

Servant Leadership: Its Origin, Development, and Application in Organizations

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This paper examines the philosophical foundation of servant leadership by extracting several value-laden principles drawn from Greenleaf's and Jesus Christ's delineation of the concept. The primary intent and self-concept of servant leaders are singled out as the distinctive features of servant leadership. While empirical research studies are critically needed to develop the concepts underlying the servant leadership movement into sound theory, an accurate understanding of the conceptual roots of servant leadership is essential in the process. The current developmental stage of the servant leadership movement is explored in order to provide some useful signposts for future research directions.

Although the notion of servant leadership has been recognized in the leadership literature since Burns' (1978) and Greenleaf's (1977) publications, the movement has gained momentum only recently. Bowman (1997) argues that to date there is only anecdotal evidence to support a commitment to an understanding of servant leadership. For example, Spears' (1995) identification of ten characteristics of servant leadership (i.e. listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community) is based solely on his readings of Greenleaf's essays, and is not grounded in solid research studies.

One reason for the scarcity of research on servant leadership is that the very notion of 'servant as leader' is an oxymoron. It may be difficult to think and act both as leader and servant at the same time – a leader who serves and a servant who leads. Nevertheless, the dynamic conceptual relationships and complementary roles between servanthood and

leadership have recently attracted the attention of leadership scholars and practitioners (Bass, 1999; Bowman, 1997; Buchen, 1998; Chappel, 2000; Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998; De Pree, 1989; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Graham, 1991; Pollard, 1997; Russel, 2000; Senge, 1990, 1995; Spears, 1995).

Bass (2000) asserts that, as a concept, servant leadership theory requires substantial empirical research. Bass (2000:33) does believe that its profound philosophical foundation provides avenues for its theoretical development: "The strength of the servant leadership movement and its many links to encouraging follower learning, growth, and autonomy, suggests that the untested theory will play a role in the future leadership of the learning organization." Given the current organizational context which puts an emphasis on a sense of community, empowerment, shared authority, and relational power, Bass' (2000) hypothesis on servant leadership suggests it may be a theory with great promise for the future.

This paper explores the philosophical basis of servant leadership as conceptualized by Robert Greenleaf and as represented by historical figures such as Jesus Christ. The core construct of "servant leaders" will be drawn and examined.

The Origin of Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's Model of Servant Leadership

According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leaders are leaders who put other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own. The servant leader's deliberate choice is to serve others. In fact, the servant leader's chief motive is to serve first, as opposed to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). Furthermore, servant

leaders seek to transform their followers to “grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977:13-14).

While working as an AT&T executive, Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized the notion of servant leadership and introduced it into the organizational context. Interestingly, his concept has, to a certain extent, some similarities with Burn’s (1978) transforming leadership. Greenleaf (1977:13) claimed that:

The servant leader is a servant *first* (italics in original)... 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.

Similarly, Burns (1978:20) asserted that:

(Transforming) leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality...But transforming leadership ultimately becomes *moral* (italics in original) in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, thus it has a transforming effect on both.

Greenleaf (1977:7) himself constructed the notion of servant leadership not by studying some top-notch corporate leaders or other high profile individuals, but through his reading of Herman Hesse’s story about a spiritual pilgrimage, *Journey to the East*:

In this story we see a band of men on a mythical journey...The central figure of the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as the servant who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They cannot make it without the servant Leo. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering, finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.

As appealing and refreshing as Greenleaf’s conceptualization of servant leadership is, 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 of servant leadership. From the narrative accounts of his life in the Bible, it is evident that servant leadership was taught and practiced more than two thousand years ago. This practice has been echoed in the lives of ancient monarchs for over 1000 years. Nair (1994:59) asserted that the importance of service to leadership has been acknowledged and practiced for over a thousand years:

Ancient monarchs acknowledged that they were in the service of their country and their people – even if their actions were not consistent with this. Modern coronation ceremonies and inaugurations of heads of state all involve the acknowledgement of service to God, country, and the people. Politicians define their role in terms of public service. And service has always been at the core of leadership in the spiritual arena, symbolized at the highest level by Christ washing the feet of his disciples.

