

**2011 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
ON MORAL LEADERSHIP:**
The Classic Virtues in Organizational Leadership

How Servant Leadership Theory Serves A Biblical Theme

Alireza Hejazi
Regent University

*“...Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all.”
(Mark 10: 43-44)*

It is clear that the model of leadership exemplified by Christ was servant leadership, but how can such a model be followed by our modern history leaders who experience a different social and organizational environment, incomparable with what Jesus experienced in his own time? As modern time servant leaders it is a responsibility to learn from Jesus' example in order to be effective servant leaders at home, the society, and in our vocation; the places that afford us the opportunity to speak and practice the message of servant leadership in a manner that best represents our humane character. We should develop a process in which such a goal may be attainable. Making that process requires a reliable understanding of how servant leadership theory serves Biblical themes.

Our modern history has been a witness of incorporating ethical values into theories of management and leadership by a number of thinkers and theorists. For instance, servant leadership that is a well-known style of leadership was introduced for the first time by Robert Greenleaf in 1977. Servant leadership begins with a very innate ability in which a leader seeks to serve others (Greenleaf, 1977; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999). A Biblical review can reveal a scriptural foundation for this style of leadership (Matthew 23:11-12).

When servant leaders shift their primary focus to their followers and away from the organization, a special connection develops between the two parties. Christ said: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5: 4). For a person to mourn in this fashion is to care deeply (Augsburger, 1982). For the servant leader to portray intense mourning, it further reinforces the focus on serving the followers, superiors, and even the clients of an organization (Winston, 2002). This active tense verb portrays a leader who is literally in mourning for the condition of their followers and others invested in the organization.

Such an implication reveals a great concern for the subordinates encouraging the focus on the follower. With sincere mourning of the leader, followers know that their leader has their interests at heart (Winston, 2002). Leaders who serve in such a way appreciate and understand the principle of leading with a key means of service. Servant leaders exhibit service as they support

the frontline, discover the uniqueness of each employee, unleash creativity in people, and contribute to the larger good (Patterson, 2003).

According to Daft (2007), servant leaders "care about followers' spirits as well as their minds and bodies, and they believe in the unique potential of each person to have a positive impact on the world." He maintains: "Servant leaders help others find the power of human spirit and accept their responsibilities. This requires an openness and willingness to share in the pain and difficulties of others. Being close to people also means leaders make themselves vulnerable to others and are willing to show their own pain and humanity." But how can we develop such a quality of leadership? Is it enough to be a moral leader, or should we develop other leading traits such as "self-sacrifice" not just for our leadership style, but also for other aspects of our lives?

Servant Leadership Analysis

A real leader is not the person with the most distinguished title, the highest pay, or the longest tenure, but the role model, the risk taker, the servant; not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others.

According to Daft (2007), servant leadership is leadership upside-down. It means putting the needs, interests, and goals of others above your own. There are four basic precepts in Greenleaf's servant leadership model: Put service before self-interest, Listen first to affirm others, Inspire trust by being trustworthy, Nourish others and help them become whole.

Servant leadership stems from acts of selfishness, the removal of pride, and less focus on worldly aspirations (Wong and Page, 2003). It is impossible to be an effective servant leader, if the leader is indeed focused entirely on self and individual success. Servant leadership focuses primarily on the follower and the loving relationship that is established to reach a desired and mutual goal.

Servant leadership behaviors contribute to the development and maintenance of strong interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers and are instrumental in helping employees attain their fullest potential and become self-motivated (Manz & Sims, 1987). Leaders foster these important behaviors by forming social exchange relationships with their followers, rather than relying solely on the economic incentives in the employment agreement or the authority vested in their positions.

A servant leader doesn't impose his or her will on others. Servant leaders gain trust because they give everything away—power, control, rewards, information, and recognition. To become a servant leader means to have a positive impact on the world and this requires an openness and willingness to share in the pain and difficulties of others: Self-sacrifice. In general, self-sacrificial leadership is demonstrated when a leader exhibits self-sacrificial behaviors as defined above in the service to his/her organization and employees. In any specific case, however, self-sacrificial leadership can be shown as a one-time occurrence, at one point in time, or repeatedly, as a continuous behavioral pattern (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1998).

