that correct?” I mean, that’s the hard part. Everybody talks about change, but who likes change except a wet baby? That’s the hard part—changing. Man, I mean, that’s holding people accountable, and having honest discussions with people, and maybe having somebody mad at me for a few days when I tell them the truth about their performance, or appreciating people. That’s so awkward if I haven’t done that the last 20 years of my life. To really get sustainable change in your life, it’s not easy to move the needle.

So back to your question, how do you help people to change? I had kind of a significant emotional event in my life as it relates to my business, back in the early ‘90s. I’d been teaching servant leadership for—I don’t know how long, it had been awhile at that point. And what would happen was I would go into these places and teach, and the HR person would call me a year later and say, “Hey, you’ve got to come back and charge everybody up again.”

And I would oblige, and [say,] “OK.” It was great for my billing, but after awhile, I started to feel a little guilty. I mean, what’s the point of coming in here and preaching all these sermons and charging everybody up if we don’t get a behavior change? If we’re only getting one in 10, aren’t we kind of ripping off the stockholder here? I mean, it would be cheaper to just hand out Little House on the Prairie tapes to everybody. They’d get a warm fuzzy, they’d go back to work and nothing changes.

I mean, what’s the point of this stuff? I started to think I’m not really serving my own clients. And I take servant leadership very seriously; I work very hard at it in my life and my marriage, with my family, with my business. So I try to eat my own cooking, and I’m thinking, “If I’m getting a one in 10 person changed, I’m not serving my own clients.”

So this all culminated to a boiling point where I was in a factory in Indiana with 40 front-line supervisors, all men. It was a tough environment. They made windshields there, 24/7, 365, swing shift operation. Very tough, testosterone-filled environment. I was talking to a group of front-line supervisors, 40 men, all men—this was the fifth year I’d been there, talking about servant leadership. Fifth year in a row. At the end of this seminar, in the front row was a guy named Bill Hudson, and I’ll never forget him, he had red hair. And all of a sudden he starts to weep. I mean, literally, starts bawling like a baby in front of 40 men. I have never had anything remotely close to that happen in one of my seminars, and he wasn’t trying to hide it, he wasn’t embarrassed about it. He was just weeping, and I mean loud.

So really didn’t even know what to do. So I just said, “Bill, you want to tell us what’s up?” And what he said changed a lot of what I do now. He looked at me, as serious as a heart attack, and I can still see his face. And he said, “Jim, you had me five years ago. I know I need to be doing this stuff. I need to be doing this with my wife—I won’t even go there with you on that. My four boys—I’m not even going to go there.” He said, “I’ve got 40 guys at the plant reporting to me. You had me five years ago. I know I need to be doing this stuff.”

He said, “But Jim, let me tell you what the problem is.” I said, “What’s the problem?” He said, “You’re going to leave here today and I’m not going to hear those two words, ‘servant leadership,’ again until 12 months pass and you come back here again and preach another sermon. I can assure you my bosses aren’t going to be practicing this stuff. I can assure you that nobody’s going to be asking me how I’m doing, if I’m growing.

I mean, there's just going to be a huge vacuum between today and when you come back."

He said, "I'm not proud of that, I know I need to do my own changing. I get that, Jim. But I'm just telling you the way it is." I said, "OK, I get that." And then he said, "Jim, do you have any idea what I have on my plate when I go back to work?" I said, "What [have] you got?" He said, "I've got discipline issues, I've got safety issues, I've got budget issues. I've got people I need to write up. I've got performance reviews I'm late on." He listed off a list of about 10 different things. He said, "I'm buried. This is going to go the back burner, just like it has every other year. I'm not proud of that, I'm just explaining my reality to you."

And then he said the final thing, Tami, that just tore my heart out. He said, "Jim, you want to know what I really think?" I said, "I do, Bill. What do you really think?" He said, "Next year I hope you just stay home."

TS: Wow.

JH: "Because, you know, you just come here and I just feel worse. Why don't you take a year off? You just make me feel worse about myself." Well, I'll tell you, I had a few sleepless nights after that day. But what is painful instructs, and what it got me to do was realize that coming in and preaching sermons to people, having people listen to tapes or read books or watch PowerPoint presentations isn't enough for most people. We need more. We need more help than that.

