

Servant Leadership: a Model Rooted in the Word of God

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Introduction

In the Holy Bible, in chapter twenty of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, it is written that the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked a favor of Jesus: that her sons be given positions of great authority in Jesus' kingdom, to sit at his right hand and at his left hand. She desired her sons to be rulers, leaders, to be chief figures (much like a Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer) and to exercise their divinely granted authority over others in Jesus' kingdom. He refused her request and in so doing he presented a clear dichotomy between two types of leaders: those who dominate others and exercise authority by reason of their own greatness and position versus those who use their position and authority to serve those whom they lead, even sacrificially, for the good of the followers and motivated by love for them. In the passage at hand, Jesus presents himself as the perfect example of this others-focused form of leadership.

But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28, KJV)

The mother of James and John aspired for her sons to be leaders, but her understanding of leadership was informed by the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and Judea, under which she lived. Jesus draws her attention, along with that of the other disciples, and modern day readers, to a different way of leading; a way that he prescribes for his followers.

This way of leading through selfless service to others, through ministering, through putting the followers' best interests first, which was described and prescribed in the Holy Bible, has been more recently described in the modern academic field of leadership and termed servant leadership. According to modern academia, servant leadership is a behavioral approach to leadership whereby the leader chooses to serve the follower through prioritizing the needs and development of the follower above those of the leader and modeling ethical and moral behavior in every situation (Northouse, 2019). And while servant leadership does not require an explicitly religious foundation, Christian or otherwise, its unique focus among leadership theories upon modeling moral behavior is a central element extending beyond the leader/follower relationship, beyond industry stakeholders, and driving a concern for social justice in general and a desire to serve the greater good of society (Northouse, 2019). Also unique to servant leadership is its self-replicating nature whereby servant leaders strive to develop followers who will in turn become servant leaders themselves "either as the result of direct grooming by the leader or indirectly through the modeling of leader behavior" (Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser, 2014, p. 1437). In these ways, servant leadership is reminiscent, or perhaps reflective, of the mission of the church, as delivered by Jesus, to disciple the nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

History

The modern theory of servant leadership began with the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970 (Northouse, 2019). He coined the term and both his personal character and his academic works have been guiding lights for researchers and writers as they build upon his foundation to develop a comprehensive model of servant leadership (Northouse, 2019). Greenleaf himself credits the nascent inspiration of the theory of servant leadership to his reading of *The Journey to the East*, a novel by Hermann Hesse, written in 1956, wherein is told the story of a servant's

critical role in the mission of a group of travelers – only upon his disappearance do the travelers realize that it was the servant who was truly leading (Northouse 2019). From the wisdom gained by his reading of this novel coupled with his own 40 years of service at AT&T and mediated by his spiritual identification with the Quakers, a particularly peace-loving sect of Christianity, Greenleaf birthed the theory of servant leadership and posthumously furthers its development through the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, which he originally founded as the Center for Applied Ethics in 1964, a foundation which continues to serve to this day as “a clearinghouse and focal point for research and writing on servant leadership” (Northouse, 2019, p. 228).

Key Thinkers

Indicative of the centrality of Greenleaf to the theory of servant leadership is the fact that one of the major academicians to contribute to the field did so through his identification of 10 characteristics of servant leadership as found in the writings of Greenleaf. It was Spears who, in 2002, published this first model of servant leadership based on Greenleaf’s writings, casting the theory as a decalogue of leader behaviors: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Northouse, 2019).

In the same year that Spears published his work and during the year following, several influential authors extolled the virtues of the theory, including Bennis, Blanchard, Hodges, Covey, DePree, Senge, and Wheatley; and not surprisingly several major companies got on board as well, including Southwest Airlines, The Toro Company, and Men’s Wearhouse (Northouse, 2019). While servant leadership was being put to good use after the turn of the millennium, it remained very much a theory-in-development with no consensus of a singular model, for at this same time a myriad of additional researchers were each positing their own take on the theory

(Northouse, 2019). More recently, Peter G. Northouse has distilled the mash of characteristics, conditions, behaviors, and outcomes into his own model of servant leadership building upon the works of Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson in 2008 and Liden, Panaccio, Hu, and Meuser in 2014 (Northouse, 2019).

Function in Organizational Life

Servant leadership functions as a guide for leader behaviors that work together to prioritize followers' needs and desires above those of the leader and further the personal development of the follower, relating the treatment of followers to the end results in organizational effectiveness (Northouse, 2019). As such, servant leadership requires dealing openly and equitably with followers, being receptive to their ideas and concerns, and building real relationships with them resulting in a deep understanding of individual followers by the leader and enabling the leader to aide the follower in realizing their full potential (Northouse, 2019).

