

Servant Leadership in Question:
A Critical Review of Power within Servant Leadership

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Abstract

Servant leadership theory has been written about a great deal but has not been studied extensively. Much of the research work in support of servant leadership is based on opinion, case study, and emotional arguments. We examine servant leadership, its characteristics, and the promotion of this mythic theory as it has been defined through engendered language and a Judeo-Christian lens which implies certain values and leaves little space for questioning the theory. Servant leadership theory's ideal of a leader's service to others as a catalyst of organizational change through the adoption of a service-focused foundation sets an unrealistic goal for those who strive to emulate the examples referenced in the literature, such as Jesus Christ, the language used and implied values make exploring and challenging the theory tantamount to heresy. If servant leadership is to truly flourish as a viable theory of leadership, there must be more empirical research conducted and alternate personification examples of successful implementation.

Keywords: servant leadership, power, ethics, emotions

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Servant leadership has been evaluated, debated, and written about as a theoretical basis of leadership since Robert K. Greenleaf wrote his 1970 essay *The Servant as Leader* (Spears, 1996). Since that time little empirical evidence has been collected to demonstrate that this theory belongs among the ranks of more researched theories. If anything, servant leadership theory seems poised to take its place as another popular leadership theory appealing to emotions but holding little weight among those who seek empirical evidence that it is a viable and applicable theory of leadership. Much of the documented research in support of servant leadership is based on opinion, case study, and emotional arguments.

In addition to the need for empirical research, the verbiage used must be clarified to define the characteristics and attributes of servant leadership rather than to describe them. Ample information can be found in the literature which illustrates how servant leadership looks in action, but one is challenged to find writings that define what it is. Laub (2004) notes the importance of establishing definitional terms associated with servant leadership to “create a benchmark for future challenges and revisions” (p. 2). Without a definition of the theory, it is challenging for any researcher to determine if servant leadership could be effective in organizations.

Few modern examples of leaders and organizations using servant leadership are available in the literature, and little formal inquiry has been done into determining whether servant leadership works in organizations and how it can be applied. The predominant correlation is to the Judeo-Christian religious figure of Jesus Christ. By invoking this emotionally striking ideal as representative of what one must aspire to in order to be a servant leader, the religious appeal

of servant leadership is another factor which continues to drive its interest yet stymie serious research. As this ideal becomes more prominent as the vision of what a servant leader must be, it becomes increasingly difficult for one to argue against the ideal as truly representative.

This paper will review a definition of servant leadership and models proposed for the research of servant leadership, it will attempt to break down the contradiction of terms in servant leadership, and it will challenge the engendered language used to describe servant leadership and the religious overtones embedded which continue to feed the emotional appeal.

Identifying Servant Leadership

The term “servant leadership” was labeled by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1977 when he wrote:

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being *served*.

The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

(p.4)

Greenleaf formulated the notion that the true meaning of leadership comes from serving others first from his experience as an AT&T executive and his reflections on Hermann Hesse’s story *Journey to the East* (Eicher-Catt, 2005). In this story of spiritual pilgrimage, the main character, Leo, accompanies a group of travelers on a long journey. His songs and service to the group lift their spirits, and when Leo disappears, the group cannot continue and disbands. Some years later, the narrator, who was among the group, finds Leo and is brought into the Order which had

initiated the journey. He discovers that Leo is their heralded leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). From this story, and his own experiences, Greenleaf came to believe that in order for organizational change to occur those leading the organization must serve others which will inspire those served to serve others in turn. He believed that this ongoing call to serve will perpetuate itself until the priority is to meet others' needs through which each member will have his/her own needs met.

The theory of servant leadership has been emotion-laden from its inception, especially in times when organizations are being called into question based on their ethics (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). As noted by Wong and Page (2003) "SL [servant leadership] holds the promise of an ethical and socially responsible management and leadership as an antidote to corporate scandals." (p. 1) Organizations know they need to address the community's desire for better leadership, and they see servant leadership as a panacea to the greed, corruption, and economic devastation consumers have seen. The key to servant leadership's success is in its ideal as a value-based style of leadership which might invoke change in organizations and introduce greater morals and values into business. Both are integral components of the attributes of servant leadership.

Depending on the definition, there are five to twenty characteristics, attributes, or variables which describe the qualities of a servant leader. Based on Laub's (2004) definitions:

A leader is a person who sees a vision, takes action toward the vision, and mobilizes others to become partners in pursuing change. Leadership is an intentional change process through which leaders and followers, joined by a shared purpose, initiate action to pursue a common vision. (p. 4)

Given these definitions, Laub (1999) defines servant leadership as:

...an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization and those served by the organization. (p. 81)

When we consider these definitions, it becomes clear that the servant leader may be seen as the spiritual leader and soul of the organization.