So I went into my "prayer closet" for a week and I started really thinking about this. How do you help people to change? So what I basically came to was basically what the quality model says. The quality model says if you want to create a quality product or service, there's three steps: You've got to set the standard—what are we trying to achieve? Then you identify the gaps—step two, identify the gaps between what we're getting and what we need to get—identify the "stuff." Third step, eliminate the gaps. Set the standard, identify gaps, eliminate gaps.

So I thought, "That's a great model for producing quality products and services. Why couldn't we do that with leadership?" In other words, why couldn't we—OK, step one, come in and set the standard. Come in and teach servant leadership. I mean, that's an important piece. I'm not saying training is not important. I'm not saying tapes are not important. It's very important. People need to have their paradigms challenged, people need to understand this stuff. I mean, people need these things. There's no question. But it's only the first step.

Then the second step, what people need next, is, "I need to understand my gaps between where I need to be and where I am." I call that "stuff"—the gaps between where I need to be as a servant leader and where I am. And we've all got different kinds of stuff. Some of us don't hold people accountable, some of us aren't patient, some of us aren't kind, some of us don't listen well, some don't appreciate, some are arrogant, some need humility lessons, some need to treat people with more respect. We've all got different kinds of stuff.

So help me see my stuff! Don't assume I know what my stuff is. So set me a standard, help me identify my stuff, and the third step is create a little friction. Give me some support so I can eliminate these gaps. Don't just leave me alone; help me to get after my stuff.

So what we do to help people get after their stuff is we'll go into an organization—let's say we went into Sounds True, and you're the supreme commander there, Tami. And what we would do is we would take you and your team and we would teach them servant leadership. And we can do that in half a day, four hours.

I mean, I can lay the foundation, unpack servant leadership in four hours. That's the easy part. Getting people to agree to these principles is the easy part. At the end of four hours, their heads are going to go up and down and [they'll] say, "Yes. That's what I need to be doing."

Then the second step is, we have a little inventory where people would give them feedback. It's a form of a 360-degree feedback, where they get feedback from their subordinates, their peers, their superiors—people who really know their "stuff." It might even be family members, it might even be customers. I mean, who really knows your stuff?

But what we ask are questions around leadership. The problem with most 360-degree feedback—and two-thirds of organizations in corporate American do 360 feedback, there's nothing new about 360 feedback—but the problem with most 360-degree feedback is we're not asking the right questions. We're asking management questions, we're not asking leadership questions. We're asking questions like, "Can they plan? Can they budget? Can they problem-solve? Can they organize? Can they read a balance sheet?" That's not leadership.

We ask questions around servant leadership: "Is Tami a leader we're confident following? Does she inspire confidence in us, in the mission? Is she patient? Is she kind? Does she hold people accountable to excellence? Does she meet needs, rather than wants? Is she encouraging? Is she humble? Is she respectful? Is she selfless? Does she meet the needs of others rather than their wants? Is she forgiving? Is she honest? Does she confront people with problems and situations as they arise?" Twenty-five questions against that high standard of servant leadership.

And then you'd also do a self-assessment. All [of] your team would go through this. They would all get a very simple report, just helping them to see their stuff. OK? Easy.

TS: Well, I'm not convinced that that step right there of identifying the gaps is easy. I mean, what I noticed as I was familiarizing myself with your work in servant leadership is that in identifying my own gaps, I actually cringed a little bit when I had to tell myself the truth about the areas where I'm underdeveloped as a servant leader. It hurt, actually.

JH: Yes, it can be painful to get the feedback. There's no question about that. So when I said "easy," I just meant the logistics of it. I mean, to do a thing online, to fill out a report and have people do this, that part's easy. Yes, getting the feedback, owning the feedback, and then doing something about it is anything but easy. That's the heavy lifting.

So the point is, we've set a foundation of what it is. [And] the second half [is] foundation, feedback, friction. We've set a foundation, we've given people some feedback, but the most important is the third step: the friction. How do we create some healthy tension in the organization so people grow? How do we help? What do we do? So how do we create some healthy friction so people will start getting after it?

So what we do is we would create several layers of tension. First thing would be, we would ask everybody on your team to write two specific, measurable plans of what they're going

to do about their stuff based on their report. Just pick two—we don't want you to fix everything, we just want you to go after two things. "You don't appreciate people? OK, that doesn't mean you're a bad person. It means you've got a bad habit. What are you going to do about that?"

"OK, well, I'm going to catch two people doing something right. I'm not going to leave the building until I can catch two people doing something right that I can give sincere, specific appreciation to." "Great! How are you going to measure that?" "Well, I'll keep track in my Palm Pilot who I talked to, what I said, and I'll make a little notation at the end of the day." "Great. What's your second goal?"

