

A Practical Introduction To Servant Leadership

Chris Holdorf

11/20/2013

Servant leadership is a people-oriented approach characterized by leaders serving followers and placing the welfare of followers over their own self interests. Although the term "servant leadership" was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf, the notion of leaders serving followers has its roots in the Bible. Jesus not only taught this approach to leadership, He modeled it by washing His disciples' feet in order to demonstrate the concept of voluntary subordination. This article establishes credibility as the foundation for servant leadership and then provides steps with which to begin understanding and implementing servant leadership.

Introduction

What leadership is and what makes one a great leader have been topics of debate for years. In fact, there seems to be as many definitions and constructs of leadership as there are people studying these issues. In the early 20th Century, leadership was thought to be a result of innate qualities and characteristics that people were born with (Northouse, 2013). These early studies, known as the “great man” theories because one either had leadership qualities or didn’t, suffered two principle criticisms: (1) after more than a century of study there appeared to be no consensus concerning which traits were most determinative of great leadership, and (2) these theories offered little room for developing leadership qualities (Northouse, 2013).

Most recently, scholars and practitioners have focused on the *style* approach to leadership which focuses on two general types of leadership behaviors: task behaviors and relationship behaviors. Emphasizing task behaviors, the 1990s witnessed the rise in popularity of bigger-than-life narcissistic leaders who decorated the covers of popular magazines (Maccoby, 2007). People such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, Oprah Winfrey, Bernie Ebbers and Martha Stewart became household names, often better known for their own personalities than the companies or products they promoted.

However, business organizations increasingly are seeking leadership that emphasizes ethics and a concern for society, in part as a reaction to the numerous high-profile scandals involving greedy and self-centered corporate executives (Peterson et al., 2012). Likewise, organizational scholars have shifted their attention away from leadership based on individualistic, self-serving tendencies toward more relational styles of leadership. Additionally, recent empirical studies have shown that servant leadership, a form of leadership that accentuates personal integrity, the needs of followers, and a strong moral compass, has a positive effect on organizational performance (Choudhary, et al., 2013).

This article is intended to introduce Christian leaders to the concepts underlying servant leadership and to offer a starting point for adopting the “others-first” leadership style described and modeled by Jesus. However, a word of caution for those who are looking for a “quick start” approach. Servant leadership cannot be reduced to merely ‘*doing*’ acts of service. Rather, the concept ultimately demands that one ‘*be*’ a servant (Sendjaya et al., 2008). However, for Christian leaders who have previously known only the traditional top down, command and control style of leadership, this article hopefully provides sufficient information and inspiration to consider this paradoxical leadership approach.

Servant Leadership

First coined by Robert K. Greenleaf, servant leadership is an approach focusing on leadership from the point of view of the leader and his or her behaviors which put followers first (Northouse, 2013). It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first, then a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead (Prosser, 1999). Although servant leadership is being more regularly taught in secular texts and organizations, its origins are rooted in the Bible. In fact, it has been suggested that servant leadership is the only model of leadership that Jesus ever espoused (Boa et al., 2007).

Ultimately, the cornerstone of servant leadership is love (Patterson, 2003). In fact, it is a divine notion of love that serves as the foundation for Jesus' teaching and modeling servant leadership. In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus distinguished a biblical view of leadership from that which was customary in the world. The Lord acknowledged that the worldly mindset of leadership is a hierarchical, oppressive and self-focused endeavor.

You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. (Mark 10:42)

In contrast, Jesus set Himself as the standard for servant leadership which His followers were to emulate.

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to be great among you shall be your servant...For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve... (Mark 10:43-45)

Biblical scholar Andreas Köstenberger (2007) contends that Jesus' followers were not convinced by His words and needed an object lesson, namely the Lord's washing of the disciples' feet, to fully grasp the concept of serving others. The Scriptural context of this footwashing pericope was Jesus' Farewell Discourse and is a demonstration of the love theme which concludes with the Lord's three commands to "love one another" (Coloe, 2004).

The historical/cultural context brings the full impact of the footwashing episode to light. Throughout the Old Testament, foot washing is depicted as a familiar practice of hospitality and honor for guests in a home (Gen. 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 1 Sam. 25:41). In the dry climate of Palestine, with the extensive walking necessary to get from place to place, usually in open sandals, this was an essential act of hygiene, especially since people did not sit on separate chairs at a table but reclined side by side by leaning back in close proximity to one another (Köstenberger, 2007). Usually, the task of footwashing was done by slaves. However, in the upper room on the night of Jesus' betrayal, dinner having already been served, and with no slaves apparently present, this customary act had not been done. Someone had to step into the role of servant.

After Jesus washed the disciple's feet (including Judas's), the Scriptures record his words:

Do you understand what I have done for you?...You call me "Teacher" and "Lord," and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13:12(b)-17.

