SERVANT LEADERSHIP, THE ART OF LEADING FROM BEHIND: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This paper explores the style of "leading from behind" in workplaces – also known as servant leadership (SL) -- and how it impacts behaviours in an organisation. At some point in the history of an organisation, a servant leader will influence employees, thereby leaving an indelible mark. Self-serving leaders will not find their place in leadership positions of the organisation. Leaders around the world will likely be individuals who "serve first and lead second."

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Leading from Behind, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership

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Scholars have come up with various approaches to classify and document different leadership styles, which are based on the degree of involvement of both the follower and the leader (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). Therefore, they range from leader-centric style on the one hand to follower-centric on the other. Furthermore, the use of psychology as a discipline has led to more leadership theories that focus on indi-viduals. Indeed, psychology has led to different leadership perspectives based on individual dynamics, such as behaviour, involvements, traits and personalities (Lu *et al.* 2019). More theories continue to be proposed and advanced to suit the fast-changing modern world. However, academics have done little re- search to understand the factors that propel leaders to either lead from the front or behind; or maybe bothfrom the front and behind. This paper explores literature about the leading from behind.

Evolution of Leadership

Leadership is the ability to inspire and exert influence on others (Munroe, 2014). Thus, a leader must have the ability to inspire, influence, and convince regard the merit of whatever he or she advocates. If a group of people rotate continuously around an equidistant imaginary point for a few hours, following thesame pattern, they will attract a crowd of naive people to join in, without any signalling, verbally or oth- erwise (Dyer *et al.* 2009). This indicates that leadership in humans, just as in other species, is a predictableand programmable behaviour. In humans, it is evolutionary, as demonstrated by different biological, socialand psychological studies.

The need for group action and coordination in solving problems, such as conflict, defence and hunting for food help in understanding the importance of leadership in human groups (King *et al.* 2009). Leadersare necessary to initiate and coordinate such actions. Though leadership is an old concept, over the ages, it has always adapted itself to reflect the understanding and needs of that particular time. The mediaeval civilisations witnessed the need to control, rule and sometimes subjugate people and/or resources (Mun- roe, 2014). The concept of leadership at that time was perceived as that which would best help society achieve mediaeval goals. Indeed, most leaders then were thought to possess traits and abilities that other members did not possess.

Types of Leadership

Lewin *et al.* (1939) advanced a model that identified three main leadership

styles: authoritarian, demo-cratic, or laissez-faire.

1. Authoritarian: There is little or no consultation between the leader and the followers. It is a painfulleadership and management style (Schaeffer, 2002).

2. Democratic: Here, a consultation happens, and every opinion is considered, but the leader makes the decision on behalf of everyone. It is good to let people determine their goals and how they want to achieve them (Rosener, 1990).

3. Laissez-faire: Under this style, consultation occurs, but decision-making is left to the followers. There is little or no government interference on the economy, individuals or society; basically, is it a hands-off approach (Northouse, 2018).

Furthermore, Burns (1978) viewed leadership as two broad categories: "transactional or transforma- tional." Transactional leadership is a quid pro quo or tit for tat style, premised on the value derived and not on the intrinsic value of humans. Leaders using this model reward followers in order to motivate them to attain particular goals. They passively motivate followers through the management by withholding cer-tain benefits until the conditions are met. Despite research demonstrating that this method is unproductivein the long term, it is still widely applied in today's world (Khanin, 2007).

On the other hand, transformational leaders are expected to pursue goals above mere short-term rewardsand benefits. They must seek to inspire followers to be better in the long-term (Khanin, 2007). Such a model corrects the numerous weaknesses of the transactional leadership model. It shares many similaritieswith the Servant Leadership model in that they both put the genuine interest of the followers first.

According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders must have an intense desire to improve the overall welfare and development of their followers. Besides, he believed that a leader could be both transactionaland transformational at the same time. He disagreed with Burns' (1978) argument that a leader can only be either, and not both. In support of his argument, he developed a model commonly known as the Four I's:

1. *Idealised influence:* Under this category, leaders are role model to their subjects, thereby influenc-ing them to be more of their own versions. They become prototypes of what they would like to seein their followers, hoping that would become better humans.

2. *Inspirational motivation:* Under this style, leaders present a vision and inspire followers to pursue it. They convince followers by communicating clearly.

3. *Individualised consideration:* Here, leaders help followers achieve self-actualisation by showing genuine concerns and interest in the followers' wellbeing. They provide individualised attention and personalised care for individual members, bearing in mind their varying capabilities and needs. They are mindful of everyone's uniqueness and tailor their approach to suit that reality.