The effects of servant leadership upon various measures of business success were examined by Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser who studied 961 employees at 71 different locations of a chain of restaurants (Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser, 2014). Their main finding was that through the propagation of servant leadership from leaders to followers, through the mechanisms of social learning and modeling, the entire culture of a business unit came to reflect the values of servant leadership and the resultant behaviors correlated with increased order accuracy, increased customer satisfaction, improved internal and external audit results, increased

employee identification with the business unit, and decreased turnover intention, all of which positively affected profitability (Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser, 2014).

Similarly, in their study of the effects of servant leadership behaviors exhibited by supervisors in the hotel industry in Spain, Elche, Ruiz-Palomino, & Linuesa-Langreo confirmed that servant leadership leads to an increase in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) indirectly through the mechanisms of social learning theory (SLT) and social exchange theory (SET), thereby increasing employee empathy and increasing “group service climate” within the organizational culture (Elche, Ruiz-Palomino, & Linuesa-Langreo, 2020, pp. 2036, 2046). Essentially, servant leadership was proven to result in followers going the extra mile for their leaders, for their coworkers, for their organizations, for their followers, and for their customers, and all of this OCB leads to service excellence and translates into profitability. So, while the focus of servant leadership is an altruistic desire to serve followers for their own benefit, a fortunate indirect effect is a better bottom line.

To explore whether the benefits of servant leadership, a theory that was primarily developed in the context of western cultural emphasis on equitable relationships between superiors and subordinates, would translate into an eastern context of more paternalistic and hierarchical leadership, Chen, Chen, and Li share the results of their study of 265 supervisor-subordinate relationships from industries in Taiwan in their article “The Influence of Leader’s Spiritual Values of Servant Leadership on Employee Motivational Autonomy and Eudaemonic Well-Being” (Chen, Chen, Li, 2013). By spiritual values they are referring not to the specific religious beliefs of supervisors but rather to the ethical and moral treatment of subordinates in a way that recognizes their existence whole human beings, not merely as the means to an industrial end. Motivational autonomy refers to the reasons why a subordinate

performs their duties, whether they do so simply to avoid negative consequences, or to gain positive external rewards, or to gain positive internal rewards, or because they have adopted the duties as their own desires (Chen, Chen, and Li, 2013). Eudaemonic well-being refers to the human potential in areas of personal growth and life-purpose (Chen, Chen, and Li, 2013).

In their research, Chen, Chen and Li found that, in the typically paternalistic and authoritarian work-culture of Taiwan, when servant leadership was present, with its altruistic concern for the well being of followers, then subordinates experienced a greater sense of well-being, less physical and emotional stress, and a greater degree of autonomous motivation (Chen, Chen, and Li, 2013). In essence, what they found was that servant leadership lead to positive effects in an eastern culture as well, and that it did so by transforming the paternalistic model from one of authoritarian power to one of benevolence – it was still a paternalistic relationship in an eastern culture, but it was more like the paternalism of a loving father under servant leadership.

The effectiveness and effects of servant leadership within a paternalistic culture are better understood in light of the work of Van Dierendonck, & Patterson in their article “Compassionate Love as a Cornerstone of Servant Leadership: An Integration of Previous Theorizing and Research” published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, where they state that “Compassionate love is foundational to servant leadership and is considered the cornerstone of the servant leader/follower relationship; this love is related to *aga’pao* love... the Greek term for moral love, meaning to do the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons” (Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 121). In this way servant leadership is further Biblically rooted. Not only does servant leadership operate in accord with the leadership principles espoused by Jesus in Matthew 20:25-28, as explored in the introduction to this paper, but servant leadership also has at its

foundation the fundamental Biblical principle of loving others more than self, as expressed in the following exchange between a lawyer and Jesus Christ:

“But when the Pharisees had heard that he put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Conclusion

Servant leadership at its core is the idea that the leader should serve the follower selflessly, and that the follower should emulate the leader in their service towards others. As a leadership model, it is not only effective, but also intriguing. It is a beautiful picture of altruism at work, a portrait that is yet unfinished, awaiting the next generation of servant leaders to take up their brushes and make their mark on the canvas. Modern research and development of the theory leaves room for exploration and synthesis as there remains some variability regarding the definition and model of servant leadership, and opportunities exist for further study of the model in practice within various cultures and industries. Servant leadership offers a prescription for an improved bottom line by implementing and propagating behaviors conducive to developing a culture of service, yet an improved bottom line is not the primary goal of the theory. Instead, servant leadership focuses its attention on the well-being of the follower and on modeling a service orientation and the positive effects on the bottom line are a welcome byproduct. In these

and other ways, servant leadership can strike one as paradoxical. It is a business practice and a way of loving others. It is a relatively new theory and an ancient practice. In seeking to better understand servant leadership, one can see the model clearly exemplified in the scriptures and principles of the Christian faith and in the person of Jesus Christ. It is an approach to leadership that can be learned and implemented in any industry and any society, and with the confidence of knowing that servant leadership is both supported by rigorous academic investigation and rooted in the truths of the Word of God.

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