

Servant Leadership: An Ancient Style with 21st Century Relevance

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Abstract

Servant leadership is not a new concept; it has roots in ancient history. Robert Greenleaf (1970) revitalized the practice of servant leadership in modern organizations, but little progress has been made in the decades since in conceptualizing and operationalizing servant leadership. A review of the current literature identifies the history of servant leadership and outlines the recent path this leadership style is traveling toward increased organizational acceptance. A lack of a universally-accepted model, a shortage of quantifiable research, and the absence of a comprehensive instrumentation have slowed the acceptance of servant leadership amongst business scholars and practitioners and led to considerable confusion of what servant leadership is and is not. Examination of the servant leadership research and instrumentation reveals that servant leadership is at a critical moment in its journey towards becoming a fully recognized leadership style. Given that Van Dierendonck's (2011) work brings together the previous models with a comprehensive measurement system, servant leadership is poised to enter the next stage of organizational acceptance.

Keywords: Leadership; Servant Leadership; Leadership Measurement.

JEL classification: M12, M14, M19

1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners alike must have a thorough understanding of the various leadership styles that could effectively be employed to lead organizations into an increasingly complex and uncertain global business environment. Much research has been completed and authenticated with regard to mainstream styles of accepted leadership such as democratic, transactional, and transformational leadership, but there is significantly less available research on a leadership style that has been in practice for thousands of years - servant leadership. While Robert Greenleaf (1970) brought this leadership style into the corporate spotlight, it was not until nearly the turn of the twenty-first century that

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it began garnering any meaningful research attention from leadership scholars and experts. Therefore, there is a great need for consensus with regard to what exactly servant leadership is and is not (Brown & Bryant, 2015), particularly with regard to the leadership crisis that is taking place on a global level (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016).

This paper seeks to demonstrate what servant leadership is and, perhaps more importantly, what it is not. The key objective is to demonstrate that servant leadership is not simply some utopian philosophy that holds no merit in today's organizations; rather it can be a highly desirable style of leadership that can be examined, understood, and applied from a holistic perspective, philosophically, tangibly, and most recently quantitatively. The paper begins with a brief historical reflection of servant leadership to demonstrate its wide sweeping application over thousands of years. Next, it clarifies what servant leadership is not, followed by a concise explication of what servant leadership is. From there, the authors of the paper expound why servant leadership works and how it can be measured for its organizational effectiveness. Concluding thoughts initiate a call for an even deeper exploration for the most meaningful application of what proves to be a very viable and potentially highly desirable style of leadership.

2. A Brief History

Servant leadership has a long and rich history. In a more modern context, it can be traced back to Robert Greenleaf (1970). While Greenleaf (1970) reinvigorated the concept of servant leadership, he did not create it. Servant leadership dates back to ancient history. Ancient monarchies acknowledged that their leadership was in service of their people and country (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Though servant leadership is sometimes assumed historically as a Christian leadership paradigm, servant leadership has influenced and been influenced by many of the cultures of the world. According to Winston and Ryan (2008), the teachings of Confucius are similar in construct to servant leadership; likewise, some of the constructs of servant leadership show up in the Zhou Dynasty (111 - 249 B.C.) (Hirschy, Gomez, Patterson, & Winston, 2012). The traditional tribal leadership of the Bedouin-Arab culture also aligned with the concepts of servant leadership, as these leaders were expected to be selfless and elevate the needs of family and guests above their own needs. Undoubtedly, one of the best-recorded examples of servant leadership in history comes from the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Jewish culture two thousand years ago. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) suggest that Jesus was the first to "introduce the notion of servant leadership to everyday human endeavor" (p. 58). These teachings were paradoxical two thousand years ago, and still present a conundrum today as the term "servant leader" strikes many as an oxymoron. In more recent history, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. may serve as examples demonstrating servant leadership.

As noted previously, Greenleaf (1970) was the first to begin the process of operationalization and applying servant leadership to modern organizations.

Spears (2004) clarifies Greenleaf's definition of servant leadership by presenting ten salient characteristics present in Greenleaf's description - listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and building community. Spears' (2004) revived the study of servant leadership in the twenty first century; subsequent studies on servant leadership abound, with 39 peer reviewed articles published in high ranking management journals between 2004 and 2011 (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Spears' model was quickly followed by additional characteristic models from Ehrhart (2004), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008), Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) and Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), with each of these models progressively leading toward clearer operationalization and measurability.