"Well, my people don't feel like I hold them accountable to excellence, that I allow mediocrity." "Hmm—sounds like you've got a bad habit. Doesn't mean you're a bad person. So what are you going to do about it?" "Well, I guess the first thing I need to do is make sure everybody's clear on the standard, what the rules of the house are." "Well, when's that going to be done?" And so forth. So everybody picks two areas that they're going to work on and they write a very specific and measurable plan. We're talking about a paragraph. So that's the light tension.

Then, within about a week of that time, I come back, after the training, and we have a meeting with each person on the staff. And usually the CEO is sitting there, I'm there, sometimes the HR person, the person being reviewed, and their supervisor, if it's somebody other than the CEO. And we have a 20 minute meeting and we talk about their stuff.

In other words, "OK, you got some feedback, how did you feel about it?" Kind of get that out of the room. Then, "What did you decide to do? What specifically? How are you going to measure it? What are you going to do about it?" So they make a commitment to everybody in the room, sitting around a little table, eyeball to eyeball. So now we've turned it up a little bit. Now there's a little more tension in the room. Everybody knows. [Laughs]

Then, a week after that meeting, now we ask them to do it as a group. In other words, you would call a meeting with your staff and you would go first, Tami. You'd stand up in the front of the room, you would say "Here is what you all had to say." And you would literally put it up on the wall with an overhead.

"Here is what you all had to say. Thank you for the feedback, thank you for all this great stuff. But now, here at the bottom, I've got a couple areas I need to look at. So here are my two plans of what I'm going to do about it, and here's how I'm going to measure it. Have I hit the right thing? Have we missed any elephants in the room? Is this the right stuff, guys? What do y'all think? Give me some feedback."

Then you would sit down, [and] the person to your right would go next. We call that the "opening the kimono" meeting. [Laughs] A little bit crude, but that's what it feels like to some people. We get people to stand up and start owning their stuff.

Now, the irony of this, is that the people around the table already know it. If you don't think your people know, Tami, they're the ones that gave you the feedback.

TS: Yes.

JH: They already know. We pretend like people don't know. They know. People spend half

their waking hours at work. They spend more waking hours in your building than they do with their families. They're very aware of what people's stuff are. This isn't a mystery. But we've got to get people to stand up and start owning it. So everybody goes around the table—this takes an hour to do this, it doesn't take a long time to do this. It'll take an hour. Everybody talks about how they felt about their results, what they're going to do about it, [how] specifically they're going to measure it. OK?

And we're not done yet. Now, a week after that, we ask them to go to their department, or wherever it is they lead, and do the same thing. "So here's what y'all had to say. Thanks for this feedback. I have a couple areas I need to work on. Here's what I'm going to do, and here's how I'm going to measure it. Now, I'll be getting back to you regularly, perhaps on a monthly, maybe bi-monthly basis, and give you a little update on how I'm doing and I'm going to be looking for some feedback from you folks. I'm going to start working on my stuff. That's my commitment. We can't ask you folks to be the best that you can be if we're not willing to be the best we can be. So mom and dad—we're working on our stuff."

So what that does, and what I have found in doing this for about 20 years now, is the group will start to build some community together when you do this. It forces us to go to some deeper levels. I mean, we're talking about some deep stuff now. The group starts to build a little community together. And when you're sitting in a room with 20 sets of eyeballs on you, and you make a commitment to the group, there's a lot of power in that. There's a lot of power.

What it does is it gets you to a point where you're left with a choice. And life is all about choices. It's not death and taxes, it's all about death and choices. You're left with a choice, and the choice is this: you're either going to get so uncomfortable you're going to have to leave, or you're going to start doing something about growth and continuous improvement. You're going to have to start getting after your stuff. You're going to start changing what you're doing.

So it's a radical way of helping to get people [to] change, helping people to change. But we have found it to be profoundly successful, especially with a committed CEO.

TS: And have you noticed a difference now, that we're not talking about 10 percent but we've got some other kind of number of people who are actually really growing into servant leaders?

JH: Yes. I can't give you a hard number, and that's because it all depends on the commitment of the CEO. All I can tell you is this: the greater the commitment there is at the top, the more success that we have.

If I have a committed CEO—and I'm getting pretty good at it now, and I can pretty much tell now if somebody's really in it or they're just trying to do dog-and-pony stuff. An organization that really wants to change for continuous improvement as more than just a punch line, where they really, really do want to grow. When I have a CEO like that, my job's really easy.

