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Introduction

Servant leadership is a growing practice that calls for community leaders (politicians, clergy, and educational centers) to be more pragmatic and lead others by serving them. Inspired by principles of religion, servant leadership implies that true servants make true leaders (Greenleaf, 2002, 21). They must be flexible in their approach and responsive to the needs of those they serve. Servant leaders must also provide a fresh outlook based on their past experiences and contribute to society by meeting its demands in an earnest effort. Exhibiting such behavior definitely may have a positive impact on others; thus inspiring them to do more to help others.

Servant leadership provides institutions a way to improve what it is becoming and producing by building capacity in others to do the same (Pollard, 2006, 76). In addition to an increase in self-efficacy within the servant leader, the improvement process that takes place has a grassroots direction: the community. Because of this, communities can better utilize their resources and develop a stronger institution.

Servant leadership pushes for “a moral community that shapes character and behavior; a community that serves as a stabilizing force in society; a community that focuses on the worth and value of people; a community with a soul” (Pollard, 2006, 166). Because of its origin, servant leadership fosters a sense of cohesiveness within communities. Not only does it build a sense of oneness, servant leadership serves as a catalyst for positive social change.

This paper is a critical essay that discusses the influence of servant leadership on urban community sustainability. It analyzes current practices in urban development as it relates to servant leadership; both individual and institutionalized. It also explores negativity within the urban culture and how servant leadership can effectively curb such negativity through processes of individual empowerment and educational development through the formation of community collaboratives.

Grassroots Benefactor of Servant Leadership

Institutions are being called upon to alter their self-serving traditions and become servants of society. In many cases, capitalism is becoming more socialistic. Many organizations are giving back to communities that allow them to thrive. For instance, seated at the core of an urban Jackson, Mississippi neighborhood is West Jackson Community Development Center. A grass roots community based organization; West Jackson CDC has become a powerful catalyst for positive social change in

the area. Over the past five years, the Center has successfully aided the community in redeveloping the area. This push for sustainability allowed for the building of new homes and the development of new scenic parkways. To add, Jackson State University has been able to acquire abandoned property, which has allowed it to expand its campus east to the edge of Mississippi's financial center, Downtown Jackson. According to Dr. Ronald Mason (2002), president of Jackson State University, this multi-million dollar project allowed the university to develop The Palisades at e-City, which is a five million dollar privatized housing alternative for students, faculty and staff at Jackson State located on Valley Street where a cotton-seed oil plant and a row of drug houses once stood.

The Urban Community and Servant Leadership

The urban community consists of peoples who work, reside, and worship within the nucleus of metropolitan areas. One may be quick to point out such a place on a map, but what really brings into the perspective of community is the overall sense of togetherness the various peoples who dwell within the community makeup. Because of overwhelming differences brought on by a coercion of cultures that metaphorically simmered in a single pot, the urban community has evolved into a pit of distrust between residents and its leadership (2005). This is because many citizens believe that leaders, including institutions, "allocate more resources to themselves than to their followers" (DeCremer, 2003). This is a major problem in urban communities.

Robin Kelley (1997) wrote that as many upwardly mobile individuals flocked to suburbs from urban areas, those who were left behind faced difficulty obtaining city services and social services such as decent housing and working schools. Over time this "neglect" validated their opinions because of an increase in school dropout rates, crime, and residences living with poor healthcare. Moreover, there was an increase in publicized scandal within the media, which allowed the community's already negative views to have a domino effect on others' perceptions. Thus, this negative impact somehow managed to trigger a lack of motivation to step up and become leaders.

In urban communities, individuals experience a lot of hesitation to serve their communities (West, 1999, 347). It is believed that individuals who are perceived to be in the forefront or be an intellectual are perceptively problematic for many residents. Because of the high level of distrust stationed within urban communities, many "intellectuals" find themselves being a member of a "subculture" within the urban community (Kelley, 1997, 45-49). This subculture typically breeds a sense of insecurity that motivates these "intellectuals" to change their desire to serve to one of self-interest (1997). More specifically, it is distrust in conjunction with the given "constraints on upward social mobility and the pressures for status and affluence among middle-class peers" that they "principally seek material gain and cultural prestige" (West, 1999, 305). For example, Robin Kelley (1997) wrote that many individuals who experience negativity and/or neglect transition their interests toward activities that will help them to survive daily. Because these experiences have become commonplace within urban communities, individuals who reside there turn to activities such as gambling, drug selling, prostitution, and selling of stolen goods to support them selves and their family. But why is this so? It appears that servant-type institutions that push for wholesome communities and "self-help in the world" have not and probably will not eliminate poverty or create enough gainful employment needed to employ the urban community (Kelly, 1997, 96). Even though this idea is built mostly on perception from those who lack will and resilience, it plays a major role in the perceptions of others' that reside in these communities.

