

SERVICE **IN** ACTION

A real-world leadership case study from the Service Leaders at [FourSimpleWords.ca](https://www.foursimplewords.ca)

Leader, Know Thyself



Emma Smith with her life partner, Ben

“You can always say no.”

Emma Smith heard this a lot in early 2022. Meeting after meeting, medical appointment after medical appointment, counselling session after counselling session. Hundreds of conversations began and ended with this simple, clear and authentic permission to step back. It was an important message for Emma to hear as she was making a big decision. She was in the process of getting ready to donate a kidney to her life partner, Ben.

When you hear Emma talk about this decision, it doesn't sound like the significant and brave act that many of her family and friends feel it was. For Emma, this was a commitment she took the right amount of time to reflect over and when she was ready, jumped in with both feet.

“This was an act of service because I wanted to help someone,” reflected Emma as she celebrated a healthy six-month surgery anniversary. “It was a big decision for sure. And, once I put my hand up to see if I was a match, I was in. I was fully committed to seeing this as far as I could. Before that decision, it was important to take time and really reflect if this was something I could or wanted to do. When I knew it was, there was a sense of calm, purpose and even excitement. Because of that personal check-in and being clear about the why behind my decision, the second they took that first vial of blood, I was confident this was the right thing to do.”

This intentionality about service is a common theme in our Four Simple Words research. We often hear from leaders it is vital to be clear about their “why” when they step into a place that will require them to authentically serve. These

Story content graciously shared by Emma Smith



leaders understand that good service is a partnership which demands we understand the specific value or support we can offer. This can happen during a brief interaction over a coffee shop counter or a lifelong commitment like donating a kidney. Good intentions without clarity can quickly turn into spaces and relationships of confusion, possible resentment, and misunderstood goals.

Kindness and Service

Acts like Emmas are often labelled as kindness. Our research tells us that, while related, kindness and service are not the same for two specific reasons. And, as we look for ways to truly harness the power of service, it is important to recognize those differences. Before we get into those specifics, we want to be clear about one thing: kindness and service are important and we are big fans of both! #KindnessMatters—the world needs more kindness. It also needs *real* service.

The first difference between kindness and service is risk. Being kind is often low risk. It is given on our terms and is grounded in our own bias of what someone else needs. It will often look like simple gestures such as holding a door open, giving a compliment, or showing empathy in a conversation. Kindness requires little-to-no planning and is usually exchanged during short-term personal interactions. Buying and giving a sandwich to someone who is homeless is an act of kindness.

Service, however, requires more emotional risk. To be clear, it does not need to be as risky as donating an organ! It will, however, demand the deepening of an authentic and equity-based relationship. In the case of wanting to help someone who appears to be homeless, true service would require stopping to talk with (not to) them, which can be uncomfortable and will interrupt our plans. During that conversation, we would ask if they are hungry and check in to see if they would like something to eat. If yes, going away and finding what they wanted (not what was convenient to buy) and then returning with their choice of food could be a significant investment of time. And, good service would require we not quickly run away after dropping it off—as we may have done in our act of kindness. Service then is more involved, complicated, and risk-filled than kindness.

Learn more about organ donorship

[BeADonor.ca](https://www.beadonor.ca) is run by The Trillium Gift of Life Network which is an Ontario government agency focused on the promotion and coordination of organ donations. It has resources about organ donorship and how you can support the system. Learn more about supporting kidney donation at [The Kidney Foundation of Canada](https://www.kidney.ca). Most importantly, talk with your family about your plans for organ donorship and add your name to the donor list in your province. Signing up only takes a few minutes and, one day, could save up to eight lives.



Service Leadership Takeaways

1. Service Leaders understand the connection and difference between kindness and service. They use kindness as a way to explore how they can be of real service.
2. They also recognize the key question to balancing kindness and service is how much change (sometimes internalized as discomfort) they are willing to receive.

