Servant Leadership:

A Natural Inclination or a Taught Behavior

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An examination of the past research on leadership indicates that leaders are born. Both the trait theory and the great-man theory indicated that a leader had to be born with certain traits and tendencies for him or her to be considered a leader. Present studies introduce a mix of variables that combines leader behavior with relational and situational approaches. Relational, behavioral, and contingency theories lean toward development of leaders as a learned behavior. This paper examines servant leadership as a learned behavior using the current studies on leadership. The principles outlined by servant leadership are a clear indication that servant leadership behavior can be taught and developed.

There are many schools of thought regarding the issue of whether a leader is born or if an individual can be taught to be a good leader. This paper concludes that leaders are made and not born. Leadership is a learnable behavior whose knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be acquired (Bergen, 1972; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Capowski, 1994; Clark & Clark, 1994; Dimock, 1987; Herman, 1990; Prawl, Medlin, & Gross, 1984; Sogunro, 1996; Stogdill, 1974). Stogdill concludes that leadership should be viewed as a dynamic process which varies with the leader, the followers, and the situation in which leadership occurs, rather than as a unifactorial entity. In this paper, I will explore whether leaders are born with a natural inclination to lead or if it is a taught behavior. This will be accomplished by defining leadership, presenting theory on past and present research, and defining servant leadership. I will conclude by answering the question of whether leadership is something that can be taught or if it is a trait an individual has to be born with.

On many occasions in the Bible, Jesus modeled how He was the ultimate servant leader. John 13:14 states, “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” Verse 15 says, “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.” When Jesus took His garment off and used it as a towel to wash the disciples' feet, they were shocked and protested that they should be washing His feet. He replied, “I'm doing this to set an example for you.” Nothing Jesus said could have influenced the disciples as much as watching Him do this most humble deed. Jesus was the ultimate servant leader.

Leadership Defined
Yuki (2002) cites Hemphill and Coons (1957) as saying that leadership is “the behavior of an individual . . . directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal.” This agrees with House (1999) who understands leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the
effectiveness and success of an organization.” The role of the leader is critical to the effectiveness of an organization.

Past and Present Research on Leadership Studies

Past Research

Since the beginning of the 20th century to the late 1940s, leadership research concentrated primarily on the leader’s personality traits (Chemers, 1997). In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus shifted to the leaders’ behavior (Chemers). In the late 1960s through the late 1970s, theory-based approach became the focus—with an emphasis on leader/follower relationships, as well as contingency approaches by analyzing the effect of situational variables (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974; House & Mitchell, 1974). The following are leadership theories that developed during this period. It is instructive to note that early research indicated that leaders are born, not taught, because they had certain characteristics.

Trait theory. The trait model attempts to attribute certain leadership criteria to certain traits (i.e., height or personality) (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002). Some trait theorists have tried to explain the trait theory by associating it with a five-factor model of personality under the dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, while others think that such a description confuses personality descriptors with personality itself (Pervin, 1994). The problem with trait theory, and in particular the five-factor theory, is it only describes what people are like, not how they operate (Epstein, 1994). Trait theory is comparable to the great-man theory.

Great-man theory. This theory holds that some leaders possess special traits that allow them to rise to positions of prominence regardless of their situation (Chemers). The theory implies that those in power deserve to be there because of their special endowment. The theory was first described by Thomas Carlyle (1902) who proposed the idea of a leader as one gifted with unique qualities that capture the imagination of the masses (Chemers). Jennings (1960) presented a comprehensive survey and analysis of this theory and supported the previous idea by Dowd (1936) that leadership was the special preserve of the superior few (Chemers). This theory is comparable to the trait theory that associates certain traits or personalities with leadership. This can mean that leadership is either hereditary (Galton, 1869), or can be programmed by developing the traits that make up a good leader (Chemers).

Present Research

Recent approaches to leadership research have concentrated on a mix of variables. Not only does this research focus on the cognitive effects of leaders on their followers, but also their influence on the organization itself through structural, cultural, and performance measures (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). These approaches combined emphasize a leader’s motivational skills, symbolic behavior, vision, and morality in what is termed transformational effects of leadership (House, 1994).

The past theoretical approaches have all aided in the contemporary research methods used today. Trait or personality approaches set the stage for in-depth analyses on leadership characteristics, including physical attributes, personality style, social skills, and personal abilities and skills. The focus on leadership behavior in 1950s and 1960s brought about different dimensions of leadership, with examinations of distinguishable behavior, leadership training, reward and punishment, charismatic, and transformational leadership behaviors (Chemers). This is an indicator that leadership can be a learned behavior.

The situational and contingency approaches of the late 1960s and 1970s introduced a comprehensive approach where traits/personality variables, task orientations and structure, leader-follower relationships, and situational contexts were all measurable variables through which a leader’s effectiveness could be examined (House).

Relational leadership. Relational leadership is defined by Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998) as a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit common good. This type of leadership thrives to develop the community and depends upon values inclusively with a view of strengthening all members to develop common purposes. Komives et al. also defines community as the binding together of diverse individuals committed to a just, common good through shared experiences in a spirit of caring and social responsibility. Komives et al. uses Gardner’s (1990) list of ingredients for
community: diversity, shared norms and values, free–flowing communication, atmosphere of trust, effective participation in leadership, and an awareness of a larger system upon which the community belongs.

Behavioral theory. House and Aditya (1997) explain that there are some universally effective leader behaviors that can be identified. In this model, the leader becomes the focus and not the follower. The accepted behavior is then quantified and it is assumed that such behavior would enhance effectiveness and productivity. Heilbrunn (1996) suggests leader behavioral analysis does not yield a clear correlation between the behavior of the leader and the productivity of the followers. This model is different from the trait theory in that it does not look for leader attributes or traits that make a good leader, but instead formulates behavior characteristics that would enhance leadership if such behavior is accepted and appropriated. The trait theory assumes that leaders are born, while this model indicates that leadership can be taught.

