# Perspectives of Servant Leadership

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## Abstract

It has been an age long quest to understand behaviours that leaders can adopt in order to lead and influence others to achieve their goals. Servant leadership is one of the popular styles that are capturing a worldwide momentum in various sectors. This leadership style has been adopted by some of the best business organizations in the world with much success. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the very excelling behaviours of servant leaders, which if embraced by teachers can greatly enhance the motivation, commitment and performance of students for increased learning.

## *Key Words*

Vision inspired, person centered, service oriented, bonded in humility, being and doing synchronized.

## Introduction

The concept of Servant Leadership was initially introduced by Green Leaf in 1970 with his foundational essay *The Servant as Leader*. The work highlighting servant leadership from the early 1990s paid attention to identifying themes that could help to operationalize the idea of servant leadership. Laub in 1999 spelled out valuing people, developing people, building community, showing authenticity, providing and sharing leadership.

## I.     Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is one of the modern theories of leadership and it varies from the traditional trait, behavioural and situational theories. Servant leadership was first proposed by Greenleaf (1970) is a theoretical framework which requires that a leader's prime motivation and role is service to others. Greenleaf was the first one to coin the term servant-leadership in 1970 in the essay entitled, *The Servant as Leader* (Spears, 1996). According to Greenleaf, servant leadership commences with the

natural feeling of serving that culminates in the aspiration to lead. (Greenleaf, 1991). Greenleaf was motivated to write about servant leadership when he read the book entitled *The Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse. The book is about a band of men on a spiritual quest. *Servant Leadership: The Exemplifying Behaviours.*

The chief character in the book is Leo, who is their servant. Leo is not only their servant, but he sings for them and sustains their spirits as well. When Leo disappears, the group falls apart and swerve away from the journey. When the narrator of the story encounters the group again later on, he realizes that Leo was in fact, the leader of the group, although he was also serving them. Hence, Leo is portrayed first as a servant and then later on as leader and this is the essence of servant leadership.

## II.      Theoretical purview

Servant leadership is a style of leadership which comes under the democratic style. Leader and servant are antithetical terms but the practice of servant leadership takes place when the characters of these two opposite terms are used simultaneously in an individual's leadership style. In servant leadership, a leader is called to serve the members of the group or followers while leading them. This theory advocates that a leader's chief motivation and role is to serve and meet the needs of others, which optimally should be the main motivation for leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). Greenleaf attached great significance to this concept that true leadership carries with it the assumption of the responsibility to serve. He says that true leadership surfaces from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. It prioritizes the well-being of the followers before other goals (Greenleaf (1977). Servant leaders develop people, assisting them to strive and flourish (McMinn, 2001).

Servant leadership is a belief that organizational goals will be achieved on a long term basis only by first providing the growth, development and general well-being of the individuals who are the part of the organization (Stone *et al*, 2003). It is therefore a leadership style that gives importance that leaders should be attentive to the concerns of their followers and empathize with them; they should take care of them and nurture them (Northouse, 2007). The best examination of the leader is whether those served grow as persons and whether while being served they become healthier, wiser and better capable of themselves to become servant leaders (Wheeler, 2011). The theory of Servant leadership as an ethical style in leadership and management is quite significant among leadership styles and can be regarded as one of the ideal styles in managing human resources (Mazarei *et al*, 2013)

### III.    Qualities of a Servant Leader

Despite vast array of terms used to describe servant leadership, the main descriptors that are consistently specified are, leading by example, service, vision and humility (Hale & Fields, 2007). A servant leader has true commitment to his or her followers and primarily serves the needs of followers, hence providing vision and empowerment, with service being the main activity of the servant leader (Sendjaya Sarros, 2002; Stone *et al*, 2004; Spears, 2010 in Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013). The following is a discussion of these typical servant leadership behaviours as described by various writers.

### Vision inspired

This servant leader behaviour entails having foresight. Foresight requires to be combined with the ability to communicate the vision to and influence followers in and developing a shared vision for an organization (Hale & Fields, 2007). The main role of the servant leader is establishing a strategic vision for the organization (Covey, 1996; De Pree, 1997; Maxwell, 1998 in Russell & Stone, 2002). In the visionary role, leaders are expected to define the trend of the organization and they need to communicate what the organization stands for and how organizational values encompass the individual values of its members (Blanchard, 2000). When it comes to vision and values, the leader has to say it over repeatedly until people get it right (De Pree, 1997). In order for the vision to have impact on the employees, it must be communicated to them effectively so that they are in a position to comprehend how they fit in this future envisaged state. Lubin (2001) maintained that the leaders job is to encourage people to share their good ideas to ultimately create a shared vision that everyone cares about. Taylor (2002) affirms that the mark of a leader and the attribute that places him or her in a position to enchant followers is when the leader shows the capacity to see more clearly the best destination for the organization.

