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The Potential Application of Servant Leadership

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of servant leadership as advanced by Robert Greenleaf and others. By exploring and elaborating what Robert Greenleaf and others have had to say about the servant leadership model, the article creates a connection and relationship between values, a focus on service and six sigma business strategies to create a lasting value for all. This article argues that the application of the servant leadership model in today’s organizational context may improve business results. Empirical research will need to be carried out to provide specific empirical data on implementation of the model to demonstrate that servant leadership is the model for today and the future.

Introduction

The concepts and principle of servant leadership were first developed by Greenleaf (1977, 2002) based on the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New International Version Bible, John 13: 1-15. Greenleaf (2002) developed the servant leadership model to include a set of characteristics that can often enable leaders to serve the follower and other stakeholders with the intention of creating a better society. The model embraces values, emotional intelligence (EI) and spirituality. EI is the ability to perceive and express emotions, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand and reason with emotions, and effectively manage emotions within oneself and in relationships with others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). The values and beliefs give the leader a sense of purpose and meaning, thus finding meaning in serving others. Ashmos & Duchon (2000) pointed out that to have meaning in life one has to believe in something, a more superior force or deity and the value of serving others from a personal position in relation to the more superior force or deity, and its part in adding value in the results they expect to achieve.
Servant leadership is guided by strong principles, virtues, and integrity which serve as the fixed and stable reference point, with principles and dependable benchmarks. These help leaders make sense of ambiguity and conjecture, and serve as a source of resilience that produces positive energy in systems, enables growth and vitality in people, and enhances the probability of positive performance and sustainability by creating a lasting value (Cameron, 2007, George, 2007).

Additionally, servant leadership creates a culture of service and nurture which so much reflects Hofstede’s concept of soft focus on describing the eastern cultures coupled with his long term orientation concept (Hofstede, 2010). Constructs of culture, organizational values, individual values, and stakeholder value creation have today become major factors in organizational development and as such, visions and missions of organizations are tied to values espoused as part of culture, individuals, organizations and society.

The model provides an excellent approach to help organizations achieve global citizenship and leadership as they attempt to solve the world’s toughest problems through innovations as they endeavor to create lasting value. George (2005) pointed out that companies, if guided by values, should no longer be seeking a quick fix with a jump in stock price; instead, they should now be attempting to realize long term success and care about the impact on stakeholders and society. Such companies reflect Hofstede’s fifth dimension of his classical concepts on culture the Long-Term Orientation (LTO). Long-Term Orientation focuses on the degree the society embraces, or does not embrace long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values. As such, such companies prescribe to the values of long-term commitments and respect for tradition, reflecting High Long-Term Orientation ranking (Hofstede, 2010).

A leader implementing servant leadership will focus on addressing the needs of the followers, thereby removing the hurdles that would hinder them from achieving their goals. As this happens, the followers become empowered and respond by focusing on addressing the needs of those they serve. Buchanan (2007) explained why the best leaders are servants because it is the best way to get the best out of people and yourself. In servant leadership the goal of the leader is to serve the follower by addressing their needs emotionally, physically and spiritually. Though the leader holds a position of authority over the follower, he or she chooses to serve, treating the followers as internal customers. Just like the external customers, internal customers ought to be served effectively and excellently for them to remain loyal, motivated and productive. As such, servant leadership is the most appropriate leadership model in improving productivity and customer service.

The unique perspective taken by management embracing servant leadership may be useful with the challenge of change occurring in the environment and the fast moving vast global business world today. There appears to be a need for universally accepted leadership; one that can operate in all cultures whether organizational, national or global. The economic convergence resulting in collaborations between and among companies along with the interdependence of businesses and the emergence of teams across borders of organizations, nations and continents, means that globalization has become a reality coupled with the emergence of a similarly intelligent and skilled followers to their leaders in organizations, which means followers will need a much softer form of leadership and a much different focus on power (Nye, 2004). As borders across companies, communities, nations, and continents continue getting blurred by increased globalization, and
competitive convergence becomes a reality leading to collaborations in businesses. Servant leadership stands out as the most suitable model in such diverse cultures, teams, and within the workforce.