The biblical principle established for today's Christian leaders is that one should have the attitude of Christ (unconditional love), and be willing to lower one's self in order to meet another's need. The Lord's discourse from Mark 10 brings this principle squarely into the context of leadership.

Contrary to the views of skeptics, servant leadership is not a form of romantic idealism where workers are free to set their own agendas with little regard for productivity, performance or goals. Quite the opposite. In fact, the practical steps discussed below offer a framework to begin

the journey of servant leadership in a way that has been shown to build stronger, healthier, more committed, more creative, more productive, and yes, more profitable organizations.

Practical Steps To Servant Leadership

The focus of servant leaders is on others rather than upon self, and on an understanding of the role of the leader as a servant (Stone et al., 2003). The foundation of all leadership, and particularly servant leadership, is trust and credibility. Upon that footing, servant leadership can be depicted in the form of an inverted pyramid with the leader providing vision, recognizing goals and needs of followers, serving followers by directing resources and using their influence, skills, and experience to empower and develop subordinates. Lastly, servant leaders create performance measuring standards and offer feedback to ensure personal and organizational growth and success.



Credibility

Credibility is the foundation for servant leadership.

Unlike the top-down, transactional styles of leadership that rely on bureaucratic authority based on rewards and punishments meted out by virtue of one's position (Bass, 1999), servant leaders transform the personal values of followers to support the vision and goals of the organization by fostering an environment of trust, respect, integrity and credibility (Stone et al., 2003). Since leadership, by nature, is a process of influencing others to reach common goals (Northouse, 2013), leaders must establish credibility before others will chose to follow.

Researchers James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2011) have been studying leadership trends for over three decades. After surveying over 100,000 people from around the world, they have found that the most important virtue for leadership is credibility. In their words, "People have to believe in their leaders before they will willingly follow them." Credibility is *earned* over time through honesty, competence, transparency and a display of strong moral and ethical character (Kouzes and Posner, 2011). It is *maintained* by servant leaders who display an unconditional concern for the well-being of those who form the entity.

Vision

Visioning is a principle function of servant leadership (Farling et al., 1999). Buchen (1998) contends that a key characteristic of a servant leader is his/her preoccupation with the future which he describes as a form of stewardship for both the organization and its members. Additionally, it is important that servant leaders be personally connected with vision, mission and strategies in order to inspire others in the organization to buy-in (Prosser, 2007).

Ken Blanchard (2003) asserts that servant leadership begins with a clear and compelling vision of the future that excites passion in the leader and commitment in those who follow. Blanchard

suggests a good vision has three parts: (1) your purpose/mission; (2) your preferred picture of the future, and (3) your values, that is, how you want people to behave when they are working on your mission and picture for the future. Servant leaders must be committed to establishing and communicating inspirational vision.

Follower Goals and Needs

A critical aspect of servant leadership is helping subordinates grow and succeed (Peterson et al., 2012). The servant leader thinks of service in the process of thinking about leading and sees his/her role to the follower as one of providing the follower what is needed so that the follower can accomplish his/her task (Winston, 2003). This desire to serve people supersedes organizational objectives. Servant leadership embodies a belief that organizational goals will be achieved on a long-term basis only by first facilitating the growth, development, and general well-being of the individuals who comprise the organization (Stone et al., 2003).

Yet, organizational goals are important if the enterprise is to succeed. A mark of a leader is one who has a goal and can articulate it clearly for others (Flaniken, 2006). In this regard, leaders convey value and purpose to subordinates when they communicate clear alignment between organizational vision and how each person's role in the organization contributes to this vision. This ensures followers know what is expected of them (van Dierendonck, 2011) and it positions leaders to assess how they can best serve the needs of individual followers.

Serving Others

The hallmark of servant leadership is service. In fact, the desire to serve others takes precedence over the desire to be in formal leadership positions (Sendjaya, 2008). Central to servant leadership is a willingness to voluntarily subordinate one's self whenever there is a legitimate need regardless of the nature of the service, the person served, or the mood of the servant leader (Sendjaya).

In essence, servant leadership requires turning the hierarchy upside down so front-line employees are at the top of the organization and are able to respond to customers, while leaders serve the needs of employees, helping them to accomplish the vision and direction of the organization (Blanchard, 2003). A practical way to focus on serving subordinates is for leaders to continually ask, "How can I direct resources and use my influence, skills and experience to meet my followers' needs and equip them to be successful?"

The net effect of servant leadership is empowerment of followers. In fact, it has been argued that there is no servant leadership where there is no sharing of power (Patterson, 2003). Ultimately, empowering people, with the best interest of those served in mind, is at the heart of servant leadership. Buchen (1998) contends that nothing is more demoralizing than to be powerless. He credits Greenleaf as saying that power is defined as a scarcity that leaders hold. "But the supreme paradox is ...that power when distributed becomes more power."

