Servant Leadership:
Is it an Academic Jargon or a Lifestyle?

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Although the subject of servant leadership has generated considerable academic interest, the paper argues that it is not a subject that remains in classrooms but a lifestyle that expresses high level leadership. Briefly, this paper argues that true a servant leader is the one who goes out there to practice the principles of servant leadership. The paper argues that one cannot consider him/herself as a servant leader, unless there is a practical expression of loving service to followers. Using a high-quality leader member exchange relationship (LMX), the servant leader seeks trust and follower compliance as prescribed by the biblical principles of 1 Corinthians 13, and using the model of Jesus Christ as the perfect prototype of the servant leader.

Since Greenleaf wrote about servant leadership in 1977 a lot of books and articles have been written; organizations have been founded; and existing organizations have extracted Greenleaf’s teachings and incorporated them in their programs. In this paper, I want to explore the practicability of servant leadership with the hope of trying to answer the question whether servant leadership is just academic jargon learnt for scholastic purposes or whether it is a lifestyle to be espoused. I will explore the definitions of academic jargon, the meaning of a servant, and the meaning of leader then I will provide the practical aspect of servant leadership and show that servant leadership is not just classroom concept but a life that needs to be lived by those who have been entrusted to leadership. This will be done by exploring the concept of leader member exchange (LMX). In this concept the relation between leader and follower is emphasized and it explains that effective leadership can be greatly achieved if the leader is deliberate in how he/she interacts and relates with the follower. This concept agrees with the teachings of Jesus Christ in relationship to how the leader interacts with followers and servant leadership is a proponent of the sort of leadership Jesus ascribes. Jesus spent a long time explaining to His disciples that in a dyad relationship, the leader should consider him/herself not as a boss to the follower but as subordinate to the follower. This follows that the true test of a servant leader is not how competent or knowledgeable he/she is but how he/she relates to his/her followers and how much transformation takes place between them.

**Academic jargon defined**
Merriam Webster dictionary defines jargon as the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group. It explains that jargon is an obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words. The principal occupation of the academic community is to invent dialects sufficiently hermetic so as to prevent knowledge from passing between territories. By maintaining a constant flow of written material among the specialists of each group, academics are able to assert the acceptable
technique of communication intended to prevent communications. This, in turn, establishes a standard that allows them to dismiss those who seek to communicate through generally accessible language as deformers, or popularizers. Many concepts are discussed in classrooms but never leave the classroom to enter reality and so they remain classroom concepts. Einstein’s special theory of relativity is an example of such concepts (Russell, 1997).

The meaning of servant
Bauer (2000) explains that the Greek word *doulos*, which is translated servant, has different usages. He posits that the word can be used as a verb to mean to be owned by another or be subjected to another. He mentions that it can also mean to act or conduct oneself as one in total service to another, perform duties of a slave. It can also mean to serve or to obey. The noun of the verb has been used to mean to put in someone’s total control, or to be subject to someone. In a positive sense, Bauer explains that a servant can mean being obedient in a humble way by showing that the one being served is superior or more important. It is in this usage I will further explain. If one were to serve another, he/she needs to consider the person being served more important because it is the presence of the one being served that provides the opportunity for the one serving to assist in that capacity. God expects us to serve others—because humans are important to God. Therefore, it is a special honor to be given the responsibility to serve others. Jesus washed His disciples’ feet in the upper room and gave His disciples an example to follow (John 13:1-17). Biblical servant hood is responsive, respectful, willing, loving, self-sacrificing, and submissive (de Pree, 1997). Servant hood does not mean unthinking obedience. It means that one has a willingness to lower oneself, to humbly serve another person, to put the best interests of someone else above your own enjoyment and concerns.

The meaning of leadership
Yukl (2002) defines leadership as a process that involves intentional influence by one person over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or in an organization. Garner (1986) defines leadership as the process of persuasion and example by which an individual induces a group to take action that is in accord with the leader’s purposes or the shared purposes of all. To explain his definition of leadership, Gardner has assigned different tasks to leadership as follows: (1) the leader has the responsibility to envision goals; (2) he/she affirms values; (3) he/she motivates followers; (4) he/she has the responsibility of achieving a workable unity among followers; (5) he/she shares information of what is going on and why; (6) he/she serves as a symbol to the organization; (7) represents the organization as well as renewing it during times of change. With these tasks in mind, it imperative to understand that leadership has to do with how the individual undertakes his/her responsibility to extract the best out of others. Biblical leadership is responsible, compassionate, understanding, accountable, competent, respectable, authoritative, pioneering, exemplary, and God-fearing. Being a leader does not mean making all the decisions. Nor does it refer to being the "boss" in organizations, but it implies taking initiative, accepting responsibility, and shouldering the weight of accountability before God.