Servant leadership can be applied successfully in the more flattened organizational structures of today. Hierarchical power and leadership may no longer be effective with the contemporary emergence of a network of techno savvy followers whose access to information can be deemed unlimited and whose expectations to have a voice in organizational authority has risen steadily (Spencer, 2007). Spencer (2007) emphasized that the time for servant leadership is now and not the future, "it is destined to be more than just another option hence is the appropriate model for organizational leadership," (Spencer, 2007. p. 16).

Other models such as transactional and transformational leadership (Northouse, 2010) do not realize the same level of value creation. Transformational leadership is about inspiring positive change in people. In transformational leadership the leader identifies the needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executes the change in tandem with followers (Bass & Riggio, 2008). Servant leadership stands out compared to these models. For example, the transactional leadership model lacks emotional connection with followers and appears only suitable in hierarchical organizational structures, and so may not be appropriate for modern, flatter organizations. It is clear that there must be a shift from the traditional leadership, the transactional (management) model, largely based on hierarchical structures which appear more irrelevant now, to the servant leadership model. Servant leadership works well in all cultures and religions hence is the model to apply in diverse cultures (Friedman, 2005).

Patterson (2003) examined servant leadership as a theoretical model not backed by scientific research. Patterson explored the virtuous constructs of servant leadership which is what sets it apart. Patterson (2003) pointed out that exclusive reliance on transformational leadership is undesirable, so the need for additional theoretical perspectives and/or more comprehensive examination of leadership in organizational settings. Exploring what servant leadership is, establishing that its constructs are what sets it apart as a model by itself and the fact that it is about service, modeled through demonstrated values and ethics, is put forward by Patterson (2003).

Stone, Russell and Patterson (2003) examined transformational leadership and servant leadership to determine the similarities and differences that may exist between the two leadership models/concepts. They established that primarily the difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is the focus of the leader. While in transformational leadership the leader’s focus is on the organization, and builds follower commitment toward organizational objectives, the servant leader’s focus is on the followers, not on the organization but the achievement of organizational goals is through the achievement of the followers’ goals (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2007).

The fact that the model was developed based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and not scientific research may enlist endless debates as many people view organizations as contemporary entities and spare that model for the religious circles. These debates continue to make implementation of servant leadership an uphill task sometimes with efforts producing no or minimal gains. Spencer
(2007) warned that “the theoretical debates about servant leadership must not be viewed as a sign of weakness with the theory, but rather as an indication that the theory, until now, has not ‘gotten over the hurdle’ of finalizing associated variables and establishing a recognized operational construct” (p. 4).

Morals and Ethical Reasoning in Leadership

Moral and ethical reasoning has become a primary consideration in organizations today when selecting senior leaders and boards of trustees, (Ashley, 2000, Stables 2005). Values influence a leader’s moral reasoning and personal behavior which determines the choices, decisions, and nature of risks they will be able to take. As such values determine the extent to which a leader will accept or reject organizational pressures and goals as they differentiate what is ethical or unethical based on their personal values (Russell, 2001).

Leaders with values will thus influence the organizational culture with their personal values; leaders influence culture and vice versa. A set of universal values or rights which is critical for success include: reciprocity, respect for life, acting fair, being honest, striving for justice, and honoring the environment (Teehankee, 2008). Stables (2005) and Ashley (2000) showed that moral reasoning influenced justice and responsibility toward others and that there is a relationship between moral reasoning and social responsibility as well as environmental protectionism respectively. Organizations are not only to adopt formal statements of corporate values, but leadership should routinely identify virtuous behaviors such as honesty, integrity, and social concerns as top issues on their company’s agendas in awareness that customers and other stakeholders expect more than just a statement of values but that these are demonstrated consistently (Van Lee, Fabish, & McGaw, 2005).

In addition, values that focus on social responsibility, trust, humanitarianism, and environmental protectionism can be viewed as a strategic priority by some leaders and organizations. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Poter & Kramer, 2006) is gaining popularity in value guided organizations. These values not only help to define a sense of purpose for an organization, but are also a way to attract and retain the best employees and customers. They define an organization that people want to be a part of or belong to and that customers want to buy from. This focus on a new and evolving set of values is also critical to achieving organizational results as well as continuously improving performance.