Jesus Christ’s Model of Servant Leadership

Of all the biblical accounts of servant leadership, the following parts of Jesus’ teachings to his disciples, as recorded in the Gospel of Mark (Chapter Ten), are perhaps the most powerful and instructive. It is perhaps helpful to understand the context in which this teaching took place.

On one occasion during his ministry, Jesus was teaching his disciples about the betrayal and death he would soon experience. Jesus’ disciples, however, did not grasp the meaning of that particular lesson. Instead, they argued bitterly among themselves about their individual superior positions over the other disciples. Each of them claimed to be the greatest leader in the absence of Jesus. Their arguments must have been intense since they are outlined in all four Gospels (only a few events in Jesus’ ministry are cited by all four Gospel writers).

Two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, who were blinded by their fascination with the temptation of power, asked Jesus to install them in the uppermost leadership positions in God’s kingdom, next to Jesus himself. This request caused the other disciples to be furious with them. The outcome of this constant bickering and jockeying for position was the deterioration of the disciples’ harmony. From

that point onward, they would have been suspicious of each other's motives. It was following these incidents that Jesus taught his disciples the principle of servant leadership:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (NIV Bible, Mark 10:43).

In this example, Jesus used the term "servant" as a synonym for greatness. Contrary to the popular opinion of the day, Jesus taught that a leader's greatness is measured by a total commitment to serve fellow human beings.

Not only did Jesus teach servant leadership, he applied the concept in concrete ways. Jesus demonstrated what servant leadership is by engaging in the humble act of washing the feet of his disciples, as recorded in the Gospel of John (Chapter Thirteen).

As noted above, it is perhaps helpful to take into consideration a little background information on foot-washing in first century Palestine to understand and appreciate the significance of this act. Foot-washing was not primarily a ceremonial custom (Ford, 1991). It was practically important because people walked in sandals through dusty, muddy and manure-filled streets. Given the use of animals for transportation at the time, it was easy for feet to get dirty and smelly. Consequently, washing someone else's feet was regarded as one of the most demeaning tasks anyone could perform (Ford, 1991). Hence, it was the custom of the time that the host provided a servant to perform the task before the guests came to the table for a meal. In the absence of the host's servant, it was common for the lowest-ranking guest to wash the feet of the others (Ford, 1991).

The account in the Gospel of John indicates that neither Jesus nor his disciples

have their feet washed when they entered a house to have a meal together. They sat at the table with dirty feet, as there was no household servant present. Shortly after the evening meal was served, Jesus abruptly "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (NIV Bible, John 13:4-5). This unexpected action came as a shock for his disciples, and was an unambiguous example of servant leadership:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "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 (NIV Bible, Gospel of John 13:13-15).

Jesus reportedly knew that he had "all things under his power" (John 13:3). The unusual twist of Jesus' leadership through the feet washing example has redefined the meaning and function of leadership power from 'power over' to 'power to', that is power as an enabling factor to choose to serve others.

The Philosophical Basis of Servant Leadership

These preceding examples highlight the philosophical basis of servant leadership in terms of *who* the servant leader is and *what* the servant leader does. These 'being' and 'doing' attributes of servant leadership represent a significant paradigm shift in the act of leadership, which comprises the leader's self-concept and primary intent, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Servant Leadership Constructs

<i>Primary Intent</i>	Serve others first, not lead others first
<i>Self-concept</i>	Servant and steward, not leader or owner

The Primary Intent of Servant Leaders

There has been a strong tendency among leadership scholars and journalists to treat

leaders as isolated heroes controlling and commanding others from within their ivory tower (Gronn, 1995; Yukl, 1989). In the

organizational context, the word 'leader' has been mostly ascribed to people who hold management positions and are capable of giving orders to other members of the organization (Senge, 1990). The common, principal motive for such larger-than-life Herculean leaders is to lead followers to achieve certain organizational objectives. This role stands in sharp contrast to servant leaders whose chief motive is to serve others to be what they are capable of becoming (Greenleaf, 1977).

