Presenting the Servant Leadership Model as a Panacea to Bad Leadership in Tertiary Education in West Africa

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1.0 Introduction

Tertiary education in West Africa presently is fading in value compared with the last two or three decades when graduates of universities in Nigeria and Ghana were highly rated by world ranked institutions in Europe and North America. In many West African tertiary institutions there are chronic and critical challenges impeding quality delivery of education to the citizens. Some of these lead to avoidable wastes in time, financial and human resources. In Nigeria for instance, there are many cases of students' unrest leading to wanton and unwarranted destruction of properties and sometimes human lives. In addition, lecturers and non-academic employees in tertiary institutions compound the already endangered system by embarking on industrial strikes to press home their demands for better pay, conditions of service, less government interference, etc. Hence, in West Africa presently, huge amount of valuable resources are wasted in educational institutions of higher learning due primarily to human and systemic problems associated with bad leadership structure. Crippen (2005) argued that the way forward is a paradigm shifts in how educational leaders see themselves in the leadership process of higher institutions of learning (p. 2). Bennis and Goldsmith (1997) also argued that for transformation to occur, leaders must recognize the paradigm shift through which they view themselves. In this paper, the paradigm shift we propose is leadership in tertiary educational institutions as one meant to first serve the school community rather than leading it. Thus, advocating the servant-leadership model of leadership as originally propounded by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970/1991).

It is instructive to note that there is the need to care for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of employees in educational institutions globally, especially in West Africa where the morale of employees and students appears low, resulting in incessant workers' strikes and students' demonstrations. The consequence of these is the usual disruptions in the academic calendars of the educational institutions, especially in Nigeria. Wong & Davey (2007) suggested that several scholars are of the opinion that the best practices of positive management are consistent with ethical and humanistic orientation which is inherent in the servant leadership theory and practice. Hence the need to consider the servant leadership model as a possible panacea to solving the myriads of leadership problems in tertiary educational institutions in West Africa with Nigeria in focus.

2.0 Definitions of Leadership

While writing on educational management of Nigerian institutions, Ogunsaju (2006) defined leadership as a position of dominance and prestige accompanied by the ability to direct, motivate and to assist

others in achieving a specified purpose. Cheng (1996) noted that there two general elements of leadership in the various definitions of many scholars: first, leadership is connected to the process of influencing others' way of behaving and second, connected with conceptualization of goals and achievements. Arikewuyo (2007) argued that the essence of leadership is such that without it, goals may not be easily attained within educational institutions. In this paper, we assume a 'complex moral relationship', a process involving relationship between the leader, follower(s), and the context with which there is an expected outcome (Hughes, R. L., et al., 2008). Thus, we define leadership as neither positional nor personal but a process. Yukl (2010) defined leadership as follows:

'Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish efforts to accomplish shared objectives' (p. 8).

For instance, it is disheartening to note that Nigeria's premier university-University of Ibadan-that used to serve as a centre for the University of London in the 1940s is now lowly ranked among universities in Africa (ICU, 2010). This abysmal performance is disturbing and it is high time it was curbed as it portends low quality education delivery in the Nigeria education system hampered by many constraints (Ekundayo & Ekundayo, 2010). In this regard, this paper suggests the adoption of the servant leadership model as a possible way out.

2.1 Preference for the Servant Leadership Model

There are many leadership models in practice in organizations globally such as transformational leadership, transactional leadership, responsible leadership, ethical leadership, charismatic leadership, exemplary leadership, etc. Even though some of these models are value laden but the servant leadership model is presented in this paper as a panacea to solving the chronic problems bedevilling tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria due to its nature of putting service first before leading (Greenleaf, 1977). This is the uniqueness of the servant leadership model.

It is noteworthy that many business organizations globally are presently espoused to the practice of the servant leadership model, however there seems to be scanty research studies and writings relating to this phenomenon especially in the leadership structure of tertiary educational institutions globally (Autry, 2001; Bennis and Goldsmith, 1997; Covey, 2002; De Pree, 1989; Sendjaya, 2005; Senge, 1990). At this juncture, a pertinent question can be asked: is servant-leadership a viable model for present day tertiary institutions in West Africa? In the light of this, it will be worthwhile to ruminate over the stand of Greenleaf (1977) as he speaks directly to educators:

'Many teachers…have sufficient latitude in dealing with students that they could, on their own, help nurture the servant leader potential, which I believe, is latent to some degree in almost every young person. Could not many respected teachers speak those few words that might change the course of life, or give it new purpose?' (p. 5)

Even though there are several models of leadership, it is only servant leadership that stand outs as model of leadership with the main distinction that the one who is called a servant leader does not step forward with the intention to lead but with the innate intention to serve (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977). Greenleaf (1970) in his seminal essay made reference to Leo's account in the book written by Hermann Hesse (1956) titled: "Journey to the East". The chief servant of the team on the mythical

journey, Leo, used his culinary and singing skills to serve the team, cook for them, cheer up their spirits and did chores for the members of the team on a daily basis. In the story, one day, Leo was nowhere to be found, the team was then in great disarray leading to the discontinuation of the spiritual quest. However, a member of the team later discovered as he went to the headquarters of the organization that sponsored the journey that Leo indeed was the *de facto* leader of the group. The reading of the Herman Hesse's 'Journey to the East', left tremendous impact on Greenleaf which later led him to unravelling the construct-servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

