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Are Servant Leaders Born or Made?

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Abstract

This essay examines whether servant leadership is an innate personality trait, a learned behavior, or a combination of both. Authentic servant leadership is based on the premise of serving others and putting others' interests before personal interests (Greenleaf, 1977). If this premise is true, then many will be unable to practice servant leadership due to a lack of the prerequisite attributes of a servant leader. This study begins by discussing servant leadership as it relates to personality attributes. It next considers the possibility that servant leadership practices and attitudes may be formed and developed in those to whom servant leadership does not come naturally. If so, then servant leadership may potentially be utilized by those who are not natural servant leaders in one of two ways. First, it is possible that one may grow into an authentic servant leader through ongoing practice of the habits of servant leaders. If so, this is a powerful idea. Second, it seems possible that a skillful manager may potentially draw from the quiver of authentic servant leadership on a situational basis. The study concludes by evaluating each of these two possibilities.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Personality Attributes, Innate Personality Traits, Learned Behavior

Many modern leadership theories have grown out of the traditional trait, behavioral/human relations, and contingency leadership theories. Among the current leadership theories such as adaptive, transformational, transactional, charismatic, and others, one that is (re)gaining much attention since first being introduced in the 1970s is that of servant leadership.

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In his seminal book, *Servant Leadership*, Robert Greenleaf (1977), in commenting on the lessons he took from Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, says: "to me, this story clearly says that *the great leader is seen as servant first*, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness" (p. 7). Greenleaf later goes on to posit that the true servant leader must be 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. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established...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...the natural servant, the person who is servant first, is more likely to persevere and refine a particular hypothesis on what serves another's highest priority needs than is the person who is leader first and who later serves out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations" (pp. 13-14).

Greenleaf assumes that most people can learn to discriminate among those who presume to serve them and identify true servants (e.g., those who are servant first) as those they will choose to follow.

The purpose of this study is to review servant leadership and examine how servant leadership styles are developed and implemented. Servant leadership is a popular style of leadership today, but how can one become a servant leader? Are servant leaders born that way, as Greenleaf seems to imply, or can this type of leadership be developed over time?

When servant leadership is considered in its basic form as presented by Greenleaf, several questions need to be considered, including: Is the act of serving others something that can be developed through practice or is it inherently a part of one's personality? Can putting others ahead of self truly be genuine? Can those who are not inclined toward servant leadership nevertheless mimic that style effectively? Can actively practicing servant leadership strategies—even if not natural at first—lead to the progressive transformation of someone into Greenleaf's ideal? Greenleaf believed one had to have the desire to serve before becoming a leader to be a true servant leader, but if a leader recognizes the limitations—or even sheer folly—of his or her current approach to leadership, can he or she learn to become a servant leader, and thus, a more effective leader?

There are many examples that can be considered in parallel with servant leadership. Some of these include parenting, athletics, and even the spiritual disciplines. For example, the best parents are the ones who become that way through the practice on a regular basis of the activities that "good" parents do. In Christian faith communities the believers who appear to reflect Christ most authentically are generally the ones who—through spiritual discipline (i.e., practice)—become increasingly comfortable performing

Christ-like acts of service even if those acts do not feel right or comfortable at first. In the same way, can a leader adopt the servant leadership behaviors and, through practice, become a genuine servant leader? Greenleaf (1977) uses examples of Christ and faith when describing servant leadership, indicating, perhaps, that this might be possible.

According to Sun (2013), a leader typically develops a connection with servant leadership through self-identifying with the values and beliefs of serving. This orientation comes from the very essence of an individual's identity and qualities. When servant leaders are presented with decisions and must consider whether or not to participate in decision making in their own best interests, certain servant leadership factors will be present to combat self-serving decisions. Sun identifies these qualities as "calling, humility, empathy, and agape love...that servant leaders are consciously and hence cognitively, aware of" (p. 547). These factors are intrinsic to the servant leader as they feel a calling to serve others with humility, empathy, and agape or unconditional love. With this in mind, to call upon servant leadership in particular situations, it would seem the leader would need these intrinsic characteristics at the core.