Spears (1998) identified 10 attributes from Robert Greenleaf's writings on servant leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) took Spears' list a step further in identifying 20 unique characteristics of servant leadership and classifying them as "functional attributes...results from their repetitive prominence in the literature" and "other characteristics that are classified herein as accompanying attributes...appear to supplement and augment functional attributes" (p. 146-147).

In their research, Linden et al. (2008) noted nine dimensions of servant leadership from their review of the literature. There is a great deal of overlap as authors identify what makes a servant leader, but what is not contested is that the core concepts of values and morals are essential to being an effective servant leader.

Gender and Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a contradiction of terms and in description. By using the terms "servant" and "leader" Greenleaf (1977) created a paradox of two conflicting concepts which causes dissonant feelings. Evoking particularly deep emotion beginning with the juxtaposition

of the words “servant” and “leadership” as described by Eicher-Catt (2005) are the “underlying gendered implications of the terms involved” which call into question servant leadership’s gender-neutral practice and applicability. “Leader” is conventionally perceived to be a masculine term and identified with male traits, superior status, and authoritative style denoting a position of power. If the term “leader” is perceived as being privileged, then the term “servant” takes on the perception of being subjugated, oppressed, inferior, and female, bringing to mind the power imbalance dynamic at work within the definition and the organizations within which the term “servant leadership” is applied (Eicher-Catt, 2005).

Many of the characteristics of servant leadership identified previously would generally be attributed to a feminine style of leadership, and as Eicher-Catt (2005) indicates, as long as we think of the qualities associated with servant leadership as female qualities, men will likely eye servant leadership with skepticism because the pairing of the terms in servant leadership does not “de-gender” the language used. Male leaders who use of servant leadership may face challenge from subordinates when they incorporate qualities seen as feminine and may be viewed as having political motivations for amending their previous masculine managerial style with value and moral-driven characteristics.

The semiotic treatment of the term “servant leadership” places it in an ambiguous space where those so motivated could co-opt it for their own power usage because it appears to offer a balanced and neutral approach to leadership (Eicher-Catt, 2005). It is this dichotomous perception of servant leadership which offers the most fertile opportunity for linguistic critique as those who want to be perceived as practicing a softer leadership style could use the feminist language of servant leadership to implement a much more authoritative style of leadership under the guise of the supposedly more cooperative practice. Instead of being gender-neutral, servant

leadership asks the user to interact with others based on the chosen style at that moment causing organizational confusion and leadership crisis.

When the term servant leadership is viewed through the theological lens the element of gender stands out when “servant” and “leadership” are defined. Women have long been pointed to as transgressors in religious doctrine. In the theological sense the term “servant” receives the definition of female and takes on the “requisite shame or guilt associated with it” (p. 22). Such strong religious connotations assume the leader takes on the self-sacrificing role even while maintaining a strong leadership position which causes confusion among organizational members about the true leadership and its intentions. It is this use and promotion of engendered language that detracts from servant leadership’s potential use as a viable theory of leadership.

Religion and Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has largely made its mark through an emotional Judeo-Christian appeal. In spite of the Eastern spiritual tradition in which Hesse’s novel was written, proponents of servant leadership have situated it squarely in Christianity with no reference to alternate religious or spiritual movements.

Robert Greenleaf’s initial definition of a leader was appropriated specifically from religious doctrine not mere abstract spiritualism. Thoroughly steeped within the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends, i.e., Quakers, it is no wonder that Greenleaf proposed such an ideological movement for organizations. Greenleaf wanted the corporate world to be infused with and regulated by religious doctrine. (Eicher-Catt, 2005, p. 21)

Greenleaf’s message of serving others as a path to leading (1977) was revolutionary when first identified as a theory of leadership, but most authors since have cited no other historical, and few

modern, examples of servant leadership. It is this fact that outweighs servant leadership's other critiques because without modern examples from successful organizations, business and other, leaders are challenged to see the authenticity of servant leadership.

In an emotional appeal, most proponents and researchers continue to cite their example of the ideal servant leader, Jesus Christ. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) remarked that "Greenleaf is not the individual who first introduced the notion of servant leadership to everyday human endeavor. It was Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, who first taught the concept" (p. 58) and noted that the many examples of Christ's servant leadership are well-documented in the Bible.

We have seen the Judeo-Christian influence grow exponentially around the world. The spread of Christianity has been a focus of many churches, and while the idea of service to others is a component of religion and spiritual philosophy, it is closely linked to Judeo-Christian theology including "the internal conviction that the servant leader is a servant of a higher being or power, and in obedient gratitude to that higher being or power, serves other people" (Sendjaya, Sarros, & Santora, 2008, p. 406). Wong and Page (2003) write that "leaders need to take the risk of intentional vulnerability – willing to lose their job and even lose their life in serving others as Jesus did" (p. 6). Should we understand this to mean that servant leaders must give their lives in service to others? This question underscores the heart of the argument against viewing servant leadership as a theologically and emotionally driven practice. When one begins to see serving others through this frame, the theory becomes impossible to question, and if the theory becomes impossible to question, it is impossible to substantiate with empirical research.