Despite its introduction as an organizational leadership style, more than 414 books published and more than 481 dissertation and peer-reviewed articles in the last four decades (Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, & Baggerly-Hinojosa, 2015) the existing empirical studies (Laub, 1999), servant leadership is still in the early stage of theoretical development (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Laub (1999) laments that servant leadership lacks consensus of definition and theoretical framework. Though our understanding of servant leadership has advanced considerably since 1999, it has not yet been fully operationalized (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Van Dierendonck (2011) suggests that with a valid and reliable method of measuring servant leadership it will grow into a fully operational practice, taking its rightful place with other established styles of leadership in the near future. Setting an appropriate understanding of what servant leadership is and is not will further aid in the ongoing effort to define and operationalize servant leadership.

3. What Servant Leadership Is Not

Servant leadership is not well understood. The dichotomous nature of servant leadership may lead to a general misunderstanding of what servant leadership really is. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) suggest that one of the reasons servant leadership suffers from a scarcity of research is that so many see it as an oxymoron. For many, it seems to be difficult to create a legitimate perception of a servant who leads. The misperception is likely due to an incorrect understanding of both what a leader is and what a servant is. Recent history leaves an indelible impression on our understanding of leadership. The trait theory of leadership stemming from the 'great man myth' (Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn, & Lyons, 2011) identified leadership with traits that allowed leaders to lead with authority and power (McFarlane, 2011). The great man myth perception of leadership says little of interpersonal skills needed to lead well (Yukl, 2012). On the other hand, the humility and meekness of the servant are "seen as weak or ineffective in a society where domination, oppressive strategies, and individualism are stronger values than humility, collectivism, and sharing of power and authority

with others” (McFarlane, 2011, p. 31). These misconceptions of leader and servant combine to result in a wrong understanding that servant leaders engage a lackadaisical or laissez-faire style of leadership.

Servant leadership is not disengaged or weak. Servant leadership is neither lackadaisical (i.e., lacking in enthusiasm and determination), nor laissez-faire (i.e., it does not things take their own course without interfering). Servant leaders are as proactive, ambitious, and driven as any other leader, but the focus of their drive differs from that of other leaders. What differentiates servant leadership from other styles of leadership is its primary focus on the follower first (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Whereas many, if not most, styles of leadership direct their focus first on a mission and second on empowering followers to achieve that mission, servant leadership directs its focus first on the ability of the individuals to succeed and second on the success of the mission. In this way, servant leaders serve those who follow their lead and collectively with their teams serve organizations or missions. This leadership focus reveals strength through discipline and humility, which is often demonstrated through the leader’s ability to put their own needs after that of those they serve. Servant leaders accomplish organizational mission by helping their followers develop and succeed. The perception of a servant leader should be one of a courageous steward who holds people accountable for their own good (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

4. What Servant Leadership Is

First and foremost, servant leadership is difficult. In fact, one could argue that it is more challenging than most if not all other known leadership styles, because in practical reality it is often easier to require follower compliance than it is to inspire a willing acceptance of the requirements needed to meet an organizational mission and vision (Patterson, 2011). Not surprisingly, for both the scholastic and practitioner communities alike, a philosophy rooted in placing the needs of followers before the needs of the organization is counter-intuitive to what so many have believed to be a logical or viable form of organizational leadership (Brown & Bryant, 2015).

Therefore, the immediate question becomes, why try to implement servant leadership? At their core, servant leaders are those individuals who develop and empower others to reach their highest potential (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This speaks directly to the individual potential of the follower(s), not the potential of the organization. Yet, servant leadership embraces the notion that if the followers are maximizing their potential, this will directly translate to the potential of the organization, or, in other words, organizational performance.

Further, given the lack of understanding and clarity surrounding servant leadership, it often gets confused with transformational leadership. This is in part due to the fact that servant leadership is itself a transformational approach to create a more caring and just society (Beck, 2010). While this is a noble and

noteworthy descriptor of one of the key elements of servant leadership, the fact that it contains a transformational component does not make it interchangeable with transformational leadership. The two styles may have striking similarities at first glance, but servant leadership differs from transformational leadership by providing moral development through charismatic effects (Graham, 1991). Unequivocally, the transformational leadership style places no direct emphasis on moral or personal development.

Graham (1991) and Farling, Stone, and Winston, (1999) assert that servant leadership is similar to Burns' (1978) transforming leadership, in that both approaches encourage leaders and followers to "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality." (p. 20). Thus, while both styles of leadership share this commonality, this is where their similarities end.

The most traditional approaches to organization, leadership, and management have a tendency to consolidate power amongst a few people within an organization, who in turn expect rigid compliance down each level of the organizational hierarchy (Winston & Fields, 2015). Accordingly, in this context, charismatic and transformational leader behaviors focus on inspiring and engaging followers as the means to attain organizational goals (Winston & Fields, 2015). This is where transformational and servant leadership begin to diverge and take noticeably different paths in meeting the mission and vision of the organization, because, it begins at the traditional assumption of concentrated power and clear authoritarian relationships in the leader/follower exchange. Even if the organization were flattened and such assumed power were removed from the leadership equation, there is yet another key distinction between transformational and servant leadership. In a transformational leadership model, the clear priority is on the goals of the organization, not the people working to achieve those goals, as is the case with servant leadership. Thus, the key difference between servant leadership and transformational leadership is that servant leadership places the people within the organization first, while transformational leadership places the mission of the organization first.