Because here's the deal: once everybody on the team understands the CEO's in, I've got nowhere to hide. Where am I going to hide? I mean, the CEO's standing up there opening their kimono, where am I going to hide? I've got to start getting serious about growth and continuous improvement. I've got to start getting after my behavior. And in the end, leadership is about our behavior. You know, like, be nice, tell the truth, hold people

accountable to excellence, appreciate people, build trust. I mean, basic things.

But to get people to do that stuff, they'll agree that it's the right thing to do, but to get them to start hitting the ball and practicing that stuff—you know, the farmers are very clear about this. Anything living, you are in one of two states. You are either green and growing, or you are ripe and rotting. [Laughs] I mean, pick one. I hate to be so blunt, but that's really the truth. You're either growing, you're either moving in one direction or the other. C.S. Lewis said, "There's no neutral ground in the universe." You're moving toward the light or you're moving toward the darkness.

So what this process does is it says, "You know what? We've got to start growing. If we're going to be leaders in this organization and have human beings entrusted to our care for half their waking hours"—I mean, think of the awesome responsibility of being a leader. Having human beings entrusted—if I've got a lousy boss, I've got a lousy job, and you're messing up my life. I mean, a lousy boss messes up people's lives. I don't know if you've ever had a bad boss, Tami, but I have, and it affects what goes on around your dinner table.

So, "If you're going to be a leader in our organization, we're not expecting you to be the best leader in the world. But we are expecting you to grow. We are expecting you to be moving the line northward. We want growth."

My definition of continuous improvement is this: that you're able to say, "I'm not where I want to be, but I'm better than I used to be. I'm better than I was three months ago. I'm better than I was six months ago. I'm listening better. I'm holding people accountable more. I had a crucial conversation yesterday that I probably never would have had before, but I finally had that conversation." Are you moving the ball up the field?

So this process ensures that we have got the appropriate tension in the environment. We want people to grow. We know you're moving one way or the other. Nothing stays the same. Anyone who thinks they're the same—I mean, nothing stays the same. Nothing living. If you're think you're the same as you were six months ago, the world is moving by at such a high rate of speed these days, by definition, you're going backwards.

Nothing stays the same. Where are you heading? What are you becoming? My wife's a psychologist; she used to love to tell her clients, "There are no human beings, only human becomings." We are all becoming something every day. A better leader or a worse leader. More of a saint or more of a swine. Every day we're becoming something.

So CEOs that really get that, Tami, that really get that, "I've got to push my people"—and that's the essence of servant leadership. It may not be what they want. It may be uncomfortable. It may not be what we want, but it's absolutely what we need. And that's what servant leaders do. They're not interested in what people want, they're interested in what they need. "What's going to help this person grow?"

And most of us, 90 percent of us, Tami, we need some friction. We need some push. We've got a crazy world coming at us. [Laughs]

TS: Yes.

JH: And we've got a ton of stuff on our plate. And I need more than a PowerPoint deck and a book to become a better leader. I know I need to, I know I need to grow, I know I need to be a better dad, a better husband, a better—I know I need to grow, but help me! Help me

to do that.

TS: Now, I'm curious, Jim, in this "opening the kimono" move here. I'm curious to know a little bit more about you, if that's OK, and what your own challenges have been in embodying servant leadership in your life, and how that's evolved for you over time. Maybe one aspect of servant leadership that has perhaps been the most challenging for you.

JH: Oh boy. I've had several. Gosh. My latest or my ones in history, or does it matter?

TS: Whatever occurs to you.

JH: You know, one of the tough ones—and I don't think it's sexist to say this, especially with men, I think a lot of us men suffer from this one—is we like to put the mask on, especially at work. Being authentic, being vulnerable, being willing to talk about what we really think and what we really feel, and getting out of that mask mode was a big challenge for me.

Back when I first started studying community building under Scott Peck back in [the] mid-'80s, my wife and I went to his Foundation for Community Encouragement, just a powerful organization about building community. And one of the things I found was the reason I wasn't having a whole lot of community in my life was because I had my mask on. And it's really hard to an effective leader if you've got a mask on.

This has never been more true than with the young people coming up these days. These young people, these Millennials coming up, born after 1980, they don't like masks. They're not impressed by corner offices, they're not impressed with your 30 years of experience. They are impressed by authenticity. They want to be able to look you in the eye and know that what you're saying is reality and who you really are. They're much more impressed with that.