2.2 What is Servant Leadership?

Even though servant leadership is an emerging field, it is generating interests in organizations and polity, as more and more people desire leaders who are ready to receptively listen to them, empathize with their feelings and emotions and in the process, bring healing to their situations rather than leading them for pecuniary gains. The original proponent of the term, Robert Greenleaf, rather describes who a servant leader is, and what servant leadership does without really defining it:

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. – Greenleaf (1977, p. 13)

Another scholar who has worked on the servant leadership model; the first to construct a reliable measuring instrument of servant leadership in organizations referred to as Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA), James Laub, gives a succinct definition as follows:

Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader – Laub, (1999, p. 83)

2.3 Desirable characteristics of the servant-leader in action

Many writers and scholars have written and researched about servant leadership which is fast becoming an emerging phenomenon (Covey, 2002; Drury, 2004; Laub, 1999; Horsman, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Thompson, 2001; Ledbetter, 2003 and Russell, 2001). However, Larry Spears discovered after exhaustive study of Robert Greenleaf's research and writings that there are in fact ten main characteristics or attributes of the servant leader. These traits, we argue are in current demand in educational institutions within West Africa, particularly Nigeria:

2.3.1 Listening

Servant leaders are receptive listeners. They almost always allow their followers or subordinates to do the talking; knowing that talking out depressing issues could be a therapy to followers. [Can we use Clinton case as a classical example here?]One leadership skills that is often eulogized is communication. In servant leadership, deep passion and commitment to listening is a priority. Leaders of the Nigeria's higher education system appear to lack the listening skill of servant leadership. This is seen in the day in, day out protests (sometimes violent) made by students and staffs of the institutions in order to get their leaders to listen to them on burgeoning issues.

2.3.2 Empathy

Another attribute of a servant-leader is the willingness to empathize with others knowing that people

need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirits. There is no basis for rejection on whatever ground, even when their behaviour or personal performance is not as expected by the leaders. Spears, (1998a) argued that "Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing (p. 81). Its high time leaders of the Nigerian higher education system began empathizing with the students and staffs of institutions. This would help them understand pressing needs and how they may well addressed to improve the system.

2.3.3 Healing

Servant leaders have the inner strength to heal themselves and others. They are aware of the 'wounded' within the institutions and the consequent need for healing in their broken spirits. These wounds could have emerged from the workplace or outside its walls. There is therefore that attitude of always wanting to 'make whole' in servant leaders. Leaders of Nigerian institutions must understand this and work towards ensuring subordinates are wound-free so they can do their jobs with free minds and without burdens.

2.3.4 Awareness

They are aware of the beholders' perception and also self-awareness in the leadership process. Servant leaders are more concerned and careful with issues involving ethics and values in the workplace; they therefore have holistic view of situations and scenario. As Greenleaf observed; "awareness is not a giver of solace-it is just the opposite – it is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed" (Spears, 2004, p. 3). Another phrase used for awareness is: "walking your talk" (Bennis and Goldsmith, 1997, p. 70-71). It appears that leaders of Nigerian institutions lack a holistic view of the institutions. There is therefore a need for them to be aware; to lay hold of the institutions they manage towards it prosperity.

2.3.5 Persuasion

Even though servant leaders are aware that they possess enormous power and authority, especially when they are the topmost leaders in a hierarchical organizational set-up, they rather employ persuasion rather than positional authority in making decisions within an organization knowing that according to Lord Acton, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely (Dalberg-Acton, 1949, p.364). Hence, they work with the aim of seeking to convince others (followers or subordinates) rather than demanding compliance through control and coercion.

2.3.6 Conceptualization

Servant-leaders are visionary with ability to see into the future by dreaming big dreams and seeing larger than life visions making them to think beyond day-to-day realities. This is the dividing line between managers and leaders; while the former are immersed in the day to day routine and doing mechanistic activities the latter are charting a way for the glorious future of the organization. Starratt (2004) emphasizes, "Those who lead schools need to have moral depth and a well-articulated platform for the moral work of learning in the school, as well as a clear sense of how to proactively engage teachers and students in an authentic process of learning" (p. 136).

2.3.7 Foresight

Spears (2004, p. 2) stated that: "Foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future." This is deeply rooted within the intuitive mind of the individuals which largely remains unexplored in leadership research till date.

2.3.8 Stewardship

Servant leaders know they are holding whatever leadership positions they are in based on trust. They also know that trust is earned and can be lost. Spears (2004, p. 2) quoted Peter Block's definition of stewardship "holding something in trust for another." As relating to educational institutions, Fullan (2003) suggests that school principals (and teachers, as well) must be mindful that "changing context is the key to deeper change" (p. 21) and principals must ask: "What is my role in making a difference in the school as a whole" (p.21)? De Pree (1989) stated that "the art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values" (p. 13). The bottom-line as argued by DePree is for leaders to make contribution to society (Crippen, 2005).