Servant leadership defined
How can servant hood and leadership be compatible? From the definitions of servant hood and leadership, it is instructive to note that it is not a contradiction of terms, but an all encompassing concept that defines some of the highest forms of leadership. Servant leadership espouses a concept that reveals the nature of the leader in relationship to the followers. Spears (1998) defines servant leadership as is a practical philosophy concerned with the ethical use of power and authority. He explains that servant leaders believe that power and authority are for helping others grow, not for exploiting, ruling, or taking advantage by setting groups or individuals against each another. Spears (1998) explains that servant-leadership is a practical philosophy supporting people who serve, first, in their life, and then, work. To spread out that service to individuals and institutions, they choose to lead, whether in a formal position or an informal position. In either position, they encourage trust, insight, listening, cooperation, and the ethical use of power. Servant-leaders also have the courage to become the change agents they wish to see in the world. In biblical use of the concepts, leadership does not mean dictatorship, nor is a servant someone who is mindlessly compliant to every impulse of a master.

Jesus had the right to dictate by virtue of His authority and power, but He came to earth and took on human flesh (John 1:14; Phil 2), patiently putting up with flawed and obstinate people in order to provide mankind with the highest form of leadership. He provided strong leadership; nevertheless, His love for people permeated His leadership style. He did not compel anyone to follow Him. Rather He earned the reverence and compliance of
men and women and they willingly followed Him. That's the kind of leadership men/women need to provide today.

In his reading of Greenleaf, Spears (1998) has identified a set of ten characteristics which he ascribes to the servant-leader. These include the following:

1. Listening receptively to what others have to say. Willingness to listen to the will of the group and make informed decisions from the group’s voice as pertaining to vision of the organization is critical to servant leadership. James 1:19 instructs us to be slow to speak and quick to listen. Listening allows one to tap resources from others.

2. Empathy. – choosing to accept and recognize people for their unique spirits to identify individual needs and concerns. Jesus never ignored human needs but He identified Himself with them and met those needs (John 5).

3. Healing – seeking to be a potential for mending broken spirits. This is a critical characteristic because it describes a willingness to seek to minister to the deep personal needs of individuals. This is a practice that was apparent in the character of Christ who laid down His life for the same of others and His life on earth constantly portrayed this characteristic when He not only met physical need of healing, but He also forgave sins (Mark 2).

4. Awareness – being sharply aware and reasonably disturbed, about oneself and the environment. Biblical teachings encourage discernment and good judgment (1Cor 2:14). Servant leaders should cultivate the ability to judge all things and test every situation. A good leader is the one who makes sound judgments and discerns problems through well thought out spiritual disciplines. The servant leader needs to appreciate that he/she has own shortcomings and needs to understand that the work of leading other comes from a higher calling – therefore dependence on God in making decisions and discerning the surrounding environment.

5. Persuasion – It is the duty of the servant leader to convince instead of coercing or using positional authority. Just as the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin (John 16:8) without coercing us into blind obedience, follower compliance should be sought from persuasion instead of coercion because convincing is more effective than coercing. The reason for this is that followers’ self motivation can never be coerced.

6. Conceptualization – seeking for the ability to dream great dreams for oneself, the followers, and the organization. Only a person who is totally committed to others can dream great dreams for others because people have a propensity to seek only for one’s good. Due to the fallen nature of humans, selfishness plays itself in almost all people and only a person who has genuinely been changed is capable of dreaming for others. 1 Cor. 13 intimates that love seeks the good in others.

7. Foresight – using the lessons from the past, realities of the present, and the likely consequences of the decisions one makes for the future. Prov. 29:18 (KJV) states, “Without a vision, people perish.” Ross (1991, p. 1116) comments that Israel’s well being depended on obedience to divine revelation. If prophetic revelatory vision in Israel was missing then the nation had no direction, resulting in disobedience to the law. Leaders that do not communicate the vision will be unproductive due to lack of follower direction and motivation.

8. Stewardship – cultivating a sense of holding something in trust for another. Any responsibility the servant leader has for the organization, he/she would have to uphold with trust and conviction because he/she is supposed to do all things for the sake of the organization. Whatever one does in an organization should be done for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). This would be done with the conscious knowledge that he/she is only entrusted responsibility for a season.

9. Commitment to the growth of the people – consistently reminding oneself that people have an intrinsic value beyond their contributions as workers. The servant leader takes up responsibility knowing that that God created humans in His own image and likeness (Gen 1:26). He/she serves to develop the better not only to be better workers, but also better humans. If God gave humans such an incredible value, then the servant leader should emulate God by placing the same value on them.
10. Building community – the servant leader should demonstrate his/her own unlimited liability for a specific community related group with the belief that each community has its own personality and hopes. Recognition that people are part of each other and that they need each other is critical to building a great organization. Ephesians 4 teaches that the Christians are the body of Christ and each organ of the body needs the other such that when one suffers, all suffer.

**LMX theory**

Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) provides a diagnostic tool for analyzing relationships between a worker and leader. LMX theory defines leadership as the specific work interactions between a leader and an individual worker. LMX theory also gives us a greater ability to improve the leadership function. For example, understanding the LMX process can aid managers in improving communication with workers, reducing unwanted turnover, and improving worker performance (Graen, Scandura, & Graen, 1986).