Modern contingency theory of leadership implies that leaders can identify with several different leadership styles and call on a particular style as events occur, but someone who identifies with the servant leader style will still have a heart for service to others as a core attribute regardless of the leadership style used (Sun, 2013). Northouse (2013) asserts that servant leadership can sometimes seem counterintuitive because the two concepts appear to be in conflict: servant and leader. Northouse explains that this seemingly inverse relationship creates a distinctive viewpoint. Servant leaders are concerned about their followers and put them first, assisting with personal development and inspiring them to take on responsibilities and personal growth.

Russell and Stone (2002) suggest that "if countless individuals transform into servant leaders, infinitely more people would benefit. Servant leadership offers the potential to positively revolutionize interpersonal work relations and organizational life. It is a concept that longs for widespread implementation" (p. 154). Servant leadership appears to offer a leader style that is appealing to followers and organizations, so what needs to be understood in order to practice servant leadership? Washington, Sutton, and Feild (2006) suggest one of the Big Five personality factors, agreeableness, is an essential element of the personality of servant leaders, as well as the leader's integrity and empathy toward others. These factors seem to correlate with Greenleaf's view of the servant leader and the focus on service above self.

Though we revisit it later, it is worth noting at this point that servant leaders are not only the servants of their employees or customers. The "serving" that servant leaders perform also serves the *organization*. This view of servant leadership coincides with Jim Collins' concept of "Level 5" leaders who have great personal humility and focus on achieving organizational purposes without concern for personal recognition.

Reinke (2004) suggests that leadership goes beyond personality characteristics or qualities to create connections and build relationships between leaders and followers. Certainly, servant leadership appears to fit this model of connectedness rather than a transactional relationship. Reinke also points out as these relationships are developed

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among followers and leaders in the servant leader model, this lends itself to optimally functioning teams within an organization. Other outcomes include improving trust, empowerment, and performance of the organization. As leaders attempt to build trust among followers, an open, transparent relationship between leader and followers will be vital to continued success.

Joseph and Winston (2005) suggest that improving trust among leaders and followers will increase the potential for success of an organization. As servant leadership is considered and the ways this leadership style can be put into practice, trust appears to be one critical factor. Joseph and Winston discovered a positive, direct relationship between servant leadership, trust, and the perceptions of followers. “Managers and leaders can improve organizational performance through practice of servant leadership behaviors that increase trust in the manager and in the organization” (Joseph & Winston, 2005, p. 16).

In assessing servant leadership as a potential leadership style, as well as the specific habits of servant leaders, it is important for leaders to understand and evaluate the characteristics of this leadership style. Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008, p. 162) identify nine dimensions of servant leadership:

1. Emotional healing
2. Creating value for the community
3. Conceptual skills
4. Empowering
5. Helping subordinates grow and succeed
6. Putting subordinates first
7. Behaving ethically
8. Relationships
9. Servanthood

These nine dimensions can serve as an outline of factors to consider practicing in order to improve servant leadership abilities. Liden, et al. (2008) posit that “servant leadership may enhance both job performance and commitment to the organization and ...leaders may inspire followers to take an active role in serving the community in which the organization is embedded...creating a culture of serving others, both within and outside the organization” (p. 174). This seems to present an opportunity for leaders to enhance performance and collaboration through the practice of servant leadership.

Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) suggest a measurement model for servant leadership by focusing on eight factors of servant leadership similar to the nine dimensions presented by Liden, et al. (2008). The factors used by Dierendonck and Nuijten include: empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, forgiveness, and stewardship. The authors posit that their model can measure both “servant” and “leader.” This can be crucial for leaders as they attempt to implement “best practices” of servant leadership.

In order for leaders of organizations to utilize servant leadership and improve on those particular characteristics related to service, there will be a need to understand this style of leadership. Organizations struggle to identify leaders and sustain leadership. Peterson, Galvin, and Lange (2012) posit that “practitioners would also benefit from a better understanding of what leads to servant leadership. That understanding would help in leader selection processes, as organizations attempt to determine who is more likely to display behaviors consistent with servant leadership, and would help organizations plan for how such leadership might be encouraged among incumbent executives” (p. 566-67).