Such self-sacrifice can be generated by a belief in a purpose higher than acquiring more material goods for oneself. It should be founded on real ethical and moral rules that may be only found in the Bible.

Biblical Theme of Servant Leadership

Jesus Christ is the model for servant leadership, which involves acting in love with truth no matter what it cost the leaders (Lawrence, 2007). He did not take the stance of exuding power and success as other typical natural leaders would in such a position. He portrayed the opposite of egotism and humbled himself to be focused on self-giving rather than self-serving.

Coleman (2005) affirms that the model that Jesus presents for leadership is based on his willingness to humble himself, taking on the “very nature of a servant”. Jesus' ministry was to the people. He loved and served the multitudes. In fact, no one could serve them better. To be a servant leader is to give without selfish motives and in a manner unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Jesus' illustration of washing his disciples' feet (John 13:15) serves as the ultimate example of servant leadership. To be great one must be prepared to count and endure the cost of servant leadership.

The description of a servant leader by Trompenaars and Voerman (2010) which says "A servant leader is someone who has a strong wish to serve as well as a strong ability to lead and, most importantly, is able to combine both in such a way that they strengthen each other positively" can be best observed from the life of Jesus. van Dierendonck and Patterson (2010, p.64) reflect a similar perspective by saying "The servant leadership of Jesus of Nazareth, culminating in his atoning and self-sacrificial death, has been the central focus for Christian scholars and practitioners in the ongoing quest to find an effective moral model for leadership".

A similar model can be found in St. Paul's life and works. Surely, he is considered a true servant especially when we read that he had “been in prison, flogged, exposed to death again and again, received 39 lashes from the Jews, beaten with rods 3 times, pelted with stones, shipwrecked 3 times” and so on. (2 Corinthians 11:23-25). Yet he said, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy” as I want to present you to Christ as a pure virgin (2 Corinthians 11:2). In addition to enduring the above hardships, Paul took it upon himself to “groom” others. It was also evident that Paul “provided [clear] direction, aligned followers, and built relationships” (Daft, 2007).

Paul was passionate about the Father's business. He showed through his lifestyle that studying and become proficient is important, but not more important than trusting God and walking by faith. His letter to Timothy serves as ideal instruction on how to pursue a spiritual servant leadership life style. He writes in 1Timothy 3:2-7:

“Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.”

The servant leadership instruction to Timothy, the nine fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23, an active prayer life, and a close relationship with the Creator are good examples of how Paul and the aforementioned founding leaders of our past lived as spiritual servant leaders of God. Spiritual servant leadership comes at a cost which at times results in loneliness, fatigue,

criticism, and rejection (Sanders, 2007). A servant leader is prepared to pay such costs in practicing his progressive style of leadership.

Samples of Servant Leader in Our Modern Time

According to (Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010), following core characteristics of servant leadership represent a departure from earlier and more popular leadership approaches. First, servant leadership is not so much about leadership than it is about servanthood. It begins with a discovery of felt and existing needs that propel one to reach out to those needs. Hence, servant leadership is not a particular supervisory style one chooses to use when it is convenient or personally advantageous. Rather it is a conviction of the heart that constantly manifests whenever there is a legitimate need to serve in the absence of extenuating personal benefits. The humble positions as servants to others are voluntarily assumed and the acts of service wholeheartedly performed for the sake of others.

Second, the focus of the servant leadership relationship is on the followers, not the organizations. Rather than being preoccupied with mobilizing followers to achieve “performance beyond expectations”, which is the number one and ultimate priority for transformational leaders (Bass, 1985), servant leaders emphasize followers’ holistic needs, development, and autonomy (Graham, 1991).

