

Servant Leadership – A Leadership Style to Imbibe

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Abstract

A leader is an important part of any organization. He or she holds the reigns of the organization and directs it towards achievement of the organizational goals. The style in which a leader leads his/her group or organization defines its success. Same is applicable to any group like social, religious, etc. who tend to follow a leader. If the leader knows his/her leadership style then it gives a scope for improvement or change altogether. This paper dwells upon a specific leadership style – Servant Leadership. It tries to explain this concept through a descriptive research. It throws light on core concept of servant leadership and also its impacts in the practical business environment. There is huge scope for research on this leadership style. In the changing dynamics of present day across different fields, servant leadership can be surely looked at.

Introduction

A leadership style can be defined as a set of behavioral patterns that a leader may adopt to direct the followers and motivate them to achieve the set goals. The way a leader leads or his leadership style has been a topic of research, observation and study for last several decades. It was initiated by psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1930s (MindTools, n.d.). His study then introduced mainly three leadership styles: authoritarian, democratic and delegative. This created a foundation for the various studies that happened later. As more and more researches were done by scholars around the world, new concepts around leadership and styles were developed. In present day, the number of leadership styles has grown manifold. There are people who promote different leadership styles based on the context they dwell in. Understanding the leadership style of a leader has become very significant today. If a leader understands his or her own style, it can be either

improved upon or entirely disposed off or combined with aspects from other leadership styles. The ultimate aim is to achieve the objectives of the group or organization that he or she leads. If the current styles are not yielding suitable results, then the leader can upgrade on his style of leadership and be a better leader for his followers. The people who are led often look up to their leader for guidance, motivation, etc.

Leadership could be needed at various stages or contexts around us. A business organization, a social community, a country or any kind of group with a set purpose, all of them need their respective leaders. To achieve their objectives, they are faced with several challenges both, outside and inside the group. The group needs to be led to move ahead of these challenges and attain their goals. In this context, the success of the group essentially depends on the leader, the group, the leadership style and so on. Of many leadership styles that have been discussed about, one of the styles is the “Servant Leadership” style. The terms “servant” and “leader” are quite contrasting to each other. Yet, they can be connected with each other to define a novel concept of servant leadership style.

What is Servant Leadership?

Servant Leadership as an idea has been in knowing for ages. Various religious texts across the world, have mentioned about this concept. In the Hindu text – *Bhagavad Gita* enlists quality of a superior person as – “he is one who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pain and pleasure, and forgiving” (Sivananda, 2000: 12: 13). Also, an ancient treatise in management written by Kautilya, the duties of a King have been mentioned as – “In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare; whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider as good.” There are many passages in the Bible which depict the servant leadership qualities of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who lived in the first century A.D. and taught His disciples, “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11; New King James Version of the Holy Bible). Jesus modelled His teaching on servant leadership by washing the feet of His disciples.

The phrase was coined by Robert Greenleaf in “The Servant as a Leader”, an essay that he published in 1970. In that essay, he said: “The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.” He mentions that a

servant-leader would work towards serving the highest priorities of other people, look after if they are growing, becoming wiser, freer, and more autonomous and so on. A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong (Greenleaf Center, n.d.). Many experts like Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Peter Drucker, etc. have supported servant leadership because based on their experience they found that this leadership style practically works (Keith, 2010).

Core qualities of Servant Leadership

The key noticeable part of servant leadership is that it incorporates flexibility and diversity in itself. It seeks numerous ways to solve the problem and selects one based on the whole context of the problem. The context here could be of too much variation with people in the team from different culture and backgrounds, different thought processes, views, behavior and so on. A servant-leader would be ready to serve them mindfully considering the differences and similarities in his followers. The desire to serve others is supreme in such leaders. They are basically servant by nature but also possess leadership abilities. A classic example of a servant-leader in day-to-day life could be that of any parent in this world. A parent always works towards growth of their child, its overall development till the time the child is dependent on them, and even after that. A servant-leader is also kind of a parent to his followers, sometimes tough, sometimes kind, but always thinks of benefit of his followers.