4. *Intellectual stimulation:* Leaders try to stimulate and motivate followers to be creative and inno- vative, to continually challenge the norm, and to be a better version of themselves. More im- portantly, they always to strive to achieve a higher performance level (continuous progress).

Additionally, in his behaviour model, Reddin (1970) viewed leadership from how leaders behave and conduct themselves, or the goals they to pursue. He came up with eight categories of leadership styles:

1. *Deserter:* Leaders are passive and mostly uninvolved. They are not useful in decision-making and are less concerned and give little or no attention to the tasks or relationships of the followers.

2. *Missionary:* Leaders are least concerned about selfish material gains and focus on creating an im-pact on others' lives. They pursue harmony and genuine cause selflessly.

3. *Autocrat:* Leaders are selfish, have little confidence or regard for the welfare of the followers. They are unpleasant, short-sighted, and usually make decisions, even when they are least suitable or qualified to do so. Most autocratic leaders suffer from narcissistic personality disorder and have an exaggerated view of self-importance.

4. *Compromiser:* Characterised by their pursuit of a middle ground between two opposing sides, they are sometimes seen as poor decision-makers and lacking in principles by some followers.

5. *Bureaucratic:* This style focuses on rules and procedures as opposed to intended overall goals. The problem could be lack of creativity and innovativeness or the desire to maintain control and influ-ence.

6. *Developer:* Leaders focus on developing skills, character and over-all wellbeing of followers. Theybelieve everyone can be a leader and strive to nurture talents and capabilities to create a better version of the followers in order to increase productivity.

7. *Benevolent Autocratic:* They have the best interest of people but do not consult; they make the decisions but do so in the best interest of the followers. They are dictators with a good heart.

8. *Executive:* These pacesetters set the standards high for everyone but are mindful of individual abilities and weaknesses. They motivate followers to achieve the set goals in the best way they can, depending on capabilities. They are good team manager too.

Recently, scholars have attempted to shift their focus towards leadership styles that emphasise the ethics,values, and conduct of society in general. This is where SL comes into play.

Leadership and Servant Definitions

Leadership is the act of directing or guiding others down a certain path usually geared to achieve a certain collective goal. It is therefore assumed to be teleological. However, despite the lack of a universalagreement on the definition of leadership, most of the definitions that have been put forward over time seem to agree that it involves some of the following key components (Asamoah, 2018):

- *Capacity to influence:* change attitude and behaviour of others positively.

- *Inspirational:* change behaviour of followers positively and creatively.

- *Passionate:* have a compelling attachment to the cause leaders are pursuing.

- *Visionary:* make decisions and take actions whose benefits will only be reaped in the future.

- *Principles or conviction:* have a strong belief in the cause to which leaders are attached.

- *Purpose:* live up to a higher purpose than oneself.

On the other hand, the word "servant", which is derived from the word "ser-

vice", describes a person who performs duties for and on behalf of others. Thakore (2013, p. 26) believes that service is "an act of assistance or benefit a favour; an act of helpful activity; help; aid, work done by one person or group thatbenefits another." Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) add that "the act of serving includes a mission of respon-sibility to others. Leaders understand that service is the centre of servant leadership and model their serviceto others in their behaviour, attitudes, and values (2005, p. 603)." Therefore, it can be deduced that for a servant to render service, he or she must endeavour to actively labour to be useful and to be of help to others.

Servant Leadership in Organisations

Leadership has traditionally been associated with power and authority. Most organisations – both profit-making and non-profit making – are initially set up to have a firm leadership to make progress. However, in the modern age, it is continuously seen that organisations have failed and have been shut down because of leaders who are not up to the mark (Asamoah, 2018).

Barnard (1968) proposes what he refers to as a bottom-up view. He asserts that people will follow in-structions or accept the order as long as these four conditions are met:

1. The person understands the order;
2. The person believes the order is consistent with the organisation's goals;
3. The person believes that the order is compatible with his or her interests; and
4. The person is mentally and physically able to comply with the order (1968, p.259)."

In contrast, Follett (1949) strongly opposes the system of an organisational hierarchy. Instead, she ad- vocates for a system where all people have powers based on the job that they do instead of the position they hold in the organisation's hierarchy. This merit system would reward people based on their ability todeliver on a task or job based on their skills, experience, and knowledge. She envisaged a corporate systemthat empowers everyone in the organisation. The leadership of such an organisation would focus on em- powering and improving the workers' well-being so as they can be more productive and responsible.