So I really have had to do a lot of work over the years—and I still work on it—to work on that aspect of my life: vulnerability and authenticity. But the rewards are awesome. So I tell men regularly, I say, "Here's the thing, if you're not willing to be authentic and you're not willing to be vulnerable, you're just not going to experience much community in your life. And you're going to miss out [on] some of the sweetest parts of living."

And we can have a lot of community at work. One of the things I do with organizations is help them to build communities on their staffs. We are spending half our waking hours there. Why wouldn't we want to be a community? A place where we can be honest with each other. We can get our mask off, we don't have to worry about things like confidentiality and whether I can trust you that you're [not] going to talk behind my back. We can come in and get real with each other and talk about our joys, our dreams, our frustrations, our sorrows, our ideas. To build community together.

It's a huge part of leadership. In fact, I'm going to be writing a lot about this in my third book. I find the really great servant leaders are pretty adept at this. They not only are great leaders, [but] they know how to build community with people. They know how to build trust, and trust is the basis of a relationship. They know how to get people to come to a meeting and really be fully present.

Peter Drucker, the great management guru for 50 years in America—he passed a few years ago—used to say, "The first responsibility of a leader is to drive out fear." Is it a safe

place? Is your management team—is that a safe place to be? Can I really be honest? Can I really tell you what I think? And if you're not getting candid feedback from people, you're going to be in a heap of trouble.

So authenticity and vulnerability, that's been an area for me. Another area, early on, was accountability. And I find that many executives struggle with this one. In fact, the number one gap we find between where people need to be as leaders and where they are—after 30 years, the number one gap, [there's] not even a close second, and we've done these results on these leadership skill inventories for many, many years—well, let me ask you, what would you think would be the number one gap?

TS: I'm not sure, but I can tell you that accountability was the challenge that I identified for myself very clearly as the biggest area of difficulty for me—holding people accountable. So I've been reflecting on that very deeply in preparing for our conversation today. So I'm eager to hear what you have to say about this.

JH: It's number one. And there's not even a close second. Not even a remotely close number two. Far and away, the number one gap is failing to hold people accountable for the standards that have been set and failing to confront people with problems and situations as they arise. Far and away, people who are otherwise just wonderful executives, great people, they shy away from the tough conversations. Because we have this need to be liked, we have this need to avoid this tension. We just avoid that stuff.

So that was an area for me that I really had to work on early on, because I tend to want people to like me. And so to tell people the truth—but then I had somebody confront me with it just point-blank, right between the eyes, and I had a paradigm change. Probably a significant emotional event, one of the couple that I've had in my life, is he looked at me and he said, "You know, Jim, here's the thing. If you don't hold your people accountable to excellence, you're a thief and a liar."

And I said, "Well that's a little strong." He said, "Every time you take a paycheck, you're stealing. Because this organization pays you to hold people accountable to excellence. And number two, you're deceitful, you're lying because you're pretending everything's OK and it's not OK. And guess what? Everybody in the building knows it. You think you're fooling anybody in the building? They all know. Everybody in the building knows who you're holding accountable and who you're not. So you're deceitful. You're anything but a servant leader. You're a slave leader. You're not doing what people need, you're doing what people want."

And now, that just went to my core, because I'm all about character and building trust, and I'm thinking, "Man, if I'm not telling people the truth, I'm a dishonest person. I don't have a really authentic relationship with any of my people. I'm pretending it's OK and it's not OK. So I'm a phony!" So that just went to my core.

But as I said earlier, what is painful instructs. Once I got out of the woodshed, it really motivated me to change. Because then I didn't look at discipline as, "Oh boy, this confrontation—we've got to have a tough meeting," and I'd be awake the night before worrying about it.

No, I'm not here to discipline you. I'm here to disciple you to excellence. I'm here to help you be the best you can be. When I don't tell you the truth about your performance, you're going to end up worse than when you got here. I'm not serving you. I'm here to help you grow, and when I see an opportunity, when I see a gap between where you need

to be and where you are, we're going to be talking about that. Why? Because I care about you. I want you to grow.

You see, here's the thing, mom, dad, boss: Don't tell me how much you care about me if you're not willing to have me mad at you for a couple days. Don't you dare tell me that. If you cared about me, you'd be kicking my butt up and over that performance bar every day. It might not be what I want, [but] it's absolutely what I need. You'd be kicking my butt up and over my performance bar so that when I leave here, I'll be a whole lot better than when I got here.