LMX theory operates on two basic foundations:
1. LMX theory hypothesizes that leader-worker relationships can be divided into two basic categories: High-quality relationships or in-group relationships, where the leader and follower both perform work roles above the norm for a given workplace (Cashman, Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1976). In this relationship a leader gives in-group members greater job autonomy, flexibility, and rewards (Waldron, 1991). (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989) posit that high-quality relationships have more frequent leader and follower communications, greater exchange of work related information, and development of increasingly similar perceptions of the work environment.

2. LMX relationship is a low-quality, or out-group, LMX relationship. In these relationships both the leader and the worker typically conform to minimum output levels implied by the work contract. Also, communication between parties (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989) and mutual perceptions of the workplace will deteriorate throughout the existence of the relationship (Waldron, 1991).

In servant leadership LMX as described by high-quality relationships defines the most effective relation between the leader and follower. One who is committed for the good of the followers will most likely be one who has close interactions with the followers. Relationships between the leader and follower can predict job satisfaction and low turn over rates because both the leader as well as the followers performs their tasks beyond the prescribed work roles. Yukl (2002) proposes that leaders identified as close to the constituents are often described in terms of follower motivation, task behavior, and identification with the leader. This quality is more apparent in servant leadership because the leader is in close proximity to the constituents. In other words, the servant leader motivates the workers to go the extra mile because of the high-quality relationship. The greatest servant leader ever lived is Jesus Christ who has a high-quality relationship with His disciples such that after His departure from the earth, the disciples were able to continue with the work of evangelism because they were both motivated and they had learned from the close proximity of Jesus Himself.

**Servant Leadership is a learned lifestyle**

Leadership without loving service produces an unbalanced, ugly creature. To be willing to take the role of a servant requires deliberate acts of love. The kind of man/woman worth following expresses the love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. The love described in 1 Corinthians 13 has the following characteristics:
1. It is kind and therefore does not hold grudges. The servant leader has to be conscious that he has been committed to represent the organization, which is in itself and honor. That means that his/her dealings with the followers have to be genuine without any trace of holding grudges against any of them – whether he disagrees with them or not.

2. It is patient and therefore always hopes the best and thinks of the best for the others. Even when the followers make mistakes, the servant leader is likely to chastise them with love and patience and will not rejoice in the evil that would happen to them.

3. Love protects others. The servant leader knows he is a steward who has been entrusted with responsibility of leading people. He tries as much as he can to protect the followers and he hopes that some good will come out them. He believes in their abilities and rejoices in truth such that
before he/she can believe any rumor concerning one follower, he/she must establish the truth first before taking any formal action.

4. Loves covers a multitude of other grounds including: it is not easily angered; it not envious, boastful, proud, rude, selfish, and not a thinker of evil; it perseveres, trusts, and hopes in others.

A leader who expresses that kind of love prescribed by 1 Cor 13 won't have trouble finding followers who would be more than willing to submit to his/her leadership. Such love requires that a man/woman become vulnerable to being hurt and rejected, that he/she put aside his pride and humble himself for the good of others. This kind of leadership can only be exemplified by servant leadership. And it shows that love is not only a concept to be studied but it is also a life to be lived.

Spears (1998) posits that many individuals within institutions, along with some institutions themselves, have adopted servant-leadership as a guiding philosophy. He intimates that at the heart of the servant-leader concept is the importance of leaders to nurture both the institution and those individuals affected by the institution. One notable example is Greenleaf Center has made a significant impact on the development of community leadership.

Spears (1998), comments that around 1980 several articles appeared concerning the linkage between the servant-leader concept and experiential education programs. Servant-leadership is increasingly viewed as the ethical basis for many service-oriented education programs at colleges and universities, as well as some secondary school programs.

Spears (1998), explains that in the area of corporate training, servant-leadership is increasingly utilized as part of a broader program by consultants working directly with companies. A related area of activity has to do with the growing interest in bringing together servant-leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM). Several people have recently published pieces discussing the benefits of using both TQM and servant-leadership in the corporate setting.

Again Spears (1998) continues to highlight the importance of servant leadership by commenting that it is being integrated into a variety of programs involving Jungian psychology; feminist philosophy; men's awareness groups; and, twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. In these diverse programs, servant-leadership is viewed as an ideal model for both personal growth and service to others.

Conclusion
Can the servant leader sit on the peripheries of academic utopia to explain concepts and not go out to the field – to the trenches to explore the applicability of the concept? No. The servant leader is the one who goes to the trenches with the followers and lovingly lead them into greater compliance and achievement through follower motivation. Through a high-quality leader-member exchange the servant leader develops himself as well as others is copying the greatest servant leader that ever lived – Jesus Christ, who, although He was equal with God, He become a servant so that He would deliver God’s people from bondage of sin. He constantly became a role model to His disciples by serving them and teaching them to follow His footsteps. His rallying call was “The one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant” Luke 22:26(NASB).

References