On the other hand, Khandwalla (2007), in support of a humane management approach, which is partic- ipative, empowering and people-driven, declared that such a system would result in a long-term compet-itive reward for

corporate establishments. He believes that more organisations are progressively adopting an all-inclusive approach, whereby authorities and duties are extended to all stakeholders. This, in turn, has resulted in well-behaved corporate behaviour where the corporate entities are more socially responsi-ble, compassionate and ethical as opposed to just focussing on profit maximisation. In that sense, corpo- rates are increasingly adopting the SL approach.

Over the years, many theories have been advanced to explain what SL is, how it can be characterised, and whether it can be empirically measured. Greenleaf (1970) saw leadership as a source of inspiration rather than a source of power. He expounded on the need for leaders to earn trust by being an example of what they would like to see of their subjects. He believed that people would follow those they trust. Con- versely, SL's modern concept emphasises empowering people (Tarallo, 2018).

Visionary/Leadership Role versus Implementation/Servant role

The standard hierarchical pyramid (see Figure 1) works well for the leadership facet of SL. Like children looking to their parents and players to their coaches, employees look to their executive leaders for vision and direction. These leaders in an organisation steer the course of action; they keep crucial responsibilities to themselves and never allot them to others (Lett, 2014).
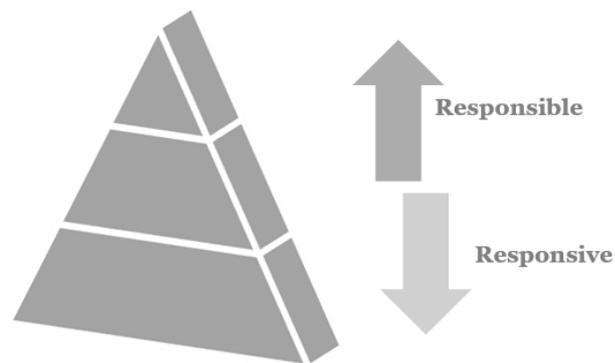

Figure 1: *Visionary/leadership role (Lett, 2014)*

Most organisations find it difficult to go through the implementation stage of the leadership process. When self-serving and selfish leaders are at the top of organisations, employees believe that they work for the individuals above them. The moment employees believe that they work for the individual above them, it is automatically assumed that the leader is "responsible" and employees have to

be "responsive" to theleader whether they be commands or caprices (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). Such a leader is generally categorised as a "boss" | at the workplace (Tarallo, 2018).

As a matter of fact, Wasylyshyn (2012) affirms that "boss watching" has turned out to be a well-knownpractice among employees in most organisations, which eventually proves beneficial for promotions by using upward-influencing skills. Consequently, all the organisation's vitality is moving up the hierarchy, far from its clients and front-liners that are nearest to the deed. Hence, whenever there is a disagreement between the clients' wants and the boss's wants, it is always the boss that wins (2012, p.22). On the other hand, servant leaders possess the knowhow to philosophically invert the standard hierarchical pyramid upside down with regard to implementation (see Figure 2).
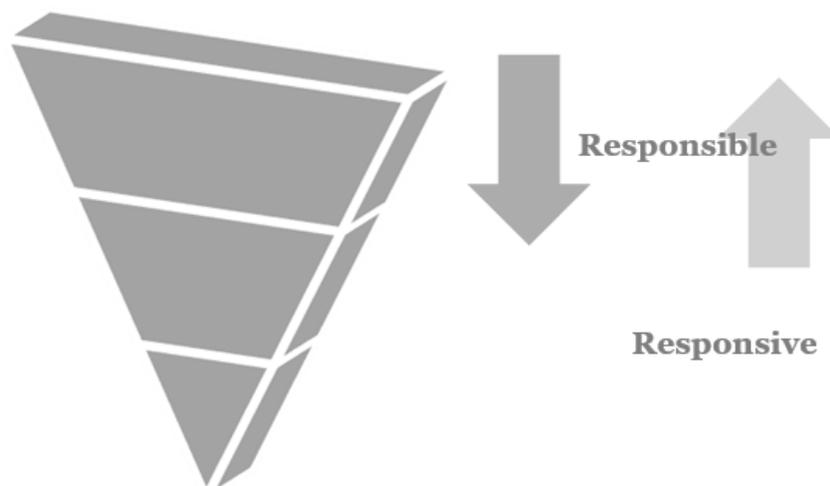

Figure 2: Implementation/servant role (Lett, 2014)

Criticisms of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has been promoted as the new paradigm shift for organisations, which want to dif- ferentiate themselves from a corporate world that is marked by greed and selfishness (Graham, 1995). Those organisations with a SL approach are more to be trusted and tend to attract more long-term orientedstakeholders. Despite all these appeals, many assumptions of the servant leadership model remain un- solved. Here are some of the shortcomings of the servant leadership model:

1. *Unrealistic concept:* The characteristics set out in the vast literature are impossible to achieve. The bar is set too high, discouraging aspiring servant leaders to even take the first step. The examples of servant leaders mentioned in many works of literature such as Jesus Christ are way above human reach (Eicher-Catt, 2005). Furthermore, the language used to envision a true servant leader makes the whole concept more of a fantasy than an achievable reality (Graham, 1995).