Because just like you, I'm either green and growing or ripe and rotting, so if you let me be me mediocre, if you don't confront me with my stuff, you don't hold me accountable to the stuff that I'm doing here, I'm going to be worse when I leave you. You haven't served me. Don't tell me how much you care about me. You care about yourself. You're not serving me, you're serving yourself. You get to avoid the hassle. Now, when I had somebody explain it to me that way, Tami, that motivated me.

TS: What's interesting to me is, in this conversation, you're really pointing out how receiving feedback—pointed and constructive and right-on-the-money feedback—is such an important part of the change process.

JH: It really is. I mean, business people will tell you, we can't make decisions unless we have good data. We have to have feedback. We have to understand how we're doing. The difference between fact and opinion is evidence. What's the evidence?

If we're in a leadership position, we have to give people pointed feedback about what we're observing, what we're seeing, what we're hearing, what we're smelling. We owe that to people. If we want them to grow, they need that. They need that tension, they need that friction to help them to grow. Again, this might not be what they want, but it's absolutely what they need.

TS: Now, I'm curious, are the principles of servant leadership based on Jesus as an example of the ultimate servant leader? Is it fair to say that?

JH: Well, I don't know. I get asked that a lot, and I don't think of servant leadership as a religious thing. I think of it as a Golden Rule thing. I don't think of it as a great commission thing where I'm evangelizing anybody.

Jesus did make a statement about servant leadership. He said [that] anybody that wanted to be the leader must first be the servant. If you want to lead, you've got to serve. But 2,000 years before him, Lao Tzu in China said pretty much the same thing. So I don't view it as a religious thing. I view it as a Golden Rule-type thing. I view it as just treating people the way you'd want to be treated.

I often tell people in my seminars, I say, "I'm not here to instruct you. I'm here to remind you. Everything you need to know about leadership you already know. It all boils down to one simple rule: treat people the way you'd want to be treated. Be the boss you wish your boss would be." You know that person you want your boss to be? Same person your people want you to be.

Be the father you wish your father had been more fully for you. Be the mother you wish your mother had been more fully for you. I mean, all servant leadership is, Tami, is identifying and meeting people's legitimate needs [and] seeking their greatest good.

So if you're going to be a servant leader, yes, you've got to make a little list. What do people need? And I tell people, "If you ever get stuck on your list, just ask yourself a simple question: What do I need? That'll get you going again. Respect, appreciation, relationship, listening, accountability, rules of the house, clarity—basic things that people need. What do you need from your leader? Then go be that person."

It really is simple. It's not simplistic, but it really is simple. It's basic. I teach servant leadership to Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, Cub Scouts—they get this stuff. It's not a difficult topic. Some people want to make leadership a difficult topic, [but] it's not a difficult topic. Serve your people. Get in there and identify and meet their needs. Get them the things that they need, and they have a lot of needs. They also have a lot of wants, so sometimes we have to discern between the two. But get in there and meet needs, and they'll walk through walls for you.

TS: Now, there's a word that you talk about, a word that you use liberally, freely, although you define it carefully, which is bringing—here we go—love into business.

JH: What's love got to do with it!

TS: Yes! And so, tell us, yes, what does love have to do with it?

JH: [Laughs] Oh man. You know, I had to make a choice. Again, it's not death and taxes, it's all about choices—death and choices. I had to make a choice about 25 years ago. Was I going to introduce love into my business seminars? This was even before I wrote books on it.

I thought, "OK, now that's going to be risky." I mean, you start talking about love around HR people, and their eyes start to glaze over. "Mr. Hunter, we're trying to get sexual harassment out of the building. What are you talking about love for? You're killing me!" Tami, you start talking about love in corporate America and sprinkle a little Jesus in there, you're going to lose some clients. Trust me. It's going to cost you dearly. So I had to make a choice, and I nearly chickened out.

TS: Well, I'm so glad you didn't. Just for the record.

JH: [Laughs] Thank you. I almost chickened out. But in the end, the reason I didn't was that I just could not be intellectually honest and leave it out. It wasn't because I was so courageous, it was just I couldn't be intellectually honest.

Why? All the great servant leaders in history all talked about love. Every one of them. Jesus—he was only one. Mother Teresa, one of the great servant leaders of all time. I mean, she wrote four books on the topic of love. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. Herb Kelleher built an airline on that word. In fact, if you want to look up Southwest Airlines on the New York Stock Exchange, the three-letter ticker symbol is LUV. "The airline that love built." That was their jingle back in the '80s.