The motivational element of servant leadership (i.e. to serve first) portrays a fundamental presupposition which distinguishes the concept from other leadership thoughts. This presupposition forms the mental model of the servant leader, that is the "I serve" as opposed to the "I lead" mentality. The primary reason why leaders exist is to serve first, not to lead first. To put it differently, the servant leader operates on the assumption that "I am the leader, therefore I serve" rather than "I am the leader, therefore I lead." The following case in point outlined by former Herman Miller CEO, Max De Pree (1992:218-219), helps illustrate the difference:

I arrived at the local tennis club just after high school students had vacated the locker room. Like chickens, they had not bothered to pick up after themselves. Without thinking too much about it, I gathered up all their towels and put them in the hamper. A friend of mine quietly watched me do this and then asked me a question that I've pondered many times over the years. "Do you pick up towels because you're the president of the company. Or are you the president because you pick up the towels?"

Two premises can be derived from the above modest incident: I serve because I am the leader ("I pick up towels because I am the president") and I am the leader because I serve ("I am the president because I pick up the towels"). While both premises imply a linear relationship between the act of service and the position of leader, they stand squarely opposite to each other in terms of cause and effect.

The first premise 'I serve because I am the leader' signifies the act of altruism. Both Jesus' and Greenleaf's delineation of servant leadership put the emphasis on the acts of service, as opposed to the act of leading, of the leader. As the leader-teacher of his followers and disciples, Jesus deliberately declares to them, "I am among you as one who serves"

(NIV Bible, Gospel of Luke 22:27). Greenleaf (1977:13) posits that the servant leader "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first." At its core, the nature of the servant leadership is serving, not leading (De Pree, 1989). It is through that act of serving that the leaders lead other people to be what they are capable of becoming.

The second premise 'I am the leader because I serve' begins with the deep-seated desire that one wants to lead, or ambition to be the foremost among the troop. The desire to be ahead of others may compromise the career endeavors or personal ambitions of leaders. For example, when Lee Iacocca decided to reduce his annual salary to one dollar to transform Chrysler Corporation, that action was done to "convince employees of the need for sacrifice and extra effort" (Bass, 1985:15). However, Choi and Mai-Dalton (1998) question the authenticity of such action, commenting that it could merely be nothing but a tactic to impress followers and manipulate their responses to reciprocate.

"Being": The Self-Concept of Servant Leaders

The notion of self-concept has been associated with self-image, self-esteem, self-perception, and self-awareness (Leonard, Beauvais and Scholl, 1995; Sosik and Dworakivsky, 1998). Using this definition, the leaders self-concept involves the extent to which they are aware of their thoughts, beliefs and values. Like other individuals, leaders behave in ways consistent with their self-concepts (Sosik and Dworakivsky, 1998). Therefore, the servant leader's primary intent to serve may emanate from their self-concepts as an altruist, moral person.

Servant leaders view themselves as the servant first, as distinguished from leaders first "who later serves out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations (Greenleaf, 1977:14). Viewed this way, servant leaders are natural servants (Farling, Stone & Winston, 1999; Greenleaf, 1977). To recapitulate, servant leadership is not only about 'doing' the acts of service but also 'being' a servant. It logically implies, therefore, that the leader-follower relationship is that of a client-server, not supervisor-subordinate or master-slave relationship.

