Paradoxical Leadership: The Impact of Servant-Leadership on Burnout of Staff

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“If you are planning for one year, grow rice. If you are planning for twenty years, grow trees. If you are planning for centuries, grow men.” – A Chinese Proverb

This paper provides the rationale for a quantitative correlational investigation of servant-leadership and burnout that will be carried out by Wally Rude under the supervision of Dr. Paul Wong and Dr. Don Page at Trinity Western University in 2003/2004. It begins by describing the prevalence of burnout, how it is defined, and some of the antecedents of burnout. Antecedents include both internal and external factors. The paper gravitates to the impact of external factors, and in particular to the process of supervision. Supervisors as leaders wield substantial power; bringing employees to their knees in fear, pain and disengagement, or allowing them to flourish, grow and be meaningfully engaged at their workplace. It then describes how servant-leadership can play a substantial and pivot role in reducing burnout in individuals by; reducing and buffering toxic emotions, developing people, and reducing fear and uncertainty.

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Job Burnout

The test of servant-leadership – “Do those served grow as persons; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become a servant? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?” – Robert Greenleaf

Prevalence/Impact

There appears to be a growing number of individuals burning out in the workplace. There are likely many factors that are leading to this situation. Shirom (2003) helps us perhaps understand the context of this ever increasing problem in a recent review on job related burnout:

Burnout is likely to represent a pressing problem in the years to come. Competitive pressures in the manufacturing industry that originate in the global market, the continuing process of consumer
empowerment in service industries, the rise and decline of the high-tech industry are among the factors likely to affect employees’ levels of burnout in different industries. In addition, employees in many advanced market economies experience heightened job insecurity, demands for excessive work hours, the need for continuous retraining in the wake of the accelerating pace of change in informational technologies, and the blurring of the line separating work and home (p.24).

In one very recent study conducted with more than 180 organizations in Canada representing more than 500,000 full-time workers, it was found that that psychological conditions (depression, anxiety, stress and other mental health conditions that affect employee health and productivity) are the leading causes of both short-term disability and long-term disability (Watson Wyatt, 2003). It was also found that “fewer than half of survey participants engage in health initiatives that specifically target employees’ psychological health (Watson Wyatt, 2003, p. 7). Of particular interest was the respondents’ prediction of the greatest health and productivity challenges of the next five years. “Nearly four out of ten (38 percent) expect stress and burnout to be critical issues…” (Watson Wyatt, 2003, p. 14). It seems clear that from this survey that psychological concerns such as burnout are real threats to organizational well-being and productivity, and that institutions are not in a position to address the issue effectively, as they have very few strategies in place to target psychological issues.

In another survey, using the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the General Health Questionnaire conducted by the Cancer Care Ontario’s Systemic Therapy Task Force, it was found that medical personnel “[were] experiencing burnout and high levels of stress and that large numbers [were] considering leaving or decreasing their work hours”(Grunfeld, et al. 2002, p. 167). Of the 681 participants, more than one-third had high levels of emotional exhaustion and low levels of personal accomplishment (Grunfeld, et al., 2000).

Understanding some of the theoretical underpinnings of this phenomenon will help us grasp the antecedents, consequences and cures.

**Conceptual Basis of Burnout**

The primary focus of the historical research on burnout centered around the service related professions such as teachers, doctors, social workers, nurses and policemen. The premise was that these professions typically had to work under conditions where they were continuously expected to invest “emotional, cognitive and even physical energy” to serve client, patients or students which often would lead to a process of “emotional exhaustion, mental weariness, and physical fatigue” (Shirom, 2003. p.2). However, those working in other types of careers such as management, sales or accounting may also be exposed to the potential of burnout because of the tremendous demands that employees are under as corporations have downsized and “squeezed” in an attempt to remain more competitive.

Experts in the field have generally agreed upon the definition of burnout. “Burnout may be defined as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding” (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501). Three separate components make up burnout: 1.) Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally over extended and drained by others, 2.) Cynicism refers to a callous response toward people who are recipients of one’s service and 3.) Personal efficacy refers to a decline in one’s feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501). These three measures are embedded within the construct of burnout as measured by the MBI-GS. Although burnout represents a negative psychological state, the positive antithesis of this state is job engagement (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Other models of burnout include the Pines Burnout Model that defines burnout as the “state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations” and the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Model that characterizes burnout as state where one feels “depleted of physical, emotional, and cognitive energies” (Sharom, 2003, p. 7 & 8).