One may ask what could possibly be done to address and perhaps overcome this spirit of negativism?

How can organizations help? What seems to work well in developing and sustaining urban communities is the presence of access and opportunity to its residents. Having access to adequate housing, jobs, and a strong yet cost effective educational system, as well as the opportunity for individuals to exercise what they have learned is a key factor of success. Institutions using their influence and financial power can curve such negativity and establish a sense of hope and communal prosperity in the hearts and minds of individuals who possess countered feelings (Smiley, 2006, 25).

Servant leaders play an important role in fostering relationships with community residents, businesses, and institutions to implement solutions to persistent problems that plague urban communities (Purdue, 2001). Problems such as crime, poor access to education and healthcare have become commonplace throughout the years. Even though addressing these issues vary in approach, they all have a common end; the building and implementation of social capital, which requires human participation through influence brought on by fostering resilience, self-efficacy, individual empowerment, and sustainable urban communities. When leaders reach out and include community residents in making decisions, they instill in them a sense of hope and empower them to lead and serve others.

In his work, Purdue (2001) listed building trusting relationships between communities and institutions as a primary factor for utilizing most resources available in implementing development projects. This includes leveraging all resources, both internal and peripheral, to build a humanly and financially capitalized program to implement servant led projects to bring about positive change. Moreover, it allows communities to basically “grow their own” by motivating individuals to take ownership of their community at a young age (Harney, 2003). This promotes communal empowerment, which harvests a strong approach to address many issues that plague communities by placing power in the hands of those who lead and reside within the community.

Everyone wants to live in a successful community; one that offers access to good education, good healthcare, fair housing, and is free of crime. A very effective approach to leveraging all resources to help create a successful community is to address issues with two factors as presented by Purdue (2001). These factors are: communal social capital in their relation with the local residents of the neighborhood and collaborative social capital in the regeneration of partnerships.

- Communal social capital in their relation with local residents of the neighborhood involves simply getting community residents involved in the change process. This may entail delegating duties, and group decision making from a grassroots approach. Such a process focuses on self-empowerment and self-actualization because they allow community residents to focus on their own inner strengths and abilities (Purdue, 2001). The effect of this is dynamic in that individuals working together learn together and become successful together in building a stronger community (Harney, 2001).
- Collaborative social capital in the regeneration of partnerships calls to action working relationships between the community and various institutional entities. Whether it is between a business, church, educational center, or non-profit organization working partnerships can have promising results in restructuring communities (Pollard, 2006, 97-98). This is because such partnerships allow for strong pushes toward positive social change such as community benefits agreements. These types of agreements typically foster “hiring programs for neighborhood residents, livable-wage employment opportunities, training and/or educational opportunities,

increased transit access and services, healthcare and childcare services, increased access to technology, increased affordable housing opportunities, opportunities for ownership/profit sharing for community residents and institutions, and neighborhood amenities such as parks and cultural centers” (Smiley, 2006, 180).

One may ask who needs to do what to develop these types of capital? Just as an old African proverb reads “it takes an entire village to raise a child,” it also takes an entire village to build and sustain a community. Thus, the answer to that question is that it takes everyone; community residents, politicians, businesses, and educational centers in collaboration to empower each other to work for a common good and bring about positive social change.

Communities, especially urban ones, thrive off of the work performed by servant leaders. What many do not realize though, is that generally all it takes is one person or organization to implement positive change in urban communities. This is because positive work done by one individual typically influences others to do positive things (Clark, 1983, 177). When Hurricane Katrina hit the coastlines of Mississippi and Louisiana many people were left homeless and without food or clothing. Oprah Winfrey, with the help of many of who were clergymen and women, businessmen and women, and athletes, came to the rescue with supplies. The most touching part though is that in a midtown area of Jackson, Mississippi, Oprah and Kevin Garnett, a professional basketball player, built eighteen homes in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity on a street now known as Angel Lane. Each donated millions of dollars of their own money toward building materials, and Oprah’s Angel Network supplied the home furnishings. Even more touching is that in the first week of the project, ten homes were built. This was possible because over 400 volunteers of all ages, races, and creeds, showed up to help. Nurses and physicians gave free medical care on their days off, students and teachers donated time on their days off, and most of all, businesses donated food, clothing, transportation, and around the clock aid for volunteers. No, Oprah and her friends not are the epitome of servant leadership. But her work provides a model of how one positive act by one or two individuals, or institutions, can motivate hundreds of others to act by giving within their means to help and serve others. Following Hurricane Katrina, millions of Americans, especially in the south, felt hopeless, but acts of service performed empowered people because they were able to use what they had to serve someone else. This service that they provided to others allowed each individual involved to empower someone else to make a difference in their community. What this suggests is that communities and institutions should invest in individuals who show interest in servant leadership.