The Problem of Trust

If the trust of one’s followers is a key factor in effective servant leadership as several authors indicate, this would seem to imply that one cannot move in and out of being a servant leader. Trust is built up over time and, once lost, is very difficult to regain. Robert Bruce Shaw (1997) says one key component of trust in a leader is the belief that he or she truly cares about constituents as people, not just what they can do for the leader or the organization. As the old adage goes, “*people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.*” This conviction reinforces Greenleaf’s assumption that followers can discriminate among leaders who truly want to serve and those who merely acquire the impression of serving to achieve other goals. If a leader rises to power using a more traditional leadership style and then decides to become a servant leader, it will in all likelihood take some time for followers to learn to trust that his or her transformation is real and lasting and not simply a manipulation to improve productivity or the leader’s organizational performance.

Recent empirical evidence illustrates the significance of trust as it relates to servant leadership, suggesting that trust may be either a natural outgrowth of servant leadership, or an essential element that requires nurturing on the part of the leader. Chatbury, Beaty, and Kriek (2011) discover significant trust among low-level employees and their managers in the presence of servant leadership. Sendjaya and Pekerti (2010) examine whether servant leadership is an antecedent of trust, finding that servant leadership is a significant predictor of trust. What is especially fascinating is that Sendjaya and Pekerti go on to itemize a list of specific behaviors that a leader can utilize to strengthen trust: behaviors that seem to increase trust include articulation of a shared vision, role-modeling, appearing concerned for others and respectful of them, and acting in a manner consistent with verbally articulated ideals.

Given the rising concern regarding corporate leaders making selfish decisions for personal benefit while risking harm to the organization, it would behoove organizations to encourage the practice of servant leadership. So what are organizations to do if they desire to instill a culture of servant leadership? First, it would seem that those organizations desiring to be led by servant leaders should screen for these traits in the selection process. If being a servant first *is* an important component in true servant leadership, the best way to build an organization of servant leaders would be to hire people to be leaders who already have a desire to serve others.

To continuously reinforce the importance of servant leadership as the preferred leadership style within the organization and to institutionalize it within the organization’s

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culture, organizations must then also evaluate managers on aspects of servant leadership in performance reviews, rewarding and promoting those who are the best examples of the servant leader. If non-servant leaders are performing in managerial positions within the organization, it must be recognized that – even with a deep personal desire to change one’s leadership style – it will take time for such an individual to transform from a traditional leadership style to one that is truly accepted by followers as a servant leader. This will likely be a long and difficult process, depending on the extent of the leader’s “non-servant” behavior in the past. This being said, organizations (and individual managers) can and should invest in development programs that help those with a true aspiration to become a servant leader to do so. Servant leadership development training would be particularly valuable for new managers or high potential professionals within the organization who have not yet developed a leadership style.

Through the continuous practice of serving behaviors in a leader’s decision making and organizational interactions, even those who are not the natural “servant first” ideal of Greenleaf’s may, given time, gain the trust of their constituents – provided these behaviors are seen as sincere and permanent.

Concluding Reflections

We would like to think that the practice of authentic servant leadership need not be limited to only those naturally gifted along the nine dimensions of servant leadership articulated by Liden, et al. (2008). Were this the case, then an organization in search of such leaders would face considerable competition to land qualified applicants from what is likely a relatively small pool. And, as we discuss above, the hiring process would necessarily be an endeavor with high explicit and implicit costs. Hiring such a person would require two steps. In the first, an organization would need to identify the servant leader they desire. But even once hired, it could take many years for that person to earn the trust of the individuals throughout.

An alternative possibility is that a given manager or leader might occasionally try to mimic the traits of a servant leader when a particular circumstance seems suitable, and use other strategies in other situations. Here we see little hope. This notion cannot be reconciled with the significant role of trust in the relationship between the leader and those he or she leads in the servant leadership model. A manager who constantly shifts gears between “servant” leader and other leader styles erodes and compromises the usefulness of the servant leader style.

In contrast, we see great hope in the idea of the servant leader who is formed by past experiences, the mentors he or she seeks and follows, and the daily practice of the habits of a true servant leader. Even if someone is not yet a genuine servant leader, anyone who possesses a sincere desire to have the heart of a servant leader – to lead as other servant leaders – has the potential to lead through service.

Of course, this is not the only path to servant leadership. Inasmuch as one of Greenleaf’s key insights is that servant leaders are those who come to the realization that the best way they can serve is to lead, it seems entirely likely that both avenues to

authentic servant leadership are open to those inclined to follow them: while one may learn to serve by leading, another may indeed also learn to lead through serving.

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