Leadership, Servant

While the concept of servant leadership is relatively new to the field of organization studies, many argue that it has been in practice for thousands of years. By way of definition, servant leadership places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. That is, servant leaders lead by serving their followers. Central to servant leadership is the valuing and development of people, the building of community, and the practice of authenticity; it also promotes the sharing of power between leaders and followers as means to benefiting each individual, the total organization, and the broader community.

Conceptual Overview

Greenleaf's 1977 essay entitled the "The Servant as Leader" is accredited as the foundation work from which the theory of servant leadership has emerged. In his essay, Greenleaf credits Herman Hesse's *The Journey to the East* as the source of his ideas about servant leadership. For Greenleaf, servant leaders begin with the natural feeling that they want to serve first; then they make a conscious choice to lead. He argues that such a leader is sharply different from one who is a leader first; the difference is manifest in the care taken by the servant leader to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being addressed. Greenleaf adds that the test of success for servant leadership is to ask, do those served grow as persons? Do they, through the service of the leader, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

While serving first is the defining characteristic of servant leadership, Greenleaf proposed several other attributes that are necessary for successful servant leadership; these included

- *listening*—servant leaders are able to listen to followers while at the same time directing them;
- *empathy*—they always maintain a sense of empathy toward followers;
- *imagination*—they have the ability to imagine and have the innovative capacity to provide vision;
- *intuition*—they must have a honed sense of intuition; and
- *foresight*—they must have the foresight necessary to make decisions that their followers will respect and benefit from.

The ideas that Greenleaf puts forth in his essay have idealistic, moral, and religious overtones. In regard to religion, other writers in the field suggest that even though Greenleaf was accredited with the founding work in servant leadership, he was not the first individual to introduce the concept; these writers attribute this to Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ. They argue that from narrative accounts of Jesus's life in the Bible, it is evident that he taught and practiced servant leadership more than 2000 years ago. These writers go further by asserting that since then the practice of servant leadership has been echoed in the lives of ancient monarchs. For centuries, monarchs have consistently espoused that they are in the service of their people; even modern coronation ceremonies and inaugurations of heads of state indicate a service to God, country, and the people, as noted by Sendjaya and Sarros in 2002. Interestingly, the servant leadership literature offers little by way of critique in regard to the disparity between the words and the deeds of such monarchs, a disparity that is echoed in history.

In the years since Greenleaf's work was published, numerous writers have attempted to extend his ideas and

develop a particular model of servant leadership for organization contexts. Bass suggests that rather than having a religious grounding, the concept of servant leadership has its heritage in the theory of charismatic leadership, which can be traced back to the work of the German sociologist Max Weber. But he adds, in comparison to charismatic leadership, the theory of servant leadership is virtually nonexistent in organization studies. He and other writers observe that while the work that has emerged on servant leadership establishes it as a distinct leadership style in which the leader's focus is on the follower rather than on the organization, the literature lacks specific details that may help to identify clear definitions and models of the concept.

More recently, Russell and Stone, along with Sendjaya and Sarros, have attempted to address this problem by synthesizing the variety of definitions and models of servant leadership found in the literature. Collectively they identify 10 key functional characteristics of servant leadership. These are

- *listening*—servant leaders are seen by their followers as active listeners;
- *empathy*—they display an understanding and genuine sense of empathy toward their followers;
- *healing*—they are recognized as having the ability to heal both themselves and their followers by generating a sense of well being and helping their followers achieve a balance between mind, body, and soul;
- *awareness*—they are attributed with a general sense of awareness of the contextual issues pertinent to the success of their followers and their organization;
- *persuasion*—they have personal power, they influence their followers through persuasion rather than relying on positional authority;
- *foresight*—they display the ability to foresee the potential outcomes and consequences of emerging situations;
- *conceptualization*—they use their imagination and conceptualize their dreams into meaningful missions and strategies that benefit their followers and organization alike;
- *stewardship*—they first and foremost display a commitment to a form of leadership that focuses on the needs of others;
- *commitment to the growth and emancipation of people;* they display a commitment to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each of their followers; and
- *community building*—they genuinely seek to develop a sense of community and commitment to each other among the people they lead.