The concern with these references to the Judeo-Christian perspective is that viewing servant leadership through one lens assumes one belief system which excludes non-believers and puts the development of the servant leadership theory at risk. When Wong and Page (2003)

write “Jesus is equally at home with the exercise of power and the humility of servanthood” (p. 2) they are not speaking all those who aspire to understand servant leadership and are setting up a scenario where questioning Jesus’ place in the discussion disables productive dialog about what servant leadership is and how it is practiced.

Laub (2003) notes that “Jesus clearly contrasted his own leadership to the autocratic model of the day” (p. 12) which gives today’s servant leaders license to contrast their own leadership with the modern autocratic model and categorize themselves with Jesus and, therefore, assume a position of being unquestionable. Taking servant leadership out of the Judeo-Christian tradition and putting it back in the realm of broader spirituality creates the opportunity for questions, conversation, and research.

Another argument against perpetuating a Judeo-Christian perspective of servant leadership through the example of Jesus Christ lies in the discussion of power. Servant leadership is optimally effective in a flattened organization where a more egalitarian style of leadership flourishes and decision-making is seen as a participatory process (Wong & Page, 2003). Most religious organizations, particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, have a hierarchical structure with top-down leadership. As Wong and Page (2003) describe:

One reason for the prevalence of authoritarian hierarchy (AH) in religious organizations is that religion is linked to divine authority or divine revelation...God is the Head, the CEO...governance is based on theocracy...divine authority is administered and mediated by a hierarchy of human authorities called by God. (p. 5)

In this sense, the hierarchy within Judeo-Christian organizations generates positions of power which breed ego. Servant leadership cannot succeed when the need for power overshadows the religious doctrine to serve, and the power-driven are reluctant to abdicate their power to serve

others. This struggle between power and service may be the Judeo-Christian religious tradition's largest obstruction to servant leadership.

The literature reviewed for this paper failed to regularly cite modern leaders who fit the descriptions of servant leaders. Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are examples of servant leadership whose characteristics and style can be studied and promoted as diverse ideals of what a servant leader is. The premise asserted by Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) that "I serve because I am the leader" (p. 60) seems particularly applicable to these individuals as serving others was not, for them, a means to an end but the end itself.

Models of Servant Leadership

A search of the literature reveals little research into servant leadership and even less empirical research which has produced a way of studying servant leadership outside of case studies or discussions of what servant leadership is. The following is a review of five models of servant leadership.

Servant Leadership Models

Russell and Stone (2002) offer two models of servant leader attributes put forth to become "a foundation for understanding, applying, researching, and developing the servant leader concept" (p. 145). These models are based on their assumption of nine functional attributes, operational characteristics which demonstrate repetitive inclusion in servant leader literature, and eleven accompanying attributes which are readily identified in the literature and which actuate servant leadership. The first model begins with the values and core beliefs from which servant leaders operate as the independent variable. Servant leadership manifested, and the individual's functional attributes, makes up the dependent variable. This interaction is

moderated by the accompanying attributes which impact the level of servant leadership displayed as the functional attributes. Model two builds on the construct as “servant leadership itself ultimately becomes an independent variable that affects the subsequent dependent variable – organizational performance” (p. 153).

Organizational Leadership Assessment

Laub (2003) developed the Organizational Leadership Assessment in 1999 to identify how servant leadership is defined, its characteristics, and whether its presence can be determined through a questionnaire. Dividing the work into two parts, Laub used a Delphi survey conducted on servant leadership experts to identify servant leadership attributes and then, used the attributes to construct the questionnaire. Originally an 80-item instrument, it was revised to 60 items, and Laub found the Organizational Leadership Assessment to be high in reliability and validity and has used it with other research and consulting.

Revised Servant Leadership Profile

Wong and Page (2003) revised their original Servant Leadership Profile to accommodate questions related to power and ego in authoritarian hierarchy. They added two subscales reflecting those characteristics in opposition to servant leadership to go with the eight subscales which indicate the presence of servant leadership characteristics. They also amended the way in which the survey is administered to accommodate a broader cross-section of leaders surveyed. The result is eight interpretable factors which the authors believe provides an easily understandable picture of servant leadership and the ways in which it can be implemented.