Servant leaders also view themselves as stewards (De Pree, 1989; Kiechel, 1992; Senge, 1990). The word "stewardship" is

derived from the Greek word "oikonomia" whose meaning is rooted in the idea of a house manager (Locyker, 1986). The "oikonomos", which is translated as "steward", was entrusted with the responsibility of managing the business affairs of a household. The word often referred to a servant who was given responsibility over money, property, goods or other servants. In our current terminology, the word carries the idea of a trustee, one to whom something of value is entrusted. Block (1993) asserts that the concept of stewardship essentially is the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger community by operating in the service of those around us. The stewardship for the people they lead is a critical characteristic of servant leaders. As stewards, servant leaders regard their followers as people who have been entrusted to them to be elevated to their better selves and to be what they are capable of becoming.

It is important to note that the servant leader's deliberate choice to serve and be a servant should not be associated with any forms of low self-concept or self-image, in the same way as choosing to forgive should not be viewed as a sign of weakness. Instead, it would take a leader with an accurate understanding of his or her self-image, moral conviction and emotional stability to make such a choice.

A profound example of such secure servant leaders again is Jesus Christ himself, who "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (NIV Bible, Philippians 2:3-8). Commenting on the story of the foot-washing incident, Ford (1991) points out that it was not weakness that compelled Jesus to be a servant in this case. Instead, it was Jesus' strong self-image that moved him to make a deliberate offering of himself; he "operated out of a sense of being deeply secure in his identity" (Ford, 1991:153).

Several authors have argued that the source of a servant leader's motivational base lies in their principles, values and beliefs (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999) or their humility and spiritual insights (Graham, 1991). These intrinsic motivating factors enable servant leaders to take on the nature and the role of a servant. In fact, they enable servant leaders to engage themselves in self-sacrificial behaviors (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998).

In the following sections, we discuss the theoretical and practical domains of servant

leadership which provide signposts for future research in this field.

The Evolution of Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership and Charismatic Leadership

Servant leadership and charismatic leadership share common biblical roots. As outlined earlier, the notion of servant leadership originates in the Bible, as does the concept of charisma. The earliest and most significant study on charisma was conducted by sociologist Max Weber (1947). Weber (1947:48) defined the Greek word 'charisma' in his seminal book *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* as "a quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he [the leader] is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities." This definition, as Bass rightly states (1999), borrows much from the biblical notion of charisma as being endowed with the gift of divine grace. In fact, Weber develops his definition based on the use of the word 'charisma' in the Bible (i.e. Paul's epistles to the Romans and Corinthians) and, primarily, in religious organizations (i.e. churches) where it is used as a basis of legitimacy for various functional roles and figureheads.

Weber later developed his understanding of charisma by observing Prussian bureaucracy at the beginning of the twentieth century and the dynamic forces of authority in Prussian society (Bass, 1999). This approach has transferred the concept of charisma from the domain of theology to sociology and, thus, changed the initial meaning of charisma (Bass, 1999). Subsequent studies have explored charisma in political science, sociology and organizational behavior (Conger, 1993).

However, there remain enormous conceptual and empirical gaps between the concepts of servant leadership and charismatic leadership. Unlike charismatic leadership which has been systematically studied and developed into a rigorously tested theory, the notion of servant leadership remains a movement and an untested theory (Bass, 1999).

Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) assert that Greenleaf's notion of servant leadership is similar to Burn's transforming leadership, a

view shared by Graham (1991). Graham (1991) postulates that servant leadership, while similar to charismatic leadership, has particular characteristics that distinguish it from other previous charismatic leadership models. In particular, Graham (1991) argues that servant leadership exceeds Bass' (1985) transformational leadership model at least in two ways: (1) its recognition of the leader's social responsibilities to serve those people who are marginalised by a system, and (2) its dedication to followers' needs and interests, as opposed to those of their own or their organization.