Servant leaders must dream while dwelling in the past and focused on the future because this allows the leader to take advantage of the opportunities of the present (Bennett, 2001). Servant leader's advance shared vision coupled with personal example is appealing to higher ideals such as serving the community. This shared vision certainly leads to team work. In servant leadership, employees will usually be moved by an inner motivation to attain the vision of the organization. The servant leader will occupy all of them and inspire each of them to stretch and use whatever talents they have in order to attain this shared vision (Page & Wong, 2000). Employees who comprehend and take part in the organization's vision are inspired,

energized and feel ownership of that vision and the decisions management makes as a result of the vision. When employees own the vision of the organization, they are motivated to work towards the fulfilment of that vision which in turn will cause them to be dedicated to the organization. Empirical studies have reinforced this variable (Russell & Stone, 2002; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Hales & Fields, 2007; Budwest & Bocarnea, 2008).

## Person centered

Empowerment is a major factor in servant leadership and should be one of its main focus (Russell & Stone, 2002). Patterson (2003) affirms that empowering people, with the best interest of those served in mind is at the heart of servant leadership. She further emphasizes that it is delegating with authority. It is letting people accomplish their works by enabling them to learn, grow and progress and as such it means allowing for self-direction and freedom to fail and this multiplies the follower's strengths and trust (Patterson, 2003).

Empowerment and development of people is about giving people in the workplace responsibility for their own actions. Through empowerment, the servant leader affirms the talents and strengths of employees. In addition, the servant leader encourages employees in their actions and in their personal growth. Emphasizing empowerment is the acknowledgment that employees are not merely subordinates, but that each is an individual in their own right (van Dierendonck, 2011). Empowering employee's means employees assume roles that were previously the domain of management such as the assignment of tasks, ordering materials, and even disciplining co-workers. Empowered employees share in both planning and decision is making which will ultimately lead to more decentralized organizations that embrace power sharing (van Dierendonck, 2011). This empowerment of followers is progressive in nature, allowing the follower to learn and grow until he or she is capable and willing to handle larger levels of empowerment (Winston, 2003). A large number of empirical studies have studied, supported and lent credibility to this servant leadership behavior (Page & Wong, 2000; Patterson, 2002; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya, 2003; Dennis & Winston, 2003; Erhart, 2004; Dennis & Bocarnea , 2005; Liden *et al* , 2008; Sendjaya *et al*, 2008; Earnhardt; 2008).

## Service oriented

The virtue of service is at the hub of the servant leadership model (Patterson, 2003). Servant leaders instill the meaning of and reinforce the importance of serving

others within and outside the organization through their behavior, which provides crucial cues that serving others is a typical characteristic of the organization (Zhang *et al*, 2012). According to Spears (2004) the best leader is first experienced as a servant by others including employees, customers and community as the number one priority. A leader's main desire is to first assist others and servant leadership commences when a leader takes up the position of servant in his or her interactions with followers. Servant leaders are primarily servants at heart and are called to a life of service, thus servant leaders choose to lead based on the interest of others, as opposed to self-interest (Russell & Stone, 2001; Patterson, 2003). Servant leadership is not much about leading but about serving as a leader (Sendjaya & Peckerti , 2010 as cited in Taleghani & Mehr, 2013).

Servant leaders model service through their own behaviour thus cultivating an organizational culture of service that inspires and motivates followers (Patterson, 2003). Leaders understand that service is the focal point of servant leadership and they should emulate a service model for the follower in their behaviour, attitudes and values (Russell & Stone, 2002; Winston, 2003). Servant leaders are therefore follower focused and their primary aim is to serve others and fulfil their needs (Parolini *et al,* 2009 as cited in Wei & Desa, 2013). Greenleaf (1970) wrote and said that this simple fact is the key to the greatness of the leader. Amy (2012), states that Greenleaf gave noteworthy weight to the idea that true leadership carries a responsibility to think first about being of service to others. When a leader prioritizes the interests of the followers before his or her own self-interests, it brings out the best in the employees who will then exhibit higher levels of organizational commitment. According to van Dierenndonck and Patterson (2010) as cited in Wei and Desa (2013), the servant leader's nature of serving others helps to produce an environment of cohesion, concern and trust. Unlike other leadership styles, servant leadership therefore emphasizes other's needs over their own (Mazarei *et al*, 2013).There are huge number of empirical studies that have supported this way of servant leadership (Farling *et al*, 1999; Page & Wong, 2000 Dennis & Winston, 2003; Hale & Fields, 2007; Patterson, 2002; Russell & Stone, 2002; Mazarei *et al*, 2013; Taleghani & Mehr , 2013).