Urban Communities and the Servant Institution

Servant leadership can bring about positive change in urban communities. However, when performed at the institutional level, the results could be greater than that performed by individuals because of available financial resources. An example would be Jackson State University’s fostering of urban renewal through the sponsorship of a series of new single-family homes being built through partnership with Habitat for Humanity. Even though poor families are being presented with access to quality housing, faculty, staff, students, and residents throughout the community are given an opportunity to serve those in need. But regardless of the participatory level this project is a result of the fostering of relationships between the institution, businesses, and community.

One may ask how can this process be successfully implemented when negativity oftentimes is overwhelming? In response, Greenleaf (2006) stated that servant leadership is shared leadership. If

individuals and institutions form collaboratives where each player involved shares an equal voice in matters, everyone feels empowered and would most likely perform their best. The implication of this is that the positivism resulting from these good deeds will inspire those involved to become servants of others.

The religious foundation from which servant leadership derives has been extremely promising in highlighting critical areas that need to be addressed at the institutional servant leadership level (West, 1999, 14). For example, Voices of Calvary Ministry and Tougaloo College in the metropolitan Jackson, Mississippi area address many issues that plague local communities. Each provides free healthcare and medication assistance, free educational services, free meal, and quality housing assistance to poor residents in the city. Such collaborative effort seems to foster a greater understanding that helps to define parallels that operationalized themes of building trust between parties. As in the Oprah Winfrey Angel Lane project, trust is what helps build a sense of community, which motivates others to want to do their part in serving others. Thus the implication is that fostering relationships build trust; and with trusting relationships between institutions and community residents, communities have a greater chance to thrive and sustain.

Although servant leaders can come from all walks of life, communities typically benefit from those in which residents have the most trust, including institutions. According to Robert Greenleaf (2002), these entities may appear in the form of:

- The Church. Our churches are well-respected institutions in our communities (Greenleaf, 2002, 232). In the case of the Church as a servant institution, this may very well be true. Many religious and spiritual individuals turn to the Church for help in healing emotional and sometimes financial wounds. In many communities, the Church is the only institution that maintains a strong bond between its residents (West, 1999, 368-389). Depending on the area, many of them worship together, attend church-related events together, and participate in church-sponsored youth activities. Because the Church serves as an institution that builds character and pushes strong morals and values in humans, it has a can be a strong influence that motivates others to serve their community (Greenleaf, 2002, 235).

On any day of the week, one may see a church hosting a community-enriching event. Whether it is a health fair or sponsoring a Blitz for Habitat for Humanity, churches and similar faith-based organizations realize their place in society as a foundation for positive community health, well-being, and success. In the event of life-shaping experiences, these types of events show promising results because they are humanly uplifting (Rude, 2004, 78).

- The Foundation. Foundations are organizations, commonly of a non-profit status, that operate from gifts, grant funds, and investments. In the mission statements of many of these types of organizations, one may find a clause that states that a primary focus of their particular organization is to serve others. What seems to be most ironic about foundational serving is that “the most difficult way to serve may be the giving away of money” (Greenleaf, 2002, 215). And although many organizations see this as the case for their lack of service to communities, they fail to realize that this is not the only mien of service. What about volunteering time?

Instead of giving money to various causes, many organizations establish foundations the focus on service through the kindness of volunteers. These foundations are typically non-profits and will leverage their resources to help those in need overcome hardship. Because of this, its prudence in who the

foundation helps may be highly justified by its outcomes within the community.

- The Education Center. “As an educator, whether one concentrates on the merits of a leader’s character, or give attention to good leader behavior, one sees the same person” every day (Rude, 2004, 40). This is why educators are extremely effective in being servant leaders. Their day-to-day contact with students and the community places them in an excellent position to help others develop.

Whether working within the walls of an institution or outside amongst numerous communal stakeholders, educators are some of the most effective practitioners in influencing individuals to become servants of others. This is because educators and their institutions oftentimes model ideal behaviors and processes that spur inner growth. “Without question, education is the key to progress and prosperity in the United States today” (Smiley, 2006, 25). It provides a necessary foundation for developing servant leaders; one that strongly supports the empowerment of others and building sustainable communities.