Contingency theory. Fiedler’s contingency theory posits a two-way interaction between a measure of leader task motivation against relationship motivation and situation control (House & Aditya, 1997). Situation control is the degree to which the leader can control and influence the group process. This model was developed by Fiedler and states that performance of groups is dependent upon leadership theory and situational appropriateness (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002). This is an example of learned behavior.

Servant Leadership
In his writing, Greenleaf (1977) discussed the need for a new kind of leadership model—one that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority. Greenleaf’s own definition of the concept is often quoted today:

Natural servants are persons who understand they are servants first. Consequently, they are more likely to define and strive to meet the "highest priority needs" of others, "than is the person who is leader first and who later serves out of the prompting of conscience or in conformity with normative expectations." (p. 14)

Spears (1998) states that true leadership emerges from individuals whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. Zohar (1997) states that servant leadership is the "essence of quantum thinking." Zohar calls for leading from a level of deep, revolutionary vision. Servant leaders change the system, invent the new paradigm, clear a space where something new can be, and they accomplish this not so much by doing as by being (Zohar). Servant leaders endorse a "concept of persons," which begins with an understanding of the diversity of people's gifts, talents, and skills (De Pree, 1990). Spears has extracted the following 10 central characteristics of the servant leader from Greenleaf's writings:

1. Listening—seeking to identify and clarify the will of a group, hearing one's inner voice, reflecting. Impact comes from relationships, not positions (Luke 9:6; John 4:5-30).
2. Empathy—accepting and recognizing people for their special and unique spirits. Leaders must choose and develop their key people (Mark 3:14; Luke 10:1).
4. Awareness—being sharply awake and reasonably disturbed about one's self as well as general conditions. Leaders should live the life before leading others (Luke 7:22-23; John 14:11).
5. Persuasion—seeking to convince instead of coercing or using one's positional authority. Show security when handling tough issues (Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:19-26).
6. Conceptualization—ability to dream great dreams. Leaders must give their lives to causes that count. They must sense that what they do matters to God. Only then will they feel deep satisfaction for their work (Isaiah 49:1-3).
7. Foresight—ability to understand lessons from the past, realities of the present, and the likely consequences of decisions for the future. Leaders should let their purpose prioritize their life (Matt. 6:22; Luke 19:10; John 17:4).
8. Stewardship—sense of holding something in trust for another. God wants us to remember that leaders are brokers of the resources they have been given (Luke 19:11-26).
9. Commitment to the growth of people—belief that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. Great leaders call for great commitment (Matt. 10:17; Mark 8:34-38).
10. Building community—demonstrating his or her own "unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group" (Greenleaf, 1970). Good leaders include others when they serve (Mark 9:40).

While not claiming to have created an exhaustive list, Spears (1998) believes these 10 characteristics "serve to communicate the power and promise that the concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge."

A commitment to such values has long existed at furniture manufacturer Herman Miller, a business led by Max De Pree. The leader, declares De Pree (1990), is the servant of his followers in that he removes the obstacles that prevent them from doing their jobs. Leaders must be clear about their own beliefs, have the confidence to encourage contrary opinions and to "abandon themselves to the strengths of others" (De Pree). De Pree writes about covenantal relationships, recognizing that there are standards of performance to be met, profits to be made, jobs to be secured, and service to be given. He declares that covenantal approaches are not easy, that they are, in fact, very demanding and can be discouraging, but hold great promise for creating new atmospheres in corporations.

The covenantal approach is further exemplified in Covey's Principle-Centered Leadership (1992). In Covey’s paradigm, which is also encompassed by the servant leadership idea, the leader every morning "yokes up," putting on the harness of service, thinking of others. Leaders like Covey understand that growth begins from the inside; hence they concentrate on changing themselves first, and then focus on expanding to other areas of influence in the organization. One person, Covey declares, can be a change catalyst, a transformer, in any situation or any organization.

**Conclusion**

Can servant leadership be taught? Gardner (1990) answers with "an emphatic but qualified `Yes'—empathic because most of the ingredients of leadership can be taught, qualified because the ingredients that cannot be taught may be quite important" (p. 157). The currently popular position that "leaders are made, not born" is a clear indication that many contemporary theorists believe that the capacity to lead is teachable (Komives et al., 1998, p. 28). The emergence of graduate and doctoral programs specializing in leadership studies serves as another conspicuous manifestation of the notion that leadership can be taught (Rost, 1991).

Many leadership theories suggesting that "leaders are made, not born" offer a tight, concise, and innovative lens for understanding the "nuts and bolts" of a leader, yet they often neglect to offer such a lens for understanding how a leader develops (Rost, 1991). Because there are so many leadership theories, we can glean a wealth of information from the actual application of the theories. Consider the following examples of theory.

Transformational leadership is a process in which "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). Burns frames the development of leadership as creating a collective: "A symbiotic relationship . . . bind[ing] leader and follower together into a social and political collectivity" (p. 452). Burns tells us to develop skills that nurture and recognize interdependent relationships. Servant leadership recognizes awareness as a key mechanism for leadership development (Greenleaf). Considering the development of servant leaders, Greenleaf suggests that "awareness . . . strengthens one's effectiveness as a leader" (p. 27). The sign of an effective servant leader is whether or not the community the leader serves becomes "healthier, wiser, [and] freer" (Greenleaf). Greenleaf suggests that leaders must learn how to view the act of leading as an act of serving followers.

**References**