Measure & Feedback

Many leaders initially discount people-oriented leadership styles, including servant leadership, for fear that it fosters mediocrity and malaise concerning organizational goals and risks a firm's competitive advantage. Yet research shows that servant leadership promotes organizational

learning and innovation, which in turns improves organizational performance (Choudhary et al., 2013). Through the process of visioning, goal setting, development and empowerment, subordinates tend to hold themselves accountable for results.

This does not mean that leaders are removed from monitoring progress and providing feedback. As servant leaders establish milestones for progress and metrics for performance, this further demonstrates value to followers (Prosser, 2007). In the end, the credibility gained through servant leadership strengthens the validity of a leader's feedback and his/her ability to hold subordinates accountable for results.

Conclusion

Servant leadership begins by establishing and communicating a clear and compelling vision. Then, servant leaders ensure that each member of the team understands their role in fulfilling that vision. By asking themselves, "How can I use my position and influence to help others be successful," leaders serve and empower followers. Finally, having demonstrated sincere interest in the well-being of followers, accountability for achieving results becomes part of the natural process of meeting goals and further developing followers. In the end, servant leaders take pride in seeing each person in the organizational hierarchy, in turn, serve those they lead.

Without a doubt, servant leadership constructs go beyond the scope of this article and will further inform leaders in a deeper and more comprehensive way. However, for those who have not previously understood the connection between Jesus' teachings and modern leadership, it is hoped that this introduction will inspire them to see themselves as servants first, and leaders second. As Jesus said from the Upper Room, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

References:

- Bass, Bernard M., and Paul Steidlmeier. "Ethics, Character and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior." *Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), (1999), 181-217.
- Blanchard, Ken, and Phil Hodges. *The Servant Leader: Transforming Your Heart, Head, Hands & Habits*. Nashville: J. Countryman, (2003).
- Boa, Kenneth, Sid Buzzell and Bill Perkins. *Handbook To Leadership: Leadership in the Image of God*. Atlanta: Trinity House Publishers, (2007).
- Buchen, Irving H. "Servant Leadership: A Model for Future Faculty and Future Institutions." *The Journal of Leadership Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 1. (1998), 125-134.
- Choudhary, Ali Iftikhar, Syed Azeem Akhtar and Arshad Zaheer. "Impact of Transformational and Servant Leadership on Organizational Performance: A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Business Ethics*. (2013) 116. 433-440.

Coloe, Mary L. "Welcome Into The Household of God: The Foot Washing in John 13." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 66/3, (2004), 400-416.

Farling, Myra L., A. Gregory Stone, and Bruce E. Winston. "Servant Leadership: Setting the Stage for Empirical Research." *The Journal of Leadership Studies*. Vol. 6, No. 1/2, (1999), 49-72.

Flaniken, Forest. "Is the Bible Relevant to Servant-Leadership." *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*. (Summer, 2006). 32-39.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, (2007).

Kouzes, James M. and Barry Z. Posner. *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It; Why People Demand It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, (2011).

Maccoby, Michael. *Narcissistic Leaders: Who Succeeds and Who Fails*. Boston: Harvard Business Press. (2007).

Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Sixth Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Patterson, Kathleen. "Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model." Cited from www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference_proceedings/servant_leadership_roundtable/2003pdf/patterson_servant_leadership.pdf.

Peterson, Suzanne J., Benjamin M. Galvin and Donald Lange. "CEO Servant Leadership: Exploring Executive Characteristics and Firm Performance." *Personnel Psychology*. (2012) 65, 565-596.

Prosser, Stephen. *To Be A Servant-Leader*. New York: Paulist Press. (2007).

Sendjaya, Sen, James C. Sarros, and Joseph C. Santora. "Defining and Measuring Servant Leadership Behaviour in Organizations." *Journal of Management Studies*. 45:2 (2008), 402-424.

Stone, A. Gregory, Robert F. Russell, and Kathleen Patterson. "Transformational versus Servant Leadership: A Difference in Leader Focus." Cited from www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference_proceedings/servant_leadership_roundtable/2003pdf/stone_transformation_versus.pdf.

Winston, Bruce. "Extending Patterson's Servant Leadership Model: Explaining How Leaders and Followers Interact in a Circular Model." Cited from www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/conference_proceedings/servant_leadership_roundtable/2003pdf/winston_extending_patterson.pdf.

van Dierendonck, Dirk, and Inge Nuijten. "The Servant Leadership Survey: Development and Validation of a Multidimensional Measure." *Journal of Business Psychology*. 26, (2011), 249-267.