2. *Too many unrealistic attributes:* According to Spears (2010), SL encompasses several qualities, such as listening, conceptualisation, commitment to growth, awareness, foresight empathy, healing, persuasion and stewardship. It is quite impractical for an individual to possess all these qualities, especially to the degree that is required to demonstrate true SL. Worse, the list of qualities that an ideal servant leader must possess is getting longer each time a new research generates a new definition and model of the SL style. At the same time, there are no clear distinctions between behaviour, traits and attributes. Even characteristics, abilities and qualities seem to be used inter- changeably.

3. *Empirical measurement:* So far, much of the debate and literature available for SL have been the-oretical. Proponents appeal to emotions and theoretical case studies. Despite much discussion, very little empirical evidence has been adduced. This could partially be so because it is a relatively new research topic or the empirical evidence for SL is difficult or impossible to get and analyse, ren- dering the whole theory untestable. Either way, it is difficult to place SL together with other deeply researched theories such as transformational leadership (Minnis and Callahan, 2010).

4. *Lack of a clear definition:* Too much about SL is of a general quality and not much about what it is specifically. Most of the literature uses attributes, characteristics and qualities to describe what a servant leader needs to do, how the leader needs to behave, how SL can be illustrated, but there is not much on the actual definition of SL. Laub (1999) admits this and acknowledges the need for a definition of terms so that future researchers of the theory have something to

build upon. More importantly, it will equip future scholars with a benchmark to determine the degree of success of the SL concept.

5. *Gender:* Most terms used to describe SL in its literature are masculine, despite the fact that the model advocates for a genderless approach to leadership (Eicher-Catt, 2005). The literature uses patriarchal connotations, yet the theory uses a masculine-feminine contrast to create an emotionalappeal. It is ironic that the theory of SL advocates for a fair and inclusive approach to leadership while at the same time underpins privileged masculinity.

6. *Few examples:* The SL style has too few examples of leaders who fall within its description and even fewer organisations that practise it. Very little research has been done to determine if it has been applied in organisations and whether it has achieved the desired results. The 21st century is driven by business and information. Unless big multinational corporates embrace the concept, smaller organisations will be reluctant to do so. Also, bigger organisations will not embrace the concept until the theory has been reliably tested and shown to deliver results (Minnis and Callahan,2010).

7. *Association with religion:* Most SL literature indicates that SL emerges from the Judeo-Christian theology. This explains why some of those who have questioned the theory have been seen to be indirectly questioning Christianity as a religion (Minnis and Callahan, 2010). This is further rein-forced by the numerous times Jesus Christ is portrayed as the ultimate symbolic leader of what an ideal servant leader should be. All this makes it difficult to critique the idea and, even worse, makesit difficult for those who do not subscribe to Judeo Christianity to embrace it wholeheartedly.

8. *Paradox:* To compound the problem of lack of an agreed definition, the phrase servant leadershipis composed of two words that are paradoxical in nature. The word servant means to serve – someone who does tasks meant to benefit a person, who is usually higher in status or rank. On the otherhand, a leader is a person who directs and guides others towards a certain goal or vision. Hence, the act of being a servant while at the same time being a leader is an

oxymoron as the two words have opposite meanings. Only a clear definition of the concept will solve this issue.

9. *Provision for resistance from followers:* The theory also assumes that the followers will always accept and embrace the model. Some people are resistant to change, especially when the status quo benefits them. The model does not allow for resistance from followers. Some may fail to reciprocate since there is very little pressure to do so; hence, they fail to accomplish their objec- tives. The assumption that the goodwill of the leader is sufficient to make the model a success is unrealistic (Laub, 1999).

10. *Innate versus acquired attributes:* Finally, the model does not specify if the attributes that define SL are inborn or can be learned. Some attributes like humility are not natural to many people – itis learned. While others like persuasion come naturally to some people and not to others. At the same time, the model does not specify which attribute is required in what proportion, which one is a must-have and which one can be compromised or substituted.

In a nutshell, the SL theory seems all rosy and cosy, but a lot of work remains to be done to make it anempirically testable concept and one that can be practically implemented and monitored. The idea seemsmore populist and utopian and less pragmatic. In a competitive 21st century world, it would be a risky move, sometimes even suicidal, to embrace an idea out of emotional appeal and gut feelings without relying on tested measurable empirical evidence.