5. Why Servant Leadership Works

Contrary to much popular opinion, there is a combination of philosophical, tangible, and empirical evidence that suggests that servant leadership not only works, but meets critical criteria that would deem it both an effective and desirable form of leadership in a myriad of organizational settings and contexts. This point will be demonstrated by the following two sections.

Servant leadership at the most fundamental level works, because it incorporates one of the proven elements of effective leadership in general. Effective leadership is not linear, nor is it a one-way form of communication or event; rather it is highly interactive (Northouse, 2007). This notion that leadership is very much a two-way relationship classifies many archaic leadership styles as ineffective, but it would certainly include styles such as transactional and

transformational leadership in addition to servant leadership as viable and/or desirable styles. Servant leadership is the most interactive style of leadership when it comes to leader/follower engagement, since the primary emphasis for attaining organizational goals is based on serving the followers tasked with achieving those goals.

Another reason servant leadership works is due to the fact that it can have a direct correlation to employee engagement. The most recent Gallup employee engagement survey statistics indicate that only 32% of Americans are engaged at work; and this number drops off even sharper on a global level to a mere 13% of employees being engaged in their jobs (Mann & Harter, 2016). Put another way, this means that almost 70% of the U.S. workforce and 87% of the global workforce are either disengaged or actively disengaged in their work. Thus, a high degree of engagement between leaders and followers will be required to get these numbers moving in the opposite direction. Ultimately, leaders have the responsibility of converting people within an organization from a place of being mission neutral to becoming advocates for the organization who joyfully give their time and talents, which in turn enhances the value of the organization (Stone, 2015). This requires unselfish leaders who are willing to go above and beyond with their own time and talent. Behaving unselfishly as a leader acts as a catalyst to create an organization full of motivated and enthusiastic employees (Manby, 2012). Placing the needs of the follower first is arguably the most unselfish posture that leaders can take toward their followers. Manby (2012) and Stone (2015) suggest, based on historical evidence, when servant leadership is applied correctly with the proper intentions, that an authentic and natural form of reciprocity takes place between the leader and the follower, thus increasing workforce engagement and improving organizational performance.

Additionally, servant leadership works from a moral perspective in two critical ways. First, from an organizational perspective, it is well documented that on a global level a leadership crisis exists as exemplified by the corporate fraud and scandals that regularly dominate news headlines despite the imposition of rules and regulations from governments and ethics boards alike (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). Thus, this becomes a crisis involving human behavior and human nature. Price (2004) asserts that humans are more likely to behave immorally when there is sufficient reason to believe that they have run out of reasons to behave morally. Spears' (2004) ten characteristics of servant leadership demonstrate there is arguably no more morally virtuous leadership style in existence today. While both moral and ethical failure are still plausible in a servant led organization, this style potentially acts as the best safeguard against these types of failures based on what we know to date with regard to leadership theory and leading organizations. Second, from a follower perspective, today's workforce is far removed from the days of healthy job security, pension plans, and other employer incentives that were made readily available as recently as one or two workforce generations ago. Further, those currently entering the workforce are expected to change jobs at least four times between the time they graduate

from university and the age of thirty-two (Long, 2016). Thus, mutual suspicion between organizations and employees is likely to persist, in extreme cases leading to a “fight or flight” reaction that impairs organizational effectiveness. By contrast, servant leadership by its very nature can dispel these fears and break down barriers between the organization and those who serve in it (Griffiths, 2009).

Finally, Jim Collins (2001) in his seminal work *Good to Great* identifies the Level 5 leader, which is the greatest level of executive leadership ability and capability identified in his extensive research of companies around the world (Collins, 2001). According to Collins (2001), the level 5 leader “blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will” (p. 21). To date, servant leadership is the only leadership style that prescriptively calls for personal humility as one of the keys to successful implementation. Additionally, as has already been addressed, servant leaders do not fit the stereotype of being weak, rather quite the contrary. Thus, servant leadership fits almost seamlessly within the context of what Collins identifies as the highest level of leadership capabilities. While the work of Collins (2001) identifies the high potential of servant leadership in theory, because it can now also be quantitatively measured, it becomes easier for even the greatest of skeptics to see its viability and value in practice.