Sharom (2003) argues that the most sensible theoretical view of stress and burnout is based on the Hobfoll’s Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. According to COR theory, “when individuals experience loss of
resources, they respond by attempting to limit the loss and maximize the gain of resources” and postulates that stress occurs under one of the three conditions; (1) when resources are threatened, (2) when resources are lost, and (3) when individuals invest resources and do not reap the anticipated rate of return” (Shirom, 2003, p. 11). When applying this theory to burnout, individuals feel burned out when there is a continuous net loss which cannot be replenished.

**Measuring Burnout**

*There has been approximately 25 years of research on job burnout, and the “Maslach Burnout Inventory is currently the most widely used research instrument to measure burnout, that is used in over 90% of empirical research” (Schaufell and Enzmann, 1988).*

It appears that using the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) as a measure of job burnout is very reasonable based on the psychometric properties of this scale. One study looked at the construct validity of the scales factor structure and correlates, evaluating both internal and external validity of the scale. In terms of internal validity, the factorial structure of the MBI-GS was examined using confirmatory factor analysis. It was found that the three separate components were really measuring the same underlying attribute, and the authors suggested that, “the scores on these dimensions may be combined into a single burnout score by summing the scores on the three burnout dimensions (Taris, et al., 1999, p. 229). However, in the second part of their study, examining external validity, they found that “the pattern of correlates was different for each of the three burnout dimensions…” (Taris, et al., 1999, p. 234). This suggests that it may be prudent to correlate the three components of burnout separately with other factors.

Another study examined was a project that looked at the factorial validity of the MBI-GS across occupational groups (Schutte, 2000). One key finding was the internal consistency of the burnout subscales, expect for the cynicism subcomponent. In addition, it was found that that MBI-GS proved to be invariant across all occupational groups.

**Causes – Situational and Internal**

Research has pointed to both situational and individual factors as antecedents of job burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). According to Maslach et al. (2001) “research has found that situational and organizational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones” (p.418). It is thought that individual traits predispose individuals to burnout through interaction with organizational factors (Sharom, 2003). An example of this interaction is given by Sharom (2003):

*As an example, when a major slump moves management to require that all employees increase their input of available personal energy and time to ensure the organization’s survival, those employees who possess high self-esteem are less likely to experience burnout as a result.*

Other individual factors that have been found to be predictors of burnout “include demographics variables (such as age or formal education), enduring personality traits, and work related attitudes” (Maslach, et al., p. 409). Sharom (2003) also highlights individual factors such as self-esteem, hardiness and optimism as being important. There certainly seems to be an empirical case for internal factors acting as predictors of burnout.

External factors include variables such as job characteristics (job demands, social support from peers, managerial support, feedback, participation in decision making), occupational characteristics (care-giving or teaching roles), and organizational factors (fairness and equity, downsizing/mergers) (Maslach, 2001). There is likely some interaction between these factors, and when this is considered in the context of individual factors, it becomes a complex situation to understand. However, it appears that one of the most salient influential factors is leadership. Leadership influences at a number of levels. For example, a CEO of a large company will set the tone and influence the culture for every employee, creating a positive and productive environment, or perhaps a negative and destructive one. However, senior management within a corporation can explicitly support a particular philosophical approach, which is not followed by the unit managers or front-line supervisors.
I believe these managers, supervisors, or leaders that are directly responsible for a handful of employees wield the most power. They have the power to buffer or enhance upon the leadership that is given from the “top”. They are in a position to greatly influence the lives of those employees working directly for them, independent of what is happening at the senior level. They are generally responsible for making many decisions, and often have the power to make or break individuals. They often hold the key that will unlock the door to access the many resources that employees need to maintain and enhance performance, and will use their position to interpret institutional vision, goals, and policies. They appear to be the gatekeepers for a small group of employees. In the eyes of many employees working for an institution, the key person in their work world is their immediate supervisor.

If one assumes that supervisors are in a tremendous position of influence when it comes to the employees they are responsible for, then one needs to be cognizant about the fact that this influence can be positive or negative. A profoundly important study has just been completed by Jeff Morley at the University of British Columbia in 2003 titled *Meaning Engagement in RCMP Workplaces: What Helps and What Hinders*. The study, which interviewed 25 Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers from the greater Vancouver area, used a semi-structured, open-ended question process. The study took a qualitative approach to answer the following question, “What are the critical incidents contributing to or detracting from RCMP officers being meaningfully engaged in their work?” (Morely, 2003, p. 8). Morely acknowledges the difficulty in defining workplace engagement, and part of the purpose of the qualitative study was to evaluate what workplace engagement meant to the participants. However, Morley (2003) does offer this definition:

> At a conceptual level the construct of workplace engagement may include sub-constructs such as motivation, commitment, satisfaction and loyalty. The converse of engagement is disengagement. This construct could conceptually include sub-constructs such as stress, burnout, boredom, or disinterest (p.13).

