

# Leaders Eat Last

“Leaders Eat Last” is a leadership philosophy popularized by Simon Sinek. At its core, it means that leaders put the needs, safety, and well-being of their people before their own comfort or status. In practical terms, leaders use their authority to serve, not to extract privileges.

***In non-profit organizations—where missions matter, resources are limited, and burnout risk is high—this concept is especially powerful!***

Non-profits rely heavily on mission-driven staff, volunteers and board members, and trust from donors and communities. When leaders prioritize themselves, morale drops and trust erodes. When leaders consistently put others first, people feel safe, valued, and motivated to give their best. By utilizing the “Leaders Eat Last” concept, it creates a stronger commitment to the mission, higher retention of staff and volunteers, healthier organizational culture, and better long-term impact.

This concept does not mean that leaders are weak or self-sacrificing to the point of burnout. In fact, strong leaders protect themselves so they can better protect others. Service does not mean neglecting boundaries. This method is most effective when used as a daily leadership mindset, not as an emergency response.

## People Before Position

Leadership is not about rank.  
It's about responsibility.

A leader's role is to:

- Protect their team from unnecessary stress
- Remove obstacles that block progress
- Share credit for wins
- Take responsibility when things go wrong

## Safety Creates Performance

When people feel psychologically safe, they speak up with ideas and concerns, take initiative, and collaborate instead of competing.

Leaders Eat Last by ensuring:

- Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities
- Concerns can be raised without fear
- Respect is modeled at all levels

## Service Over Privilege

Leadership perks should never come at the expense of the team.

This means leaders:

- Don't hoard information
- Don't take credit for others' work
- Don't expect special treatment during hard times

### What “Leaders Eat Last” Looks Like in a Non-Profit Organization:

#### For Executive Directors and Senior Staff

- Taking pay freezes or reductions before cutting staff hours
- Stepping in to support frontline work during busy periods
- Being transparent about financial realities
- Listening before making major decisions

#### For Board Members

- Supporting staff rather than micromanaging them
- Prioritizing the mission over personal agendas
- Asking, “What does the team need to succeed?”
- Holding leadership accountable with respect

#### For Program and Volunteer Leaders

- Covering shifts when volunteers fall short
- Ensuring volunteers have tools, training, and recognition
- Protecting volunteers from unrealistic expectations

Remember that this method is not to be used to avoid accountability, allow performance issues to slide, make everyone equal in authority, or ignore the needs of the organization.

**It means making hard decisions with empathy and fairness.**

### Practical Ways to Apply This Philosophy

- Start meetings by recognizing team contributions
- Ask for input before decisions are made that affect staff or volunteers
- Share difficult news honestly and early
- Model work-life boundaries
- Step up first during challenging moments

In non-profit organizations, leadership is not about being first—it’s about being last in line for comfort and first in line for responsibility. When leaders eat last, trust grows. When trust grows, people stay. And when people stay engaged and supported, the mission thrives.