The point—I couldn't be intellectually honest and leave love out of it. I just couldn't do it. The problem with it is that most people have a pretty weird idea about what love is. Hollywood has butchered the word. The classic definition of love is not a feeling. It's not a noun about what we feel. The classic definition of love is a verb. It's about what we do. Love your neighbor—the verb in the sentence is love. It's not about what we feel, it's about what we do.

Vince Lombardi has a great quote that I used in one of my books, where the great coach used to tell his players, every spring training, he used to say this: “Ladies, listen up. I don’t have to like you. You don’t have to like me. But as your leader, I will love you.” And he said, “My love will be relentless.” [Laughs] “I’m going to love you to death.”

Now what did he mean by that? “When you leave my team, you’re going to be in demand in the NFL. You want to know how much I care? Watch what I do. I’m going to make you great.” That’s the classical definition of love. Are you extending yourself for somebody, identifying and meeting their legitimate needs, seeking their greatest good, so they’re going to be better when they leave than when they got there?

That’s what love is. Love is an extension of yourself. It’s a willingness to extend myself for you, meet your needs, help you to grow. That’s what real love is. Regardless of how you feel, you’re the leader. You signed up to do this. I tell people in business seminars, “I don’t care how you feel about your people. I don’t care if you like them or not. I’m not asking you to like them, I’m asking you to love them. Love is an extension, your willingness to extend yourself for them. Hug them when they need a hug. Spank them when they need a spank. Help them to be great.”

There [are] times my wife—my dear wife [who] I’ve known since the first grade, [we’ve] been married for several decades—doesn’t like me very much. Do you believe that, Tami?

TS: I do.

JH: I know it’s unbelievable.

TS: I do. I know you’re being intellectually honest when you say that.

JH: [Laughs] That’s right. Has nothing to with whether or not she loves me, whether or not she’s still patient with me, still kind, still forgiving—thank the Lord—still committed, “Still in the game, honey, even though you’re acting like a jerk this week, I’m still in.” That’s the classical definition of love: a willingness to extend yourself, committed, all-in, regardless of how I happen to feel this week.

So love, the classical definition, is the willingness to extend. Hollywood love is almost the exact opposite. Hollywood love is falling in love. Falling in love is effortless. It’s almost the opposite of true classical love. When I was 18, I could fall in love five times in a Friday night, Tami. The more beer I drank, the more in love I got. I mean, that was easy. Falling in love is effortless. And there’s no commitment involved, it’s just feelings-based.

But true love—I mean, here it is now, several decades of marriage, written a couple of books on the topic, been talking about it for 30 years—I’m just beginning to understand the depths of that word, “love.” But one thing I’m real clear about? It’s a whole lot more than feeling. Feelings come and go based on whether I ate pizza last night or not.

So that’s what I have to do in seminars. I have to get people to understand the definitions. When we talk about love, we’re not talking about how you feel. We’re talking about what you do.

TS: And in terms of an organization—you’re working with an organization—how would you know if there was a lot of love present in that organization versus, “No, this is an unloving organization”?

JH: Well, as many organization as I've been in now—last count, a little over 700. So I've been in a lot of places. It's to the point now where I can pretty much tell in about the first six minutes. It's palpable in an organization. It's palpable. I call it the community spirit. You can feel it when you walk in the door, just by the way you're treated, how people engage you, how people look you in the eye.

There is something about an environment where love is present and where community is present that is—again, the best word I can use for it is “palpable.” And it's a pretty rare thing. I don't see it a whole lot. But I have seen it in some places, and it's a marvelous thing to experience.

TS: What would you say to a leader who wants to bring more love into their organization? How would you direct them to immediately be able to make change in that regard?

JH: Well, the first thing is, you've got to be the change you want to see in the world. Just like Gandhi said. You have to be the change you want to see in the world. Because the first thing everybody wants to do is blame somebody else, right? “The problem is my boss, the problem is my spouse, the problem is somebody out there.”

You know, what I tell them is some of the great servant leaders I have worked with over the last 30 years work for terrible bosses, work for dopes that don't get it. Terrible Nazi, command-and-control, Gestapo-type leaders that don't get it. But they have made a decision in their life. They can't control what their boss does, but they can control what they do and how they treat their people.