Of the 370 incidents that were elicited from the RCMP officers, 197 were incidents that helped officers experience meaningful engagement in their work, and 173 were incidents that hindered officers in experiencing meaningful engagement in their work. All the critical incidents were grouped into 19 categories based on the nature and meaning of the incident. The primary categories that were identified were supervision, police incidents, perceived organizational support, transfer, personal circumstances, and peers.

By far the most significant and salient finding was related to supervision. This category represented 30% of the total incidents, 19% higher than the second most important category. Within the category of supervision, there were 52 incidents that were considered engaging, and 57 that were considered disengaging. Only two officers reported incidents in this category.

Disengaging incidents included supervisors not doing their jobs, blatant sexual harassment, supervisory inaction, and permitting inexperienced officers to work in an area with no experience. One example of this type of incident included a comment to a female officer when she was told that “Nobody wanted you here. I got stuck with you”. Another example included a supervisor holding a closed door meeting to gossip about other members in the section.

Thankfully, supervisors also had the power to help officers feel engaged. One officer, after reflecting on a number of different supervisors commented, “My desire to work was very strongly influenced by who I worked for”. Incidents included in this category ranged from supervisors giving freedom to officers to do their job to supervisors that were positively involved in the lives of the officers. In one example, and in contrast to a disengaging critical incident, an officer would simply come out on the road to simply talk to one of the officers. The officer stated, “They cared about me”. In another incident, a supervisor tore up an officer’s pass requesting leave, in light of the overtime this officer had put in. The supervisor simply gave the officer the time off.

It is interesting to note that the category of perceived organizational support, which reflected support from senior management ranked fifth in the percentage of total incidents. It seems clear from this study that the
influence of supervision is overwhelmingly important to employees. It is also equally as clear that this influence lead to employees feeling both engaged and disengaged. Maslach et al. (2001) emphasizes that “lack of support from supervisors is especially important” (p.407) when it comes to buffering individuals from burnout.

Another study, by Coady & Kent (1990) also supports the concept that supervisory support effects burnout of staff. In this study with 151 social workers across 45 states in the US, it was found that “workers who perceive their supervisor as supportive have less potential for burnout” (p. 116).

Now that we have established the significant role, if not leading role, that leadership plays as an antecedent to burnout, let us now turn to servant-leadership and evaluate the connection between this approach to leadership and job burnout.

Servant-Leadership

“I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.” – Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction

Leadership does matter! The influence of leaders penetrates every facet of our existence! The quality of one’s leadership can have detrimental, negative and damaging impacts, or it can have beneficial, positive and productive impacts on work culture and on people’s lives. We currently have a leadership crisis in our institutions, corporations and churches. More often than not, the quality of leadership is left wanting, and the impact on the organization is suboptimal. This often leads to unnecessary suffering and pain on the part of the staff.

Have you ever been impacted by someone’s leadership, in either a negative or positive way? Perhaps you have felt the internal rush of a word of encouragement, the nod of approval or a reaching hand of support. On the other hand have you experienced the stinging pain of being berated, insulted or cut down? If you answer yes, then you are not alone and you will want to read on. Most of us at some point have been touched in some way by those in positions of influence. One only has to take note of what is happening on the world stage to realize the tremendous influence that leaders have.

There are a plethora of leadership approaches that could be evaluated; however servant-leadership will be evaluated in this paper. Robert Greenleaf, the father of servant-leadership, defines this style of leadership as one where a leader truly takes into consideration the needs of others and makes it a priority to empower and develop these individuals in a spirit of true service (Greenleaf, 1977). According to Page and Wong (2000), “Servant Leadership incorporates the ideals of empowerment, total quality, team building and participatory management, and the service ethic into a leadership philosophy” (p.69).

Definitions

Robert Greenleaf published his first essay on servant-leadership entitled The Servant as a Leader (Greenleaf, 1977). This seminal work was an impetus for a new kind of leadership model to emerge in the 1970’s. Greenleaf is responsible for coining the term servant-leadership. The central definition of servant-leadership according to Greenleaf (1997) is:

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. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p.14)

Spears, the current Chief Executive Officer of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, has developed a list of ten characteristics that represent a servant-leader, based on his readings of Greenleaf’s works. The ten
characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2003).