Future of Servant Leadership

Many value-based leadership approaches have been proposed over the years. In the recent past, two leadership styles have emerged as the key frontiers for scholars of leadership: servant and transformativeleaderships. Both leadership styles focus on the interest of the followers (Dierendonck, 2011).

However, according to Spears (2010), transformative leadership sees people's needs as a means to an end while SL sees people's needs as an end in itself; hence SL is a more authentic approach to genuinelyaddress the needs of the followers.

The shift from purely theoretical to empirical discipline has pushed SL to

the front line and positions itself as a major frontier for researchers and scholars. As more people join the world of research and academics, there is increasing pressure, especially from peer reviewers, to ensure that their research findings are empirically verifiable. Hoch *et al.* (2018) and Asamoah (2018) have presented empirical argu- ments supporting their cases for SL style over other approaches.

Another advantage of the empirical approach to SL is its comparability, which shows a correlation be- tween the SL approach and the intended specific outcome. This further enables scholars and decision- makers to make accurate predictions on the impact and benefits of the servant leadership approach (Dierendonck, 2011).

According to Ehrhart (2004), the future of organisational leadership is shifting towards helping others develop. Furthermore, the motivation of those in leadership will be to serve others, not just to lead. As almost every stakeholder in an institution has access to information at the click of a button, the days whenleadership and data were a preserve of the elites have been overtaken by time (Parolini *et al.* 2009).

As such, the role of SL is to empower subordinates to become leaders in their units. The competitive future belongs to those leaders and organisations, which will have everyone on board, empowered to iden-tify and resolve the organisation's problems (Ehrhart, 2004). The empirical research by Zehir *et al.* (2013) shows a strong positive correlation between SL on the one hand, and organisational justice, organisationalcitizenship and job performance on the other.

Consequently, the concept of organisational citizenship cannot be achieved without servant leadership (Oğuz, 2010). This means that for employees to exhibit altruism and go beyond the call of duty, the lead-ership needs to empower each employee to feel part and parcel of the organisation. This is only achievablewhen the leadership of an organisation is concerned with the holistic well-being and growth of everyone:talents, hobbies and families (Oğuz, 2010).

Job performance is the aggregate of an individual contribution to the organisational goal over time (Mo-towidlo, 2000). It could be "task performance" or "contextual performance." Task performance contrib- utes to the production of goods and services and is relatively easy to measure and monitor. On the other hand, contextual performance involves a set of interpersonal and voluntary activities, which help an or- ganisation achieve its core goals in a broader context.

This can only be achieved with a united team of empowered staff and an environment that focuses on the staff members' holistic welfare (Motowidlo, 2000).

In this competitive 21ˢᵗ century, institutions that will survive are those that are willing to embrace change and have SL at the core of their organisational structure (Zehir *et al.* 2013). Globalisation has technically turned the world into one village. The culture and norms influence one another across the continents. Multinationals export best practices but also learn from host communities (Dierendonck, 2011). The vi- brant human rights movements across the world have shifted the focus to human needs. This, coupled with the ever-growing labour unions, will not allow the management and leadership styles of the past based on command, prestige and authority to survive (Oğuz, 2010).

The success of SL is determined by the extent to which the one served — the follower — grows as a person (Cunnigham, 2006). Moreover, when Greenleaf (1970) conceived the phrase servant leadership, he laid a lot of emphasis on the fact that SL must start with the willingness and desire to serve others, and that success or failure must be measured by the degree of responsiveness of the leaders to the overall needs and welfare of the people (Khandwalla, 2007).

Once SL has been embraced and lives up to its tenets, the fruits of successful SL will be manifested in every aspect of the society through most of the various attributes enumerated by Spears (2010). Everyone will listen and be listened to; hence there will be little or no misunderstandings. This will help build a united, cohesive community that confronts common challenges in unison. As such, society will be more empathetic, committed to the growth of every member.

Conclusion

Organisations will be more responsive to the needs of those who work for them and to the societies in which they operate. In essence, it will boost corporate social responsibility more than ever (Tarallo, 2018). Also, people will resort to persuasion and dialogue over power and authority to resolve conflicts, thereby reducing disaffection and even violence. People will develop a sense of altruism and go beyond the mere call of duty to benefit the whole organisation or society, even outside of their official duty (Spears, 2010). Nevertheless, the failure of SL, if any, will only be attributed those who refuse to conform and opt to stick to the old ways (Buchen, 1998). They might drag behind in this endeavour, but they risk finding them- selves obsolete and out of business. As Toffler (1970, p. 62) famously said, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot

read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

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