Servant Leadership in Organizations

Levering and Moskowitz (2000) contend that servant leadership has been practiced and advocated in some of the best companies to work for in America, on the basis of the *Fortune* survey. According to Levering and Moskowitz (2000), six criteria identify these companies: openness and fairness, camaraderie/friendliness, opportunities, pride in work and company, pay/benefits, and security. Three of the five best places in *Fortune's* January 2000 "Top 100 Best Companies to Work For in America" were held by companies that lived by these criteria, namely Southwest Airlines (#2 in 2000, #4 in 1999, and #1 in 1998), TDIndustries (#4 in 2000, #2 in 1999, and #5 in 1998), and Synovus Financial (#5 in 2000 and #1 in 1999). The latest *Fortune* 2001 annual survey of top employers ranked Southwest Airlines, TDIndustries, and Synovus Financial numbers four, six, and eight respectively (Levering & Moskowitz, 2001). The following paragraphs provide more detailed accounts of these companies in view of their servant leadership practices.

As one of the largest mechanical contractors in America, TDIndustries has employed servant leadership as an organizational-wide leadership development philosophy and program. CEO and Chairman of TDIndustries, Jack Lowe (1998) asserts that when people become grounded in servant leadership, trust grows and the foundation for organizational excellence is established. The culture of trust is evident in the ownership of TDIndustries by the employees (thirty top managers and the founder's widow own 25% of the stock; lower-level employees own the rest), which explains why the company's 1,273 employees are called partners.

In a similar vein, Synovus Financial Corporation, a multi-billion dollar financial services firm, illustrates the servant leadership concept through a strong commitment to family-oriented policies such as work flexibility, leave for new parents, work/life balance, and advancing women in their careers. Chairman and CEO Jimmy Blanchard outlines the company's values in the following way: "The heart of the servant-leader brings order, brings meaning to employees. When employees feel order and meaning and that they are a part of a team that stands for something good, that there is a higher calling than just working to get a paycheck, that they are improving mankind, there is an energy level that explodes and great things happen" (Chappel, 2000:5).

Under the leadership of founder and CEO Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines had one of the most distinguished organizational cultures in America. The company has been recognized as one of the most admired companies in the world and the most admired airline in the world year after year. Servant leadership principles provide the foundation for altruism, defined as the constructive, gratifying service to others, and one of the core values of Southwest's culture (Quick, 1992). Quick (1992) noted that employees of Southwest are notable for their caring approach and appreciation of each other, as well as in the service of others.

Many organizational leaders see themselves as servant leaders today. William Pollard, Chairman of The ServiceMaster, is a case in point. His company has been recognized by *Fortune* magazine as the best service company among the *Fortune* 500 firms over the past ten years. Describing himself as, and encouraging others to be, leaders who lead with a servant's heart, Pollard (1997:49-50) contends that the real leader is not the "person with the most distinguished title, the highest pay, or the longest tenure...but the role model, the risk taker, the servant; not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others."

Conclusion

As this paper indicates, the distinctive characteristics of servant leaders lie first and foremost in their primary intent and self-concept. Servant leaders portray a resolute conviction and strong character by taking on

not only the role of a servant, but also the nature of a servant. This paper also argues that cases of servant leadership in organizational settings do exist, and will continue to do so. While these accounts are mainly reported in the popular press, at the very least they indicate the proliferation of the servant leadership concept, as well as in practice.

Recommendations for future research need to be established if servant leadership is to become a valuable leadership theory. Contrasting the servant leadership and charismatic/transformational leadership models helps familiarize us with the distinct characteristics of servant leadership. However, to be valuable, a 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.

In order to develop a theory of servant leadership that systematically draws the concept together into an intelligible whole, there exists a need to explore the following questions: What are the differences between servant leaders and those who choose not to be? What does it take for a would-be servant leader to embrace the nature and play the role of servant leader? Are certain types of people likely to feel more comfortable with the role and nature of servant leader? Does the practice of servant leadership produce results that differ from other models/paradigms of leadership? Can servant leadership be measured? What are some organizational factors that are likely to foster and inhibit servant leadership practices?

Exploring the above questions requires rigorous quantitative and qualitative research. As the current literature on servant leadership is filled with anecdotal evidence, empirical research is critically needed to test and validate these various questions and to create further predictions and hypotheses in order to fully develop the concept and construct of servant leadership.

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