Page and Wong (2000) in a chapter titled A Conceptual Framework for Measuring Servant-Leadership, advocate the benefits of servant-leadership. They define a servant-leader as a “leader whose primary purpose for leading is to serve others by investing in their development and well being for the benefit of accomplishing tasks and goals for the common good” (p.70). In addition, they have provided a conceptual picture of leadership called Expanding Circles of Servant Leadership (p.72). They propose that at the center is character (a servant’s heart) and from there the circle goes outward, like a bull’s eye, to include relationship (building up others), leadership task (doing the work of a leader), leadership process (improving organizational processes) and leadership role model (impacting society and culture).

Rinehart (1998) provides yet another angle on servant leadership that is helpful. He states “that in servant leadership, serving is the expression of leadership, regardless of how people follow. Serving is both the end as well as the means” (p. 41). Servant-leadership is not only concerned about producing results because of servant-leadership, but serving for the inherent value and good of simply serving.

A more recent influential leader, Steven Covey, echoes the sentiment of servant-leadership. He suggests that there are eight characteristics of people who are principle-centered leaders. He suggests that leaders: 1.) Are continually learning, 2.) Are service-oriented, 3.) Radiate positive energy, 4.) Believe in other people, 5.) Lead Balanced lives, 6.) See life as an adventure, 7.) Are synergistic, and 8.) Exercise for self-renewal (Covey, 1991). Steven Covey’s training seminars attest to how much emphasis is placed on working from a mind-set of self-transcendence; that one needs to be mindful, appreciate and exhorting of the people that surround you at work – in essence one needs to serve others.

The principles, theories and definitions that have been purported by Greenleaf, Spears, Frost, Wong, Page, Rinehart, and Covey have all essentially resonated with a synonymous message – servant-leadership is about distancing oneself from using power, influence and position to serve self, and instead gravitating to a position where these instruments are used to empower, enable and encourage those that are within one’s circle of influence.

Servant-Leadership and Christianity

As one navigates through the waters of understanding and describing servant-leadership, I would be remiss if I did not mention the biblical model of servant-leadership that was epitomized by the life of Jesus Christ. Although there have been many fine examples of servant-leaders that have walked the face of the earth, Christ’s stands out as an impeccable example simply because of the tremendous legacy he has left in the wake of his short existence. Jesus said, “The son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” (Matthew 20: 28). Serve He did!

Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges (2003) have highlighted some of this legacy in a book titled The Servant Leader. They remind us of how Christ came to teach, lead and train - and this is exactly what he did. He did not chase after the corner office, first class travel or power. He went about his business by surrounding himself with his disciples and pouring his life into them as an investment, as well as the multitudes that he also interfaced with. His influence is so great it is immeasurable – a great leader and yet a servant!

Servant-Leadership and the Reduction of Toxic Emotions

Many of the characteristics that Greenleaf has highlighted as being important for servant-leaders have also been endorsed by Peter Frost (2003) in his new book Toxic Emotions at Work. Although Frost does not refer directly to the concept of servant-leadership, he does support the notion that leaders must be sensitive and attuned to the needs of workers, and in particular negative emotions. He exhorts leaders to respect individuals, to be compassionate and empathic, and to put people first.

He illustrates through numerous interviews he has had with workers and leaders in a variety of organizations, the negative consequences of leaders not treating their workers with respect, compassion and value. When leaders were not serving the individuals and addressing their emotional needs and filtering their toxic
emotions, these individuals would often burnout, leave the company, or become very unproductive. This type of consequence does not bode well for the profitability of any company.

Clearly, external and internal forces are continually at work within the workplace. For example, an employee may have just lost a loved one, got a divorce, or received a negative prognosis on a health concern. These emotions are then carried into the workplace, and can certainly become toxic, if not dealt with in a responsible and caring manner. If the supervisor is completely insensitive to the employee needing a day off to attend a loved ones funeral, then toxic emotions will surely develop. Servant-leaders, who by definition care about individuals, would ensure that the employee gets the time off they need to attend the funeral. There is a short-term cost associated with this approach, as the employer has just lost one day of work from an employee. However, this short-term loss pales in comparison with the longer term costs that would be incurred by the corporation if toxic emotions began to grow within an employee who felt uncared for and unsupported. In fact, the poison of these growing toxic emotions could lead to burnout, and perhaps even the loss of a good employee.

I have personally witnessed several individuals who have burnt out in large corporations, and a consistent theme in all these cases was supervisors not listening and supporting these employees as they dealt with negative emotions. Servant-leaders have the foresight to not compromise sustainability for short-term gain.

On the other hand, a vivid example of servant-leadership is given by Morley (2003) when an officer returned to work only four months after having a baby. Her supervisor let her go home to attend to and feed the baby when necessary. The officer felt supported by her supervisor and therefore engaged. Imagine the potential toxic emotions that could have developed if this scenario was different.