In their review of the literature, Russell and Stone point out that in addition to the functional characteristics mentioned above, the literature identifies a series of attributes that, while common to other forms of leadership, are central to servant leadership. These include a fundamental *appreciation for others;* a desire to *serve* these others; an ability to *influence* and, through this, shape their followers' values and behavior; an ability to provide *vision* while serving others; and an ability to *communicate* their vision. Central to these communication skills is also the ability to *persuade.*

The literature also indicates that followers will not follow servant leaders who lack *honesty* and *integrity;* this indicates that servant leaders must also have *credibility*, and along with honesty, integrity, and credibility, *trustworthiness* is central to servant leadership. Followers must consider their servant leader to be *competent* as a leader in regard to organizational key goals and core business operations. Servant leaders also need to influence their followers through an ability to *model* behavior and relationships. *Visibility* in the form of a charismatic presence is essential; as a part of this charismatic presence, followers need to see their servant leaders as *pioneers* who shape new approaches to old problems and emerging challenges. Servant leaders constantly *encourage* their followers; *delegating* responsibility and nurturing participation are central to service leadership. Delegation, participation, and the entrustment of others involves the *empowerment* of these others; and finally, leaders who want to empower their followers must also be *teachers.*

Summarizing these functional characteristic and attributes highlights that servant leadership begins with the recognition of the other; that is, first and foremost in the mind of servant leaders is the well being of their followers. Servant leaders dedicate themselves not only to serving but also to striving to develop their followers, so that these followers can reach their full potential. In an organizational context, the leadership objective is to

channel this service and development in a way that realizes the organization's mission and goals. Somewhat paradoxically however, servant leaders, while serving and maintaining a commitment to the development of their followers, also exercise a charismatic influence over them.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

By way of critique, first and foremost, as acknowledged by Bass (2000), the existing literature on servant leadership is primarily conceptual and lacks empirical verification. Furthermore, by putting the follower first and committing to the emancipation of followers, servant leadership somewhat paradoxically proposes the reversal of the power relationship between leaders and followers. In the past, this relationship has been one in which the leader is clearly differentiated from the follower on the basis of the leader's superior power. Changing such a power relationship is problematic in a number of ways. The most obvious is that followers may not accept a servant as their leader; it is highly likely, based on the historical theory and practice of leadership in an organizational context, that followers will expect leaders to behave in a manner contrary to the behavior that the theory of servant leadership projects. For most organizational members, the idea of leaders as servants will be quite alien; in fact, the expected behavior may be quite the opposite. In such cases, servant leaders will find it difficult to influence their followers.

Servant leadership is also subject to the same critique that more contemporary shared leadership theories are subject to; that is, when addressing empowerment, the theory neglects the paradox of emancipation, as noted by Benton in 1981. Benton illustrates that it is impossible for a person to emancipate another; he argues that the paradox of emancipation in its simplest form suggests that in order to be emancipated, a person must have autonomy, but if the autonomy of a subordinate is to be respected, then emancipation is out of the question; whereas if emancipation is to be brought about, it cannot be selfemancipation. In other words, to be truly emancipated, people need complete autonomy in the process by which emancipation is achieved; such autonomy leaves no space for leadership of any kind.

In light of this paradox, some people would argue that to assert, as the theory of servant leadership does, that followers can be emancipated by the altruistic actions of the servant leader is sociologically vacuous, not to mention politically naïve. From a practical perspective, such a suggestion neglects the fact that when persons are in leadership positions, they are in positions of power; followers are well aware of this power and act accordingly, which, in most cases, is an act of deference to the leader. From a conceptual perspective, people who believe they can emancipate others run the risk of adopting a self-acclaimed position of intellectual superiority by assuming that they know the best interest of these others better than these others do themselves. Whether on altruistic or completely self-centered grounds, adopting such a position hints of arrogance and in a cultural sense is ethnocentric. This hint of arrogance flies in the face of the servant concept.

Reflecting on the practical and theoretical consequences of this paradox, some would argue that servant leadership may result in the opposite of what its theory espouses; that is, those who practice servant leadership may quite unwittingly reinforce a dominant position of power, which is anything but emancipatory and service oriented. There is no acknowledgment, let alone empirical verification, that provides insight into whether or not any such consequences are at play in servant leadership scenarios; this area would be a particularly fruitful for future research endeavors. The key focus of such research would be on how, in both a sociological sense and cognitive sense, a leader can be in a position of power and serve at the same time.

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Further Readings

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