Leading Oneself. If the Hindu text of *Gita* is referred to, then it states this concept at an individual level. It means that every individual is naturally capable of leading self and also lead people around, in family, organization, department, etc. to some extent. Its like supporting and taking care of each other. At places where servant leadership is practiced, for any challenging situation, all aspects of the problem would be looked at and then an amicable decision and action would be taken. This is applicable at work as well as in personal life of an individual.

Empowerment. Every person who is part of the group has certain skills, talents, qualities, etc. A servant-leader would give his people sufficient space and freedom to develop themselves, and give their best performance. This enable the people to work with motivation, dedication and enthusiasm. People at all the levels are given opportunities to develop their potentials and skills and grow higher and higher.

Humility. A servant-leader needs to be humble. Egoism would be detrimental to a leader in long run. A humble person has the ability to learn new things, learn from others, learn from his and others' experiences and altogether grow and be a better and better leader. Humility is reflected in actions, words and body language of a leader. The followers and members would usually pick up the cues easily.

Listening. A servant-leader must be naturally a good listener. To the least, he can develop this ability too. He or she must patiently listen to others. Sometimes good and million-dollar ideas come up from subordinates. A leader who is a good listener would pick it up and work upon it. Good listener also enables the members to speak up openly without any apprehensions and fear. This would promote an open communication within the team.

Empathy. Empathy means getting into others' shoes and understand what it means to be them. Some people are natural empathes and can easily understand other people. However, this skill can be developed by a leader at his or her personal level. This skill in the servant-leader would enable him/her to better understand the members, to know their pain points, etc. Listening and empathy in the leader, would also enable the members to come up and share their viewpoints willingly to the leader.

Forgiveness. A human being is bound to make mistakes. The members are human beings and hence would make mistakes quite often though not desirable. A servant-leader needs to forgive them, especially if they are not too critical. This does not mean that relevant actions as per rules and laws are not taken. Sometimes, leaders tend to keep the mistakes in mind for long time and the consequences come out at some point in future. Once the matter is closed, a servant-leader would forgive and let it go.

Accountability. A servant-leader is accountable for his/her own actions. Rather than passing the buck in case things go unexpected, he/she would own up the responsibility and be accountable for it too. This could in fact encourage the members and followers to be accountable to their actions too.

Truthfulness. Truthfulness is a quality which has been traditionally promoted around the world by various religions, spiritual gurus, etc. This is one of the most desired quality by all the people especially from others. A leader is closely observed and followed by the followers and members. Truthfulness and accountability, together would put the leader in a better commanding position in the team.

Foresight. Foresight is an essential aspect of servant leadership. This could be a natural talent in a person or could also be developed from experience, over a period of time. Foreseeing the possibilities, can help the servant-leader to make better decisions and be prepared for the upcoming challenges. The leader needs to be proactive in his approach. This is one of the critical elements because failure of foresight would mean that the leader is reactive in nature and can be detrimental to the organization or the group.

Changing the Pyramid. The traditional pyramidal approach of organization structure with a top-down approach has a boss with only subordinates and not colleagues. A servant-leader will have leaders like CEO at the top level too. He would have a team of leaders at the top with members who are committed to each other and the objectives and would share information with each other.

Developing the people. People in the team or group must have new opportunities to develop themselves in skills, knowledge and talent. They must be able to grow and develop their potential. When the members grow, the team also grows. A servant-leader tries to bring out the best from the members by inspiring them, motivating and encouraging them to take up challenging tasks and so on. Together with listening skills and empathy, a servant-leader can be an effective one.

Self-Awareness. A servant-leader must be self-aware and mindful of how he or she is impacting others. The followers respond to the personalities, strengths, weaknesses, skills, experiences and behavior of the leader. A servant-leader must be observant of the verbal and non-verbal feedback that is received from the members to reflect upon and gain insights for self-improvements.