Servant-Leadership and Human Resource Development

Another area that servant-leadership reduces burnout is related to human resource development. At the heart of servant-leadership, is the desire for leaders to see employees develop, grow and reach their full potential. There is certainly a limit to what a leader can do for an employee; however, the leader has significant power to create an environment in which an employee can flourish. No doubt this takes courage on the part of the supervisor, as some employees may simply surpass the leader in creativity and productivity. The antithesis of this approach is to control, oppress and limit employees. If a leader is insecure and fearful of employees developing, this often will happen. However, a sustainable effort to keep resources from employees will surely end up in burnout and disengaged employees.

More specifically, servant-leaders should be attuned to the skill sets, passions, and giftings of employees, and assess these attributes against the current job description of the employee. A skilled servant-leader will have the ability and willingness to perhaps redirect an employee that would be better suited to another job, or give the employee opportunities to explore and use their areas of expertise. Perhaps an employee is working in a job and making a contribution, but would be better suited in another job. Perhaps another job would provide a more optimal fit for the employee. The supervisor is faced with a difficult decision. The employee would benefit from the new job, and the institution would likely benefit, but the supervisor would lose the valuable contribution of the employee and would be forced to train a new person. The servant-leader would do what is right for the individual and the institution, and by doing this would aid individuals from becoming stagnant and burnt out.

Morley (2003) gives an example of a supervisor that allowed an employee to be released from their normal duties to work on a high profile case. The employee felt engaged by this decision. Think of the extra effort that the supervisor had to make to replace the valuable employee. Think also of the contribution that the employee was making as they felt valued and engaged.

Servant-Leadership and Employee Uncertainty/Fear

There is certainly substantial uncertainty and rapid change taking place within our organizations today. Higgins & Duxbury (2002) summarize this sentiment on workplace changes:

_Nationally [In Canada], the 1990’s was a decade of turbulence for working Canadians as companies downsized, rightsized, restructured and globalized. The recession of the early 1990’s was followed by the_
“jobless recovery” of the mid 1990’s and job security was the issue that absorbed many working Canadians and their families (p. 2).

Many individuals have a propensity to worry and ruminate in the face of change and uncertain times. The reality of the situation in most organizations is that change will continue to be a major factor, especially in light of technological advancement and globalization. Many individuals simply cannot cope with the ramification of these changes, and end up burning out. Servant-leaders can play a pivot role in this situation, as clear, candid and open communication can take place with employees. Often fear is rooted in the unknown, but leaders can mitigate this by strategically including employees in discussions and decision making.

**Servant-Leadership in Action**

Numerous corporations and institutions have embraced this approach to servant-leadership with stunning success. It was reported in People Management in May 2003 that “the only American airline [Southwest Airlines] to post a profit and avoid redundancies since September 11, 2001 accredits it success to a servant-leadership culture. Southwest Airlines gave hourly updates of events to its 35,000 employees. Its top three leaders chose to work without pay for the rest of the year. Last year the airline was the most valuable in the US and rated ‘Most admired airline’ in Fortune magazine.” Certainly from this example, servant-leadership seems to impact the “bottom line” of companies.

The Broetje Orchard is another glowing example of how a company has embraced the principles of servant-leadership and has aimed to incorporate them into their orchard business (Broetje, 2003). In their pursuit of excellence in growing fruit, the company employs approximately 900 people year round using a largely Hispanic workforce. They have gone beyond simply paying their workers for their time and have the workers build a community and family environment where affordable housing, daycare services and educational facilities have been provided on site to help employees and their families grow personally.

**Conclusion**

“Do not fear failure, fear succeeding at those things that do not matter.” – Duane Henley

Corporations, governments and churches are facing unprecedented challenges in this new era of “cheaper and faster”. Governments are downsizing and corporations are reeling from the mounting pressure to create shareholder value. Burnout and other work related psychological conditions appear to be growing at a rapid rate, impacting individuals and corporations in ways unimagined.

Leaders are playing an even greater role as mediators between the often tumultuous ground where corporation’s expectations collide with the reality of what employees can deliver. Leaders have a unique and glorious opportunity to empower, develop and invest in their staff, or they can do the opposite and use their power in self-serving ways that only causes pain suffering and turmoil. What will it be? We believe servant-leaders are in an enviable and powerful position to chart the course for a better tomorrow. We trust that these servant-leaders will not shrink back with fear and remain swirling in the eddies of inconsequential. It is imperative that we move forward and face the swift and churning rapids that are ahead, for by doing so, we will surely reach our goal; and that is to make a meaningful contribution to individuals, institutions and to society as a whole – through servant-leadership!

**References**