Partnership is Key

The second difference is partnership. True service can be instigated by kindness (in this case, seeing a need) but is not service until we willingly enter into a partnership with someone who agrees that they want to receive something. Until we have an agreement about what the beginning, middle, and end of what that partnership looks like, we can't have service. In our example above, it is the person we have connected with telling us that they would appreciate a meal. Good service (unlike kindness) isn't a one-way flow of energy, effort, or a desire to save someone. Service is a clear and welcome act of sharing between two people.

When we look at the risk that Emma took (the emotional and physical risks were significant), and the partnership that Emma agreed to (there was a clear beginning, middle, and end to this gift) it is clear this generous act of love was a great example of service.

"I'd only known this person for three months when I started the process," Emma quietly shares. "That was it. This is why, before I told people I was doing this, it was so important I work through this and said, 'okay, this isn't like you're doing it for your mother or your father. This is someone who you just started dating and this relationship could end.' I had to ask, 'are you going to still be okay with what you've done?' And everything inside me kept pointing toward yes. I believe our paths crossed at the right time for many reasons. It's hard to ignore the specific serendipitous timing of it all."

Watch Your Energy

Emma also agrees with one of the core tenets of good Service Leadership. Managing energy levels allows us to be of service to others in the short and long term.

"I've learned when I give to others in a way that is long-term harmful to me, I've done such an injustice to myself and others. After a lot of self-work, I've recognized that you have to help yourself before you can help anybody else. And that help is really about knowing and trusting yourself. It's not about putting my needs first but it is about knowing my strengths and weaknesses and being really honest about them. I move through life a lot more confidently, because when I look in the mirror, I know how to check in with myself

Great Elora Coffee

The next time you are in Elora, say “hi” to Emma and her team at [The Lost & Found Cafe](#). Located downtown on Mill St West, you can count on great coffee, a really tasty breakfast bagel and of course, great service.



first. And when I really understand my intention, I can do so much more good for the people around me.”

Kindness is a Gateway to Service

Here is another pro tip we heard from Emma and others: kindness is a gateway to service. Service Leaders view kindness as a tool that can lead to growth and impact. They use simple acts of kindness as a way to experiment and better understand how they can be of eventual service. Because it is low threat, kindness is a quick and easy way to test the waters (for yourself and those we want to be in service to) if there is more to be done. Kindness unto itself is a good thing. Being kind can also open us up to finding ways we can step into service with confidence and clarity.

This idea of serving others comes naturally to Emma. Her parents modelled compassion, caring, and community involvement at an early age. She also owns and runs [The Lost & Found Cafe](#), a successful coffee shop in Elora, and has worked hard to build a team culture focused on great (customer) service. Emma modelled confidence when she





Kindness (little personal change)	Service (more personal change)
Easy	Hard
Short-term impact	Long term change
Well-intentioned	Deeply authentic
About me	About someone else
Little emotional risk	Lots of emotional risk
One-way	Partnership

FOUR
Simple Words

Four Simple Words is building a movement to transform organizations and lives through the power of service.

We have seen the future and it is demanding we leadersembrace service as a way to heal ourselves, build sustainable relationships and solve our 21st-century problems.

This case study is a gift from Emma and Ben about what it means to be in service to others. Learn more about the four simple words and our passion for service at foursimplewords.ca

bought the coffee shop in early 2021—during the pandemic! Clearly, Emma is not one to shy away from a challenge. Her genuine humility about that may be the superpower that drives her success. This was her response when asked what the rest of us need to know about organ donorship.

“Honestly, just how easy it is to do and how many people are in need of this kind of service. Yes, it had moments of exhaustion and it was a roller coaster waiting for test results. The fear you face is real and is something you need to check in with yourself before beginning this process, but ultimately the stress and worry are minimal compared to the individual on the other end of this transaction. There was fear of rejection; just as strong was the fear of getting a complete head-to-toe health screen and discovering something unknown about myself. Once you get over those initial concerns, this process really is manageable and very rewarding. Almost six months to the day from the surgery, I’m back to my regular hard-working routine and healthier than most people out there. Ben is well on his way to recovery too. The math is really simple: in exchange for two months of not feeling well I was able to save someone’s life. That is a pretty great return on my time.”