Practical Impact of Servant Leadership

As mentioned earlier, Servant Leadership had been in practice since ages before it was formally coined as a term by Greenleaf in 1970s. There were several research works done by various people like Blanchard, Russell, etc. They could find that the concept of servant leadership was quite anecdotal and lacked empirical evidence of the impact on the business and organizations. These instances laid a foundation for the study of the concept and acquire empirical evidences to support it. Therefore, many researchers have setup various models of servant leadership and attributes to test it practically. Though the intent and concept of it are different from transformational and charismatic leadership styles, they are quite similar to some extent. Some of the companies that had servant leadership at their core, were considered to be some of the

better places to work. Empowerment, truthfulness, support for others, and trust were some of the values considered valuable in these companies by the people there. Various researchers have developed models like OLA (Organization Leadership Assessment) and SLS (Servant Leadership Scale) that have tried to measure around 30 qualities associated to the leadership from the prism of servant leadership. These studies have found out that some organizational variables like extra efforts, organizational effectiveness, satisfaction, procedural justice, organizational citizenship behavior, leadership effectiveness, team effectiveness, organizational commitment, job stress, integrity, competence, etc. varied correlation with them indicate that servant leadership is impacting the organizations.

Most of the studies conducted on servant leadership focused upon scale development and validation of this construct. Also, it is important to note that most of these studies on servant leadership have been conducted in the countries with low power distance. Such countries have scored high on servant leadership. Low power distance means that power is equally distributed in the society. E.g. the UK, the Netherlands, etc. The countries with high power distance are the ones where power is not distributed equally. E.g. India. Quite less study has been done for the countries with high power distance.

A research study conducted by Vaneet Kashyap of Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, attempts to conduct a research for servant leadership in India and its impact on employees' intention to stay in the organization. Another main objective of this study was to check the level at which servant leadership is practiced in Indian organization. It covered eight hypotheses to study the positive correlation of several core qualities of servant leadership like empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, forgiveness, and stewardship, with employees' intention to stay in the organization. The sample space included participants across different demographic like gender, industry (manufacturing & service), public and private type of organization, age groups of 20 to 40, different education qualifications, junior level to senior level, varied experience of less than 5 years to more than 10 years, and also covered leader's age and gender. Servant Leadership Scale (SLS) was used to conduct the research for the considered hypotheses.

The results of SLS indicated that the hypotheses of positive correlation between dimensions of servant leadership and employees' intention to stay, hold true. So it can be implied that the SLS parameters do help organizations to retain their employees over a long term. Also, the GLOBE study suggests that India belongs to the cluster of high power distance. In the research, it was also observed that Indian managers stood low on humility and forgiveness parameters. This can be attributed to the high power distance existent there. A deeper regression analysis of the above SLS parameters further stated that two main parameters – forgiveness and empowerment play a major role in the intention to stay. Every human being is bound to make mistake. Though bearing the consequences of same is implied, a person would still hope that the mistakes are forgiven and forgotten after that and that it is not unnecessarily remembered in future to affect his/her growth prospects. Apart from this, psychology also supports the point that every person is capable enough to do his or her own tasks, face the challenges on their own, if they are given sufficient scope to do so. So naturally, empowerment would provide it to them and also the sense of achievement and success that they would have will make them feel better about the place they work at.

Conclusion

Though the study conducted has been quite at preliminary stage and covering only one major aspect of intention to stay in the company, it sets the stage for further research to be done ahead. Already, plenty of research and study exists for countries with low power distance. There is good amount of scope for research and studies to be done in the countries with high power distance. In the changing scenarios where human resource management has become a critical and significant aspect of business management, with newer HRM initiatives and practices being taken up for welfare and care of the people in the organization, servant leadership could be looked at for a leadership style to be imbibed. This can surely give an edge to the organizations to retain and develop quality human resource in their setup.

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