**Bonded in Humility**

According to Collins (2001), organizations do not only require to be good today in order to survive, but great, and a fundamental ability in building great companies is displaying humility as well as strength. *Servant Leadership: H*umility is one of the main characteristics of the emerging people-centered leadership theory,

servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011 as cited in Stefansdottir, 2013). Humility is an attitude and affirmation by the servant leader that they are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Humility enables the leader to affirm that employee's may have more knowledge and experience than oneself. Ferch (2005) stated, "One of the defining characteristics of human nature is the ability to discern one's own faults, to be broken as the result of such faults, and in response to seek a meaningful change". Patterson (2003) described humility in leadership as a leader's ability to understand the idea of not knowing, comprehending, or having all the answers. Such a conceptualization of humility is fundamental to leader self-evaluation. For servant leaders in organizations dependent on knowledge workers, this is especially significant as it is highly probable that employees do indeed know more about their specialization than anyone else inside the company. Indeed, humility is also about modesty and it is for this reason that a servant leader swerves away into the background when a task has been fully accomplished (van Dierendonck, 2010). By acknowledging frailty and the limits of one's own knowledge, the servant leader helps to provide a learning environment in which employees can learn and develop through their own experimentation and by learning from others. Many studies have given credibility to this servant leadership behavior (Patterson, 2002; Sendjaya, 2003; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005; Sendjaya *et al*, 2008; Ambali *et al*, 2011; Mazarei *et al*, 2013; Taleghani & Mehr, 2013).

**Being and doing Synchronized**

Servant leaders have the capacity to blend harmoniously their being and doing. There is no disharmony between what they say and do. Their words have authority because they preach what they do. Modeling in the form of a visible personal example is an important element of servant leadership (DePree, 1992; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Bennis & Nanus, 1997 as cited in Russell & Stone, 2002). Modeling is the principle way through which a leader can persuade the followers. Leaders model the way through personal example and commited execution. Modeling facilitates an example and shows the behaviour that the leader is seeking from others. Servant leaders model examples that can be imitated by others.

Genuine leaders model what matters and are willing to put into practice what they preach when it comes to expected organizational behaviour. Modelling what matters is the primary and most effective way to transmit the organization's mission, values, and ethos and that action communicates much more loudly than words when it comes to organizational values. Effective leaders also emphasise values through deeds

as much as or more than through words (Malphurs, 1996 as cited in Russell & Stone, 2002). In order to support this leadership practice, DePree (1992) argues that clearly expressed and steadily demonstrated values are often the most important factor in facilitating the important relationship between leaders and followers. Servant leaders draw followers by their example so that they become more committed, dedicated and even disciplined. The behaviours of senior leaders also create the ethical tone of their organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Servant leaders model servant behaviors such as assisting with housekeeping or setting up for meetings. They work together while serving with others in and around the organization (Ehrhart, 2004 as cited in Ebener & O'Connell, 2010). There are empirical studies that have supported this role modeling behavior (Russell & Stone, 2002; Page & Wong, 2000)

## IV.      Servant Leadership versus Other Leadership Styles

Servant leadership typically stands out from other leadership styles. While most traditional leadership theories are based on behavior, servant leadership emerges from a leader's principles, values, and beliefs (Walker, 2003). At the same time, most types of leadership focus on the well being of the organization while in servant leadership the emphasis is on followers who are considered to be the most significant (Kool & Dierendonck, 2012 as cited in Taleghani & Mehr, 2013). Servant leadership focuses on the humble and ethical use of power, nurturing a genuine relationship between leaders and followers and creating a supportive and positive work environment (Wong & Davey, 2007). The attention of the servant leader is on meeting the needs of the employees and not on fulfilling the leader's needs. It is a leadership style that places great importance on the personal development and empowerment of followers (Thakore, 2013).

Servant leadership thus includes an understanding and practice of leadership transcends self interest of the leader to the good of those who are led.  Today, the success of organizations and companies is greatly ensured by people oriented leadership style and it is no wonder that servant leadership is gaining a lot of importance in the current years. Servant leaders gain influence in a non-traditional manner that derives from servant hood itself (Russell & Stone 2002 in Stone *et al*, 2004). The significance of servant leadership is on the service of people rather than control or self-interest. It is not much about leading but about serving as a leader (Sendjaya & Peckerti, 2010 as cited in Taleghani & Mehr, 2013). However, in terms of exercising leadership, servant leaders are free to integrate the positive aspects of all other leadership models except command and control dictatorial leadership style

(Wong & Davey, 2007). Servant leaders are free to be agile and situational (Wong, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Servant leadership has emerged as a modern movement for the last forty years. It continues to gain momentum. Leaders who are aspiring make a difference aspire towards servant leadership. Servant leadership revolutionizes leadership style and makes positive changes within the person, family, team, community, department, company and the organization. Servant leadership nurtures caring, healing, loving, productive, creative, free, explorative, supportive and initiating new horizons in the world. The world today needs person centred, vision inspired, service oriented leaders who can empower one another in humility, with a happy blend theory and practice. Servant leadership ensures shared vision, altruism, aspiring for common good, sacrifice, commitment, freedom, fruitfulness and growth. Servant leadership is therefore a style of leadership style that can be embraced in relating with one another, in families, communities, companies, organizations and Institutions.

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