6. Servant Leadership Instrumentation and Validity

Servant leadership has suffered from a lack of consensus of how to measure its effectiveness. The historical models of the last four decades have produced six different instruments to measure servant leadership (Green, Rodriguez, Wheeler, & Baggerly-Hinojosa, 2015, p. 79):

- Organizational Leadership Assessment (Laub, 1999)
- Servant Leadership Scale (Ehrhart, 2004)
- Servant Leadership Questionnaire (Barbutto and Wheeler, 2006)
- Servant Leadership Scale (Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson, 2008)
- Servant Leadership Behavior Scale (Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008)
- Servant Leadership Survey (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011)

Green et al. (2015) do an excellent job of identifying each of the reliable and validated available instruments and providing a brief overview of each. Following the development of each instrument from 1999 through 2011, it poses an interesting perspective on how the understanding of servant leadership has progressed. Unsurprisingly, while each of the instruments has its own merit, each also suffers from shortcomings.

Van Dierendonck (2011) laments the lack of foundational agreement on these instruments. In that sense, he identifies with Page and Wong (2000) that conceptual clarity and full operationalization of servant leadership is hindered by

the lack of a reliable and valid instrument that builds from the combined foundation of the previous models. At the same time, Van Dierendonck concurs with Leary and Hoyle (2009) that complicated constructs such as servant leadership cannot be fully measured by a single instrument, but may require a broader range of instruments. These two opposing sentiments should not be thought of as a contradiction, but rather a balance. It should be acknowledged that no single instrument can capture every aspect of servant leadership such as behaviors, characteristics, and motivations, but instead that a common instrument is needed to identify the effective dimensions of servant leadership that affect the follower and the leader. Van Dierendonck (2011) suggests that previous instruments suffered a lack of dimensional validity and focused heavily on the servant aspect of servant leadership to the detriment of the leader aspect of servant leadership. As a consequence, the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) is the latest instrument that was developed (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). The SLS takes into consideration the previous models of servant leadership while validating the interdependent dimensions of servant leadership and focusing equally on the servant aspect and the leader aspect of servant leadership (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

The result of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) work is a thirty question instrument which measures eight dimensions of the leader-follower relationship, measured from the perspective of the follower. The eight dimensions are:

- Empowerment: empowering and encouraging the development of followers;
- Accountability: holding individuals and teams responsible for the outcomes in their control;
- Standing back: supporting the interest of others and directing recognition for accomplishments to those that deserve the credit;
- Humility: the leader's ability to acknowledge his or her their own limitations and seek the contributions of others to overcome those limitations;
- Authenticity: accurately representing, both privately and publicly, one's true self;
- Courage: challenging accepted models and daring to take risks to find new solutions;
- Forgiveness (interpersonal acceptance): the ability to understand where others are coming from and forgive when confronted with offenses, arguments, and mistakes;
- Stewardship: the ability to act as caretaker and role model in accepting responsibility for the larger organization.

Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) completed two qualitative and eight quantitative studies across two countries from eight samples with 1571 participants to establish the reliability and validity of the SLS. The SLS

dimensions are relatively easy to interpret and can be used in different settings. Most importantly, the SLS “is the first instrument to include the essential elements from the servant leadership literature (Greenleaf, 1996) that can be psychometrically distinguished” (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 264), from both the servant and the leader perspective. With the introduction of the SLS, the effects of servant leadership on both organizations and individuals can be established, which should lead to a fuller, more common understanding of servant leadership.

7. Conclusions

The primary purpose of this paper was to demonstrate what servant leadership is and what it is not. The paper aimed to demonstrate that servant leadership is a potentially highly desirable style of leadership that can be examined, understood, and applied. The rich history should make researchers and practitioners alike pause to consider the viability of servant leadership today. There are few, if any, practices that directly deal with human interaction and engagement that stand such an enduring test of time as servant leadership. Greenleaf’s (1970) thrusting of servant leadership into the corporate spotlight was perhaps the most significant contribution to servant leadership in the 20th century. Examples of recent historical leadership figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. indicate that Greenleaf did not resurrect a dead leadership practice. Rather, he simply articulated and began to operationalize what was an ongoing practice, which was an important step toward current organizational understanding and relevance.

Greenleaf’s (1970) contributions were significant and must not be diminished. They laid the foundation for servant leadership practice in modern organizations. Unfortunately, this foundation has not produced rapid growth; there has been and continues to be a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding the practice of servant leadership. The more recent work of Van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011) that produced the SLS is perhaps one of the more exciting breakthroughs with regard to servant leadership since Greenleaf’s (1970) work. With a functional understanding of what servant leadership is and is not from a philosophical point of view and a tangible means by which to quantitatively measure its organizational effectiveness, perhaps the leadership community can begin to marry the theoretical and the measurable aspects of this style, bringing us closer to a universal understanding and acknowledgement of how—and more importantly, why—servant leadership. Thus, the authors of this paper propose that this is the trajectory that much needed further research on servant leadership could take in order to foster more widespread understanding and acceptance of its viability in modern day organizations.

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