It is a lapse or lack of values that has led to most of the crises in health, environmental, social and justice systems in modern societies today. In fact much of the world economic crisis is due to failed ethics and values. Scandals such as the ENRON situation amongst others, serve a good example of what lack of values and ethics can do. Such values are critical as they can help organizations to achieve global citizenship, social responsiveness and environmental protectionism (McLaughlin, 2009).

The servant leadership model provides a solution to many other demands of leadership long sought after. Lanctot & Irving (2007) explored the connection between morality and leadership which has been sought after by leadership scholars and practitioners over the years. Lanctot & Irving (2007) point out that servant leadership creates that connection. They examine the
antecedents and philosophical foundations of servant leadership that can be used to facilitate further research. Besides receiving more attention in media and popular press, many key organizations are implementing servant leadership practically. Notably, up to 20% of 100 top companies to work for listed in Fortune magazine have sourced guidance from Greenleaf’s Center for Servant Leadership (Lanctot & Irving, 2007).

Implementing Servant Leadership

Implementing servant leadership requires leaders to embark on a transformational process. However, to adequately attack complacency and address the inward focused cultures, the workforce should be mobilized to play the leadership role regardless of their positions. As leaders, they will influence the culture of the organization by leading by example. Kotter’s Eight Step model of transformational change (Kotter, 1996) can be used to implement servant leadership in any organization.

The steps will have to be followed in the correct sequence (Kotter, 1996). However, Bruch, et al. (2005) warned that this will not just be following a step-by-step program as this may not help realize the desired success. “Part of change management also embodies taking a firm grasp on a seminal change idea or purpose, which must then be thought through and clarified before the enactment of the change” (p. 98). As such, just like any other change initiative, implementing servant leadership should be well planned and continually communicated effectively through seminal training and workshops.

The steps used to implement servant leadership were developed by examining over 100 organizations of varying sizes and industry types (Kotter, 1995). The steps include: establishing a sense of urgency, establishing a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, anchoring new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 1996). Establishing a sense of urgency is the first step–basically examining the market and competitive realities and identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities. Some of the realities would include the blurring of borders across organizations, countries and continents, flattening of structures, emergence of similarly intelligent and skilled workforce with their leaders, and economic convergence leading to more collaborations and service orientation to businesses. Opportunities may include the synergy created in strategy execution produced by a focus on followers’ needs.

The possibility of attaining global leadership standards in line with the organization’s vision and mission can be demonstrated. The disconfirming information should be strongly presented to sufficiently attack the complacencies in order to develop survival anxieties (Schein, 2009) and create a need to change. Learning anxieties will develop as the leaders develop the need for change and these can be reduced through training and the seminal demonstrations of the concepts to ensure clarity in grasp of the change.

Second is creating the guiding coalition which involves putting together a group with enough power to lead the change and getting the group together to work as part of a team. Third is developing vision to direct the change effort and developing strategies for achieving that vision. Fourth is
communicating the vision using every vehicle possible to constantly ensure a buy-in of the new vision and strategies and having the guiding coalition role model the behaviors expected of leaders and/or managers and employees.

Fifth is empowering broad-based action which involves getting rid of obstacles, changing systems or structures that undermine the change vision, and encouraging risk taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions. Sixth is generating short-term wins to motivate the players by planning for visible improvements in performance, or wins, and recognizing people, leaders and teams who made the wins possible. Seventh is consolidating gains and producing more change and involves using increased credibility to change all systems, structures and policies that do not fit together and do not fit the transformation vision, including hiring, promoting or developing people who can implement servant leadership, the vision, and reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes and change agents.

Finally, the eighth step is anchoring new approaches in the culture by continually creating better performance through customer-and productivity-oriented behaviors, more and better leadership, and more effective management, smoothing the connections between new behaviors and organizational success, and ensuring leadership development and succession. Because servant leadership is based on the principle that a leader serves the followers who respond by serving others and becoming more like leaders themselves, a culture transformation is realized. With such anchoring, the servant leadership culture will be demonstrated by all in all endeavors of their work in the company.