So the first thing I tell people is stop pointing your finger and worrying about everybody else. Start worrying about what you're going to do. What are you going to change to be a great leader? That's where it all begins. What are you going to do [differently]?

You know, when we change—and it's an old cliché and I'm sure you have it in a lot of your tapes around Sounds True—our world changes. And it sounds trite, but it's so true. When we really get out and start going to work on ourselves, and start working on how we're loving people—are we patient? Are we kind? Are we humble? Are we respectful? Are we selfless? Are we telling people the truth about their performance? Are we confronting people with stuff? Are we truly honest and authentic people? Are we committed to excellence?

When we start working on our stuff and start working on our lives, the world changes. People respond differently to us, the world comes at us differently, and then we start to be alright. And then people start [asking], “What's going on with this guy?” And you start influencing people. You start building authority with people. You start building influence with people. And that's the best way. That's the best way I know of to shine your light.

[The] worst thing you can do is stand up on a block and start talking about, “You need to do this, you need to do that.” No, it starts with you. But having said that, if you are in a position of influence and a position of power, if you are at the head of an organization, I would say it's incumbent upon you to create an environment where people can not only learn these things but can start practicing. You've got to get people to start hitting the ball.

Being a better leader—and this is a point that people just don't seem to get. We spend \$60 billion on leadership training and development in America and most of it's a waste of

time and money. And I used to be involved in a lot of it. Being a better leader is exactly analogous to being a better musician, a better athlete. Nobody ever learned how to swim reading a book. Nobody ever became a better golfer watching Tiger Woods videos. You can learn about golf, you can learn about swimming, you can learn about things listening to tapes and watching PowerPoint presentations, but you're not going to become one.

I meet people every week of my life who know all about leadership, but they don't know leadership. Do you realize you can know all about something and never know it? And that's such a scary thing. We have so many theoretical leaders running around. They can quote you scripture and verse of Jim Collins and Peter Drucker and Max De Pree. They know all about leadership but they don't know leadership. I'm not sure they've ever served a person a day in their life.

Leadership is something that has to be practiced. You have to get out there and start hitting the ball. You want the qualities of a great leader, qualities like humility—Jim Collins, in his seminal book, *Good to Great*, which is now the all-time bestselling business book ever, studied all the great leaders. He said the number one quality of a great leader is humility.

Now, do you think you develop humility reading books and watching PowerPoint presentations? Do you think you develop kindness, patience, accountability skills, respect, selflessness, forgiveness, commitment—do you think you develop those things reading books? No. You've got to go practice those things, over and over and over and over.

And this process we talked about, about opening the kimono and these things, what we're getting people to do is start practicing—practicing humility, practicing being authentic with people, practicing owning your stuff, practicing honesty, getting that mask off. And when you get people to start practicing this stuff, the world starts responding differently to them. And they start to change. And it's a beautiful thing to see. But it doesn't happen reading books and watching PowerPoint slides. You've got to start hitting the ball.

So leadership is a skill, a learned or acquired ability. Remember I said before, that's the good news. It's available to you. The bad news is you've got to be willing to change. That's what I meant by that, which means you've got to go out and start doing things differently. You've got to get out of your comfort zone. You can't improve unless you change.

And change is hard. "I've been behaving this way for 30 years, you want me to change?" That's going to take more than a book. "I know I need to change. I know I'm not patient, I know I'm not holding people accountable. I know I'm not kind. I know I've got my mask on. I know I'm not humble like I should be."

Remember I said at the start of this thing, 33 years, I've never had anybody raise their hand and say they disagree? I mean, these principles are self-evident, Tami. Imagine, "No, I would rather have a boss who's impatient, unkind, arrogant, disrespectful, selfish, unforgiving, dishonest, and uncommitted. That's who I want to work for."

The principles are self-evident. Again, in 30 years, [I've] never had anybody raise their hand and say, "I disagree." I mean, which part do you disagree with? It's apple pie and the flag. The difficulty isn't getting intellectual agreement. The difficulty is to get them to start practicing.

TS: Yes. And I like the way that you've laid it out here. It's clear to me that you took it

quite seriously, this idea of, “It’s not enough for me to preach these principles, to teach these principles. I have to be involved in a change process, in helping people change.”

And you mentioned something, that you’re working on a new book, and that it has to do with relationships and community. It seems to be that when you get your teeth into something—a question that you really care about—that you take it seriously. So I’m sure that this new book that you’re working on is some product of you chewing on a question quite deeply. An