By financially, physically, and faithfully investing in these types of organizations, strong relationships can be formed. This is because organizations tend to support those individuals who support them. In retrospect, because of this reciprocated support, working collaboratively comes much easier, which offers a strong approach to addressing many community issues.

Development of the Servant Leader

When conceptualizing the development and underdevelopment of a servant leader, one may think about the poor quality of instruction in educating an individual. For instance upon graduating from college, graduates take an oath to “give back” to their communities and alma mater. But how many of them actually do? At what point in their educational experience has the gap between serving self and serving others presented itself?

When operationalizing the concept of developing servant leaders, one could consider the promotion of the practice of servant leadership with an appropriate amount of educational foundation of the practice. Instead of fostering parallels of servant leadership in leaders early on in their lives and careers, many organizations and institutions usually adjust to fit the new leader. They simply do this by changing their mission statement, but one may see this as a conflict because the overall adjustment may require the use of too many financial and human resources. Overall, this challenge is one that supports any theoretical underpinning that properly educating leaders on being servants first can and in most cases will bring about positive social change. Such an opportunity reinforces moral and interpersonal strengths to build relationships amongst institutions and communities. It also presents those involved with a memorable experience that they will cherish for a lifetime.

“Education is a seamless web... not just in graduate schools, but in early grades” (Boyer, 1990,3). By granting students a good liberal education, one that leverages students’ humanistic capabilities such as leadership, socialization, team work, and caring, the overall experience and knowledge gained can help foster their desire to serve others. Even though there has not been any literature found that specifies the youngest possible age to begin servant leadership type training, it is suggested that capturing individuals early in age will more than likely promote a sustainable future for students and communities.

Another critical factor to educating servant leaders is overcoming the idea that the educational process must occur within a classroom setting. If the term “education” is taken out of the equation, it would be easier to understand that leaders are “educated” and developed through their own personal experiences. In fact, research strongly suggests “community development projects inherently result in leadership development and human and social capital” (Zakarakis and Flora, 2005). Such an occurrence fosters the renewal of community activity and also fosters the reproduction of leaders from within the community by motivating them to step forward and assume responsibility. It also builds community members’ understanding of the importance of hard work and cohesive community building through an empirical uplifting of communal spirit between participants.

As Smiley (2006) suggests in his text, “to strengthen the ability of community members to have input on healthy living decisions affecting them, to increase advocacy skill building, and to actively change the community in its well-being, we must strengthen existing community coalitions, develop strategic collaborations, and demand the integration of community concerns and input into policy decision-making processes.” The key component here is the uplifting and empowering of the citizen to take control of their own community and bring about positive social change. People motivate and empower each other. Thus by building strong collaboratives consisting of social actors from political, business, educational, institutional, and residential arenas enormous progress can be made in addressing problems that plague communities.

Conclusion

There is an old common saying that leaders are born and not made. However, theory and practice support the premise that it is highly likely that leaders can be made through developmental processes that empower individuals in confronting issues that matter most to them (Avolio, 1999). When developmental processes such as training and mentoring occur, there appears to be a domino effect that influences others in taking helm and addressing issues within their communities. Pardon the cliché, but it seems that as one reaches one, he or she reaches everyone.

According to Gallup Management Journal (2004), there is an absence of “personal development” programs that are at the forefront of organizations and communities. These types of programs play a vital role in sustaining communities because they help develop leadership skills in individuals who typically sit at the bottom of the social or organizational ladder. To that end, for the betterment of society, it is beneficial for communities, businesses, and institutions collaborate in addressing social issues because of access to grassroots type of arenas.

“Leadership is not a role,” but a process that involves positive interaction between individuals, businesses, and institutions (The Gallop Management Journal, 2004, Avolio, 1999). Even though it is believed that most leaders are born with leadership skills, the fact remains that leadership skills can be developed in individuals (Avolio, 1999). This type of development can be done in homes, schools, businesses, and communities. By working together, these entities become societal drivers that can greatly bring about positive social change by developing leadership skills in individuals and leading others through service.

Even though servant leadership has a religious origin it has proven to be operational throughout the years in various facets of life (Greenleaf, 2002, 13). This is because servant leaders impact the lives of those individuals they serve, which in return motivates them to serve others. The pragmatic nature of

servant leadership may very well be maintained as a “school” that evolves from individual emotion and an underlying desire to improve the quality of life for all who reside within its realm. However, through developmental processes such as hands on training and mentoring, becoming a servant leader is an opportunity that is available to everyone who has the desire to serve others and their communities. True enough, leaders are born, however, they can definitely be made; and the same stands for sustainable urban communities.

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