Implementing servant leadership, like many other change initiatives, will be faced with resistance. To reduce resistance, all complacencies will have to be sufficiently attacked so as to develop the need and spur urgency for change. Clearly communicating the vision for change and authentically demonstrating the values and purpose for the vision to achieve a buy-in is important. A stable reference point and dependable principles or stable benchmarks in the chaotic world identifies virtuousness as an essential point of reference (Cameron, 2007).

**Impacts of Implementing Servant Leadership**

Implementing servant leadership has yielded positive results and provides a solution to many other demands of leadership long sought after. Even with the challenge of the economic melt-down, companies which have discovered the value creation process by implementing the servant leadership model continue to flourish (Lanctot & Irving, 2007). Servant leadership may be an effective model that can be utilized to practically and effectively execute a product leadership and cost effectiveness strategy through Six Sigma: the focus on customers to create value by continuous improvement of quality while reducing costs (Azis & Osada, 2010). The continuous improvement on the quality of products and services with reduced costs will ensure that the organization achieves its product and cost leadership strategy. As such it may help organizations improve their core competences continually thus becoming and remaining competitive.

Lanctot & Irving (2007) provided examples of iconic companies that have implemented servant leadership: Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Vanguard Investment Group, The Men’s Wearhouse, Synovus Financial Corporation, and TDIndustries. For instance, Starbucks is providing cheaper loans to enable their employees to pursue education to improve their skills. TDIndustries promotes
a culture of servant-hood continually keeping the “employees’/customers’ best interest in mind” (TDIndustries: Overview, 2010, p. 1) and the demonstrated belief in the long-term goals—they do not seize short-term benefits to the detriment of their long-term mission, continuous, intense people-development efforts, including substantial training budgets, investment in tools, equipment and facilities that enable them to better accomplish their mission.

“TDIndustries is changing the face of the construction industry through sustainable, state-of-the-art innovations that are a result of putting their employees/partners and customers first” (TDIndustries: Overview, 2010, p. 1; TDIndustries: Servant Leadership, 2010, p. 1). TDIndustries implemented servant leadership focussing on their employees as partners. The servant leadership culture is monitored and evaluated by holding leaders accountable through annual evaluation surveys completed by employees on their leader(s). There is transparency and open communication and ownership of the company by employees. There is work/life balance and friendly work environment among many other best practices for employees. TDIndustries has been named to Fortune’s ‘100 Best Companies to Work’ list for several consecutive years.

Conclusion

The purpose of leadership and organizations is to contribute to society and the common good by creating value for all stakeholders. The servant leadership model it is argued is suitable for application in all cultures within and across organizations. Servant leadership embraces values and ethics which have become the drivers of today’s society. Though not based on scientific research, it can be argued that its virtuous constructs makes it indispensable in today’s organizations, cultures, religions, and race. As borders across companies, communities, nations, and continents continue getting blurred by increased globalization and competitive convergence becomes a reality leading to collaborations in businesses, servant leadership stands out as the most suitable model in such diverse cultures, teams, and workforce.

Servant leadership can be embraced to provide a smooth transition from the highly hierarchical to more flattened and decentralized structures in organization. As employees become more empowered and innovations bring out leadership in many, organizations can adopt this model to emphasize a systems approach to organizational growth and development. When applied well in a strategic marketing process, goals are not only achieved but can also be exceeded, thereby improving business performance as well as the wellbeing of all stakeholders. It makes it easier in business strategy execution, customer satisfaction, human capital development and overall improvement of performance, growth, and sustainability in organizations.

Recommendation

Though there is consensus on the positive impact in companies implementing servant leadership, there remains a need to produce empirical data that can be used to describe servant leadership, associated variables and establish a recognized operational construct of the model. For this reason, empirical research will need to be carried out to provide specific empirical data on implementation of the model to demonstrate that servant leadership is the model for today and the future. Such research will address some of the hurdles faced in implementing servant leadership and the rising debates on servant leadership as a contemporary model.