Remembering that a servant leader is one who seeks to serve and this serving is a natural component of the leader (Patterson, 2003); we may compare a leader's ideal qualifications with our societies' actual situation and doubting about the practicality of this style of leadership in our modern time. With corrupt systems institutionalized in private and public sectors, briberies, financial and unethical scandals and many other annoying problems, such doubts about the success of implementing moral leadership in our modern history become more real. Yet there are real cases of servant leaders in our modern societies.

Some doubt whether real human beings functioning in the real world of organizations can ever achieve a remarkable level of selflessness in service to others. However, many organizational leaders have shown that it is possible to operate from the principles of servant leadership, even in the business world. Daft (2007) has mentioned interesting cases of a servant leader.

When Robert Townsend took over as head of the investment department at American Express, he made it his mission to stay out of his employees' way and invest his time and energy in getting them the pay, titles, and recognition they deserved from the organization.

Bob Thompson of the road-building company Thompson-McCully distributed \$128 million to his 550 employees when he sold the company 40 years after he founded it. Thompson also made sure he chose a buyer who agreed not to break up the company or fire workers. He believed it just wasn't fair not to share the proceeds of the sale with the workers who had made the business a success.

Conclusion

Shifting focus from the leader to the follower in servant leadership as a virtuous theory, the personal attributes of the followers become important for our desired style of leadership. It is a hopeful starting point as we are going with a powerful style of leadership based on virtuous

constructs, such as: agape love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. Growing such attributes in the followers requires the establishment of a spiritual code of conduct for small social bodies at the first level. Building up ethical organizations based on true ethical values is the key to success of spiritual styles of leadership, including servant leadership.

About the Author

Alireza Hejazi is a freelance futurist. He is the founder and developer of “FuturesDiscovery.com”. He is a member of World Future Society and the World Futures Studies Federation. Hejazi is an MA-student of Strategic Foresight at Regent University School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. He can be reached at: alirhej@regent.edu.

References

- Augsburger, M. S. (1982). *Matthew*. In Ogivie, D. (Editor), *The Communicator's Commentary*. Waco, TX: Word Books.
- Bass, B.M. (1985). *Leadership and Performance beyond Expectations*, Free Press, New York, NY.
- Choi, Y. and Mai-Dalton, R. R. (1998). On The Leadership Function of Self-sacrifice, *Leadership Quarterly*, 9(4), 475-501.
- Coleman, R. E. (2005). The Jesus Way to Win the World. *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Jan2005, Vol. 29 Issue 1, p77-81
- Daft, Richard L. (2007). *The Leadership Experience*, 4th ed. OH: South-Western Publishing.
- Farling, M. L., Stone, A. G., & Winston, B. E. (1999). Servant leadership: Setting the stage for empirical research. *The Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6, pp.49-72.
- Graham, J. (1991), “Servant-leadership in organizations: inspirational and moral”, *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 105-19.
- Greenleaf Robert K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, p.7.
- Lawrence, B. (2007). Foundational Principles of Leadership. Retrieved from <http://bible.org/article/foundational-principles-leadership>
- Manz, C. C., & Sims, H. P., Jr. (1987). Leading workers to lead themselves: The external leadership of self-managing work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 32, 106-128.
- Patterson, K. A. (2003). *Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Regent University
- Sanders, J. O. (2007). *Spiritual leadership: Principles of excellence for every believer*. Chicago, Ill: Moody Publishers.
- Sendjaya, S. and Pekerti, A (2010). Servant leadership as antecedent of trust in organizations, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 7, pp. 643-663.

Trompenaars, F, Voerman, Ed. 2010. *Servant Leadership Across Cultures*. USA: McGraw-Hill.

van Dierendock, D, Patterson, K. 2010. *Servant Leadership: Development in Theory and Research*. United Kingdom: Macmillian.

Winston, B. E. (2002). *Be a leader for God's sake: from values to behaviors (Rev. ed.)*. Virginia Beach, Va.: Regent University, School of Leadership Studies.

Wong, P., Page, D. (2003). *Servant leadership: An Opponent-Process Model and the Revised Servant Leadership Profile*. Trinity Western University.