Servant Leadership Questionnaire

Barbuto and Wheeler’s (2006) work to conceptualize and measure servant leadership came out of their acknowledgement that empirical study had not produced theoretical

underpinnings or a measure of servant leadership and recognition that both are necessary for further study. They reviewed the literature and identified and defined 11 attributes of servant leadership from which they derived five factors. They determined that “servant leaders create serving relationships with their followers” (p. 319) and that “strong relationships with positive outcomes such as employees’ extra effort, employees’ satisfaction, and perceptions of organizational effectiveness” (p. 322) indicate the characteristics of servant leaders in the organization may help create a more emotionally healthy environment.

Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale

Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) reviewed the literature to identify six dimensions of servant leadership. In two phases, they interviewed organizational executives regarding servant leadership and surveyed on quantitative and qualitative items addressing servant leadership. They then conducted factor analysis on measurement and structural elements. The authors determined the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale is an effective scale for measuring dimensions of servant leadership behavior, and they believe it is a significant step ahead in the development of an empirical measurement and validation of servant leadership.

Implications for further Servant Leadership Research

The research described provides a look at how researchers might undertake the assessment servant leadership and how the research may change as a definition and set of attributes become part of the construct. These studies began with different assumption about servant leadership as a theory of leadership set apart by certain characteristics. All presume the reality of servant leadership and define what constitutes servant leadership behavior. None began by questioning the inception of servant leadership, including Greenleaf’s understanding of

Hesse, or Greenleaf's upbringing and its influence on his idea development. With no empirical data, obvious Judeo-Christian influence, and significantly engendered language, it is difficult to understand how a substantial argument could be made for the viability of servant leadership.

Empirical research is needed to tell us whether servant leadership can be accurately defined, measured, and validated. Instrumental to continued support and encouragement for servant leadership is a definition and working model on which to base further empirical servant leadership research and organizational support for servant leadership. Research is ongoing to develop an effective model and methodology to provide a clearer picture of what servant leadership looks like in practice.

In addition to the many citations of Jesus Christ as the epitome of servant leadership, it is necessary that we have more modern examples of servant leadership to cite as illustrations of what individuals may aspire to as servant leaders. In business, where servant leadership has the greatest potential impact, three leaders who identify as proponents of servant leadership have been pointed out in *Fortune* magazine by Levering and Moskowitz (2000) as "Top 100 Best Companies to Work For in America" based on their "openness and fairness, camaraderie/friendliness, opportunities, pride in work and company, pay/benefits, and security" (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, p. 62).

Through Herb Kelleher's exceptional service philosophy at Southwest Airlines, and his employees' caring approach and appreciation of each other (Quick, 1992), employees sense that the core values of their leadership are visible in their work and the example they set for others in the organization. Kelleher's organizational culture has become legendary in business, and what has been promoted as servant leadership is identified as the catalyst.

Similarly, Jack Lowe (1998) at TDIndustries promotes servant leadership and notes that when people become grounded in servant leadership, trust grows and the foundation for organizational excellence is established. By instilling trust in his employees through shared ownership of the company, Jack Lowe believes he has created a partnership and all-for-one/one-for-all philosophy, which is labeled as a key servant leadership ideal for success.

Jimmy Blanchard's service and commitment to his employees at Synovus Financial Corporation starts with family-oriented policies and practices which he believes demonstrates the value of the employees and instills camaraderie within the organization that goes beyond the work. Employees believe "they are part of a team that stands for something good, that there is a higher calling than just working to get a paycheck" (Chappel, 2005, p. 5) which Blanchard identifies as leading to more satisfied employees and greater organizational potential.

In response to problems in business, such as employees' psychological bullying by leadership, lack of work-life balance, and unethical business practices, organizations are promoting the use of servant leadership as a more employee-centered style of leadership, and it has become fiscally imperative for business leaders to consider the ethics at work in their corporations.

Conclusions

After forty years, servant leadership theory has some position in business, academic, and popular culture discourse, but questions remain regarding whether it will ultimately find a place with empirical staying power. In 2002, Sendjaya and Sarros wrote "leadership theory must be able to, among other things, describe why leaders do what they do, support predictions about the consequences of specific leadership behaviours, and prescribe specific circumstances under

which leaders perform most effectively” (p. 63). Researchers continue to describe servant leadership and work around the theory by telling us what servant leaders do, most often through case studies or by frequently citing outdated figures such as Jesus Christ which may stymie empirical research efforts as researchers do not want to be seen challenging Judeo-Christian values and tradition.

We are little closer to a clear understanding of what servant leadership is and how it works in organizations than we were in 1970 when Robert Greenleaf first coined the term. We do know is that room exists for empirical study, and if servant leadership is an effective theory for the future of leadership, we must begin answering the questions now so that the theory of servant leadership, which brings core values to bear in serving others, does not become another leadership casualty.

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