2.3.9 Commitment to the growth of people

Servant-leaders, who are principals, administrators and teachers in this case, believe that people have innate values beyond their tangible contributions within the schools thus making them deeply committed to the growth of the students, not necessarily because they are intelligent or clever. In writing within the Canadian context, Croydon Crippen, an educationist herself has this to say: "The servant-leader is committed to the individual growth of human beings and will do everything he can to nurture others" (Crippen, 2005, p. 9) while Sergiovanni (2001) puts this in a school perspective: "The leader serves as head follower by leading the discussion about what is worth following, and by modelling, teaching, and helping others to become better followers" (p. 34).

2.3.10 Building community

The notion of the educational institution as a community of leaders, followers, parents, guardians and the society around it is highly needed today in West Africa. It is this awareness that makes servant leaders to always seek means and methods to instilling a sense of community within any institution where they are serving. This is greatly needed in higher institutions of learning in West Africa today. In stressing this important attribute of the servant leader, Starratt (2004) speaks specifically about the school leader:

The leader is responsible for sustaining and developing a healthy environment for authentic learning and teaching, for democratic working relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and school officials and for promoting the learning and practice of civic virtues – (p. 62).

In a similar vein, another educationist, Croydon Crippen, is of the view that "approaches to building community include giving back through service to the community; investing financially into the community; and caring about one's community" (Crippen, 2005, p. 10).

3.0 Practical steps towards institutionalization of servant leadership

There are pertinent questions that could be asked as to how to implement the servant-leadership model in higher education institutions in West Africa, where educational development seems to be at a very slow pace at the moment.

- What favourable outcomes, if any, could be expected as a result?

- How can a researcher quantify these possible outcomes?

- How can the authority overseeing educational governance in tertiary education, in West Africa, institutionalize through a policy instrument the adoption of the servant leadership model in all institutions?

These and other questions need to be answered in future research in this emerging field of servant leadership in educational institutions especially with particular focus on West Africa, where there is a dearth of research on servant leadership.

In this paper, it would be of value to consider ways and means by which the authority overseeing higher education institutions in West Africa can take advantage of the merits of the servant leadership model. We suggest the following steps towards policy formulations in favour of servant leadership adoption by the relevant authorities in charge of higher education institutions in the countries in West Africa:

1.   The relevant supervising authority should "model the way" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 14) by serving the institutions better and can then be at a vantage point to advocate servant leadership through the vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, deans of faculty and heads of department.

2.   The vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, deans of faculty and heads of department should read more about servant leadership especially as practised in schools in USA (Drury, 2004 and Thompson, 2002). They can then adapt or improvise ideas garnered from such in their own schools to suit their system of education.

3.   In furtherance to the point mentioned in 2 above, the top leaders in the institutions can also produce on a regular basis bulletin that will promote the virtues and values of servant leadership to all staff and students of the institutions. There could be a section in the bulletin that will also take care of parents being carried along as vital stakeholders in the leadership process within the institution and the community at large.

4.   The relevant supervising or overseeing authority at the local, state or federal level, as the case may be for individual countries, should earmark in the annual budget provisions for training of top leaders in the higher institutions for training in servant leadership at least twice a year. The authority should also assist these leaders to conduct in-house training for their staff and students at least twice a year.

5.   The relevant authority should also follow up on the institutions by choosing inspectors to visit them without notice to ascertain whether the institutions are performing as expected or otherwise. There should be rewards and punishment depending on the level of performance.

6.   The relevant authority should also do a research survey to determine the suitability or feasibility of adopting the servant leadership model in higher institutions beginning from local government level to

state government level and can ultimately be done for the whole nation. The findings can be used as a powerful tool towards policy formulation.

7.   There could be annual awards instituted for the top ten schools practicing servant leadership. The award may carry along with it more funding from the government so as to stir up the top leaders of schools to do more for their own schools so that they can win or sustain their competitive edge.

4.0 Conclusion

Institutions of higher learning in West Africa are in dire need of leaders whose top priority should be service rather than leading from top to bottom. This paradigm shift in leadership style calls for servant leadership inculcation and institutionalization. According to Crippen (2005), present day schools must instil a shared sense of mission thus creating collaborative service leading to building strong, caring communities. Sergiovanni (1999) also put forward a raison d'être for the adoption of servant-leadership approach for the present day institutions:

Such ideas as servant leadership bring with them a different kind of strength-one based on moral authority…What matters are issues of substance. What are we about? Why? Are students being served? Is the school as learning community being served? What are our obligations to this community? With these questions in mind, how can we best get the job done? (p. 61)

Having perused the attributes of the servant leadership model, it is presented here as a possible antidote or panacea to the many intractable afflictions bedevilling the service quality delivery of higher education in West Africa. It may help cure the ineptitude in the system; consequently lifting the standard of higher education which is in steep slow motion in many countries of West Africa. In addition, there are gaps in research study of this context as there are only few empirical studies done on servant leadership globally. In fact, there is presently none published in West Africa. This paper will therefore be a voice to initiate the beginning of such useful studies.

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